

HEADING REMOVED



Memory Aid E1 An Adventure In Five Acts

by Some Players

This memory aid contains background information, players' notes, referee's maps, and exploration notes. It provides a complete narrative of an ADVANCED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS adventure and it can be perused alone or as part of an extended venture into the annals of SPUT. The adventure was designed to commemorate TWO CAMPAIGNS planned by ABSENT FRIENDS.

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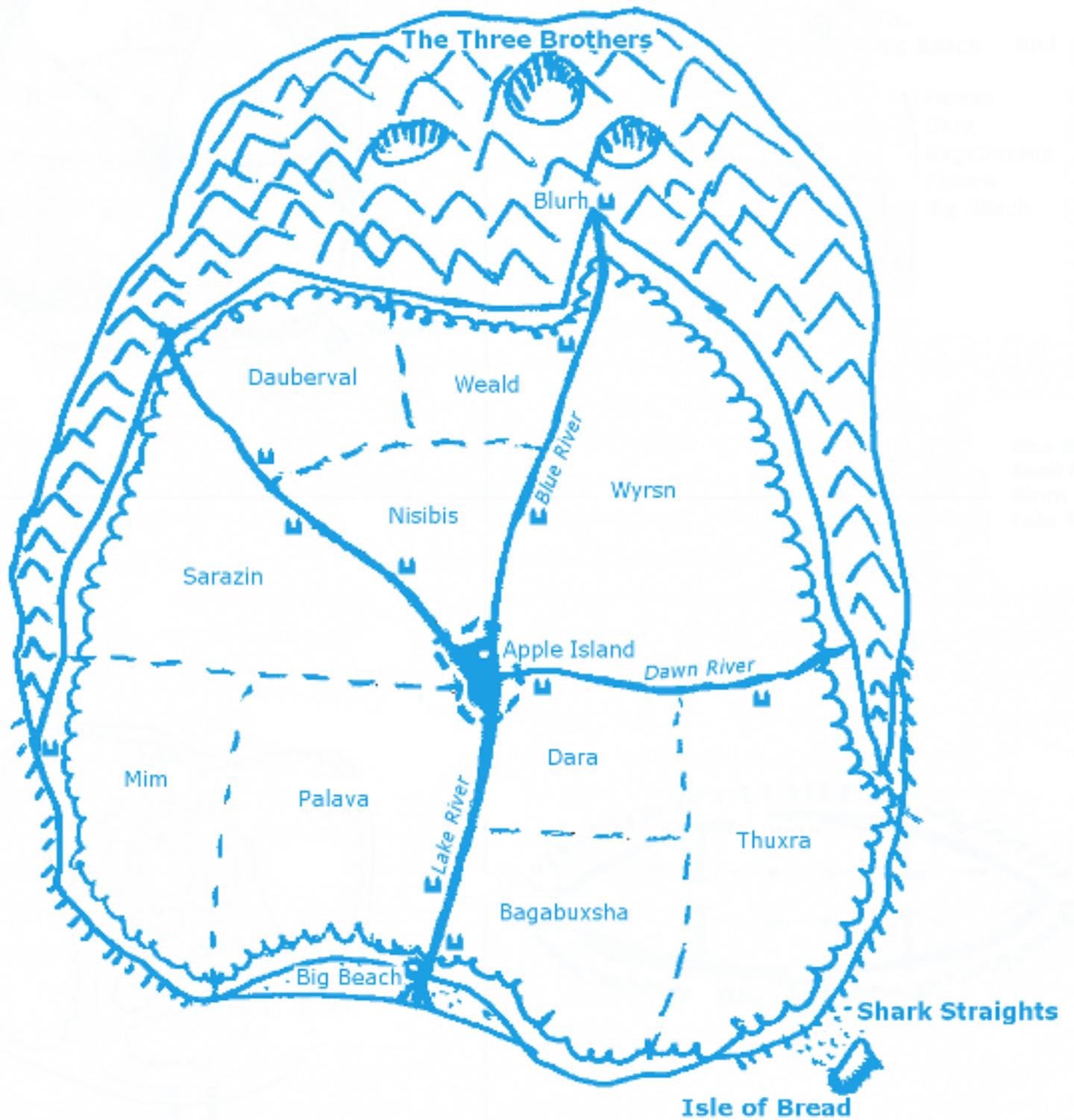
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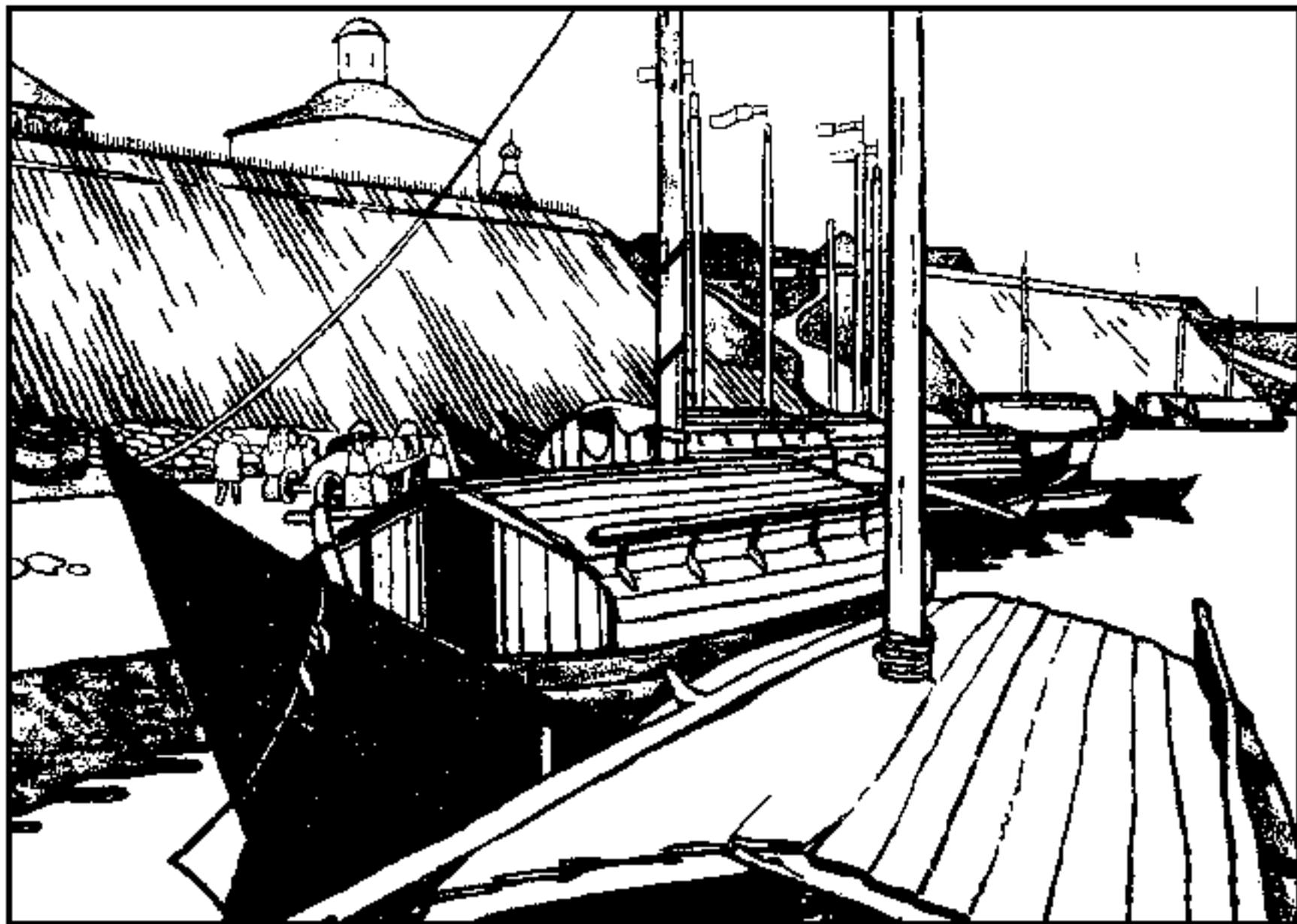
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The Forest



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An Adventure in Five Acts

“Vingt Ans après”

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An Adventure in Five Acts

Part I

Prelude

The Forest

The Forest (**SEE ILLUSTRATION #1**) is a kingdom that comprises the entirety of a single, lone island in a vast ocean with no end. It has a culture not dissimilar to that of Late Anglo-Saxon England or Ireland (early 800s), with similar myths, legends, and tech level. The realm mainly comprises vast tracts of wild, ancient, open forests, with many of the trees in them being well over a thousand years old. Young mountain ranges with sharp peaks are on the *rimward* (north), *dawnward* (east), and *duskward* (west) coasts. The island is not very large – it is said that it will take about ten days to get from one end to another. There are no paved roads on the island and goods and people are transported by river, in barges that can sail upstream using the prevailing winds but must be rowed downstream. Three major rivers flow from the rimward, dawnward, and *duskward* mountains (Blue River, Dawn River, and Dusk River, respectively) to a central lake (King's Lake). From here, another river (Lake River) leads to a beach-like area and the 'city' of Big Beach on the hubward (south) coast. At Big Beach, Lake River ends in a shallow delta that cannot be navigated. Only very few people, if any at all, have ever ventured out onto the sea, for out there, as everybody knows, violent currents and winds snap barges in two like matchstick toys; giant ships manned by ice giants attack everything on it; megalodon sharks eat anything and everything they find in and on the water. As a result, The Forest has no contact with the outside world – if such a thing exists. More notable features of the realm are: the Three Brothers, three large craters at the heart of the rimward mountains and estimated to be some 15,000-18,000 feet high, with the surrounding mountains ranging between 3,000-15,000 feet; Apple Island, where the King and his court reside and which – if not because of its apple-like shape – gets its name from the many apple trees that grow there, which, incidentally, yield an excellent cider; the Isle of Bread, which is separated from the main island by a strait with dangerous shoals and currents known as the Shark Straights, and which – if not because of the Isle of Dread – gets its name from the fact that it looks like a loaf of bread.

The population is human. Faeries, pixies, dwarves, elves, monsters, and dragons are known only from fairy tales, with only very few exceptions. In fact, the only 'monstrous' creatures on the island are giant versions of regular animals.

Climate: The Forest has a distinctive climate, with the wind always blowing inland and big differences in

temperature between the seasons. Winter lasts for two months and is cold, with lots of snow and temperatures ranging from some -15 to -20°C; spring and autumn also last two months each and are noted for their strong winds and thunderstorms; summer lasts four months, the first two being known as the *First Summer* and the second as the *Second Summer*, with temperatures habitually rising to some 35°C towards the end.

A year has ten months, a month 40 days, and a week ten days, whence it is known as a *ten-day*.

Politics: The realm comprises twelve duchies, each in turn divided in baronies, perhaps 40 in total. The duchies are A: King's Castle, Apple Island, or Lake District; B: Duchy of Wyrns; C: Duchy of Dara; D: Duchy of Thuxra; E: Duchy of Bagabuxsha; F: Duchy of Palava; G: Duchy of Mim; H: Duchy of Sarazin; I: Duchy of Nisibis; J: Duchy of Dauberval; K: Duchy of Weald; L: Duchy of Blurh. The wealth and influence of each duchy is measured by the length of its river fronts. Because the Duchy of Mim has no important river on any of its borders, it is considered to be the poorest.

Society is hierarchical to the extreme, not dissimilar to the feudal societies of the early European Middle-Ages. All dukes answer to a single King who rules as *primus inter pares* rather than as an absolute monarch. In times of peace, the King is either succeeded by one of his descendants or by an individual elected in council upon his death. The current King is called Adelwolf Rex Paternoster III and he peacefully succeeded his father to the throne. His wife, the Queen, is called Elexa and the pair have three children – two daughters (aged 14 and 11) and one son (aged 8). Since men and women are considered equal, the King's eldest daughter is the current successor to the throne.

The opinions the various dukes and barons have of each other range from disdain to outright animosity. For example, dukes often consider barons to be little more than soldiers with an attitude, while barons regard dukes as their equals but with a big mouth. In another example, the dukes of Nisibis, Dauberval, and Weald all consider themselves to be the rightful ruler of all three duchies – this because these three duchies were only established relatively recently, when the duke who ruled all three of them as one was elected King and divided his lands among his three sons. As a result, military skirmishes are not unheard of, although large-scale battles and outright wars occur only rarely, with the last major war having been fought around 150 years ago. An important reason for this is that there are strict rules as to the number of soldiers the King (500 men), the dukes (150 men), and barons (50 men) can keep. The most recent political disturbance to speak of was the result of the discovery

of a rich diamond mine in the rimward mountains around 50 years ago. Many dukes laid claim to it until the previous King (the father of the current King) decided to establish the Duchy of Blurh, which now comprises only said mine.

Never in the history of The Forest have there been conflicts or wars with creatures, peoples, or entities that did not come from the realm itself.

Population and Settlements: The Forest counts some 120,000 registered tax-payers, out of an estimated total population of around 240,000 souls, some 1,400-1,500 of which make up the ruling classes. The vast majority of the population live in settlements on the rivers, which leaves the forests to animals and the occasional outcast, hermit, or bandit. The King and his court live on Apple Island in King's Lake (**SEE ILLUSTRATION #2** and **ILLUSTRATION #3**).

Of all regular settlements, those on and around King's Lake are the largest and most 'cosmopolitan'. Indeed, the settlements along the shores of the lake are 'urbanized' centers of trade, culture, and education, with some notable examples of the latter including the Royal Aristocratic Academy, the Bard's College, the Boatsman's College, and the Engineers' College. The people live in what are called *barrows* or *boat houses* (**SEE ILLUSTRATION #4**), which are or represent upturned boats covered with a thick layer of earth. The simplest version of a barrow has a central entrance leading into a central room with a room to each side – usually a bedroom and a pantry. At all times, a fire is kept burning in the middle of the central room, typically in a large construct of four metal legs supporting a metal plate used for cooking. Fixed to a hole in this plate is a metal pipe that leads through an opening in the roof – the chimney.

Even the King lives in a collection of barrows, in this case vast edifices with ornate halls, stately rooms, bedrooms, and grand staircases to rival those of the richest Medieval mansions.

Religion: The divine is represented by 'the three faces of god', known as Olm, Ilm, and UIm. This 'god' is not so much a god in the classical sense of the word as that 'he' is a representation of life – or perhaps nature – with each of his 'three faces' representing 'three major aspects' of life as it is seen by the Foresters. Olm's three major aspects are woods, battle, and festivals, each represented by its own symbol: a treant, a treant-satyr hybrid, and a satyr, respectively. Olm is considered to represent the male aspects of life and the main body of his followers are male Druids, Rangers, Bards, and dedicated Priests. Of note is the legendary **Tree of Olm**, a tree that is said to hand out gifts to people who can find it. Unfortunately, the tree has no fixed location: it appears in random locations all over the island and then disappears again.

Ilm represents women and the female aspects of life and her three major aspects are: life, children, and the harvest, often symbolized by a mother and child, fruit, and a sheaf of corn, respectively. Some 200 women can be considered to actively serve Ilm in some sort of way and among these are Witches, dedicated Priestesses and, for example, midwives. Most villages have special Women's Houses, places where women go for council, for company, and to give birth. A legendary item associated with Ilm is the **Kettle of the Coven**, a golden kettle said to be guarded by a coven of priestesses of Ilm and believed to be able to predict the future and brew magical potions.

UIm represents the evils of life – shadow, death, and disease, 'his' symbols being a headstone (headstones are shaped like Celtic crosses), a black circle, and skulls, respectively. UIm has no clergy as such and is 'worshiped' only by people associated with one or more of his aspects in one way or another, most notably gravediggers and funeral singers. A legendary weapon associated with UIm is known as the **Sword of Shadows**, which is believed to instantly slay all whom it strikes.

It should be noted that all three 'artifacts' mentioned above are known only from myth and legend. There is no proof they actually exist.

Scattered all over the island are holy places, each dedicated to one of the 'faces of god'. Pilgrimages to these holy places are quite common and the reasons for them are many and varied (e.g., spiritual guidance, before major undertakings, to bless a marriage or newborn child, to beg for some other favor). The holy places are typically dominated by some striking natural phenomenon (e.g., a cascade, a rock formation, a specific tree). Among the better known examples would be a giant lightning-struck black oak on King's Lake (OIm) and Ilm's Rock just outside of Big Beach (Ilm). Only very few of these holy sites feature temples or shrines and any man-made structures found there have usually been built by people seeking to make money off pilgrims.

Economy: The people of The Forest are largely self-sufficient, which makes that they typically travel only to go on pilgrimages and that there is no organized trade to speak of (no guilds, no shipping companies). That is not to say that trade does not exist: commodities such as specific kinds of lumber, agricultural products, fish, minerals, finished products are still transported from areas where they are found or produced to those that require them on a small scale – folk are used to seeing to their own needs, cutting their own trees, growing their own food, collecting their own herbs, and so on. Even if one could find a 'herb shop', the owner would probably have to take an order and then go to the woods to

collect the herbs before he can actually sell them.

Magic: Magic is the realm of sorcerers and sorceresses, individuals who have somehow gained the ability to generate strange effects that emulate standard spells, often as the result of some sort of traumatic event. While not exceptionally rare – some 100 are known to exist – the vast majority of these folk can generate perhaps one or two of such effects. There are only a handful of sorcerers of greater power, each known for one or two signature spells. Among these are Loremaster Fist of Big Beach, a 50-year-old former boxer who can ignite objects by touch; James of the River, a 40-year-old man who lives on a riverboat and speaks with fishes; Wandering Bandolo, a 30-year-old sorceress without a fixed abode who can find things and make them disappear; Magus Seaworthy, an 80-year-old man who lives on what is said to be a *sea-ship* and who can fly and control the wind; and Roald Blackstaff, a 40-year-old man with a nasty reputation who lives in the Duchy of Weald and can kill living creatures by filling their lungs with some liquid. The most powerful of the sorcerers is Augustus Magister Rex, the 60-year-old rector of the Royal Aristocratic Academy and Adviser to the King.

Enter the Party

The players are informed that the party is to consist of a group of young nobles, each the son or daughter of a duke. These noble heroes are to have enjoyed an education befitting their station, making all of them 1st-level Fighters with the NWP's *Reading/Writing*, *Etiquette*, *Heraldry*, and *Land-based Riding*. Other than that, each can be of any single class their player likes, in effect resulting in either dual-classed 1st-level characters or 2nd-level Fighters.

Initially educated at home, our noble heroes studied at the Royal Aristocratic Academy after they became of age and it is here that they met and got to know each other before they finished their studies and returned home.

Sir Eber Ard Weald (Fighter 1, Ranger 1) is the eldest son of the Duke of Weald. He is incredibly strong and often states that he has been “groomed as the right hand” of his elder sister, the future Duchess of Weald, to whom he invariably refers as his “wee sister”. After his education, wanderlust and a love of nature and solitude made him choose the path of the ranger rather than that of the knight. In his own words, Sir Eber is currently assigned to “guard and rule the headstrong poachers and miners in the mountainous outskirts of his father’s duchy in preparation for his future office”.

Sir Navarre Dauberval de Vergennes (Fighter [Noble] 2) is the firstborn son of the Duke of Dauberval and, as the ducal heir, he has been raised to a life of hunting, knightly combat, nocturnal revelries, fine food, and

choice ciders. With the exception of his time at the Academy, he has spent most of his life in the family castle in the mountains, a stone edifice most of his peers consider to be socially questionable. It is here that he learned to ride¹⁾, hunt, and survive on his own and often stared in wonder at the giant eagles soaring high above the snow-capped peaks.

Sir Oengus “Moon” of Nisibis (Fighter 2) is the son of the Duke of Nisibis, second in line to the throne behind his elder sister. A man of few words when among his peers, he has but little interest in affairs of state and a love for the rivers instead. Although educated at the Academy like all noble sons, he only feels truly at home on the water and in the company of bargemen, sailors, and other river folk.

Sir Oerknal of the Forest (Fighter 2) is a strange, uncouth, squat, bearded creature many consider to be a changeling for lack of a better word. According to Sir Eber, the creature was acquired by his grandparents a long time ago, who raised it as one of their own children. This makes it quite a lot older than the rest of our noble heroes – that is, in years.

Sir Scarlat de Sarazin (Fighter [Cavalier] 2) is the firstborn son and heir of the Duke of Sarazin, a fop man of flamboyance and fine tastes, and with a *penchant* for impromptu behavior.

Sir Suvall Ard Wyrsn (Fighter 1, Sorcerer 1) is the youngest son of the Duke of Wyrsn and last in line to the ducal throne. He is a calculating, unsociable individual with an unhealthy fixation on possessions, who proclaims to prefer peace and quiet to the bold escapades of some of his more flamboyant fellows. Weirdly, he seems to persist in attempting to steer conversations to certain “restful nights” at the Academy.

The Fortnight

Each year, starting some 14 days after the spring storms have ended and the rivers have calmed, the King proclaims the *Fortnight*, a festival to which all dukes and barons are invited and which most attend. The festival is held on Apple Island and it can be compared to the ‘start of the season’ as it was known in Victorian times. It is a time of congregation, revelry, theatrical performances, dances, grand banquets (food and drink are big things in The Forest), afternoon parties, and charitable events²⁾. Eligible young men and women are presented to society and the Great Council convenes, which makes political decisions, discusses and possibly resolves disputes, and passes judgment on matters of importance. This year, it is said that all ducal houses will attend, which means that there will be about 1,500 Foresters on the island, some 400 of which will be nobles and another 400 the King’s soldiers.

This year, the Fortnight is a prelude to the *Royal Tour*, which involves the King and his courtiers going on a

grand tour of the duchies lasting most of the summer. An annual event until a century ago, the Royal Tour now takes place only once every five years

And so it is that we join our noble heroes on Apple Island, where they have renewed their acquaintance. Some of them have sat through the Great Council and even Sir Eber's bearded creature has been presented to society.

Presently Sir Navarre and Sir Scarlat have escorted a company of eligible damsels to a number of gondolas for an evening tour on the lake and a midnight *picnic sur l'herbe*, which will see the company enjoy some excellent wines and expensive dishes. Our noble heroes are determined not to let the

fact that the island is under heavy guard (soldiers are stationed along its shores at regular intervals) spoil what promises to be a sweet summer's night.

¹⁾ The horses of The Forest bear little resemblance to the bred horses of the knights of Medieval Europe, rather being more like wild horses – or even ponies – capable of surviving on their own and without requiring additional fodder.

²⁾ It should be noted that these charitable events are often aimed at lifting the spirits of the poor rather than actually providing them with any succor. Attending a fine play, a demonstration of the newest dance, or being allowed to sit at the servants' tables – these are all considered appropriate ways to strengthen the resolve of the less fortunate as they deal with their daily hardships.

An Adventure in Five Acts

Part II

Act I: The Fortnight

In which the DM informs gallant Sir Scaralat and Sir Navarre that their “sweet summer’s night” ended in some consternation when they engaged in a bit of impromptu boat jousting (Ivanhoe with boats) and several damsels had to be rescued from the water. In fact, he says, following this, our noble heroes have been left in the care of Augustus Magister Rex, who has told them that he will keep a sharp eye on them during the celebratory grand finale of the Fortnight (**SEE ILLUSTRATION #5**). As always, this grand finale is in the form of a magnificent banquet at which the first casks of Royal Cider, made from last year’s apple harvest, will be presented to – and consumed by – the assembled *noblesse*. The festivities take place on the central, 600×150-foot lawn of the Royal Barrows, where numerous splendidly dressed tables have been arranged around a long central trough filled with glowing embers. Numerous oxen and pigs are simmering in the heat above it, as are a selection of game and costly viands. It has been a while since the ceremonial opening of a duo of 500-liter casks of Royal Cider and spirits are high – although not so for our noble heroes. They are seated at a separate table under the watchful eye of the eminent Rector. The conversation is limited and comprises little more than an exchange of some polite pleasantries¹.

It must be about an hour before midnight when a soldier approaches. He whispers something to the eminent Rector, who frowns, excuses himself and leaves for the King’s table.

When he returns after some time, Sir Suvali asks him if something is wrong.

“It’s always the same,” the eminent Rector sighs, shaking his head. “Cat’s away and all that. As it happens, a military post in Nisibis was attacked by bandits some days ago.”

“I say, old bean,” Navarre says to Sir Oengus. “Wouldn’t that be your neck of the woods?”

Without bothering to reply, Sir Oengus jumps to his feet and hurries to his noble father’s table. When he gets there, he informs him of the news and suggests they return home immediately.

However, a fairly inebriated Duke Nisibis distractedly waves a mug of cider at him.

“My dear boy!,” he says. “Calm down, will you? Plenty of time for that in the morning!”

“But father! We have been attacked! At least allow me to travel ahead!”

“We will get to it tomorrow and there’s an end to it,” Duke Nisibis says. “Now, get back to whatever you were doing and enjoy the evening. There’s a good lad.”

When he gets back to the table, Sir Oengus finds his noble fellows engaged in some lighthearted banter.

“... a fire, you say!?,” the *chevalier* is heard to ask, stifling a somewhat high-pitched laugh in a handkerchief.

“*Mon Dieu!* What will come of this world? Ah! *Mon cher!* There you are!”

With a grand gesture, he invites Sir Oengus to sit down again and proffers him a bottle: “More cider?”

“A fire?,” Sir Oengus asks, holding up his glass. “What fire?”

“*C’est rien, mon cher!*,” the *chevalier* replies. “*Rien du tout.* Hand me that quail, will you?”

“Something’s burning ashore,” Sir Suvali says, pointing into the distance. “Your side.”

Sir Oengus gives him a startled look: “What?!”

Then, before anyone can reply, shouts are heard from the direction of the King’s table. Our noble heroes stretch their necks to find out what’s going on and then a horn sounds the “To me.”

“We are under attack!,” the *chevalier* cries, quickly refilling his glass. “*Aux armes!*”

“Sorry, old fruit,” Navarre says, grinning to the eminent Rector and getting up from his seat. “Duty calls.”

Our noble heroes hurry in the direction of the signal, other nobles and soldiers joining them on the way. The horn sounds for a second time and then for a third time – until it stops abruptly mid-tone.

“They killed him!,” the *chevalier* yells. “*Quelle insolence!*”

Our noble heroes round the King’s barrow and enter the meadow beyond, which slopes down to the forest along the shore. To their dismay, they see a huge fire roaring on the shore across the water.

“Isn’t that the Military Academy?,” Sir Suvali asks.

Navarre cannot believe his eyes. Is that the Military Academy on fire?

More and more nobles and servants arrive, uttering cries of incredulity and indignation. Navarre, as uncertain of what he is seeing as almost everybody else, turns to address a courtier next to him.

“It would seem there’s a bit of a fire on the shore over there,” he starts (**SEE ILLUSTRATION #6**).

The courtier impatiently waves a hand at him.

“You think?,” the man says, with more than a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

Then, a sharp whistling sounds in the forest at the bottom of the meadow. Moments later, several of the assembled guests say they detect distinct signs of movement and light among the trees.

"What's that?," Sir Oerknal asks, pointing at some trees.

"Hard to say," Sir Suvali says. "Soldiers?"

"Soldiers!," the *chevalier* cries. "It's soldiers!"

"How many, you think?," Sir Oerknal asks.

"*Mon Dieu!*," the *chevalier* exclaims. "There must be at least five hundred of them!"

Navarre is not convinced. Five hundred soldiers? Here? Who could muster five hundred men? Who could muster five hundred soldiers and get them to the island unnoticed? He vents his doubts but then armed men appear in the forest's edge. Weapons and armor glitter and gleam in the light of lanterns and torches and presently the men start advancing in an orderly fashion.

"To the King! To the King!," the *chevalier* cries, already on his way to where the King and his nobles have gathered.

Navarre, still having a hard time believing what he sees, tries to identify a banner, a coat of arms, or any other sign that might indicate who these men are. Around him, people seem to start coming to their senses and now orders are issued, servants start screaming and running, and the King's soldiers start moving down the meadow. When he turns around, he sees the *chevalier* disappear behind the King's barrow. He has another look down the meadow, where ever more soldiers are coming from the forest. Five hundred men? The *chevalier* may well have been right! To his left, Sir Oengus starts running back to the banquet area. Sir Oerknal and Sir Suvali have not moved.

Some of the King's soldiers have charged down the meadow and met the advancing enemy and presently people start falling on both sides. Our noble hero notices that the enemy seems purposeful and organized – these are trained men, not your average band of riffraff. Still struggling with what he sees, he finally realizes that the situation is quite serious and that he had better go after the *chevalier* – to the King and his nobles, if only because that is where he will likely find his noble father.

Meanwhile, the fearless *chevalier* has rather unceremoniously elbowed his way past several courtiers and he presently falls to one knee before his liege, his arms spread wide.

"*Mon Roi!*," he cries. "We are under attack! Five hundred men advance as we speak! My sword is yours! *Vive le Forêt!*"

The courtiers regard him with a mixture of astonishment, disbelief, and even offense. Then, Navarre arrives.

"Sir," he says, addressing his noble father. "It would seem that a substantial number of soldiers are headed this way. They appear to count in the hundreds and there are no banners on display."

Duke Dauberval looks at his son with glazed eyes, a mug of cider in his hand. To his left, the *chevalier* is continuing to explain what he thinks he saw.

"I assure you, Sir, that this is true," Navarre continues. "Allow me to suggest that we start organizing some sort of resistance. Although they fight without a banner, there's no denying their number."

"Five hundred soldiers," the duke finally says. "That is a serious matter."

"It would seem so," Navarre says. "We should arm ourselves. Get the men together at the jetties and make a stand there. We must arm ourselves."

"Indeed," the duke says. "Go arm yourself and return here. Have a boy bring me my armor and weapons. Tell Madame your Mother to get the women and children to safety."

Navarre hasn't moved ten yards when the King explodes.

That is to say... when the King is crushed to *pâté* by a 10-foot-long hammer in the hands of a humongous, 13-foot-tall, 6-foot-wide giant of a man in crude iron plate armor. Not that this isn't at least as strange, mind you.

A deathly silence falls – not a single sound is uttered for what seems an eternity. Indeed, when the DM informs our noble heroes that they have the Initiative, all most of them can think of is to stare at the giant in stunned disbelief.

Navarre is the first to regain his wits. He grabs his father by the arm, yells at a royal herald to follow him and starts running to the Dauberval camp.

"To me! To me!," he shouts. "Gather at the jetties! To me! To me! To the boats!"

The *chevalier* is the next to react. He drops his glass of cider and stares at his garments with a look of revulsion on his face – several bloody bits of what was once the King have completely ruined his fashionable attire.

He starts to wipe off some of the larger bits when all hell breaks loose: people start screaming and running, falling over each other, running in and out of barrows, shouting that the “ice giants are here”. Some nobles draw weapons, still looking at the giant figure in disbelief. Most start running. Women, children, and servants flee screaming into the barrows, soldiers take up their traditional defensive positions on top of the barrows, others start rolling boulders in front of the entrances.

Sir Suvali and Sir Oerknal, who arrived just in time to see the King... die, also start moving toward the tents, the sorcerer yelling to the *chevalier* to follow them.

The *chevalier* regains his composure. He assumes a gallant stance and starts looking for an opportunity to prove his courage and valor – a moment to shine, perhaps. Engage the giant, iron-clad figure? Perhaps not. Charge the advancing horde of soldiers and die a glorious death? Hmm...

Then, he spots Augustus Magister Rex some distance away, apparently paralyzed with fear while a unit of 30 men purposefully advance toward him, firing arrows. Excellent! The intrepid *chevalier* runs toward the eminent Rector, throws him across his shoulder and starts running to the jetties.

“Pardon, Excellence!” he cries, arrows whistling past him. “Allow me to get you to safety!”

Meanwhile, Navarre has reached the tents, where he finds none of his kinsmen – perhaps they are already at the boats? He enters his tent, puts on his armor, grabs his crossbow and bolt case and heads back out to find that the herald and his father are nowhere to be seen. All around him, scenes of horror unfold: nobles, servants, children, and soldiers alike run hither and to, screaming, shot down mercilessly and brutally slaughtered by the advancing soldiers, fires erupt everywhere.

Sir Suvali and Sir Oerknal are some distance away, staring at the hubward shore. To their dismay, they see that a group of men have blocked access to the jetties – and thus the boats – and that another group of some six-score men are occupying themselves with killing everybody they can get their hands on. Judging by their dark leather armors, none of these men appear to be soldiers. Bandits perhaps? Across the water to their left, the noble duo notice another fire burning on the shore. It would seem that another watchtower is burning.

Just when Navarre gives up looking for his noble father, the *chevalier* approaches at speed, the eminent Rector still slung over his shoulder. Some 30 soldiers are after him, in four groups advancing orderly, archers at the back. Out of breath, he unceremoniously drops the eminent Rector in front of Navarre.

“Save the Magister!” he yells, before disappearing into his tent.

Since the arrows are whizzing past, Navarre yells to the eminent Rector to get out of the line of fire before taking cover himself. He loads his crossbow and starts firing at the enemy archers, estimating that he has some four shots before the first of the advancing soldiers will reach him.

He misses his shot and now Sir Suvali and Sir Oerknal arrive, the latter starting to load his heavy crossbow. Sir Suvali exchanges some words with the eminent Rector, who subsequently mumbles some arcane words.

Although several soldiers suddenly stop moving altogether (*Hold Person*), Navarre still manages to miss his next shot.

Then the *chevalier* reappears, fully armored. He sees Sir Oengus approaching fast, heading for the jetties. After it has taken him some considerable effort to dissuade his noble fellow from this course of action, he takes cover next to the eminent Rector.

“Magister!” he yells. “How do we get off the island? Do we have to swim? Can you do something?”

“Yes, I can,” the eminent Rector replies. “But I need some time to prepare. There will be no swimming.”

“Start your preparations,” Sir Suvali says. “I will cast *Sleep*.”

“Good plan!” the eminent Rector says, before starting his attempts to concentrate.

Although Sir Suvali eliminates three more soldiers with his spell, things do not quite go as our noble heroes would have liked: Navarre misses two of his next three shots (inflicting minimal damage with the bolt that hits) and the eminent Rector's preparations take a lot of time, perhaps mostly because he is hit twice by the enemy archers before Sir Oerknal, Sir Suvali, and the *chevalier* can move to form a human shield in front of him. As a result, the first of the soldiers are now so close to Navarre and Sir Oerknal that they have to drop their bows, draw their weapons and engage them in melee.

Navarre finally inflicts some serious damage but the fight has only lasted for a couple of moments when Sir Suvali suddenly grabs his left hand.

“*Dimensional folding!*,” the sorcerer yells. “Join hands! Now!”

Navarre grabs Sir Oerknal's hand and then swathes of gray mist swirl before his eyes and in his mind and then dizzy and floating and then he is falling and then a loud splash.

When he realizes where he is, Navarre finds himself in the water, close to some shore featuring a huge, blackened tree that was obviously struck by lightning some time ago. He is sinking rapidly, as is the *chevalier* – both are wearing metal armor. Fortunately, the water turns out to be only some six feet deep and then, some yards away, Navarre sees a large barge from which someone is shining a light at him.

"Er, hello?," a hesitant male voice sounds.

"A rope!," Navarre shouts. "A rope! We're in armor! A rope! Hurry, man!"

Thus, despite the thick layer of slick on the bottom and thanks only to a truly Herculean effort (NWP *Endurance*) involving jumps, much holding of breath, frantic paddling, and grabbing of ropes, Navarre manages to reach the barge in his armor, where he is hoisted aboard by Sir Oengus and Sir Oerknal.

The *chevalier* is not so lucky. Thrashing about wildly, he manages to hit something floating in the water and grabs it. When this turns out to be a corpse, he lets go of it with a startled cry – and starts sinking again. Left with no choice but to get out of his armor, he eventually manages to reach the barge without it, where his noble fellows drag him aboard.

The figure with the lantern turns out to be a smallish man built, if anything, like an orangutan, with short legs, a massive chest, and long arms. On his head is a cap that reads "Captain". He looks at our noble heroes with a startled look on his face.

"Erm...," he stammers, before regaining some of his composure. "My Lords! Captain Clifford. At your service."

"Why, thank you, my good man," the drenched *chevalier* says, shaking the captain's hand. "*Très heureux*, I'm sure."

Navarre, still reeling from the event and not at all in the mood for a conversation, starts taking off his armor and wet clothes. When he is finished, he notices Sir Suvali going through a set of robes and cloaks and retrieve a strange, vest-like garment, which he subjects to a short inspection and then dons. Next to him, Sir Oengus has observed the process.

"What's with the long clothes?," he asks.

"The robes of the dear old Rector," the sorcerer says, nimbly pocketing a silver necklace with an acorn pendant. "Looks like he didn't survive the ordeal."

Then, another individual appears on deck. It is a portly woman with large hair, garish clothes, extraordinary amounts of make-up, and toting a loaded crossbow. In a stark contrast, she has the slim, petite hands and feet of a lady of noble birth.

The appearance of this strange creature almost convinces Navarre that he is dreaming. But no... when he looks over his shoulder, he sees Apple Island in the distance, in the light of the fires that rage on it. Every now and then, shouts and terrible screams reach him from across the water. Three gods! What next? It seems madness to try and get back to the island – indeed, he and his noble fellows may be the only ones to have survived the event! And what of his noble father? His mother? His dear sisters?

Meanwhile, the *chevalier* has gallantly introduced himself to the fat woman, who presently lowers the crossbow, smiles bashfully and then invites everybody below decks for a "nice cup of herbal tea".

But Navarre is in no mood for herbal tea.

"I say!," he calls to captain Clifford. "Captain! How's about something stronger? It's been a rough night!"

"Certainly, my Lord," captain Clifford says. "As luck would have it, I just happen to store a fine gin below decks. Just follow me."

"One moment, captain," Navarre says, pointing to the blackened tree on the shore. "Is that tree the *Tree of Olm*?"

"It is, my Lord," captain Clifford says.

Navarre throws him an incredulous look.

"Surely you don't mean...?," he starts.

"Ha, ha, ha!," captain Clifford laughs. "If only! Please, my Lord, let's join the others below decks. I will explain everything."

And so it is that our heroes end up in the hold of what was once a cargo ship (**SEE ILLUSTRATION #7**). Captain Clifford explains that he and his wife, Theresa, bought the barge some time ago and converted it into a passenger ship of sorts. The cargo hold, still one big space, has been made into a dormitory, with two rows of

hammocks running the length of the hold at right angles to either side of a central aisle. At the back, a wall closes off the stern. A door in it likely leads to a galley and the captain's cabin. The place is utterly spotless. "We make a modest living transporting pilgrims in the summer," captain Clifford continues, not without pride. "As a matter of fact, we have dropped off some them here today!" "Well, not anymore," Navarre says bluntly. "Consider your barge commandeered, Sir. In the name of the King, I..." "Lord!," captain Clifford interrupts. "You wish to hire my barge? We sail for Big Beach in the morning!" "How much?," Sir Suvali asks, before Navarre can react. A price is settled and it seems that our heroes have booked passage for four days. "This is half," Sir Suvali says, handing the captain some coins. "You'll get the rest when we get there."

Then, Theresa appears carrying a tray with a large, steaming pot of tea and some cups and saucers. She puts everything on a table and starts pouring the tea. "Anyone for some herbal tea?," she asks. "Dear, oh dear! The things you young men have been through! There we are, some tea will soothe and calm the nerves. Now don't be shy! Drink up, all of you!" "Not me," Navarre says, downing another gin and gesturing captain Clifford for a refill. "What of the events of tonight? See any strange soldiers? Lots of them?" "Can't say we did," captain Clifford says, pouring him another gin. "Of course, we noticed that something was wrong when people started shouting and we saw flames on the horizon." "And then what did you do?" "We weighed anchor," captain Clifford replies. "Get some distance between us and the shore if you know what I mean. It's a good thing we did or you'd have been in a lot more trouble." "Indeed," Navarre says wryly. "It's the thing to do to avoid trouble ashore," Sir Oengus says. "Standard practice." After some more of this, Sir Oerknal nudges Navarre. "Let's stick to the story here," he whispers under his voice. "Excuse me?," Navarre says irritably, not accustomed to the creature addressing him in any way. "Well," Sir Oerknal continues. "Who are these people? Who says they're not a part of this whole thing?" "Don't be ridiculous," Navarre says. "Then why aren't they at the island? Would you let them leave with your men still on the island?" "Hmm..." Sir Oerknal says.

Deciding that the whole thing has taken long enough, Navarre gets to his feet. "Gentlemen, if I may!," he yells. "Gentlemen! Order, please! Thank you. May I suggest the time has come to discuss a plan of action? I do not believe I am exaggerating when I say that we seem to be in a spot of bother. Would anyone care to speak?" A lively conversation ensues, in which many things are said. Of note would be that Sir Suvali insists that the soldiers were not human but something he calls "humanoids", which Navarre has a hard time believing since he doesn't even know what his noble companion means by that. Another interesting notion would be Sir Oerknal's suggestion that either Duke Mim or Duke Blurh is behind the attack, an idea that had also occurred to some of the others. "Perhaps not Mim," Navarre muses, downing another gin. "He wouldn't have the finances to pull this off and his absence from society has become quite the tradition, if anything. Come to think of it, who would be able to gather as many as five hundred men? These were not some ruffians. Where would anybody get five hundred trained men? I admit that this has bothered me ever since this whole thing started." "Which leaves Blurh and his mine," Sir Suvali says. "He hasn't been at the Fortnight for three years and he is probably the only one in contact with large numbers of humanoids." "My dear fellow!," Navarre exclaims. "What is it with you and these 'humanoids'?" "The dogs," Sir Suvali says. "They reacted to them." "What about the giant?," Sir Oerknal asks. "Could the dogs have reacted to him?" Sir Suvali admits that he hadn't thought of that. Still, the idea that Blurh might be involved in some way seems to gain traction when Sir Oengus reminds his fellows that it is only a couple of days ago that a military post in Nisibis was attacked. "Think about it," he says. "The Academy was torched before the attack on the island and you need a river to transport the amount of troops we saw. This points to the Blue River." "Blurh, military post in Nisibis, Military Academy, King's Island," Navarre says. "Hmm..." "The Blue River connects them all," Sir Oengus says.

"That still doesn't explain where Blurh got his five hundred men from," Navarre says.

"Humanoids," Sir Suvali says.

"I do declare!," Navarre cries angrily. "Are you seriously suggesting we were attacked by fairies?"

Ultimately, when the *chevalier*, too, seems to have convinced himself that the attack was executed by humanoids, Navarre tires of the whole thing. He gets to his feet again and calls for order. It must be said that he has consumed a considerable amount of gin at this point, somewhat to the detriment of his diction.

"My Lords!," he shouts. "Enough of this! We must organize a counterattack, raise an army! Crush the traitorous cowards who assassinated their rightful rulers and stewards! I put it to you that if we are now the Law of the Land!"

He pours another gin.

"Therefore," he continues. "In my capacity as acting Duke Dauberval, I propose that we elect from among our number a new King!"

He raises his glass.

"My fellow Dukes!," he exclaims. "My Lords! I present to you – King Oerknal the First! Gentlemen, the King!"

Glasses and cups of tea are raised and emptied – to loud laughter and cheers and then the *chevalier* takes the floor.

"*Vive le Roi!*," he cries. "*Messieurs!* We shall need a navy! I propose to nominate the captain here as... Captain of the King!"

He raises his cup of tea with a flourish.

"*Mon Capitaine!*"

And so Captain Clifford modestly accepts the cheers and guffaws of our noble heroes.

Some more of this follows. Explanations are sought and plans are made and rejected. After bringing in more tea, Theresa suggests the noble heroes get out of their wet gear and don sets of pilgrim's clothes, which she presently procures. Navarre loudly proclaims that they will have nothing of it – being peers of the realm and all that – but his noble fellows do indeed exchange their wet garments for pilgrim's robes. Then, Sir Oengus proposes our noble heroes leave immediately to evade search parties.

But Navarre argues that it isn't very likely that search parties will have started looking for them just yet.

"Securing the island will take time," he says. "At least the rest of the night and probably most of tomorrow. And even then, how will they know we were even there?"

Much later, the *chevalier* proposes an immediate visit to the shrine at the lightning-struck tree ashore, arguing that it is *Tree of Olm* and that our noble heroes should attempt to enlist the aid of the druids stationed there.

"*Mon Capitaine!*," he roars. "Do you have a boat?"

"I do," captain Clifford says. "There's a small launch you could use."

Navarre disagrees, arguing that our noble heroes should keep a low profile until they have come up with a comprehensive plan of action. It seems that the gin has made him forget that the tree isn't the *Tree of Olm* at all.

"*Fil!*," the *chevalier* cries. "Prepare the launch! *On départ!*"

"Are you mad?," Navarre yells. "This is not a time for recklessness! Who is to say that these druids are not in league with the traitors? Or that they are all dead? If there's anything we can say with certainty it is that our enemies are highly organized! There is no telling who and what they have attacked! The place could be swarming with soldiers!"

"*Silence!*," the *chevalier* cries. "Are you a coward, Sir?"

"My Lords," Theresa interjects. "Please. It has been a rough day for all of us. Why don't we all get a good night's sleep and speak of this in the morning?"

"*Madame!*," the *chevalier* says frostily. "This a military matter."

Tempers flare for a bit until captain Clifford intervenes.

"My Lord," he says to the *chevalier*. "What you propose is impossible."

"Explain yourself, Sir!," the *chevalier* cries. "And be quick about it!"

"There are no druids at the shrine, my Lord," the captain says hurriedly. "They have gone home for the night and will not return until the morning."

This seems to bring the spirited *chevalier* at least some distance back to earth.

"*Zut alors!*," he mutters. "And what might the current hour be?"

"It's an hour to morning mist, Lord," Theresa says. "Why don't we all get some sleep?"

Navarre doesn't feel like sleeping at all and declares that he will stand guard on deck until the sun rises. As it turns out, he doesn't even make it out of the hold.

Sir Oerknal is drowning. He is underwater, his armor heavy and pulling him ever further down to a watery death. When he starts trying to work his way up to the surface, he realizes that he cannot move his arms. And why can't he see? He starts gasping for air... to find that he can hardly breathe – as if a knot has been tied around his neck. Is there? His brain doesn't seem to be working at all and he struggles with the notion. He tries to get his hands to his neck and finds that they are being held. *Moradin's Hammer!* Something is around his neck and someone is pulling it tighter and tighter!

Mustering all of his strength, he manages to free one hand and lashes out, weakly hitting someone in the face but not easing the pressure on his neck. Now close to actually suffocating, he starts thrashing about desperately and crashes to the floor. Still the pressure does not diminish and with stars and lights exploding in front of his eyes, he lashes out again and hits someone in the face – again and much more forcefully this time. Someone stifles a curse and there is a stumbling sound.

Then, finally, the pressure seems to diminish. Gasping and wheezing and still having a hard time getting his mind to work, Sir Oerknal realizes that he is fighting two individuals and that one of them has his hands around his neck.

"Damn you!," a man curses under his breath. "Die already!"

A furious struggle ensues, with Sir Oerknal flailing wildly in the dark until he manages to land a serious blow and the hands finally release their grip on his neck. Exhausted and gasping for air, he tries to gather his wits, after some time realizing that he has his eyes closed. He opens his eyes and finds himself on the floor of the cargo hold. Next to him, the bulk of Theresa lies sprawled. Some yards away, the ape-like form of captain Clifford is crawling away from him on hands and knees.

Sir Oerknal feels a terrible anger rise. He gets to his feet and struggles to find his balance, his head spinning. He manages to grab his double-bladed axe, takes a couple of steps and swings the weapon at the captain – missing him by inches. The captain cries out in surprise, scrambles to his feet and stumbles to the ladder. He is already halfway up to the deck when Sir Oerknal swings his axe at him a second time, missing again and now the captain disappears through the trapdoor.

Still unsteady on his feet, Sir Oerknal sets after him and, when he reaches the deck, a loud splash tells him that the captain has jumped overboard. He scrambles to the bow, to see that the captain is already halfway to the shore.

Dawnward, the sun is just peeking over the horizon.

Cursing loudly and gingerly rubbing his sore neck, our noble hero returns to the hold. His mind still foggy, he starts waking his noble fellows. This turns out to be a lot harder than he expected and he eventually has to resort to actually punching some of them in the face before they wake up. When everybody is finally awake, most of them with their minds as foggy as Sir Oerknal's, he explains to his noble fellows what has happened. Uttering cries of anger and indignation, some of our noble heroes start denying loudly that they drank from the tea. Navarre, who is the only one who actually didn't drink from the tea but still doesn't feel much better than the rest thanks to the copious amounts of gin he consumed earlier, starts tying up the comatose Theresa. He struggles with this for some time until Sir Suvali appears and takes over.

"Thanks," Navarre says. Still a bit weak in the knees, he has a look around the hold to see that the *chevalier* is halfway up the ladder to the deck.

"*Messieurs!*," the *chevalier* cries, when he gets to the trapdoor. "*On départ!*"

Navarre casts a weary glance at Sir Oerknal.

Looks like the creature was the only one to realize that something wasn't quite right with the murderous maritime couple.

When he finally feels a bit like himself again, Navarre finds himself alone in the cargo hold. Overhead, his noble fellows are stumbling about on the deck, apparently reeling in the launch to the encouraging cries of the *chevalier*.

He still has a hard time explaining the events of last night. Who organized the massacre on the island? Why? Although the odd skirmish is not unheard of, Navarre cannot recall anything on as large a scale as this. And what of that... giant? What was that? An ice giant? Does all of this point to the involvement of some strange unnatural force as Sir Suvali seems to suggest? And how do the malicious captain and his wife fit into all this? Were they awaiting the arrival of our noble heroes? Surely the enemy cannot have foreseen them getting off the island the way they did?

He starts scanning the hold for clues – anything that could explain anything of this. When his gaze falls upon the unconscious bulk of Theresa, he shivers involuntarily. Putting aside his reservations, he frisks her but finds nothing of interest. He moves toward the back of the barge, where he finds the door to the captain's quarters slightly ajar.

Still on his guard, he opens the door and has a good look inside. To his left is a galley of sorts; at the back of the room are a number of elegant dressing-tables with an array of colorful flasks and gaudy boxes on them; to his right, the second half of the room is hidden from view by a wooden partition and a luxurious curtain.

He enters the room and closes the door behind him, noticing that it can be locked with two latches and a wooden bar. Ready for anything, he slides both latches in place and then stands motionless for a few moments. When he hears nothing other than his noble fellows on deck, he decides he is alone in the room. He subjects the galley to a quick inspection and finds Theresa's (low-quality) crossbow and a case of bolts, both of which he puts on his back. When he finds neither the galley nor the dressing-tables to contain much else of interest, he has a quick peek through the curtain.

Much to his surprise, he sees a young woman lying face down on a large bed, naked and with her hands and feet tied with black leather straps. Taking a sharp breath, he has another look around the room before turning his attention to the young woman. Still not knowing what to expect, he approaches carefully. When she doesn't react and turns out to be alive and in a deep sleep, he turns her on her back and is surprised to see that she is remarkably attractive. Taking care not to stare at her naked splendor too much, he draws his dagger, cuts the straps tying her hands and feet and then covers her with a blanket he finds on the floor.

He coughs audibly and then addresses the young woman, softly at first and then louder, but this fails to wake her up. Reluctant to prod her, he decides to start slapping her in the face, at length quite forcefully when his initial gentle administrations also fail. This finally seems to work and, with a loud gasp, the young woman opens her eyes. When she sees Navarre, she utters a startled shriek and pulls the blanket up to her chin.

"My Lady," our noble hero says, taking a step back and bowing elegantly. "No harm will come to you. You are under my protection."

The young woman regains her composure remarkably fast. Not your average damsel, Navarre thinks. He estimates her to be about his age, perhaps one or two years his senior.

"Who are you?," the young woman asks, with a hint of authority in her voice.

"My Lady," Navarre says, bowing once again. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Navarre Dauberval de Vergennes, acting Duke Dauberval, and I am at your service."

The young woman seems to consider this for a while, her eyes darting around the room.

"I see," she says eventually. "And what are you doing here?"

Navarre decides against telling her about the events of last night for now. Even though she seems to be unlike the noble damsels he is acquainted with, he cannot be sure that the poor girl's nerves would be able to take the shock. What's more, she might be able to provide him with some much needed information and he needs her with her full wits about.

"That will have to wait," he says rather more bluntly than he intended. "How did you end up here?"

The young woman hesitates for a moment and then informs him that she is a novice of Ilm, on her way to King's Island with an important message for the King. Two days ago, she had just arrived at a nearby Women's House when a group of soldiers turned up and started turning people away from the building. She managed to escape the building disguised as a pilgrim and boarded captain Clifford's barge yesterday in the company of some pilgrims.

At this point, Navarre rises and asks the novice to excuse him for a moment. He walks to a porthole to shore and opens it. Already some distance out, the *chevalier* and Sir Suvali are rowing the launch to the shore, blissfully unaware of the fact that the enemy is, indeed, everywhere.

"Sarazin, you oaf!," he yells. "Get back here! There has been a development!"

Sir Suvali starts urging the *chevalier* to turn the launch around and so Navarre closes the porthole and returns to the novice. She hasn't moved much but her eyes are darting around the cabin.

"Pardon the interruption, my Lady," our noble hero resumes, bowing elegantly again. "Pray continue."

The novice resumes her story and she says that the Coven of Ilm was raided about a week ago. Bandits entered the camp in an uncharacteristically coordinated fashion and seemingly intent only on getting the *Kettle of the Coven* as quickly as possible and then leave. The *Kettle of the Coven*, she explains, is a golden kettle that can reveal the future. It is a holy artifact of Ilm entrusted to the Coven, a secret order of priestesses of Ilm with no

fixed abode. The order counts some 50 women, who travel The Forest with some 50 servants and under the protection of 50 guards.

"Did these bandits identify themselves?," Navarre asks, forgetting his manners.

"There were bandits and soldiers," the novice says. "The soldiers wore metal armor featuring a black circle."

"The sign of Ulm!," Navarre exclaims, forgetting himself again before regaining his composure and deciding he might as well correct his current and earlier mistakes right here and now.

"My Lady," he continues. "Please forgive the interruption. Might I inquire as to your name?"

The novice looks at him uneasily.

"Er...," she begins. "Perhaps you'd best address me as novice."

"As you wish, my Lady," Navarre says. "Please, continue."

The novice continues her story. After the bandits left, the mistress of the Coven sent her away to inform the King of the attack. She eventually ended up at the Women's House, where events unfolded as related above.

"Animals!," she fumes, when she has finished. "They even refused the infirm and wounded access to the sanctuary! They should all be hanged!"

"An outrage," Navarre agrees, somewhat taken aback by the sudden outburst. "I assure you that the scoundrels will be punished to the full extent of the law!"

"All I remember after that is boarding this barge and retiring for the night," the novice concludes. "Until I woke up here, naked."

The image of the naked girl on the large bed of the weird maritime couple and with her hands and feet tied by what seemed to be purpose-made black leather straps reappears in Navarre's mind, immediately followed by a rather disconcerting thought.

"Erm...," he starts uneasily. "Are you... are you alright?"

"You mean apart from all this?," the novice asks sharply.

"Erm..., no..., I mean... yes," Navarre stammers. "No..., I mean, are you... unharmed?"

The novice doesn't seem to understand what he's on about.

Suddenly, someone starts banging on the door in an agitated fashion, and then Navarre registers the spirited exclamations of the *chevalier*.

"I say!," his noble friend hollers. "This won't do! Let me in!"

The novice startles.

"Allow me, my Lady," Navarre says, rising to his feet and moving to the door.

"*Allo?*" the *chevalier* continues. "Can you hear me!? Open this door!"

Navarre releases the latches and opens the door to look straight at the flushed face of the *chevalier*.

"My Lord," Navarre says. "Pray restrain yourself. You are in the presence of a lady."

"A Lady!?", the *chevalier* cries. "Out of the way, *mon cher!* She may be in distress!"

"Out of the question," Navarre says frostily. "I'll have you know that she is under my protection."

Behind his noble friend, the rest of our noble heroes are pushing to have a look into the room. But the *chevalier* will have nothing of it and turns around to stand his ground. Quietly, Navarre closes the door and slides both latches back in place again.

When he turns around, he sees the novice opening drawers in the tables against the back wall, the blanket wrapped carelessly around her body.

"Pray forgive my noble friends, my Lady," Navarre says. "It has been a difficult night."

"It sure has," the novice says, returning to the bed. "Perhaps you can tell me what happened exactly?"

Navarre informs her of the events of last night, taking care to omit any details he believes could discomfort or distress her.

"It would seem that the fate of the realm rests upon our shoulders," he concludes. "I assure you, my Lady, that there is no safer place for it."

The novice looks at him for a moment, apparently considering the statement.

"My Lady," our noble hero continues after some moments. "As I recall, you mentioned the raiders displaying the sign of Ulm? A black circle?"

"Certainly," the novice says. "And that's what is so strange about it. Ulm doesn't have a clergy – in fact, he only counts gravediggers and a handful of funeral bards among his followers."

"It is a mystery," Navarre muses in agreement. "Who can be behind this?"

Then the banging on the door resumes, once again followed by the strained exclamations of the *chevalier*.

"Madame! Are you alright? Navarre! Open this door this instant!"

Navarre stifles a sigh and gets to his feet.

"My Lady," he says, bowing again. "I shall retreat for a moment to allow you to make your toilet."

He steps back into the galley and closes the curtain. After some time – and after Navarre has heard several drawers and doors being opened and closed again – the novice appears wearing a pilgrim's robe. Meanwhile, the *chevalier's* cries and hammering have shown no sign of abating.

"My Lady," Navarre says, bowing slightly. "My compliments."

The novice takes a step forward and Navarre turns around to release the latches. Suddenly he thinks of something and turns to the novice again.

"Might I inquire as to whether you have found what you were looking for?," he asks.

"I was looking for my things," the novice says, after a moment's hesitation. "I have found them."

"Excellent," Navarre says, bowing to her to the sound of the *chevalier* banging on the door. "If you would allow me?"

With a flourish, he moves to the door, releases the latches, opens the door, and takes a step aside to present the novice to his noble fellows.

"Madame!," the *chevalier* cries before he can speak. "Scarlat de Sarazin, à votre service!"

He executes a grandiose gesture with which he also somehow manages to shove his noble fellows behind him out of the way.

"Stand aside, Messieurs," he cries, head down and waiting for the novice's hand. "Make way for the Lady!"

Introductions are made and the company retire to the cargo hold, where everybody is brought up to speed and an animated discussion ensues. Our noble heroes each seem to have their own idea of what is to be done next: some propose sailing up the Blue River to see what's going on at the mine; others suggest to go to Big Beach to stay ahead of the advancing enemy and see what can be done there; others want to travel to Mim, arguing that it may be the safest place right now; still others propose to get some horses as soon as possible; and yet others suggest returning to their respective duchies to gather the men left there and raise an army. The novice says that she prefers to go to Big Beach and once more displays great indignancy when she speaks of the events at the Women's House again.

Sir Oengus says he wants to load the barge with tar and flammable materials and send it back onto the lake when they disembark, rigged to catch fire when it reaches a point far away from the point of disembarkation.

"My dear fellow," Navarre says. "To what avail?"

"A distraction," Sir Oengus replies. "Create havoc in a location far, far away from where we actually are."

"But would that not create havoc when none need actually be created?," Navarre asks.

"Not if the scurvy swags are looking for us," Sir Oengus says.

"This is getting us nowhere," Sir Suvali cuts in. "We still have no idea what's going on. Is there someone left we can go to for information?"

"Loremaster Fist," the novice says. "In Big Beach."

"Why him?," Sir Suvali asks.

"Because he is a Loremaster," the novice says matter-of-factly. "Second only to Augustus Magister Rex."

"Can we get a message to him?," Sir Suvali asks.

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"A letter? A message?"

"Why should we?," the novice says. "It's four days to Big Beach. We'll get there before any letter can."

"Aye," says Sir Oengus. "And a letter can be intercepted and we wouldn't even know about it. Perhaps we should talk to the bargemen. They have a foolproof system to relay messages."

In the end, it is unanimously decided that, as long as our noble heroes have no clue as to what is actually going on, the best course of action will be to try and raise an army. But where? Nisibis, Weald, and Wyrns, which all border the Blue River, seem compromised and by now Dara and perhaps even Thuxra may also be in trouble, too. Mim seems a long shot anyway, not only because of its impoverished state but also because it would take a considerable time to reach since it has no river fronts.

"What's more," Navarre argues. "We may not be able to ensure the cooperation of men in duchies where we have no authority. My Lords, I put it to you that Dauberval is the best option. No disturbing news has come from there and it has no borders on the Blue River. It is remote and we can rally my men at the castle."

"Fi!," the *chevalier* exclaims. "That... *bâtisse*? How? On foot? Ridiculous! We shall sail to Sarazin, organize some horses and ride out to battle! To glory! *À la mort!*"

"My dear Lord Duke," Navarre says. "Although I applaud your courage, I would argue that the five of us would stand but a small chance against the forces the enemy will bring to the field."

In the end, a compromise is reached and it is decided that our noble heroes will sail to Sarazin first. Its capital is the first civilized location on the River Dusk anyway and it would be the most likely place to get some horses before traveling on to Dauberval.

"Excellent," Navarre says, quite pleased with himself now that most of his own suggestions have been translated into a course of action. "Now. My Lady, is there anywhere we can take you before all this?"

"I would like to go to Big Beach," the novice says.

"Then it is settled!" Navarre proclaims. "My Lords. We shall take the Lady novice to Big Beach and then set forth to reclaim The Forest!"

"What?," Sir Oengus says. "Big Beach?"

"Your manners, Sir!," Navarre exclaims. "May I remind you that the Lady is in distress?"

"I won't sail hubward when rimward is where I want to go," Sir Oengus declares. "It is absurd and the risk is too high. Wasn't it you, 'Sir', who argued against going to Big Beach because it would give the enemy too much time to do things?"

"Surely, Sir, you cannot suggest the Lady travel to Big Beach unattended?," Navarre asks frostily.

"You can go with her if you like," Sir Oengus says.

But Sir Oengus eventually gives in, his occasional *penchant* for contrariness satisfied, and it is agreed that our noble heroes will escort the novice to Big Beach before they head for Sarazin.

"Parley's over," Sir Oengus declares. "I'll get to changing the appearance of the barge."

When he has gone, the novice speaks.

"I will pay you for this," she says. "When I left the Coven, the mistress gave me some rare and expensive salves and herbs. I will give half of them to you."

Both the *chevalier* and Navarre jump to their feet, flushing. Navarre is the first to speak.

"My dear Lady!," he exclaims. "Not a word, I implore you! It is our duty!"

"These remedies are extremely rare and precious," the novice says. "They are a fitting payment for what you have done for Ilm! and for what is to come."

"*Madame!*," the *chevalier* cries. "We shall speak of this no more!"

But the novice will not be swayed and she produces some of her salves and herbs and so, as a result, Sir Oerknal, who suffered badly in the nightly attempt on his life, regains most of his hit points (*Ilm's ointment*; 4 doses left; **SEE ILLUSTRATION #8**).

When this is done, the company search the barge. From the various dressing-tables in the captain's cabin, they retrieve an assortment of costly perfumes, powders, and similar items of *maquillage*, as well as considerable collection of quite expensive jewelry and other precious knickknacks. Underneath the bed, they find 54 pilgrim's robes; a selection of strangling scarves with thin steel wires woven into the fabric; a variety of ropes, manacles, hoods, and leather straps; a bag with 900 copper coins; a bag with 90 silver coins; a pouch with 9 gold coins; and some 170 sachets and seals, 20 of which contain a coarse, white granular powder. The remainder contain what seems to be a mixture of dried, sweet-smelling herbs.

"That's gold," Sir Oerknal announces, grinning sheepishly and pointing to the nine gold coins when everything has been laid out on the cargo hold floor. "Can I keep it? It's not greed or anything... more like a tradition."

Some time later, our noble heroes also find ten bottles of very expensive wine in a locked box in the galley, of which the *chevalier* instantly takes control. After inspecting the bottles and making all the proper noises, he uncorks one of them with a flourish and fills some glasses.

"*Messieurs,*" he exclaims. "*Champagne!*"

It has to be said that this greatly lifts the spirits of our noble heroes and perhaps mostly so in the case of Navarre and the *chevalier* – ever since the Academy, it has been this noble duo who have proven to be the most appreciative of the finer things in life. The noble duo spend some time savoring the wine with much rolling of eyes, pouting of lips, splendid gesturing and appropriate guffawing, before magnanimously dismissing their little *tête-à-tête* at the door to the captain's cabin.

"Well played, *monsieur,*" the *chevalier* says, emptying his glass. "Well played."

Navarre uncorks another bottle and generously provides his noble friend with a new glass of wine before grabbing another glass from the counter and returning to the cargo hold. Here, he spots the novice seated with the rest of his noble fellows and playing with the various perfumes, creams, and powders from the dressing-

tables.

He swiftly fills the extra glass and gracefully moves to her side, smiling in a most charming manner. "My Lady," he purrs, presenting the glass of wine to the beautiful novice. "Lillac?"

List: Silver necklace with a silver acorn pendant; *mage vest*; assortment of expensive perfumes, powders, and other items of *maquillage* (10 gp); a large collection of quite expensive jewelry and precious knickknacks (20 gp); 54 sets of pilgrim's robes; a selection of strangling scarves with thin steel wires woven into the fabric; a variety of ropes, manacles, hoods, and leather straps; a bag with 900 copper coins; a bag with 90 silver coins; a pouch with 9 gold coins; 20 seals containing a coarse, white granular powder (a stimulant of powdered root; effects like caffeine); 150 sachets of herbal sleep tea (as *Sleep*; waking requires slapping); 10 bottles of very expensive wine (30 gp); 4 doses of *Illm's ointment*; one potion (some boosting effect; up to 6 doses, with each dose shortening the duration of each application, down to a minimum of 1 hour each)

¹⁾ As the evening proceeds, some questions posed by the PCs lead to the following information:

1. Both the Duke of Mim and the Duke of Blurh and their entourages have not shown up for the Fortnight, which is not unusual in either case. The Duke of Mim has not made an appearance for the past two years. His duchy, not being located on one of the main rivers, is one of the poorest of The Forest and it is commonly believed that he simply cannot afford to pay for the trip. The Duke of Blurh hasn't attended the festivities for some three years and he has cited "trouble at the mine" as the reason for his absence this year.
2. Although most nobles travel to the Fortnight in grand style, only some members of their extensive entourages are actually invited onto the island proper – barons are allowed three invites, dukes seven. All others remain on the shore, staying in camps, inns, boarding houses, and the barrows of friends and family.
3. There are currently several hundreds of nobles on the island (300-400 in total), about the same number of servants, and about the same number of soldiers. Soldiers are stationed along the coast in groups of two, each some 100 yards apart. It seems that this is a standard precaution against small-scale bandit raids, which have occurred in the past.
4. The King commands two companies of 50 knights which take turns patrolling the realm and act much like a mobile police force. While one is on patrol, the other remains at the Military Academy.
5. Augustus Magister Rex does not appear to be quite up to "keeping an eye" on our noble heroes. Indeed, his actions have so far comprised little more than *stating* that he would and he gives the impression that he wouldn't put up much of a fight if our noble heroes were to wander off. Therefore, it is perhaps a sense of shame and maybe a fear of running into the parents of the unfortunate damsels some of them sent into the water rather than the presence of the eminent Rector that keeps our noble heroes at their table.

An Adventure in Five Acts
Part III
Act II: Spelevaren op de grote rivier¹⁾

In which the DM repeatedly ignores Navarre's references to the last sentence of "Act I" and finally informs our gallant knight that the session starts with the novice urging the party to get a move on instead.

"The sun is rising," she says. "We should get to Big Beach as soon as possible."

Indeed, the morning rain has passed and the first light is shining through the portholes.

"As you wish, *Madame*," the *chevalier* says, exiting the galley somewhat unsteadily. "Oengus! How do we move this thing?"

"It requires people," Sir Oengus says.

"Splendid!" the *chevalier* cries. "All hands on deck, then! Now, if you will excuse me, I shall retreat for the night. *Madame, messieurs, good night!*"

With this, he climbs into one of the hammocks and starts snoring loudly.

Sir Oengus reminds his noble fellows that he wants some work done before he will raise anchor. When Sir Oerknal says that he is still a bit shaken from the attempt on his life and that he will get some sleep as well, Sir Suvali suggests he take the captain's cabin, what with him being the King and all.

Navarre jumps to his feet.

"Your manners, Sir!" he cries. With an elegant bow, he turns to the novice: "My Lady, allow me to escort you to your cabin."

With the novice thus safely in the captain's cabin – alone – and the *chevalier* and Sir Oerknal in their hammocks, Navarre climbs to the deck, where Sir Suvali and Sir Oengus are busy rearranging things. When Sir Oengus notices him, he holds out the barge's nameplate.

"Any suggestions?," he grins. "*The Lovely Theresa?*"

"You jest, Sir," Navarre says testily. "How about *The Holy Angelina?*"

Although he realizes that his noble fellow cannot understand the reference, Navarre still looks at him with a pretty pleased look on his face.

"*Varis* it be!," Sir Oengus says, in a fine reference of his own.

Navarre has to laugh and congratulates his noble fellow on the name (**SEE ILLUSTRATION #9**). Then, he leaves his noble fellows to it and turns his attention to the shore, where he notices at least six or seven columns of smoke. Once more, he marvels at the sheer scale of the enemy operation.

After some time, with the morning mist lifting, Sir Oengus and Sir Suvali raise the anchor. The *Varis* is not the only vessel *en route* to Lake River today. Vessels of all kinds are on the move and Navarre hails some of them for news. But nobody seems able to come up with anything useful and he presently finds the exertions of last night beginning to take their toll. Not wanting to go to sleep yet, he asks Sir Suvali about the stimulants from the captain's cabin. The sorcerer brews him some tea and, soon, our noble hero feels a bit like he's drank way too much coffee. He continues hailing vessels, hoping for news and any nobles who could have survived the massacre. However, he doesn't get much more than that "folk be sayin' as that the King be dead".

It isn't much later, just after the mist has gone, when the *Varis* reaches Lake River. The river is some 100 yards wide at this point and most vessels have started steering to the right, into what Sir Oengus explains is a deeper part of the river. As the *Varis* gets ever further downstream, buildings start making way for unspoiled forests and soon both banks of the river are hidden by the dense foliage of a mangrove-like forest. Flocks of birds soar overhead and all manner of other wildlife move in the water and among the trees. Soon, all signs of human habitation – mostly simple wooden jetties serving perhaps a handful of barrows or sheds – have all but disappeared.

Some time after seven o'clock, Sir Suvali happens to be in the hold when the murderous Theresa comes round.

"Sire!," he yells. "She's woken up!"

Sir Oerknal gets to his feet but doesn't say much, even when the woman starts yelling at him and the sorcerer.

"Thieves!," she screams. "Where's my husband? Get me out of these ropes! What are you doing with my barge?"

"Shut up," Sir Suvali says. "Why did you try to murder the King?"

"The King!?", the woman scoffs. "That creature? Don't make me laugh! It is not human!"

Neither Sir Suvali nor Sir Oerknal say much to this and the interrogation doesn't really lead anywhere. In the end, Sir Suvali feeds the woman some of her own sleep-inducing tea and soon she is sound asleep again.

The next couple of hours pass without much incident, the occasional jetty coming and going. Sir Suvali completes an inventory of the barge and finds that there are some forty man-days worth of supplies on board.

About an hour before midday, the *Varis* approaches the burnt-out shell of a large barge run aground close to the right bank. Numbers of people seem to be retrieving all kinds of things from it and launches move to and fro. When they get closer, our noble heroes notice what must be more than a dozen bodies under white sheets on the riverbank.

"Hmm...", Navarre says to Sir Oengus at the wheel. "It would seem that that barge was sailing in our direction. Perhaps we should try and find out who was on it."

"I won't drop anchor but I'll get us a bit closer," Sir Oengus says.

He steers the *Varis* closer to the shore and presently Navarre hails a man in a small launch.

"Ho! Over there!," he hollers. "Who are they?"

"Piss off!," the man yells back.

"Nice man," Sir Oengus says. "Best let it be. Don't blow our cover and all that."

The journey continues with Navarre, Sir Oengus, Sir Oerknal, and Sir Suvali on deck and the *chevalier* and the novice still sound asleep below decks. Some two hours after midday, Sir Oengus announces that he is getting tired and drops anchor at a jetty with a few shacks and what seems to be a tavern. He asks Sir Suvali to go ashore and get some ropes and clothes.

"You people stick out like sore thumbs," Sir Oengus says. "You need to get changed."

"Me?," Sir Suvali asks.

"Listen here, lubber," Sir Oengus says. "Someone's gotta go get the stuff and it's not gonna be the peacock or the King here. We need to stay low."

"Agreed," Sir Suvali says. "But perhaps you'd better come as well. You do speak the lingo better than I do."

Sir Oengus gives in and he is the first to get into the launch. When Sir Suvali is halfway down the rope ladder, he notices that the sorcerer is still wearing his own clothes.

"Ahoy!," he yells at him. "What did I say about peacocks?"

The sorcerer throws him an uneasy glance.

"Peacock?," he asks. "Me?"

"Look at yourself, man!," Sir Oengus hollers. "Do you look like a bargeman?"

"No," Sir Suvali replies. "I thought you could be the skipper and I the paying passenger?"

"If you want to stay alive on my barge, you will dress as I say," Sir Oengus yells.

The sorcerer looks up at Sir Oerknal on deck as if expecting some kind of support but the creature only shrugs its shoulders. He decides to swallow his pride and returns to the hold to change into the robes of a pilgrim.

When he gets to the launch some time later, Sir Oengus extends his hand.

"Mighty noble of you," he says.

Navarre decides to get some rest.

The tavern turns out to be little more than a ramshackle collection of planks, poles, and beams and there's only a handful of elderly locals in the common room. When the noble duo enter, a rather plain-looking woman approaches.

"Welcome," she says. "What can I do for you?"

"Splice the mainbrace, me beauty!," Sir Oengus hollers, turning on the charm. "Two tankards of yer best brew and a bit of yer parley-voov if I ye'll allow me!"

The woman brings a jug of ale and a couple of mugs and pours the ale. Sir Oengus takes a great swig of the ale.

"Cor blimey!," he exclaims, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. "A fine brew as ever I saw! But non' as fine as yer deadlights, me beauty! To be sure!"

The woman doesn't blink an eye – perhaps she gets this all the time.

"Aye, me pretty lass," Sir Oengus continues. "Mayhap as ye can sees me to some long clothes and a length of yer best hempen?"

"Rope? Clothes? How much rope?"

"A cable's length, if ye'll be so kind me beauty!"

"I could get you some rope, maybe twenty feet," the woman says. "Clothes? No."

"Thunder!," Sir Oengus says. "Here be me getting these pilgrims to Big Beach and as sure's I turns me back the scallywags use me best hempen to belay their togs to the mast! Never too fast to be sure and into the lake as Boreas blowin'!"

The woman turns to an old man and instructs him to bring her the rope.

"Twenty feet it be," Sir Oengus resumes, when the woman turns to face him again. "Now, me beauty, fill'em to the brim's a deuce I says. Hey! How's about last night, 'ey?"

"Last night?," the woman says, filling the mugs.

"Apple Island!," Sir Oengus exclaims. "Nobody be sayin' naught to ye?"

"The fancy folk?," the woman asks. "What about it?"

"Well blow me down!," Sir Oengus exclaims. "All hands be bletherin' about it! 't Was pillage and plunder! Gave no quarter I hears! Ye heard naught at all?"

"There's talk of some riders passing by this morning rain," the woman says.

"What course, me lass?," Sir Oengus asks.

"Folk say they were headed for the coast," the woman says.

"Who be these lubbers?"

"Who do you think?," the woman scoffs. "Fancy folk. Three sheets in the wind, no doubt!"

"There is a new King," Sir Suvali suddenly says. "A changeling."

"What?," the woman says, casting him a startled glance.

"The King," Sir Suvali says. "He is a changeling and he will retake the Kingdom."

"Have they gone mad?!," the woman exclaims. "A changeling king? You've got to be joking!"

"There has been a revolution!," Sir Suvali proclaims. "The King will prevail!"

Now, with the old man returning with a 20-foot rope, more folk in the room are looking at the noble duo.

"Avast, pilgrim!," Sir Oengus hollers, kicking the sorcerer under the table. "Ye be 'ere to pick up me tab, not steal me parley-voo!"

He turns toward the woman again and flashes her a lewd smile: "What be yer finest, me beauty? What says as you and me swigs us a nipperkin or two?"

The woman disappears behind the bar and returns with a stoneware bottle and two small glasses. She fills the glasses and goes back to the bar, leaving the bottle on the table. Sir Oengus raises his glass to her and is about to speak again when a loud voice booms at him from across the room.

"Moon! By Olm! Is that you?"

Much to their surprise, the noble duo see Sir Eber Ard Weald entering the tavern.

"We're out of here," Sir Suvali says, putting some coins on the table and swiftly getting to his feet.

"Eber! You old picaroon!," Sir Oengus yells, turning to the woman again. "Ahoy, me beauty! Another one over 'ere!"

"Now!," the sorcerer says urgently, grabbing his noble fellow by the arm and dragging him to the exit. "Take the rope!"

And so the noble duo hastily leave the tavern, Sir Suvali covertly gesturing Sir Eber to follow them.

Sir Eber, who seems to have been delayed to such an extent that he has managed to miss the entire Fortnight, shakes his head and follows his noble fellows back to the *Varis*. When they are almost there, Sir Suvali turns around.

"Don't recognize me, do you?," he says to the ranger, evidently quite pleased with himself. "I'm in disguise!"

When our three noble heroes board the *Varis* again, they find Sir Oerknal and the *chevalier* on deck, the latter waving a glass of wine at them when he spots them.

"Surprise!," Sir Oengus yells. "Look who we found."

"*Bravo!*," the *chevalier* cries, without registering Sir Eber at all. He has been awake since midday and it seems that he hasn't yet eaten a thing.

"I say!," he starts. "Who is in charge of breakfast? It has been hours! Some viands, perhaps?"

"In the galley," Sir Oengus replies.

"*Mon cher!*," the *chevalier* cries, perhaps unfamiliar with the concept. "What do you mean?"

"Make some porridge," Sir Oengus replies. "You know, pans, pots."

The *chevalier* seems confused.

"Pans? Porridge? Why... I suppose one could make do with porridge but... how does one go about making it?"

"With beer," Sir Oerknal says.

Both Sir Eber and Sir Oengus burst out laughing and the *chevalier* throws them an uneasy glance.

"Perhaps we could wake up the cook?," he ventures, gesturing to where Theresa is still held in a drugged stupor below.

But then Sir Eber heartily slams the *chevalier* on the back.

"Scaralat!," he yells. "You old buffoon! Haven't changed one bit, I see! How's tricks?"

It is only now that the *chevalier* seems to recognize the ranger.

"Eber!," he exclaims. "Is that you? Wherever have you been? *Mon ami!* Speak, I implore you!"

The ranger mumbles something about preferring forests to parties on islands and turns out to be wholly unaware of what has happened on Apple Island. With Sir Suvali and Sir Oengus already getting the *Varis* going again, the *chevalier* and Sir Oerknal bring Sir Eber up to speed.

At dusk, the *Varis* drops anchor at another jetty. After preparing the barge for the night, Sir Oengus and Sir Suvali descend into the hold, where the novice and their noble fellows are gathered around a meal. When everybody has eaten and the *chevalier* and Navarre have consumed yet another bottle of the excellent wines, Navarre proposes that someone go ashore to see what news there is of Big Beach.

But no one volunteers and so our noble hero decides to go himself. He gets into the launch and rows to the shore, where he finds some ramshackle huts and sheds and a small timber structure he assumes to be the tavern. He finds the place full of locals, who eye him for a second before resuming their conversation. He walks over to the counter and asks the barman for a mug of his best ale.

"What news from Big Beach?," he asks, when the man pours him some ale from a jug on the counter.

"Word is there's been some trouble," the barman says.

"What kind of trouble?," Navarre asks, fearing the worst. "When?"

"Riots," the barman says.

"What happened?"

"Bwoa," the barman says. "Word is some scum looted parts of the town."

"Scum?," Navarre asks. "Bandits?"

"Nah," the barman says. "Scum. Another one?"

Navarre nods and the barman fills his mug again.

When the man turns out to know nothing more about what happened in Big Beach, Navarre decides to let the matter rest – he doesn't know who's who in the tavern and he doesn't want to attract attention to himself. He finishes his ale, puts a coin on the counter and leaves the tavern, mumbling goodnight to the assembled villagers. He hasn't moved twenty yards when he runs into the *chevalier* and most of the others, all wearing pilgrim's robes.

"Ah! *Mon cher!*," the *chevalier* cries, obviously quite inebriated. "Just the man! We're off to buy some horses!"

"You're what?," Navarre asks, anxiously looking back at the tavern. "And then what?"

"*Je suis chevalier!*," the *chevalier* exclaims, assuming a grand pose.

"My Lord Duke," Navarre says. "I would remind you that we are traveling incognito."

"*Fil!*," the *chevalier* cries. "Out of my way, *mon cher!*"

And with that, he shoves past Navarre and enters the tavern.

"Hasn't changed a bit, has he?," Sir Eber says.

Navarre straightens his back.

"I'm not sure what you mean," he says stiffly.

"No matter," the ranger says. "Maybe you can tell me why we're going to Big Beach when the action is on Apple Island?"

"We are escorting a Lady, Sir," Navarre says.

"In the wrong direction," Sir Eber says. "I say we start killing people."

"That's what I said," Oerknal joins in. "Throw the bitch overboard and get on with it."

Not for the first time, Navarre is beginning to wonder whether appointing Sir Oerknal as the new King may have been a mistake, especially since the creature's behavior has taken a definite turn for the worse in the past few days. He decides to ignore the remark and informs his noble fellows that they will certainly "start killing people" after the novice has been delivered to safety. But Sir Eber isn't easily swayed.

"There's sure to be messengers getting from Big Beach to the island," he says. "I say we head into the forest, hunt them down and get some answers."

"I'm afraid I must insist," Navarre says. "I have given the Lady my word."

"Bah!," Sir Eber says. "Don't you want to know what's going on?"

"Certainly," Navarre says. "Information is the one thing we seem unable to get. However, heading into the forest and waiting for some messengers to turn up seems to be a bit of a wild goose chase to me, if not an outright waste of precious time."

"Messengers, soldiers, scouts, anything," the ranger says, flexing his muscles.

"Perhaps the magnitude of the task at hand escapes you, Sir," Navarre says. "I remind you that we are faced with an enemy with the capacity to strike in force and in many places at once. I assure you that I have seen

these forces with my own eyes and I do not hesitate to admit that the six of us would not stand much of a chance in an encounter with even a single unit of these soldiers."

"Have a little faith," the ranger says. "But we can target only messengers and scouts if you want."

"To what purpose?," Navarre asks. "Spend days, weeks in a forest in the hopes of some suitable target turning up and then what? Learn things we would also learn if we proceed with our plan? I say we keep to what was agreed. Regroup, assemble an army. Then ride into battle."

"I didn't agree to anything," Sir Eber says. "We must move against the enemy as soon as possible. Oerknal here agrees."

"I'm sure he does," Navarre says, with another doubtful look at the creature.

The discussion continues like this for some time until Navarre finally tires of it. Just when he is about to excuse himself, the tavern door is thrown open and the *chevalier* emerges, some locals scrambling to keep up with him.

"*Messieurs!*," the *chevalier* cries. "*Aux chevaux!*"

Navarre heads back to the *Varis* and climbs into his hammock. So much for getting to Big Beach unnoticed.

Back on the shore, his noble fellows actually manage to buy a horse and even succeed in getting it on board, eventually.

Around midnight, Theresa wakes up again. When she starts screaming again and refuses to shut up, Sir Suvali feeds her some more of her own tea, sending her back to sleep.

One hour after midnight, Sir Eber, on deck to keep watch, hears some more riders pass in the forest close to the shore.

Day 3: Navarre wakes up to the smell of bacon and eggs. The novice has been preparing a hearty breakfast and presently the *chevalier* compliments her on her efforts.

"*Madame!*," he cries. "I have not enjoyed such an excellent breakfast in ages! It goes splendidly with the *Lillac!*"

After breakfast, Sir Oengus and Sir Suvali get the *Varis* moving again and the day passes uneventfully until later that afternoon (16.00 hrs), when our noble heroes spot what appears to be blockade downstream. Two groups of three large barges tied together extend some way into the river, one to each side, effectively blocking both fairways. Several boats and launches are in the water and barges are cuing up to either side, their decks crawling with soldiers.

Navarre, who is on deck enjoying one of the excellent bottles of wine with the *chevalier*, gets to his feet and notices the banners of Palava on one side of the river and those of Bagabuxsha on the other (**SEE ILLUSTRATION #10**).

"Gentlemen," he says. "Soldiers ahead."

Sir Oengus is already slowing down the *Varis* and presently a small pinnacle approaches. Some soldiers are in it, yelling and waving their arms.

"Hove-to!," they holler. "To the side!"

Navarre exchanges a look with Sir Oengus, who starts steering the *Varis* closer to the shore.

"Stay there and see what they want," Sir Oengus says to Navarre. "Everybody else get down behind the railing and keep your weapons down! We don't know what side they are on!"

"I'd better get below decks," Sir Oerknal says. "What with all these humanoids about and all that."

"Good thinking," Sir Suvali calls after him. "And make sure the fat cow doesn't start screaming again."

When the pinnacle comes close enough, Navarre clearly recognizes the men on it as Palavan soldiers.

"Palava!," he shouts. "Who is in command?"

"Captain Belenos, in the name of Palava," one of the men in the pinnacle shouts. "Prepare to be boarded!"

"There shall be no boarding!," Navarre yells back at him. "We bring news from Apple Island and there is no time to lose!"

"I have my orders!," captain Belenos yells. "We will search the barge!"

"You shall do nothing of the sort, captain!," Navarre shouts. "I am Navarre Ard Dauberval. Stand down your men!"

This seems to throw the captain for a bit and, by the time the answer comes, the pinnacle is close enough for people to stop shouting at each other.

"It is for your own safety, my Lord," the captain says, after a good look at Navarre. "I will need to make sure there's no one hiding below decks with a knife to someone's throat."

"That is very considerate of you, captain," Navarre says. "I assure you that nothing of the sort is going on. You have my word."

Then the *chevalier* gets up from behind the railing.

"*Mon capitaine!*," he cries. "What news of the riders who passed this way?"

"They were the King's men, Sir," captain Belenos says. "They were headed for Big Beach."

"The King's men?," the *chevalier* asks. "How so?"

"I have been informed that they managed to break out of the fortress before the enemy could surround it, Sir."

"*Mon cher!*," the *chevalier* cries at Navarre. "There is still hope! The cavalry has survived!"

"Is there any news as to who is behind all of this, captain?," Navarre asks.

"They were professional soldiers and bandits, my Lord," the captain says. "The soldiers were unlike anyone has ever seen. They wore iron plating and wielded pole-axes."

"Any banners?"

"The soldiers displayed a black circle," the captain says.

"Who currently speaks for Palava?," Navarre asks.

"It is Lord Corwin, my Lord," the captain says. "Second nephew to the Duke."

"Where can I find him?"

"The fortress, my Lord," the captain says. "At the next jetty."

"Thank you, captain," Navarre says. "Carry on!"

The *Varis* is allowed through and soon reaches the next jetty. Sir Oengus drops anchor and remains on board with the novice while the rest of our noble heroes disembark. Navarre sets out to commandeer a horse and when he locates a soldier riding one, the *chevalier* comes galloping by.

"See you at the fortress, *mon cher!*," he cries, inciting his new horse to an even greater speed.

After some unexpected resistance, the soldier agrees to lend Navarre his horse on the condition that he will return it to him. Navarre gives him his word as a matter of course and mounts up just when Sir Suvali, Sir Oerknal, and Sir Eber appear.

When the noble quartet get to the fortress some time later, they notice the *chevalier* at the gate – still on horseback and obviously furious. A seneschal appears when they approach.

"A thousand pardons, my Lords," the seneschal says, bowing to the assembled noble heroes. "If you would follow me?"

"*L'impudence!*," the *chevalier* exclaims, before charging into the courtyard. "You have not heard the last of this, *monsieur!*"

Navarre dismounts, hands his horse to a stable boy and, moments later, our noble heroes finds themselves in a large hall where many nobles and military men are gathered at tables arranged around a large central fire. Without further ado, Navarre takes off his gloves and addresses the assembly.

"My Lords," he starts. "Barons..."

"...ladies," Sir Oerknal whispers behind him.

"... my Ladies," Navarre continues, annoyed that the creature has caught him out. "The King is dead."

Cries of indignation and disbelief follow and Navarre waits for the consternation to die down.

"I assure you this is true, my Lords," he continues. "I have seen him die with my own eyes."

More consternation follows until Sir Corwin rises and calls for silence.

"What news of my uncle?," he asks.

"His fate is unknown," Navarre says. "As is that of all others on Apple Island."

Sir Corwin takes a moment to consider this and then invites our noble heroes to his table, where they are treated to some excellent food and drink. They are asked many questions and take their time to answer them as best they can. In turn, Sir Corwin informs them that he has rallied the soldiers of Palava and that he and a number of Bagabuxshan barons have blocked the river to ensure that no one gets past unchecked. He also tells them that he has sent heralds and messengers to all duchies, to bring news of what happened and to ask for their support.

"*Monsieur!*," the *chevalier* says. "I assure you that House Sarazin is wholly at your service."

As the evening proceeds, the *chevalier*, Sir Oengus, and Navarre find themselves evaluating the events of the last couple of days with the assembled Palavan courtiers and officers, discussing organizing defenses, raising armies, and moving against the enemy as soon as possible. They also learn that some 30 of the King's men broke out of the Military Academy and managed to keep around 40 horses out of the hands of the enemy. Sir Suvali, Sir Oerknal, and Sir Eber do not speak much during most of this. The latter two have taken seats next to each other at the back of the hall and do not seem to approve of the way their noble fellows handle things.

"Look at them," Sir Eber says to the creature at some point. "Strutting their stuff and eating and drinking like fat geese. Blah, blah, blah."

"Hell, yeah," Sir Oerknal replies, in what is perhaps best described as a bit of an anachronism. "Why waste all this time? We should be killing people."

When the conversation turns to who may be behind the attack again, Navarre suddenly remembers the murderous Theresa. He gets to his feet.

"My Ladies, Lords," he says. "Barons. Perhaps our prisoner can shed some light on the subject. Lord Corwin, I would ask to bring her before you."

Moments later, Theresa is brought into the hall, presenting an even sorrier sight than usual. She is on her knees, hands tied behind her back, face still swollen and blue from Sir Oerknal's blows, hair in disarray, paint running down her face, and smelling as if she hasn't been allowed to relieve herself properly for quite some time.

"My Ladies, my Lords," Navarre starts. "Barons. I bring this wretched creature before you to be judged for her misdeeds. Woman! Are you ready to be tried by your betters?"

"Silence!," he roars, when Theresa starts to speak. "You shall speak when spoken to!"

He turns to Sir Corwin again and continues: "My Lord. I, Navarre Ard Dauberval, acting Duke Dauberval, charge this woman with the unlawful holding of a servant of Ilm, with causing distress to a Lady, with assaulting five peers of the realm, and with the attempted murder of one of the King's servants. My Lord?"

"Grave charges, indeed," Sir Corwin agrees. "What say you to this, woman?"

"I am innocent!," Theresa yells. "The girl is a thief! These people have stolen my barge!"

"Do you dare call a servant of Ilm a thief, miscreant?," Navarre says, glowering at the woman.

"She's a thief! She came aboard my barge illegally! She didn't pay for her passage!"

"That is no excuse to compromise her dignity and leave her tied to a bed unattended," Navarre says.

"I had to protect myself! She could have been hiding a weapon! I was afraid she would escape!"

"I remind you that you speak of a servant of Ilm!," Navarre roars. "I assure you, creature, that I shall not allow you to speak of the Lady in this manner much longer!"

"She's a thief," Theresa whimpers.

"Do you deny that you drugged myself and my peers with a herbal tea?," Sir Suvali cuts in.

"I do! I didn't drug anybody!"

"Lies!," Sir Suvali yells. "I have examined the tea myself and found it to contain various sleep-inducing herbs."

"Fine!," Theresa yells back. "The tea has some soothing qualities! But nothing like you suggest!"

"And what of your attempt on the King's life?," the sorcerer continues. "Do you deny this as well?"

"He is an abomination!," Theresa yells. "I don't want monsters on my barge!"

"Your excuses bore this court, woman," Navarre says, tiring of the whole thing and rising to his feet again.

"Now... I put it to you that you aided and abetted traitors to the Crown! Isn't it true, Madam, that you ferried soldiers to the island? I remind you that the penalty for this is death by hanging."

This *does* get the attention of the disheveled woman.

"No!," she cries, clasping her hands. "I didn't see any soldiers! We took to the water at the first sign of trouble! I saw no one! I swear on my poor mother's grave!"

There is profound change in the woman's voice and demeanor: she is now markedly less defiant than she was until now and she obviously does not want to be accused of aiding and abetting the enemy at all costs.

Navarre concludes that she and captain Clifford probably did not ferry any soldiers to the island and decides to leave the proceedings to Sir Corwin. He leans back in his chair and gestures a servant for more wine. As a result, he doesn't register what eventually happens to the murderous captain's wife, although she is not on the *Varis* the next day.

When the meeting draws to a close, Navarre and the *chevalier* – who has been drinking heavily – accept Sir Corwin's invitation to spend the night at the barrow. The others return to the *Varis*, but not after Oerknal presents Sir Suvali with four dogs he has bought from someone.

When the noble trio board the *Varis* and inform Sir Oengus of the events at the fortress, the latter turns out to have spent the evening convincing himself once again that he doesn't want to go to Big Beach.

"It's madness!," he yells to Sir Suvali. "The whole country is under attack and we're here holding some girl's hand! I will turn this barge around first thing tomorrow and sail for Nisibis!"

Fortunately, the sorcerer manages to convince him to stick to the plan.

Day 4: Navarre and the *chevalier* take their leave of Sir Corwin and head back to the jetty at first light, where Navarre returns his horse to its owner. When the noble duo are back on board, the novice approaches.

"What happened?," she asks impatiently. "I need to know everything!"

Navarre informs her of the events of last night, as always taking care to avoid any details he considers to be of an upsetting nature. But the novice's rather violent notions on what should be done with the enemy surprise him once again.

"They must hang!," she exclaims at some point. "All of them! How dare they murder their betters!"

Otherwise, the day passes rather uneventfully and Navarre and the *chevalier* enjoy another bottle or two of the expensive wines. In what seems to be moment of weakness, the *chevalier* admits to having difficulty coming to terms with what he saw on the island.

"*L'effroi!*," he exclaims at some point. "*Mon cher! La horreur!* I shall forever be haunted by it!"

Too polite to expand on what is surely a fleeting moment of weakness, Navarre says nothing. He hasn't allowed himself to think about the matter much, instead focusing on the matters at hand.

For the rest of the day, Navarre continues hailing barges from time to time but his attempts to get some information about what happened in Big Beach do not lead to much more than already knows. Most people he talks to seem to think that the town's beggars and thieves went on a rampage and that that was that.

"A diversion, perhaps?," the *chevalier* suggests.

Day 5: Late in the afternoon, just when Navarre and the *chevalier* are about to finish the last of the expensive wines, Sir Oengus announces that Big Beach approaches (**SEE ILLUSTRATION #11**). Indeed, the river has widened to some 150 yards and the forests have given way to a dune-like landscape with rocky outcroppings. Sandbanks and pebble-strewn islets have appeared in the river, forcing Sir Oengus to steer the *Varis* through ever narrower fairways.

Downstream, our noble heroes can see much farther into the distance than they could so far and they presently look out over a vast, open area underneath a cloudy sky. The traffic has increased notably, with all manner of vessels gathering around scores of jetties on islets and both banks of the river. Buildings appear everywhere, a mixture of all sorts of barrows, wooden structures, and even some stone buildings, many of them obviously dedicated to the maritime trade: there are boathouses, small docks, net-makers, salters. Far ahead, on the beach, are two enormous vessels unlike our noble heroes have ever seen, as well as more wooden structures and constructs. Judging by the number of buildings they see, our noble heroes estimate that Big Beach may be home to perhaps as much as 5,000 permanent residents.

Sir Oengus steers the *Varis* into the island-strewn area and now our noble heroes have their first comprehensive view of the beach. It seems to run some two kilometers to the sea and stretches as far as they can see from dawn to dusk. Starting some distance from the low dunes that mark the end of the river, a wide strip of what appears to be brackish water smothered in algae leads to the sea, in effect dividing the beach in two halves. On the sand are an assortment of ships, boats, sleds, and carts, some of them swarming with people and horses. Various wooden structures seem to be dry-docks, with pathways of wooden poles half-buried in the sand leading up to them. Others have large nets drawn over them. Far away, a span of sixteen horses are pulling one of the large vessels into the sea.

"I do declare!," Navarre yells to Sir Oengus from the bow. "I have never seen such vessels!"

"They be sea-ships," Sir Oengus yells back at him, grinning widely.

Navarre cannot believe his eyes and ears.

"Surely you jest, Sir!," he yells.

"Ha, ha!," Sir Oengus laughs. "You better believe it, lubber! They take these beauties out onto the big blue to catch fish!"

Navarre has never heard of such a ludicrous notion. As far as he knows, no vessel can survive the fury of the sea.

"And plenty of fish there be out there, to be sure!," Sir Oengus continues, steering the *Varis* to a jetty when he realizes he cannot take the barge any further downstream. "Wash up here by the barrelful courtesy of the currents and the winds! Never have to get out for more than a couple of leagues before the nets be brimming!" Navarre casts him a suspicious glance but then the novice appears next to him and hails the first man she sees on the jetty.

"Pardon!," she yells. "Sir! Where can I find Loremaster Fist?"

"Right bank, missus," the man yells back. "Straight as she goes. Last house on the beach!"

Navarre regains his composure and suggests the novice prepare herself for the journey ahead. When she doesn't answer and starts climbing down the rope ladder to the jetty unattended, he alerts the *chevalier*:

"Scaralat! The Lady requires our assistance!"

And so the noble duo have to hurry after the rapidly disappearing novice.

Just before they catch up with her, the *chevalier* stops Navarre in his stride.

"A word among gentlemen, *mon ami*," he says, extending his hand to his noble fellow. "It seems only appropriate that we shall lead the effort under your command. I will lead the cavalry myself."

Navarre pauses and shakes his noble friend's hand.

"*Mon colonel*," he says, with a slight nod of his head.

After some more hurrying after the novice on a path leading them through the dunes, and with their noble fellows in tow, the noble duo eventually reach what must be the home of Loremaster Fist (**SEE ILLUSTRATION #12**). Situated to the right of the path, it is a long, stone structure on a low dune at the foot of a tall rock jutting from the sand like a finger. It seems to consist of three separate homes in a row, each with its own entrance. Attached to the back is a large wooden hangar, a pathway of half-buried wooden poles connecting it to the beach. On the other side of the path are four walled-off sections, the first three containing all kinds of plants and low shrubs and the fourth a lone, stone bench with a splendid view of the beach and the sea beyond.

The novice finally comes to a halt, apparently in doubt.

"My Lady," Navarre asks. "Do you know which one is the Loremaster's house?"

"I don't know," the novice says. "I was sent to ask a specific question and that's it."

Without further ado, she heads for the first door and knocks on it. When the *chevalier* hurries to her side, Navarre takes a few steps back to look at the chimneys, noticing smoke coming from those of the second and third houses.

Behind him, Sir Eber, Sir Oerknal, and Sir Suvali arrive, the sorcerer immediately turning his attention to the three gardens. Navarre turns to look at the third house, where some stone steps lead up to the front door. Assuming this to be the one where people might actually live – the others being perhaps ateliers or barns – and noticing that there is no answer to the repeated knocking of the novice, he approaches.

"I say!," he calls. "Hello in there?"

After some more calling, a short young man with light hair appears in the door of the second house.

"Loremaster Fist, I presume?," Navarre asks, walking to the second house.

"Not me, Lord," the youngster says. "I be just a tenant and they call me... Tim. I sail on The Black Owl."

He nods to the beach, presumably to one of the sea-ships on it.

"I see," Navarre says. "Where is the Loremaster?"

"Can't say to be sure, Lord," Tim says. "It be just the gravedigger and us hands here."

"A *gravedigger!*?" Navarre says with some consternation, putting his hand to his sword and turning to the *chevalier* and the novice at the first door.

"Scarlat!," he calls. "There is a gravedigger in the last house!"

Strangely, the *chevalier* seems to take this as his cue to move to the back of the building and into the hangar.

Navarre has a quick look around to see where his noble fellows are, locating Sir Suvali in one of the small gardens and Sir Eber and Sir Oerknal sitting on the low stone wall surrounding another and observing the goings-on with a bored look on their face. Sir Oengus is nowhere to be seen. He moves to the novice's side, who is listening to Tim explaining that the building is divided into three separate homes, all the property of Loremaster Fist.

"Loremaster be over there," Tim says, nodding to the first house. "The gravedigger be to starboard and this 'ere be where we take a caulk as when the ship be beached."

"My good man," Navarre says, struggling to understand the fellow. "That is all as may be but we are pressed for time. Where can we find the Loremaster?"

"Can't say to be sure, Lord. He be nowhere as to be seen fer some time."

"Well?," Navarre says irritably. "You speak of being a regular guest. Surely you know where the Loremaster may have gone?"

"Nay, Lord. We be here a few days only. Never seen him since we beached."

"Think, man!," Navarre snaps angrily. "Where can he have gone? The town? Visiting friends? A paramour? A tavern?"

"Can't say to be sure, Lord."

Then, the door of the third house opens and a short, elderly man wearing what appears to be a nightgown appears.

"You there!," Navarre yells at him.

"Yes?"

"Where can I find Loremaster Fist?"

"I haven't seen him."

"Who are you?"

"I am the gravedigger."

"Your name, Sir!," Navarre demands.

"It is Taper," the man replies.

Sir Eber steps down from his wall and approaches.

"Do you have a key to this place?," he asks the gravedigger.

"Yes."

"Well?," Navarre says, impatiently glaring at the gravedigger. "Get on with it, man!"

"I wouldn't go into that house," the gravedigger says. "The Loremaster has warned us not to enter it in his absence."

"We'll be the judge of that," Navarre snaps. "Just get the key."

"And you are?," Taper asks.

"I am Navarre Ard Dauberval," Navarre says. "And you, Sir, are obstructing a mission of importance!"

"Follow me, Lord," Taper says, turning around and disappearing into the house.

Navarre hurries after him. He is beginning to consider the possibility that something may be very wrong here. Why don't the people living in the same building as the Loremaster have any notion of where their landlord could be? And what to think of a gravedigger, a worshiper of Ulm, living here?

He enters the gravedigger's house and finds himself in a small room with a raised platform about halfway up against the back wall, some steps leading up to it and with a fireplace underneath. On the right wall is a large wooden cassette with many compartments containing all kinds of animal skulls – the sign of Ulm! Taking a deep breath, he scans the room for evidence of a struggle, blood, corpses. But he finds nothing of the sort and presently the gravedigger comes down from the platform.

"Here you are, Lord," he says, some keys in his hand and heading to the door.

Our noble hero casts another quick look around the room. When he sees nothing more of any interest, he gets back outside to find that his noble fellows have already gathered at the door to the first house. Tim is nowhere to be seen and the door to the second house is closed.

Presently the gravedigger reaches the assembled nobles and turns to look at Navarre.

"Well, Eber?," Navarre says impatiently. Three gods! Does he have to do *everything* himself? "Open the door!"

"I can open it for you, Lord," the gravedigger says, moving past the ranger. He unlocks the door and takes a step back.

"Don't enter, Lord," he says. "The Loremaster has told us that entering the house is dangerous."

"More work for you, I'd say," Sir Eber says.

The gravedigger lifts his eyebrows.

"That is true," he says, his face still expressionless as ever. "I hadn't thought of it that way."

Navarre decides he has had enough of this.

"Stand back, Sir," he warns the gravedigger, moving past him toward the door.

But Sir Suvali grabs him by the arm.

"Let me," he says.

The sorcerer opens the door and looks at his dogs for a moment. When the animals show no signs of being worried about anything, he takes a look inside, into a room that looks much like the one in the gravedigger's house. There are a table and a chair and a raised platform is against the back wall, a fireplace underneath it. To his right, an open door leads to a smaller room, most likely a pantry or storage. A punching ball, a pair of boxing gloves, and a cassette not unlike the one in the gravedigger's house take pride of place in various locations. The cassette contains what seem to be boxing trophies.

"There's nobody here," Sir Suvali says.

"*Parbleu!*," the *chevalier* says. "Is there nobody who knows where he might be?"

"This won't do!," the novice exclaims angrily. "Urgent questions must be answered! How do we find out about his routine? Where he goes?"

"Speak, man!," Navarre snaps to the gravedigger.

"I do not know where he is, Lord," the gravedigger says, unperturbed as ever. "He is a sorcerer and a businessman. He meets with sorcerers and captains and all manner of folk. He uses *The Black Owl* when he wants to go places."

"Tim!," Navarre yells. "Get back out here!"

The door to the second house opens and the crewman appears. Again, Navarre asks him where the Loremaster may have gone.

"Can't say to be sure, Lord," Tim says. He seems to think for a while. "Mayhap as there be something fer to blow the gaff in the house? But ye might think twice to be sure! Cap'n said there be no quarter for hands entering." "This is getting us nowhere," Sir Suvali says, obviously not understanding a word of what the man said like the noble trio next to him. "I'll leave a note and we'll get back to Big Beach to look for him there."

He enters the house, procures a pen and some paper and starts scribbling away at the table. He has only just started when he stops abruptly, lifts his head and sniffs the air.

"Smell that?," he says. "Something's rotting in here."

He starts for the door to the smaller room – then changes his mind and climbs up to the platform. Here, he finds a table, a desk, a bed, a nightstand next to it, its lower drawer on the floor with four bottles around it. In front of it, lying face-down, with one arm stretched as if trying to reach for the drawer, is a body. It is that of a stocky, muscular man wearing a sorcerer's robe and a lot of flashy, gold jewelry. The skin is strangely blue.

Not blue as in "ice" or blue as in "the result of decay setting in" – just blue.

"Gentlemen!," the sorcerer yells. "He is here. Do not enter the house until I say so!"

He kneels down next to the body and subjects the bottles to a closer inspection. They are all alike, three of them containing a clear liquid and the fourth being open and empty, a stopper next to it. He carefully checks if there is any life left in the body – but there is no breathing, no pulse.

It would appear that Loremaster Fist is dead, poisoned by agents unknown.

When he gets back to his feet, the sorcerer notices a leather-bound folio on the bed. He flicks through its pages and finds it to be a diary or perhaps some kind of ledger. He tucks the volume under his arm, climbs down the steps and walks to the door where his noble fellows are waiting impatiently.

"Loremaster Fist is dead," he says. "His corpse is in there."

"What?!", the novice cries. "Let me see him!"

Navarre starts to speak but she has already brushed past the sorcerer and up the steps to the platform. Again, it would appear that the young novice is accustomed to much more than our gallant knight would deem appropriate for a damsel of her allure.

Sir Suvali subjects the folio to a closer look and informs his noble fellows that it seems to be a notebook containing quite meticulous notes on a variety of subjects: meetings with people; lists of herbs; names of nobles; lists of rumors at court; reports of business ventures; details of financial transactions; drawings and sketches of sites, locations, features.

When the novice gets back down from the platform, Sir Suvali turns to face her.

"Looks like he was poisoned," he says, closing the notebook. "What about those potions? Could they be antidotes?"

"How should I know?," the novice replies, obviously distraught. "I'm not an expert."

With the rest of the noble quartet now also entering the house, Navarre steps into the small room to the right and finds it to be a pantry or perhaps a small kitchen. On a table are three bottles of wine, one of them half empty. He picks up the half empty bottle and smells it: nothing, although the wine seems to have been of some quality. He calls out to Sir Suvali.

"What do you think?," he asks, handing the bottle to the sorcerer when both he and the *chevalier* enter the room. "It smells like it has been standing open for too long."

"Poison doesn't always smell of something," the sorcerer says. "In fact, the best ones don't."

"*Du vin?*," the *chevalier* exclaims, eagerly taking the bottle and smelling at it. "An excellent vintage, I daresay! A pity it is ruined."

"It may be poisoned," Sir Suvali says, taking back the bottle.

"Indeed?," the *chevalier* says absentmindedly, casting a furtive glance at the unopened bottles.

Navarre and Sir Suvali return to the main room, where the novice is talking to Sir Eber and Sir Oerknal.

"Judging by the decay, I'd say he's been dead for four days," she says. "But I'm no expert on poison."

"So he died in the night of the massacre," Navarre says, forgetting his manners. "Then it would seem that the riots in Big Beach have nothing to do with his death."

Suddenly, there is a loud crash in the room behind them and then a strangled scream. Our noble heroes hasten to the room, where they find the *chevalier* thrashing about wildly on the floor, hands at his throat and gurgling in a manner most unbecoming a man of his position. His face and his hands are turning blue at some speed.

"Can you believe it!?", Navarre exclaims. "He has drunk from the wine!"

Sir Suvali reacts instantly and calls for someone to bring him the bottles from the platform. When he is given one, he tells Sir Eber to hold the *chevalier* down and proceeds to force half of the contents down his noble

companion's throat. When this doesn't seem to work, he administers a second bottle, again succeeding in forcing down only half of it. But the *chevalier* also fails his third saving throw and all seems lost – until the novice procures a foul-smelling concoction.

"It is a strong emetic," she says, handing it to Sir Suvali. Together, they manage to get all of the concoction into the *chevalier*, who finally passes a saving throw and starts vomiting all over the place. After some time, the blue color on his skin starts to fade.

Sir Eber has observed the event with a distinct look of contempt on his face.

"Well," he starts wryly. "At least now we can be sure that the Loremaster was poisoned."

When the others start leaving the room, he picks up the bottle of poisonous wine, pushes the cork back in, further seals it with a piece of cloth, and puts it in his pack.

After all this, Sir Suvali subjects the house to a close inspection. He retrieves a strange silver quill from the desk on the platform and then inspects the small cabinet next to it. It stands on tall legs and features three slender drawers below a pair of small doors.

When he notices two tiny runes on the metal handles on the doors, the novice appears at the top of the steps.

"I would like to have a look at that notebook," she says.

"First things first," the sorcerer says, in his usual self-important manner. "First we get the Loremaster out of here."

And so, perhaps an hour and a half before nightfall, the gravedigger is called into the house. He starts going about his business and our noble heroes move outside, where they start discussing the meaning of their discovery and whether it means that they should change their plans.

The noble quartet move back into the house about half an hour later, when the gravedigger and the corpse are gone. Sir Suvali has another look at the cabinet on the platform and concludes that the runes may be the marks of some sort of exploding spell. He instructs the others to leave the house once again, telling them to stay outside until he is finished. Taking his time, he attaches a thin rope to the handles of the doors and eventually takes cover under the platform. When he pulls the rope, a loud explosion occurs and a huge fist of fire momentarily flashes through the room.

When the smoke has lifted, he climbs back up to the platform and inspects the cabinet, yet again taking his time. From it, he retrieves cache of coins, numerous documents (business contracts, mostly), a lot of even more gaudy gold jewelry, and a slender rectangular box, all of which he subjects to a lengthy inspection. He concludes that the top of the box can be removed much like the end cap on a scroll case and opens it, slowly, to reveal a slender, longish, hexagonal crystal wand, its color slowly changing from cloudy to clear as it tapers to a fine point. A sequence of runes is on each of its six sides, getting ever smaller the closer they get to the tip. Taking his time yet again, he examines the runes and finds that he can only read one of them – "*Yrmgard*".

He subjects the house to another protracted inspection and then, finally, leaves the house and informs his noble companions of his findings. When he is finished, Navarre has had enough of the sorcerer's procrastinating.

"Perhaps, Sir, you can now find it within you to hand the Lady the Loremaster's notebook?," he asks sharply.

With a distinct lack of enthusiasm, the sorcerer hands the book to the novice, who immediately sits down at the table and eagerly starts paging through it.

"Do you know there is a list in here that says where all sorcerers live?," she murmurs after a while. "Mages, mages. Another one. Huh? Oh! Hmm..."

After some time, Navarre is getting restless. He has taken the novice where she wanted to go and the mission shouldn't really have to be postponed any longer. Still, he can hardly leave the novice here, especially with a gravedigger in the same building.

"My Lady," he begins, when the novice stops paging through the book for a moment. "Is there some place in town we can take you before we must part ways?"

"Do you know what it says about Magus Seaworthy?," the novice asks, throwing him a pensive look.

"Indeed not, my Lady. I have not read the folio."

The novice starts paging through the book again.

"It says here that he sold his ship and went to the Isle of Bread," she says. "Some pages later, he says that he gave him the *Sword of Shadows*. It looks like this was some ten years ago."

"The sword of Ulm?," Navarre asks, forgetting himself again and not entirely sure what the novice is on about.

"Loremaster Fist was in possession of the *Sword of Shadows*?"

"The *Sword of Shadows*!," Sir Eber hollers. "The sword that kills with a single blow! Now we're getting somewhere!"

"*Mon Dieu!*," the *chevalier* exclaims. "It is one of the sacred artifacts the enemy is after!"

Navarre raises an eyebrow.

"Might I inquire as to how you come to this conclusion?," he asks.

"*Mais c'est évident!*," the *chevalier* cries. "First the *Kettle of the Coven* and now the *Sword of Shadows!*"

"You have lost me," Navarre says.

"*Au contraire!*," the *chevalier* cries. "Did the enemy not attack the coven of Ulm and take the kettle?"

"Indeed they did," Navarre says. "Just like they attacked Apple Island, at least one military post in Nisibis, the Military Academy, various other locations on the King's Lake, at least one sorcerer we know of, and a Women's House. And then there is the matter of the poisoning of Loremaster Fist. I'd hardly say that this means that the enemy's main objective is to find a couple of items nobody even knows for sure exist!"

"We are the only ones who know where the sword is!," the *chevalier* exclaims. "We must go to the Isle of Bread in all haste! Find the sword before the enemy finds out about it!"

"My dear fellow!," Navarre says, annoyed by his noble friend's misplaced fervor. "If there is one thing we know for certain, it is that the enemy struck in many places at once, targeting very specific locations."

"*Absolument!*," the *chevalier* cries. "They are after the artifacts!"

"Have you not heard a word I have said, Sir?," Navarre exclaims. "Need I remind you that you personally tried to save the Rector from a targeted attack by trained soldiers? What about the Loremaster here? Dead by poisoning! Doesn't all of this suggest the enemy targets sorcerers and knows exactly where to find them? Would they have 'forgotten' about this Magus Seaworthy? By Ulm! The murderous lot haven't even bothered to search this house!"

"But the location of the sword is a secret!," the *chevalier* cries. "How could they have known to go to the island?"

"So was the location of the kettle!," Navarre exclaims. "Didn't bloody well stop them from raiding the coven, did it!?"

But the *chevalier* refuses to listen and things get even worse when both Sir Eber and Sir Oerknal get involved.

"I say we go get the sword," Sir Eber says. "Start killing people."

To which Sir Oerknal, newly elected King of the Realm, adds: "I don't care where we go – as long as we dump the girl."

"Gentlemen, please!," Navarre cries. "Have you taken leave of your senses? Need I remind you that the very fate of the Kingdom rests on our shoulders? That going after a sword we have no way of knowing is still there would be a spectacular waste of time? My Lords! We cannot allow the enemy to run amok!"

"Have you forgotten Palava, *monsieur?*," the *chevalier* says frostily. "We shall count on them to stop the enemy!"

Navarre looks at his noble fellow in stunned silence.

"That milksop?," he manages to utter after some time. "Surely you jest!"

But now the *chevalier* suddenly turns to the novice.

"*Madame!*," he cries ardently. "Forgive me! My sword is yours!"

The novice, who has continued reading the notebook and kept her distance from the arguing nobles during all of this, looks at him uneasily.

"I will have to go my own way from here," she says.

This seems to throw the impassioned *chevalier*, apparently torn as he is between his desire to go after the sword and the sudden return of his chivalrous ways.

"I am confused, *Madame!*," he cries. "*Je suis chevalier!*"

"I'm afraid it has to be so," the novice says. "I have to find somebody and your paths obviously lead elsewhere."

A strangled cry escapes the *chevalier*.

"My Lady," Navarre says, deciding to put an end to the embarrassing scene. "Is there anywhere I can take you for the night?"

"She can stay with me," the gravedigger says. Apparently he has returned.

"Thank you, good man," the novice says. "I shall do that."

Navarre looks at the assembled company with a bewildered look on his face. Is this really happening? Do his noble fellows really want to go after a sword that is highly unlikely to still be on the Isle of Bread? Abandon their people to the murderous invaders? Does the novice really intend to spend the night in the house of a servant of Ulm after all that has happened? He has the distinct feeling that things are running completely out of control and that there seems to be nothing he can do about it. Indeed, the madness only seems to get worse when the agitated *chevalier* falls to his knees in front of the novice.

"*Madame!*," he cries. "You have saved my life! I am eternally grateful! Command me!"

"I am a humble servant of Ulm and saving people is what I do," the novice says. "You don't have to thank me."

"*Mais non!*," the *chevalier* cries. "You do yourself *une injustice!* My sword is yours... as is my heart!"

Mademoiselle! Your wish, I implore you!"

"I shall sleep on it," the novice says.

After some more of this, it becomes quite clear that the *chevalier*, the ranger, and the new King of the Forest choose to remain deaf to Navarre's arguments against going after the sword – albeit each for their own reasons. Mightily peeved, our noble hero seriously considers leaving his noble fellows to go on their wild goose chase and return to Palava alone to lead the fight to reclaim the Kingdom. Deciding there is little more to say, he climbs up to the platform to get some distance between him and his contrary fellows.

Here, he finds Sir Suvali studying the crystal wand. The sorcerer looks up at him for a moment and rolls his eyes, a faint smile on his lips. Navarre shrugs his shoulders and sits down, hoping that the noble trio below will somehow come to their senses after a good night's sleep.

He seems to have dozed off for a moment when Sir Eber nudges him and tells him that the night will be spent in the sailors' lodgings next door. Without saying a word, he gets to his feet and follows the ranger.

When he enters the lodgings, he finds the room sparsely lit and Sir Oengus seated at a low table laden with many stoneware bottles and glasses, engaged in an animated conversation with the hands of The Black Owl. Tired of the whole thing, our noble hero takes a seat in a corner and absentmindedly listens to the conversation, learning that Sir Oengus has spent the day in Big Beach discussing the manufacture of some sort of construct with a smith. It seems that he intends to mount it on the *Varis* and fire large bolts from it and that the smith was "very interested in Sir's brilliant and unique invention". Indeed, when Sir Oengus also paid him 150 gold pieces in advance, the smith "thanked Sir profusely" and ensured him that he was "very much looking forward to working with Sir over the next few weeks, nay, months!".

Annoyed that Sir Oengus, too, seems to have abandoned the plan everybody agreed upon, Navarre excuses himself and huddles into his chair to get some sleep. But sleep doesn't come and so our noble hero has to listen to the conversation some more, hearing a lot about hauling wind, reefing sails, shivering timbers, running rigs, and dragging nets; about the beach being 15 leagues wide; about tides taking 12 hours to get from low to high and vice versa and the difference between them being only six feet; about giant octopuses and colossal sharks devouring men and entire catches of fish; about whirlpools swallowing whole ships; and even about ice pirates roaming the sea in giant ships although none of the crew have ever actually seen them.

Later in the evening, the *chevalier* wakes him up: "*Mon cher*. A moment!"

"Of course," Navarre says, opening his eyes. "Have you come to your senses?"

"Indeed I have," the *chevalier* says. "It has all become very clear to me."

Navarre casts him a wary glance and gathers that his noble friend must have consumed quite a lot of gin.

"It has been decided," the *chevalier* continues. "We shall go after the sword."

"My dear fellow," Navarre begins. "It occurs to me that your opinions seem to change with the wind. Have you given up on joining the King's men? To lead the cavalry into battle?"

"*Fil*," the *chevalier* exclaims. "The way is clear!"

Navarre sighs.

"And what of serving the Lady novice?," he asks.

"*Mon cher!* Do you not see it? It is the Lady! It is a sign!"

"You have lost me," Navarre says.

"It is fate that has brought us here," his noble friend cries. "The *horreurs* on the island! The Lady saving my life! The *Sword of Shadows!* It is the path to great things!"

"My dear Sarazin," Navarre says, a weak smile on his face. "First, allow me to remark that your efforts pale in comparison to my smooth handling of a similar situation in "Act I". Second, and quite unfortunately so, I shall have to give up all hopes of saving the kingdom lest the adventure is over."

"Avast, ye bletherin' peacocks!," Sir Oengus hollers at the noble duo from across the room. He, too, has been drinking a lot. "Ye be still part of me crew and it be the cap'n as to decides what happens aboard! And I decides that we be layin' a course to the Isle o' Bread!"

"Ye be seekin' as to hire a ship?," one of the crewmen asks him.

"Aye!," Sir Oengus yells. "To be sure!"

"Then ye be wantin' *The Black Owl*," the crewman says. "She be finest ship around and there be none better than Cap'n Gomma fer gettin' ye to the Isle o' Bread!"

"How long be the round?," Sir Oengus asks.

"Two days to land-ho," the crewman says. "Will I be gettin' the cap'n?"

"Nary ye bother," Sir Oengus says. "Would ye disturb the cap'n takin' a caulk?"

"Just ye watch me!," the crewman hollers, straightening his back.

"I says the forenoon's t'be soon enough," Sir Oengus says. "I be off to me hammock fer the rest of the watch!"

With this, the novice announces that she will retire as well. Straightaway, the *chevalier* scrambles to his feet and drops to his knees in front of her.

"*Madame!*," he cries. "Know that you can call upon me whenever you should want to retrieve the golden kettle! I declare House Sarazin utterly and forever at your service!"

The novice doesn't react to this much. It seems that the *chevalier* has forgotten that all noble houses of The Forest are always utterly and forever at the service of the priestesses of Ilm.

Navarre gets to his feet and escorts the novice to the gravedigger's house. He knocks on the door and the gravedigger appears.

"My Lady," he says, bowing elegantly when the novice enters the house without paying him much attention. "It was an honor."

Day 6: When our noble heroes leave the lodgings at first light, they find the bailiff and his men in front of the Loremaster's house. When they approach the congregation, the bailiff takes a few steps forward.

"Top o' the mornin', gents!," he hollers, smiling benevolently and tipping his hat.

"Sarazin," the *chevalier* says, extending his hand and still a bit pale around the nose. "*Enchanté.*"

The bailiff is not impressed and continues: "As I'm sure you'll see, Sir, 's I'm here in connection with the murder of the Loremaster."

"By all means, *monsieur*," the *chevalier* says magnanimously. "By all means."

"Sure you do, Sir, sure you do," the bailiff says, taking his time to look at each of our noble heroes before turning to the *chevalier* again. "And who would you say as to killed the Loremaster then, Sir? If you won't mind my askin'?"

"*Monsieur*," the *chevalier* says. "You have me at a disadvantage. We found the poor fellow dead in his home yesterday."

"And what, Sir, may I ask brought you fine gents to this 'ere demesne?," the bailiff asks.

"I am not sure I appreciate your insinuations, Sir," Navarre interjects frostily. "I remind you that you are addressing the acting Duke Sarazin."

"Just tryin' to do my job if you won't mind, Sir," the bailiff says.

"I'm sure you're doing what you can, bailiff," Navarre says. "Now, if you will excuse us? We have matters to attend to."

But Sir Oengus decides otherwise.

"The Loremaster was poisoned," he cuts in.

"Now why would you say that, Sir?," the bailiff asks, without as much as a flinch.

"There's a bottle of poisoned wine in the kitchen."

"Would you be meanin' these 'ere bottles then, Sir?," the bailiff asks, pointing to three bottles of wine on a chair next to the entrance.

"What do I know?," Sir Oengus replies. "I wasn't even there."

"You see, Sir," the bailiff says. "Here's what's botherin' me. I've been speakin' to the neighbors, see, Sir, and all's they say's the Loremaster been murdered with poisoned wine. But how could that be, Sir, seein' as these 'ere bottles 's unopened as they is? It's a bit of a mystery, Sir, if you won't mind my sayin'. Where is the poisoned wine?"

"I'd say inside him," Sir Eber says.

"I do declare!," Navarre interjects angrily. "We do not have time for this nonsense! If that will be all, bailiff, I suggest you get on with your work. I bid you good day!"

With this, our noble heroes take their leave of the good bailiff and his men and head for the beach, where the crew of *The Black Owl* have just finished loading the ship (**SEE ILLUSTRATION #13**). *The Black Owl* is a sleek two-master that appears to have been built for speed. Two wooden constructs are attached to its flanks, which, Sir Oengus explains, can be swiveled out with drag-nets attached to them. When our noble heroes climb aboard, they are welcomed by Captain Gomma, a sinewy man of average height and with lank, black hair and gray eyes.

"My Lords," he says. "Welcome aboard *The Black Owl*."

"An honor, Sir," Navarre says, with a slight nod of his head.

"Who be in charge of the coffer?," the captain asks.

"I am," Sir Suvali says, taking a step forward.

"The price be one hundred and forty pieces of gold," the captain says.

"A trifle, I'm sure," the *chevalier* says, raising an eyebrow.

"Sailin' to the isle'll be putting the ship and hands at great risk," the captain says. "My normal fee would be the price of the entire ship. But seein' as that the hands 'ere tell me ye'll avenge the death of the Loremaster and as I considered him a friend, I'll be takin' ye to the isle fer a reduced price."

"The gesture does you credit, Sir," Navarre says, before stepping aside.

The money changes hands, upon which the captain informs our noble heroes that the horsemen are readying the horses and that the ship should be in the water within the hour. After that, he says, ten men will row the ship out of the shallows, where the currents and winds will take over.

And so it is that our noble heroes spend the rest of the day on the fast-moving ship that is *The Black Owl*, seemingly at the mercy of fierce winds and crashing waves and accompanied by great swarms of screaming seabirds. All of this is much to the delight of Sir Oengus, who hollers that he is having the time of his life on multiple occasions.

Soon, the beach is replaced by a rocky coast, which can no longer be approached by ship. Close to dusk, with steep, tall cliffs now dominating the coastline, the captain steers the vessel closer to the shore and the night shift takes over.

"Tomorrow be the hard part," the captain says to Sir Oengus. "There be three currents as can take her in the direction of the isle. The one closest to the shore'll be drivin' her into the shallows and the sea current'll be gettin' her past the isle and there be no chance to land or even come about, to be sure! The central current'll get her straight to the isle and that be the one well be havin' to find first thing tomorrow and even then this whole expedition could be endin' in tragedy."

Over dinner, the captain mentions that the Isle of Bread is home to a huge colony of giant albatrosses.

"I'll stay out of sight when we get there," Sir Oerknal says. "Don't want one of the beasts mistaking me for lunch."

When our noble heroes are alone after dinner, Sir Suvali, who has been studying his newfound treasures and the Loremaster's notebook for most of the day, informs his noble fellows that the crystal wand has the power to reduce living creatures to about a tenth of their normal size, also making them perhaps twenty times lighter. He also tells them that he thinks that the silver masterwork quill can inscribe magical spells on surfaces that normally wouldn't take ink, perhaps etching them into such surfaces rather like the runes on the handles of the Loremaster's cabinet. He hasn't found out anything about the necklace with the acorn pendant but he says he will put it around his neck from now on to see if that will lead to something.

He goes on to inform them that he has found the notes in Loremaster's notebook to be in some chronological order, quite meticulous, and pertaining to all manner of subjects – plants, places, people, ideas, business deals. It also seems that the Loremaster was rather successful in his dealings and that he was quite wealthy.

Furthermore, there appear to be long periods of time during which the Loremaster didn't make any notes at all. With regard to the *Sword of Shadows*, he now understands that the weapon was given to the Loremaster by the previous Magister Rex, who seems to have wanted to get rid of it for various but undisclosed reasons. When, some time ago, the current Magister Rex demanded to have the sword returned to the Academy, the Loremaster informed him that he gave it to Magus Seaworthy just before the latter went on a trip around the world, seemingly with the request to hide it in the most inaccessible and godforsaken place he could find. Since Magus Seaworthy was already gone at the time of the Rector's request, the Loremaster seems to have promised him to ask the Magus about the sword as soon as he saw him again. However, the notes do not mention him asking Magus Seaworthy about the sword at any time after this, perhaps because he didn't speak to him again. "So Magus Seaworthy may still have the sword," the sorcerer concludes. "In any case, the notes do not indicate that the Loremaster ever visited the Isle of Bread."

After this, most of our noble heroes retire early.

It must be way past midnight when Sir Suvali hears a strange sound. He has to concentrate quite hard to keep hearing it and it takes him some time to realize that it appears to come from the acorn pendant on his chest. Could it be the sound of a voice coming from far, very far away? Indeed, after concentrating on it for some time, all he can think of is that it sounds like someone is taking a lot of time to pronounce the letter "A", followed by similarly lengthy efforts to pronounce more letters. Intrigued, he keeps listening until he realizes that the distant voice actually is that of somebody speaking very slowly – somebody who is calling out in the hopes that someone will hear them!

Although he cannot be sure that the caller will actually hear him, he asks who is speaking. It takes a long time before he gets an answer and he concludes that it may very well take the caller as long to make sense of his

words as it takes him to make of his. In the end, he understands that he is speaking to Augustus Magister Rex, the deceased eminent Rector of the Royal Aristocratic Academy.

"Thank you for saving us," he starts. "What happened?"

The eminent Rector says that the arrows that hit him were poisoned and that he is now *in limbo*. When the sorcerer asks him what he means by that, he is told that it is a place between life and death.

"I see," he says. "Is there anything I can do?"

The eminent Rector says that solving his problem may be "tricky" and that Sir Suvali probably cannot help him – that, in fact, there is probably "no one in this world" who can. Sir Suvali takes some time to speak of what happened after the attack on Apple Island and he also says that he and his noble fellows have decided to go after the *Sword of Shadows*, which they believe to be on the Isle of Bread. He finishes by asking the eminent Rector whether he can tell him anything about the sword, to which the man answers that he knows nothing of the subject, that the weapon was involved in many terrible events involving wars and feuds, and that it leads to problems whenever it is drawn.

"Noted," Sir Suvali says.

When he asks the eminent Rector whether he has any idea who might be behind the attack on Apple Island, the answer he gets is that the learned magister "hasn't got the faintest" and then Augustus Magister Rex doesn't answer anymore.

Day 7: When he wakes up, Sir Suvali sees the first rays of the sun peeking through the portholes. Feeling as if he hasn't slept a wink, he gets to the deck and informs his noble fellows of the events of the night.

"Did the man actually say '*this world*'?," Navarre asks.

List: 1 Poison antidote; 4 thick gold rings (10 gp each); gold necklace (20 gp); Loremaster Fist's notebook; *quill of etching*; 4 thick silver rings (10 sp each); silver necklace (20 sp); large gold belt buckle set with diamonds (50 gp); 2 gold cuff links (5 gp each); 200 gp; 300 sp; 500 cp; *wand of diminution*

List (XP): +300 xp

¹⁾ This is a play on the title of a Dutch translation of Jack Vance's novel *Showboat World* (Pyramid Books, 1975)

An Adventure in Five Acts

Part IV

Act III: The Sword of Shadows

In which the DM informs our noble heroes that the conversation Sir Suvali had with Loremaster Fist only took ten minutes; that it was a dream sequence rather than an actual conversation; that the acorn amulet is a standard DMG *amulet of life saving* and that it allows the Loremaster only a very limited amount of time to communicate; that *The Black Owl* has sailed on through the night; that there are 14 crew on board (12 sailors, one cook, one captain) and that they work in three shifts of four.

Day 7, continued: Sir Suvali announces that he will spend the rest of the day below decks to study Loremaster Fist's notebook some more. It isn't much later when Captain Gomma informs Sir Oengus that *The Black Owl* is to commence its risky approach to the island.

"There be only one chance to get it right," he says. "A miss'll blow her to port and onto the rocks o' the straights the one way or to starboard and past the isle the other."

Sir Oengus doesn't seem worried. Indeed, he looks like he can hardly wait for the operation to begin.

"The danger ain't over even if she'd be gettin' the straight current," the captain continues. "She be fighting wind and waves fer four glasses and'd be havin' to come about handsomely to get into the lee o' the isle. One mistake and the currents'll hit her broadside and be drivin' her onto the rocks. Arr! I wish I had charged ye her full price!"

"The hands say you be the only man livin' as can get us to the isle in one piece," Sir Oengus says. "I'm sure we'll make it."

The captain shouts his orders and the crew start running to and fro. This continues for about half an hour, with the ship executing all kinds of maneuvers until the captain seems satisfied. For the next two hours, the ride is even more violent than it was before: the current seems to push the ship to ever greater speeds and the crew have to work hard to keep her in check.

At some point, the Isle of Bread appears on the horizon at a slight angle to the ship (**SEE ILLUSTRATION #14**). As they get closer, our noble heroes see that it must be about half a mile long, 300 yards wide, and 100 yards high. Huge colonies of seabirds – giant albatrosses, seagulls, terns – hover and dance in the wind above the island and sharp rocks jut from the waters to the left of it: the Shark Straights.

"See that?," Sir Suvali says to Navarre, pointing to the straights. "I've been told that the island was once connected to the mainland. The rocks are supposed to be what remains of a land bridge."

If anything, the closer *The Black Owl* gets to the island, the faster she seems to go. Furious winds and high waves toss the ship hither and to and then, with the island as close as it can be, the captain's orders become even more urgent: he points and shouts and hollers and the crew hasten to take up positions all over the ship.

Finally, at what seems to be the last possible moment, *The Black Owl* turns sharply left. Almost immediately, the howling winds are gone and the ship starts slowing down.

From this side, the Isle of Bread looks much like a rotting tooth: a gaping hole in its duskward side is flanked by two rocky promontories jutting into the sea, a steep cliff between them at the back of the hole reaching all the way to the top of the island. As the crew keep maneuvering the ship ever closer to the island, a beach comes into view at the foot of the cliff, caught between the promontories to either side.

On the bow, Navarre and Sir Suvali are discussing how they could get to the top of the island. They notice what appears to be a fault line running from the lower right to the upper left corner of the cliff, much like its upper and lower halves have shifted relative to each other. About half way up the fault, a fall of water comes tumbling down from the top of the cliff (**SEE ILLUSTRATION #15**).

"What's that on the beach?," Sir Eber asks, approaching with the rest of our noble heroes. "Boats?"

Sure enough, on the beach are what appear to be the remains of perhaps three vessels. The one to the left seems to be a small, reasonably intact craft with a single mast. Little remains of the vessel next to it, although enough so that our noble heroes can see that it must have been the largest ship any of them has ever seen – by far. It must have had three masts and its condition suggests that it has been on the beach for quite some time. The third 'vessel' is in even worse condition, being little more than a collection of beams jutting from the sand. It doesn't resemble any barge, boat, or ship our noble heroes have ever seen.

"It is a raft," Sir Oengus says. "A big one."

The *chevalier* has been peering at the cliff at the back of the beach with a worried look on his face.

"Is there no *escalier*?," he wonders. "Are we expected to climb up that cliff *comme des chèvres*?"

When the ship gets as close to the island as the captain can take it, the crew drop the anchor. In effect, *The Black Owl* is now in a sheltered, bay-like area and presently Captain Gomma joins our noble heroes. "Lords," he says. "Take the pinnace and do what ye must on the isle. Mind that ye'll run out of coin in four days and that ye be back aboard before that."

The pinnace is lowered into the water and our noble heroes row to the beach. The *chevalier* is the first to jump into the surf and he immediately wanders off, leaving his noble fellows to pull the pinnace onto the sand. When they are done, Navarre, Sir Suvali, and Sir Eber walk up the beach to the base of the cliff where the fault starts. Sir Oengus and Sir Oerknal move to the left to inspect the small vessel, which turns out to be a small sailing boat with a single mast. Although it was obviously well-built, it is now in bad repair and it appears to have been on the beach for perhaps a decade. When they find nothing of much interest, they walk back to the remains of the largest ship. Although most of it is gone, it is quite obvious that it must have been an enormous vessel.

"A giant ship," Sir Oengus says. "The ice giants exist."

When the noble duo get to the third wreck, they recognize only some beams and what looks like a mast half buried in the sand.

"Most of it is gone," Sir Oengus says. "It's probably been here for some twenty years. But look at those beams! It must have been at least eight yards square! A giant raff?"

Duringst the meanwhile, Navarre, Sir Suvali, and Sir Eber have found that the fault appears to be a combination of a natural phenomenon and the handiwork of some uncommonly large stone cutter: steps have been cut into the rock at various locations on the way to the top, most of them about a three feet high.

"Giant ships, giant steps," Navarre muses, looking at the top of the cliff. "It would seem that there is good chance that we will run into some giants up there."

With Sir Oengus and Sir Oerknal now approaching, Sir Suvali procures a largish bag and starts filling it with some sand.

"It's going to be slippery up there with that water," he sorcerer explains. "Let's go."

It takes our noble heroes some twenty minutes to climb the giant steps and it is shortly past noon when they have their first view of the top of the island (**SEE ILLUSTRATION #16**). Before them, a plateau stretches all the way to the other side of the island, a trickle of water running down the middle and effectively dividing it into two halves, each a gentle slope upwards to the edges. The entire plateau is covered with tall, pale grasses. To their right, the small stream disappears over the edge of the cliff, tumbling to the beach below. Right in front of them is a low, circular dry-stone wall, while a single, cabin-like structure sits at the far end of the plateau. Ferocious winds tear and rip at everything on the plateau, whipping up feathers and debris. High overhead, seabirds scream.

Our noble heroes spread out, Sir Eber and Sir Oerknal moving to the dry-stone circle and their noble fellows starting down the slope to get out of the wind. Thistles and scattered clumps of grass grow within the dry-stone circle, revealing sections of blackened bedrock. The construct is obviously a fireplace of some kind although Sir Eber concludes that no fires have burnt in it for a long time. Bow in hand, he turns his attention to the plateau again.

"No nests?," he growls. "Where are the beasts?"

"There they are!," Sir Oerknal yells, pointing to the left. The ranger turns and sees heads of numerous giant albatrosses staring at him from just over the edge of the plateau, watching his every move.

"They nest just over the edge," he growls. "Abominations! They must die!"

With this, he and Sir Oerknal start past the fireplace and up the slope – until they suddenly stop in their tracks.

"Hey!," Sir Eber yells to his noble fellows some distance down the slope. "Over here!"

Before him in the grass lies the desiccated corpse of a giant that must have stood at least 18 feet tall – making it two heads taller than the one that killed the King. The cadaver has a dark skin, stretched tightly over its skeletal frame, and it is clad in what seem to be shorts and a shirt. An ornate brass bracer is around its right wrist and in its left ear is a gold earring.

Sir Suvali, who has hurried to join the noble duo and is always the first when there's some treasure to be collected, gets down on his knees and removes the brass bracer. It features runes and markings in bas-relief, which obviously refer to fire, volcanoes, and the sun.

"He died fighting," Sir Eber says, prodding the corpse with his bow. "Cuts and stains on the shirt and skin. Looks to be dead at least a year."

"*Mes amis!*," the *chevalier* suddenly cries, gesticulating nervously and a bit paler than usual. "We must prepare for a speedy retreat! We must lower ropes over the edge for when we have get to the beach in all haste!" "My dear fellow," Navarre says. "We are six trained men armed to the teeth. I'd say we can handle some albatrosses."

The *chevalier* flushes.

"Of course!," he cries hastily. "Let us continue!"

"Besides," Sir Suvali says. "We only have twenty feet of rope. The beach is at least a hundred yards down."

"So it is!," the *chevalier* cries, flushing some more and now looking distinctly uneasy. "Excellent! That solves that then! *Mon Dieu!* What is that?"

He seems to be pointing at the dry-stone wall.

"A lighthouse?," Sir Eber says.

Realizing that he's only making things worse, the *chevalier* turns his attention to the giant corpse.

"[Not fit for print without context, ed.]," he exclaims, uttering a high-pitched laugh.

Not entirely sure what his noble friend could possibly mean by that, Navarre decides to sit down on a rock for a while.

Now, the *chevalier* gets down on his knees and removes the gold earring from the ear of the corpse. He raises it to the sun and tuts approvingly.

Sir Oerknal has not taken his eyes off the object during all of this.

"Where's my gold?," he inquires.

Startled, the *chevalier* hands the ring to Sir Oerknal, who immediately puts it on his head.

"My crown!," he roars.

Navarre turns his attention to the structure at the far end of the plateau. No smoke seems to come from the chimney and, as far as he can see, the structure appears to have a stone foundation, with the upper part consisting of wooden planks. After looking at it for some time, he realizes that it may very well be a lot larger than it would seem at first. The giant's home?

"We seem to have stumbled upon a mystery," he says, to no one in particular. "Was the giant shipwrecked here? Was the fire meant to attract attention? Why hasn't it ever been seen from the mainland? Or by passing ships?"

"Because nobody lives there?," Sir Eber suggests.

"Because no ships ever get close enough to the island to see it?," Sir Oengus adds.

Navarre has to admit that there is merit to the suggestions of his noble fellows.

"So Magus Seaworthy ended up living here with the giant," Sir Suvali says.

Navarre isn't so sure.

"Hmm...", he says. "Perhaps the giant killed the Magus the very moment he set foot on the island. So far, giants have not proven to be overly fond of Kings and sorcerers."

"What do we know about Magus Seaworthy?," Sir Eber asks.

"He makes ships fly through the air," Sir Suvali says.

Sir Eber casts the sorcerer a stony-faced look.

"And when did he get to the island?"

The sorcerer procures Loremaster Fist's notebook and flips some pages.

"It must have been about twelve years ago," he says.

"So the small vessel on the beach could have been his," Navarre muses.

"*Mes amis!*," the *chevalier* cries from the top of the steps. "*Ici!* Dried blood!"

Some heads turn but nobody moves.

"So the giant made a stand at the top of the steps and crawled here to die," Sir Eber says.

"That is assuming a lot," Navarre says. "Who says the blood is the giant's?"

"If the Magus came with the small vessel, the giant may have come with the raft," Sir Suvali suggests.

"There is no way of knowing," Navarre says. "Much will depend on who that giant was. It may have been part of some crew that sailed the huge three-master. I say we head for the hut over there and see if anybody is home."

And so the noble quartet start for the hut, leaving the *chevalier* to hurry after them.

When they get to small stream, Navarre tastes some of the water and finds it to be fresh. He fills his wine skin and starts after his fellows again. Just when the *chevalier* comes speeding past him in all haste, he catches up with Sir Suvali, himself some distance behind Sir Eber and Sir Oerknal, who seem to be discussing killing albatrosses again – both repeatedly aim their bows at the creatures and are obviously enjoying themselves immensely.

When our noble heroes get closer to the hut, it becomes apparent that it probably was built for a giant – albeit perhaps a small one. It is a haphazard collection of stones and rocks and planks and all manner of similar debris but it seems sturdy enough and it was obviously built by a skilled craftsman.

The closer our noble heroes get, the more it seems that the hut is indeed deserted: there is no smoke in the chimney, no tools lie about, the shutters are closed, and the grass has grown high. Still, the hut seems to be in good repair: the roof and shutters are intact and there are no obvious holes or missing planks in the superstructure.

“I’d say it hasn’t been empty that long,” Navarre.

“A year?,” Sir Suvali suggests. “That could mean that the giant did live there.”

“It would seem so,” Navarre muses. “What about that trail to the door?”

“It’s ajar,” Sir Suvali says. “Albatrosses?”

“We have come close enough,” Navarre says, when they get to within 50 yards of the hut. “I will announce our arrival.”

But he is too late. Sir Eber and the *chevalier* have already advanced and presently take up positions to the left and right of the entrance to the hut. Sir Eber knocks an arrow and pushes the door open with his foot. He has a quick look inside and signals the *chevalier*, who charges into the hut without further ado. Raising his bow, the ranger charges in right after him.

It is half an hour past midday.

When their eyes have adjusted to the darkness, the intrepid noble duo see that they are in a room that takes up all of the ground floor. To their left are a table and some chairs and a rough kitchen table stands against the wall in the far left corner, with some drawers in it and a cabinet on top of it. A stove and chimney are against the back wall and, to their right, a flight of steps leads to the second floor.

Taking up most of the floor is a huge magical diagram – a five-pointed star in a circle.

When the *chevalier* starts for the steps, taking care to avoid the diagram, Sir Eber stops him.

“Wait!,” he hisses, pointing at the diagram. “I’ll get the mage!”

He gets back to the door and beckons Sir Suvali, who has remained at Navarre’s side.

The sorcerer excuses himself, rather uncharacteristically it must be said, and starts for the cabin. When he is about halfway, he stops and announces his arrival in a formal manner. When there is no reply, he moves past Sir Eber into the hut, to find himself alone in the room. He notices that the furniture, while originally made for a giant, has obviously been modified later so that a man-sized individual could use it as well: a plank has been attached the legs of the table some three-quarters of the way up; a raised, man-sized chair sits in front of it; a smaller set of steps has been added to the stairs.

He turns his attention to the magical diagram on the floor and notices that it has been carved into the bedrock with care – an undertaking that must have taken many months. He procures some paper and a pencil and starts copying the diagram.

After Sir Eber told him to wait, the *chevalier* did indeed manage to restrain himself for about a second before he resumed his sprint up the steps and entered an attic-like room directly underneath the roof. To his left is a huge bed and there is a smaller one to his right, three sturdy chests in between them (**SEE ILLUSTRATION #17**). A pony-sized dog lies sleeping on the large bed.

He has to look at the creature twice before he gets to grips with what he sees – and once more to convince himself that the creature is, indeed, sound asleep. He tiptoes back down, where he finds Sir Suvali at the bottom of the steps. He puts a finger to his lips and makes a hissing sound.

Annoyed, the sorcerer looks up from his notes.

“What?”

“There is a giant dog,” the *chevalier* whispers, pointing up the stairs.

“Giant?,” Sir Eber growls from the doorway. “A giant dog? It must die.”

“What?,” Sir Suvali says, startled. “Why?”

“It is an unnatural creature,” the ranger says. “I must kill it.”

But the sorcerer will have nothing of it.

“Wait here until I’ve had a look,” he says, starting for the stairs.

The *chevalier* is right behind him on the steps when he reaches the attic, where he finds the giant dog wide awake. The creature must be quite old and it obviously hasn’t been eating well. Its eyes remain fixed on the sorcerer when he approaches – slowly so as not to upset the monster – and he ends up with the creature gently gnawing on his arm.

He opens his pack, slowly, takes out all the dog food he can find, lets the dog have a sniff and tosses it on the floor next to the small bed. Slowly, its eyes always on the intruders, the giant dog gets down from the bed, moves to the other side of the room and starts gulping down the food.

Emboldened, the *chevalier* enters the room and starts patting the dog.

Now, the sorcerer turns his attention to the three chests. He opens the smallest of the three, which contains a collection of weathered, well-worn, good-quality, man-sized clothes. The second chest contains what seem to be rags.

When he gets to the third chest, Sir Eber appears. The ranger glowers at the giant dog for some time but then seems to restrain himself. Indeed, he even attempts to befriend the creature – and fails. He turns around and sees Sir Suvali take a couple of old, well-used giant-sized tools from the third chest, obviously the tool set of a skilled ship's carpenter. He moves over and picks up a giant mallet, weighs it in his hand for a bit and then puts it on his back.

"Always wanted a war hammer," he says, grinning widely.

Outside, Sir Oengus has moved to the right of the hut and he presently discovers a pyramid-like pile of rocks at the back of it (SEE ILLUSTRATION #18). He approaches and notices a slab of stone embedded in one side of the pile, a number of runes crudely etched into it. When he turns to call his noble fellows, Navarre is just coming around the corner.

"Can you read this?," Sir Oengus asks, pointing to the slab.

Navarre approaches and looks at the runes.

"The runes are unfamiliar to me," he says. "There seem to be three rows, the middle row somewhat pronounced, see? A gravestone? An old grave? See the grass growing through the stones?"

He takes a few steps back.

"It would appear that Magus Seaworthy is no more," he resumes. "I will get Suvali. Maybe he can read the runes."

He hasn't taken two steps when Sir Oengus starts hollering the sorcerer's name. He shrugs, turns around again and continues his tour around the hut. He doesn't find anything of interest and, when he gets back to the front door again, Sir Oerknal is the only one there.

"Nothing?"

"Nothing," Sir Oerknal says.

Navarre has a look inside the hut for himself just when Sir Suvali is coming down the steps again.

"Nothing?," he asks. "No corpses up there?"

"No corpses," the sorcerer says. "Some chests, two beds. Looks like the Magus lived here with the giant for some time. Ah. And there is a giant dog up there. Sir Eber is playing with it. The cavalier is searching the room."

Navarre lifts an eyebrow.

"Searching the room?," he asks. "Whatever for?"

"Was that Oengus calling?," the sorcerer says, ignoring the question.

"Ah, yes," Navarre says. "There appears to be a tumulus behind the house. Perhaps you can read the runes on it."

"Let's have a look," the sorcerer says.

Upstairs, Scaralat de Sarazin is searching the bedroom in a manner quite unbecoming a *chevalier*. He is crawling around on the floor on his hands and knees, peering into every nook and cranny. When he gets to the small bed, he lowers himself even further, reaches underneath and pulls out a strongbox. Without bothering to get up, he opens the box and starts emptying it at speed until he finds a small bag with some diamonds.

"What's that?," Sir Eber says, who has been watching the *chevalier* surround himself with the contents of the box. "*Des bijoux!*" the ransacking *chevalier* announces, pursing his lips appreciatively and holding one of the stones to the light. "*Merveilleux!*"

And with that, like a common thief, he deftly pockets the stones.

"Not that," Sir Eber says. "That!"

He is pointing at a large construct that can perhaps best be described as a cross between a backpack and an accordion. It is made of a variety of materials – leather, canvas, metal, wood – and features numerous straps and bands as if it is meant to be attached to someone's back. On each side is a bellows-like construct. He picks up the construct and finds it surprisingly heavy even for a man of his strength. It seems to be filled to the brim with... something.

"Does it open?," he murmurs, turning the construct up and down.

But the *chevalier* isn't listening and has turned his attention to the other items on the floor around him: a scroll case, a small pouch, a short sword, a largish bag, the box he took the diamonds from. He picks up the short sword, a bland and grayish thing. He puts it down again and opens the bag, which turns out to contain a veritable stash of silver coins.

Behind him, Sir Eber gives up on the construct. He puts it on the bed and picks up the sword.

"What have we here?," he says, inspecting the weapon and finding it to be of some quality albeit rather dull of color.

"A gray sword," he resumes. "You don't suppose..."

"Ha, ha!," the *chevalier* chortles. "*Prudence, mon cher!* It may be the evil sword!"

"My thoughts exactly," the ranger says, putting the weapon on his back.

Outside, Navarre and Sir Suvali have reached the pile of stones behind the hut.

"I cannot read them," the sorcerer says after he has inspected the runes on the stone slab for some time. "I'd say they were written by an inexperienced hand. I'll copy them and maybe we can find out what they mean later."

He produces a piece of paper and a pencil and starts scribbling away. Navarre and Sir Oengus sit down on some rocks and watch their noble fellow in silence for a while.

"It is too small for giant," Navarre says after some time. "It must be for the Magus."

"To be sure," Sir Oengus says. "Buried here by the giant, who then carved the runes into the stone."

"So the Magus died before the giant," Navarre muses. "Then what did the giant do with the sword after the Magus died? Is it now in the hands of the people who killed him? I told you this whole mission was a waste of time!"

But then the *chevalier* comes storming around the corner, soon followed by Sir Eber carrying the strange apparatus and the other items from the strongbox.

"We have found it!," the *chevalier* cries. "We have found it!"

"What are you on about?," Navarre says irritably.

"It's on my back," Sir Eber says, pointing to the gray sword on his back.

Navarre gets to his feet and has a good look at the weapon.

"Is that the *Sword of Shadows?*," he asks, not half convinced. "A short sword? It seems quite unremarkable."

He has another good look at the weapon and, now, he is informed that it does appear to be of exceptional quality; that it is probably the best sword of ever; that it is 50 shades of gray; and that what else could it be?

"You see?," the *chevalier* cries. "I told you we had to go after it! There it is! In our hands!"

Even though it now seems that Navarre has to admit that the sword probably is the *Sword of Shadows*, he still isn't convinced that obtaining it was the right thing to do.

"Hmm...", he says. "That thing is sure to stick out like a sore thumb to whatever mysterious means the enemy seems to have of knowing where people and things are. If anything, it will sooner hinder our effort than benefit it."

"*Tant pis, mon cher!*," the *chevalier* says. "I'd rather it is in our hands when the enemy comes for it than in this deserted hut here. Cheer up, *mon cher!* We have outwitted the enemy!"

"Just be sure to notify me when people start drawing it," Navarre growls.

"Of course," Sir Eber says.

Sir Suvali has finished copying the runes and now notices the strange construct the ranger brought. He utters an excited cry, hurries over and starts looking at the thing from all sides. It isn't long before he has put the thing on his back and instructs Sir Eber to help him fasten the various straps and bands.

"Is there a key?," he asks when the construct is securely tied to his back.

"*Celle-ci?*," the *chevalier* asks, procuring a largish key from the box he found under the bed.

"That's it," the sorcerer says. "Excellent! Now, put it in the slot on the back of the apparatus and turn it."

Sir Eber takes the key from the *chevalier*, inserts it into the slot and starts turning it. Navarre takes a couple of steps back. When nothing happens after he has turned the key a couple of times, the ranger turns it some more, and some more, and then some more – still nothing, until, after a lot more turning, he says that he seems to be feeling some resistance.

The sorcerer takes the construct off his back, puts it against the hut and starts turning the key himself.

When nothing happens for quite some time, Sir Eber seems to have had enough.

"I'll start killing some birds, then," he says.

Sir Oengus, who has been told that killing albatrosses brings bad luck, grabs him by the arm.

"Don't you be killing any albatrosses or I'll break your bow to be sure," he says. "I want to get back to the mainland in one piece if you don't mind."

Sir Eber gives his noble fellow a blank stare.

"I have to feed the dog," he says. He calls the giant dog, which emerges from the hut and approaches, tail wagging.

Navarre has observed the whole exchange with a bemused look on his face. When the ranger starts patting the giant dog, he decides to try and get things going again.

"My Lords," he says. "Your attention, if you please. I would suggest we speak of what comes next."

"The mission to get the little sword is over," Sir Eber says. "I say we get on with the resistance."

"The resistance?"

"Get to the forests," the ranger says. "Start killing people."

"And what, pray, shall we do with the sword?," Navarre asks. "The enemy seems to be able to locate mythical artifacts at their leisure and I say the six of us will not be enough to protect it."

"We'll use it," Sir Eber says. "They'll all be dead before they can get their hands on it."

"*Messieurs*, we cannot draw the sword," the *chevalier* says.

"I agree," Sir Suvali says, still turning the key. "The legends say it brings disaster and woe whenever it is drawn."

"The bastards killed my whole family," Sir Eber growls. "I want my revenge and I will use this sword to achieve it!"

"Perhaps I could have another look at the sword?," the *chevalier* asks.

"No," Sir Eber says.

"And so it begins!," Navarre says. "This is exactly what the legends speak of!"

Sir Oengus rises to his feet.

"Tell me again about the sword," he says. "What do the legends say?"

"That the sword kills all creatures it touches," Sir Eber says, grinning.

"I remind you, Sir, that it is not for you alone to decide what is to be done with the sword," Navarre says to the ranger. "As the rightful rulers of the realm, we shall decide in council what to do with it. I second the motion that we do not draw the sword until we know how to deal with the possible consequences."

"Fine," Sir Eber says. "Then I say to your council that we head into the forest and start raiding enemy lines."

"And what of the sword, Sir?," Navarre asks. "We shall need all the help we can get to keep it out of the hands of the enemy and I put it to you that some trees will not protect it from their armies – or even a small unit of archers for that matter."

"Nonsense," Sir Eber says. "Armies cannot operate in forests. We'll pick them off one by one."

Navarre throws the ranger an indignant look.

"My dear fellow!," he says. "Surely you do not suggest we engage in a campaign of brigandage!?"

"And why not?," Sir Eber says.

"I remind you of your position, Sir!," Navarre says angrily. "The commoners depend on us for protection and it is our sacred duty to free them from the yoke of the oppressor. We must raise our armies and restore order as soon as possible, provide safe havens for those who have lost home and hearth. We must make haste and defeat the enemy. I say this can only be done in a single, decisive battle!"

A lively discussion ensues and, as usual, our noble heroes don't seem to be able to agree on anything.

Navarre is in the middle of one of his angry arguments, this one involving the notion that our noble heroes cannot not allow the *Sword of Shadows* to fall into enemy hands and that they must guard it with their lives, when the *chevalier* suddenly bursts into applause.

"*Bravo!*," he cries, looking in the direction of the plateau. "When can I have a go?"

Annoyed, Navarre turns around to see that Sir Suvali has the construct on his back again. From it, two large, wing-like protrusions appear to have unfolded.

"It is a flying apparatus!," the sorcerer cries. "Watch this!"

With this, he turns around and starts running away from the hut.

"I say we start the killing immediately," Sir Eber continues when the sorcerer is gone. "Let's not hide behind armies and start acting like real men."

"Real men?," Navarre replies angrily. "And what kind of man would leave his wards to fend for themselves? By Olm! We are Dukes of the Realm! Our place is at the head of our armies!"

"Let Palava play with his soldiers and look after the commoners," Sir Eber says. "I say we target supply lines and messengers, create confusion, strike from ambush. It is what I was trained to do."

"I am Duke Dauberval, Sir!" Navarre exclaims. "I will not resort to banditry!"

Again, the discussion continues like this until there is another disturbance and the *chevalier* bursts into applause again. This time, Sir Suvali is actually flying. He approaches through the air and makes an awkward landing close to his noble fellows.

"*Mes compliments, monsieur!*," the *chevalier* cries. "*Vous aviez l'air magnifique!*"

"Pff," the sorcerer wheezes, somewhat unsteady on his feet and wiping his forehead. "That is *not* as easy as it would seem!"

"Bravo!," the *chevalier* cries. "A demonstration! Some *pirouettes, monsieur!*"

This seems to remind the sorcerer of something.

"Ah, yes!," he says, reaching for one of the many pockets of his *mage vest*. "I almost forgot. We've found a rather peculiar map of the realm. Would you believe that it is actually much larger?"

"Pardon?," Navarre says, not quite sure of what he has just heard.

The sorcerer procures the scroll case the *chevalier* found in the bedroom. He retrieves a parchment from it and unrolls it, revealing a map of the mainland with a rather large piece of land attached to the rimward coast, just below some lettering that says "Icy Wastes". Also on the map, off the duskward coast, is a small island marked "Walrus Island" (SEE ILLUSTRATION #19).

Our noble heroes cannot believe their eyes.

"I do declare!," Navarre exclaims. "Could this map be correct?"

"*Mon cher!*," the *chevalier* cries excitedly. "More land! And no dukes!"

"Wow!," Sir Oengus says. "Walrus Island!"

"I say!," Navarre exclaims. "Could this be where the enemy came from? Why doesn't anybody know of this?"

"Magus Seaworthy knew of it," Sir Suvali says.

Navarre cannot begin to fathom what the map seems to mean but the *chevalier* begs to differ.

"This is where we must go from here!," he cries.

"*Pardon?*," Navarre says. "Why? What do you hope to achieve? No one even has the faintest idea what is up there! Are we to embark on yet another expedition into the unknown while the enemy ransacks our lands?"

"It is the heartland of the enemy!," the *chevalier* cries. "We must strike them where it hurts!"

"My dear fellow," Navarre says. "The enemy is on Apple Island. Not on the other side of the mountains."

"*Fil!*," the *chevalier* cries. "They are after the sword! If we go rimward, they will follow!"

Navarre looks at his noble friend in astonishment.

"What!?,," he cries. "For crying out loud! Do you honestly believe that the enemy will send their whole army after six men with a sword? Abandon what they have just conquered? Surely you must see that obtaining the sword is only part of their objective at best? And what if the enemy *does* hail from beyond the mountains? Who is to say that the whole place isn't swarming with iron-clad soldiers and giants? It will take weeks to get there and explore!"

"That's it!," the *chevalier* cries. "The giant was the guardian of the *Sword of Shadows!* The giants of the wastes want to take it from him! That's why they killed him!"

"Aye," Sir Oengus says. "The giant was the guardian of the sword."

Navarre cannot believe his ears. Where do his noble fellows get all this from?

"My Lords!," he cries. "Surely! Have you forgotten that this whole expedition started because the Loremaster's notebook said that he gave the sword to Magus Seaworthy? There is no mention of a giant!"

Once more, our noble heroes lose themselves in heated debate. If anything, the discovery of the map seems to have divided them even more.

"We must sail for Walrus Island," Sir Oengus says. "Think about it! Walrus Island! I feel it in my bones!"

"I am going nowhere on any boat," Sir Eber says. "We'll go rimward and we'll go there on foot."

"And leave the usurper to do as they please?," Navarre cries. "Never! I am Duke Dauberval! We will have plenty of time to explore whatever is up there once we are back in control of the realm! We must proceed as planned!"

After a lot more of this, the tide seems to turn when the *chevalier* is suddenly all in favor of Navarre's plan again.

"To battle it is!," he cries. "To Sarazin! *Tous pour un, un pour tous!*"

"Sarazin?," Sir Eber says. "Free Dauberval? What about Weald?"

Navarre draws a deep breath.

"We will liberate *all* duchies," he says. "We are going to Dauberval and Sarazin first since all reports indicate that the other duchies where we hold sway are compromised. Including Weald. You should be happy. We'll have to get to Sarazin without attracting attention."

At this moment, Sir Oerknal, who hasn't said anything at all so far, decides to speak: "I will listen to suggestions. I will pick one and we'll do that one."

The remark leads to a bemused silence, in which our noble heroes seem to reflect on the fact that they did elect the oafish creature with the golden earring on its head as their King – even if that was in a moment of drunken revelry.

Navarre is the first to speak.

"It would seem that the... King has spoken," he starts.

But now Sir Suvali points to the sky.

"A flare!" he exclaims. "Up there!"

Within seconds, Sir Oengus is on his feet.

"All hands to the ship!" he shouts.

And so it is that our heroes hastily collect their things and start running back to the cliff at the other side of the plateau. When they get there, they see that *The Black Owl* has lifted anchor and is presently *en route* to the open sea with all hands on deck.

"*Mon Dieu!*," the *chevalier* exclaims. "Another ship! Over there!"

And sure enough, there is another ship in the waters below. It flies no flag and it is heading for *The Black Owl* at speed. Many men are seen on the deck and it seems to gain rapidly on *The Black Owl*, which is maneuvering frantically in an attempt get away from the beach. Sir Oengus excitedly explains to his noble fellows what is going on below, speaking much of hauling to the wind, tacking, riding currents, and coming about.

In the end, *The Black Owl* seems to catch the right wind and pick up speed.

"She's in the wind!," Sir Oengus shouts. "She's much faster! She's getting away!"

Our noble heroes continue to watch *The Black Owl* pulling away until the second ship suddenly makes a sharp turn and starts heading for the island.

"*Mes amis!*," the *chevalier* cries. "An invasion is imminent! We must destroy the staircase!"

"Impossible," Sir Suvali says. "There is no time."

"We'll have to do something," Navarre says. "With *The Black Owl* gone, we're trapped here."

"I'll make a stand right there," Sir Eber says, pointing at the last step. "I'll have the advantage."

Yet another animated discussion ensues and plans are made and rejected and made again and rejected again. After a while, Navarre, who hasn't taken part in the debate for once, decides to try and put an end to it. "Gentlemen!," he calls. "If I may? That ship will be here soon and this leaves us no time to build anything like a strong enough defense. And even if we should manage to hold the plateau, all the enemy has to do is lay siege and wait for reinforcements or until we all die from hunger and thirst. I suggest we have Suvali fly us to the mainland with his flying contraption one by one."

The sorcerer looks at him in some consternation.

"The apparatus cannot carry two," he says.

"Then one of us must use that thing that thing to get the sword to the mainland," Navarre says. "It cannot be you, since we will need your magic here."

But this seems to alarm the sorcerer even more.

"Impossible!," he cries, before coming up with a myriad of excuses why no one but him can use the apparatus on his back. "Flying this thing is too difficult! The wind is too strong! I have to cast a spell to make it work!"

"Magic?," Navarre muses. "Then it would seem that we have a problem."

Now, Sir Oengus takes center stage.

"Friends," he begins. "Allow me to tell you a story. It be the legend of Treasure Island, a tale of heroic..."

"My dear chap," Navarre interrupts his noble fellow. "As much as we like your stories, I don't think there is time for one right now. Do you have a suggestion?"

"Aye," Sir Oengus says. "I say we let them get to the plateau and all way to the house. Meanwhile, we will board the ship unseen and take it by night."

"A good plan," Navarre agrees. "But how will we sail the ship? The waters are treacherous and sailors we are not."

"There will always be the captain and a skeleton crew aboard," Sir Oengus says. "We'll take them alive and force them to sail the ship. Pay them if we have to. I have yet to meet a hand who cannot be bought with a large bag of silver."

"*Bravo!*," the *chevalier* cries. "But we need time! We shall send one or two of us to the ship while the others set up multiple lines of defense on the plateau. We will keep the louts occupied until you signal the all clear!"

"Aye," Sir Oengus says pensively. "But we must weigh anchor as soon as we are in command of the ship lest the bilge rats have a chance to mount a counterattack we cannot survive. So how do I get the rest of you aboard before that?"

"True," Navarre says. "And how will the rest of us keep the enemy occupied long enough? How do we make sure they do not conclude that the sword is no longer here and return to the ship before we are in control of it?"

It is a brilliant, daring plan but our noble heroes cannot seem to make it work and, since the enemy ship is getting ever closer, Navarre has started to consider other ways to get off the island again. He has a long look at some of the giant albatrosses but decides that the creatures probably won't be able to carry grown men.

"Is there no magical way to leave the island?," he ends up asking Sir Suvali. "What did the Rector do to get us off Apple Island?"

"It's called *dimensional folding*," the sorcerer says. "Wait... Yes. Perhaps... I'll be right back!"

He starts running back to the hut, leaving the rest of our noble heroes to get on with trying to make Sir Oengus' plan work. When he returns some time later, they haven't really come up with anything solid.

"It could be possible to leave the island via the magical diagram," he says. "But I'm not at all sure how that would work and the risk is far too high. So I suggest we use the Loremaster's crystal wand. It can reduce things in size and weight for a day and a night and I'll use it on all of you. I'll put you in a bag and fly to the mainland with the flying apparatus."

It is a brilliant plan and his noble fellows start cheering loudly. But the sorcerer raises his hand, a pompous look on his face.

"Wait," he says. "I still need time to practice with the apparatus and you must keep the invaders on the beach for as long as possible. You must make a stand here and use bows and rocks to keep them on the beach."

He pauses and looks at his noble fellows for dramatic effect.

"There is but a single snag," he continues. "I don't know if the wand has enough power to affect all of you. If it hasn't, it will mean that some of you will have to remain here."

"*Montjoie Saint-Denis!*," the *chevalier* cries. "I shall be the last!"

"Why not leave the island right now?," Navarre asks. "Before the enemy knows we are here?"

"They know," the sorcerer says. "They saw *The Black Owl*. And I need more practice before I can fly to the mainland."

"I stand corrected," Navarre says. "Reduce me before you get to the *chevalier*."

"Then it is agreed," the sorcerer says. "Start gathering rocks and I will start practicing. I will return at the very last moment and start using the wand."

The *chevalier* bows elegantly.

"Then it is *au revoir* for now, *mon ami!*," he cries. "*Messieurs!* Let us start reinforcing our positions!"

"Right on time," Sir Oengus says, pointing at the sea below. "The ship will be here in half an hour."

The next half hour, our noble heroes work like serfs, hauling rocks and building low walls along the edge of the plateau. Since it took them about a quarter of an hour to get from the beach to the plateau, they gather they may have close to half an hour before the enemy can get anywhere close to the top of the steps after they have landed. Using bows, crossbows, and rocks, our noble heroes should be able to wreak considerable havoc among the invaders until then.

When the enemy ship has entered the bay without incident and starts maneuvering to the beach, our noble heroes know that the moment of truth is nigh. When the ship reaches the beach and drops anchor, numerous pinnaces are lowered into the water and armed men start climbing into them. Sir Oengus estimates that there at least 150 men on the ship, some 60 of which appear to be irregulars, bandits of some kind. Another 30 are clad in the strange, full-metal armor and an equal number appear to be mercenaries, wearing brown leather armor or something like it. Of all of these, some 120 are now rowing to the beach.

With a flourish, the *chevalier* procures a bottle of wine from his pack.

"*Mes amis*," he says, uncorking the bottle. "*Du vin?*"

Our noble heroes take turns drinking from the bottle until Sir Oengus tells them that the pinnaces are in range.

"Fire at will!," he yells.

With this, volleys of bolts and arrows start raining down on the pinnaces. When the invaders reach the beach, orders are hollered and the iron-clad men and mercenaries jump overboard and start pulling the pinnaces onto the sand, where they turn them over to provide cover (SEE ILLUSTRATION #20). The bandits start moving up the beach, most of them armed with slings and unarmored, using only light, buckler-like shields to try and protect themselves from the arrows and bolts raining down on them.

When the first of the bandits reach the steps, Sir Oerknal discards his heavy crossbow and starts dropping rocks onto the ascending bandits climbing the steps. The others continue firing arrows and bolts to great effect, rarely missing a shot. After some five minutes of this, about a third of the advancing bandits are wounded.

"I'm shooting at the anchor line!" Sir Oengus says to Navarre, who lies next to him.

"Good luck with that!" Navarre yells back at him, hitting another bandit in the shoulder. "By Olm! Peasants! Sending in the missile troops first!"

Five minutes later, the bandits get to where the waterfall meets the steps. They start crossing the slippery steps at speed, bucklers raised, and now the first of them die: two men slip and fall down to the beach screaming and a third follows them with an arrow in his throat. By the time all bandits have crossed the water, more than half of them are wounded and most of these halt their advance, pressing their backs against the cliff, bucklers held high. Now, Sir Eber also starts dropping rocks on them and it must be said that he does so to great effect: soon, more bandits join the agonized screams of the wounded on the beach, clutching broken limbs or worse.

But still many bandits continue the ascent and they must be about three-quarters of the way up when Sir Suvali appears. He procures his magical wand and points it at Sir Oerknal, who instantly becomes even smaller than he already was. The sorcerer picks him up and puts him in a bag while the others continue raining death on the bandits below. The next one to go is Sir Oengus, then comes Navarre, then Sir Eber and, finally, the *chevalier*. By this time, 42 of the enemy forces are either wounded or dead.

When the *chevalier* is in the bag, Sir Suvali starts running. He turns left about halfway across the plateau, charges up the slope and hurls himself over the edge among a flurry of albatrosses and seagulls. He struggles with the controls for a bit but manages to keep his altitude until the wind from the Straights catches him and blows him downward and up into the air.

It takes him some effort and time before he is on a straight course to the mainland and he presently starts looking for a safe place to land. Before him, the cliffs stretch to the left and right, some 200 feet high. He spots what seems to be a sheltered depression in the trees on the top of the cliffs and steers toward it. It takes him about 20 minutes to get close to the coast, where a violent rising wind blows him high into the air and sends him hurtling past his chosen landing point.

When he finally regains control, the flying sorcerer is soaring high above the woods, which stretch for miles and miles into the distance. Far, far away, he can see the peaks of the rimward mountains, beyond which, as he now knows, must be *terra incognita*. Having missed his landing spot and noticing that it is already late in the afternoon, he now decides to fly as far rimward as he dares. A thermal current catches him and then a strong wind starts blowing him further and further rimward.

Inside the bag, Sir Oerknal, the minuscule, newly elected King of the Realm, farts.

Some two hours later, his efforts are beginning to take their toll on the flying sorcerer. Flying the apparatus requires all of his concentration all of the time and, even then, he cannot always make it do what he wants. He decides that enough is enough and initiates a descent to the forest below, where he soon spots a clearing of sorts. When he touches down, the area turns out to be marshy and soggy and he stumbles for some two dozen yards before he can come to a complete standstill. Exhausted, he releases his noble fellows from the bag.

"Stay low until the effect wears off," he says to his noble fellows, after he has removed the apparatus from his back. "You don't want to get eaten by the first fox that comes along. I think it's another five, six days to the River Dawn and civilization. I'll keep walking until it gets dark and I suggest two of you keep their eyes and ears peeled. Eber? Navarre?"

He picks up his noble fellows, puts each of them in a pocket of his *mage vest* and starts walking rimward.

"Why didn't we board the ship with that thing?," Sir Eber asks, after a while. "We could have stayed out of sight until we got back to our own size and then killed the crew and take the ship."

"Perhaps the best explanation would be that you did not speak of this when we were discussing our plan of action," Navarre replies irritably. "Besides, I thought you didn't want to go anywhere by ship?"

"Bah," Sir Eber scoffs. "Think, think, blah. It's time we started doing something."

Navarre decides to let the matter rest. He has decided to keep a low profile as Sir Suvali suggested. Pity, though. Sir Eber's plan could have worked.

Sir Suvali covers several miles before the sun sets and he locates a suitable spot to spend the night. He starts a fire and settles down for a long, waking night.

Since there is little he can do as long as he is as small as he is, Navarre decides to get some sleep, which means that he is fast asleep when Sir Oengus starts reflecting on how large certain parts of the female body

must seem now that he is so small. He is also fortunate to miss out on Sir Oerknal suggesting that he “take a dump in Suvali’s bag” and then see what happens to his excrement when he gets back to normal. “Ha, ha, ha,” the creature roars. “Would that leave the wizard with a bag full of shit?”

Day 8: Sir Suvali spends most of the day walking rimward with our noble heroes in the pockets of his vest again. Late in the afternoon, almost 24 hours after he used the Loremaster’s wand on his fellows, he locates a suitable spot for a camp and starts a fire. Less than half an hour later, his noble fellows have reverted to their normal size. “I didn’t sleep last night and I’m tired,” he says. “I suggest you gentlemen stand guard tonight.”

Within moments, he is fast asleep.

When his noble fellows have eaten, they discuss the events of the last few days.

“Does anybody know where we are at the moment?,” Navarre asks, at some point.

“About two days inland,” Sir Eber says. “It looks like perhaps another three, four days to the river.”

“We’ll have to commandeer a barge once we get there,” Navarre says. “It is the fastest way to Sarazin.”

“Why don’t we go to Big Beach to pick up the *Varis*?,” Sir Oengus suggests. “It will be fully armed and armored by now! We’ll sail to Sarazin and blow everything out of the water!”

“Didn’t your smith say it would take months to finish the project?,” Navarre asks.

“Aye,” Sir Oengus says. “He may have said that.”

“We’ll have to adopt some sort of disguise,” the *chevalier* says, looking at the pilgrim’s robes he is still wearing with a miserable look on his face.

Navarre isn’t so sure but the events of the past couple of days have drained him of the will to start arguing again – at least for now. The others seem to feel the same way and soon most of our noble heroes are fast asleep.

Day 9: Our noble heroes leave at first light to continue their trek to the River Dawn. It must be around midday when the *chevalier* spots something moving among the trees ahead.

“Soldiers approaching,” he announces. “Nine of them.”

He steps forward and, moments later, our noble heroes identify the soldiers as being in the service of a Thuxran baron. A corporal among them is the first to speak.

“Lords. Welcome to Thuxra.”

“We are allies,” the *chevalier* says. “Your leader?”

“Pardon me, Lord,” the corporal says. “Might I inquire as to your name?”

“Tell us the latest,” the *chevalier* says.

The corporal hesitates.

“Well, what news?,” the *chevalier* asks, before waving a hand and adding ‘Scaralat de Sarazin’ as an afterthought.

“My Lord,” the corporal says. “The King is dead, slain by bandits! People say a tribal war has erupted and that armies are pouring in from the mountains! They have taken Apple Island!”

“Tell me where the armies are now,” the *chevalier* says.

“I couldn’t tell you, my Lord,” the corporal says.

“We are royalists,” the *chevalier* says. “We require free passage and horses.”

“I’m afraid we are on foot, my Lord.”

“*Et alors?*,” the *chevalier* cries. “Where are the nearest stables? Who is in control here? Who speaks for Thuxra? Who speaks for the royalists?”

“There is much confusion, my Lord,” the corporal says. “It is said that Wyrns has fallen to the rebels and that some sort of bandit council rules there. Not that the shepherds over there would have put up much of a fight, if you don’t mind my saying, Lord.”

“*Pas du tout, pas du tout,*,” the *chevalier* says with an absentminded gesture. “What of the other duchies?”

“The trouble seems to be mostly on the other side of the river, my Lord. Thuxra is still under our control and heralds have come from Dara, Bagabuxsha, and Palava to call upon all able-bodied men to take up arms and organize.”

“How many royalists are here?”

“All royalists are gathering in Palava, my Lord.”

“Any men from Sarazin among them?”

“No, my Lord. So far, only men from Palava, Bagabuxsha, and Dara have been seen there.”

“Who leads the royalists, corporal?,” Navarre asks.

“I couldn’t say, my Lord. I hear the army is led by captains and barons.”

“And what are your orders?,” Navarre asks.

“We are to look for royalists and inform them of the situation, my Lord.”

"*Et voilà!*," the *chevalier* says. "Messieurs, you have fulfilled your mission. You may assist us."

"We can take you to Thuxra, my Lord," the corporal says.

"What of the court?," Navarre asks.

"It is said that most of them are dead, my Lord," the corporal says.

"Then who speaks for Thuxra?"

"I couldn't say, my Lord," the corporal says. "The barons have left for Palava."

"*Eh, bien!*," the *chevalier* says. "Take us to Thuxra!"

"Very well, my Lord."

When the company start moving, Navarre addresses the *chevalier*: "With the royalists converging in Palava, it seems that it will be up to us to secure our own duchies."

"Not so, *mon cher*," the *chevalier* says. "An army stands or falls with its size and position. We must unite both armies as soon as possible. We cannot fight with an army in pieces. The enemy will take advantage and destroy us one by one."

"I stand corrected," Navarre says with the slightest nod of his head bows. "Where will we gather our barons before we cross the river? Sarazin? Dauberval?"

"March rimward!," the *chevalier* cries. "*Mon cher!* We must unite both armies as soon as possible!"

"I understand that," Navarre says. "But *where* do we gather our own armies? Do we call the barons together in a single location and *then* head for the lake or are we going to let each baron get there on his own? I suppose one could argue..."

"We must unite the army!," the *chevalier* exclaims. "We can only attack *en force!*"

"I hear you!," Navarre says angrily. "But do we rally our own armies first or..."

"We will send messengers to Palava with instructions to await our arrival!," the *chevalier* cries. "We will join them with our own armies and march on Apple Island *en masse!*"

Although mightily peeved that the *chevalier* doesn't seem to want to hear him, Navarre has to admit that retaking Apple Island is a brilliant idea – indeed, our noble hero has some trouble accepting that he didn't think of it himself. Still, honor where honor is due and he congratulates his noble friend.

"That is an excellent idea!," he says. "Retaking Apple Island will defeat the bulk of the enemy army and send a strong signal to royalists still hiding in the fiefs! We will have a base of operations!"

"We must march on the island as soon as possible," the *chevalier* says. "Strike when the enemy is still reorganizing."

"Agreed," Navarre says. "Combining the royalists with our own armies should get us some nine hundred men in the field. So far, we've seen, what, five hundred enemy soldiers?"

"We'll need a lot of barges to be sure," Sir Oengus adds. "And this may also solve your problem of where to unite the two armies. All we have to do is get all barges to land on Apple Island at the same time."

"Excellent thinking!," Navarre exclaims. "We can sail our own troops down the River Dusk while the royalists advance on Lake River. We will join our forces on the banks of Sarazin and attack!"

The noble trio continue discussing the plan for a while, with Sir Oengus suggesting they stop in Nisibis before they get to Sarazin.

"We'll be sailing up the River Dusk anyway so we'll pass Nisibis first," he says. "It seems only logical to stop there to see what we can do there. I could disembark and round up as many barges as I can while you go on to gather your armies. I have a lot of friends among the river folk and many will want to fight for us."

"Finally things are coming together!," Navarre says excitedly. "Barges from Nisibis, horses from Sarazin, men from Dauberval!"

"Much will depend on whether the enemy is already in Nisibis and Dauberval," Sir Oengus says. "Or Sarazin, for that matter. Still, if I can't get any soldiers in Nisibis, I think I can still get all the barges we'll need."

Some time later, the company take a short break to eat and drink. The noble trio continue discussing tactics and various ways to gather as many men as possible – providing there are still men to gather. When they decide that it is time to get moving again, Sir Eber, Sir Suvali, and Sir Oerknal emerge from the woods.

"Gentlemen," the sorcerer says. "The *Sword of Shadows* has been drawn."

The noble trio look at him in stunned silence.

"So we can tell you that the blade casts a shadow that is longer than it actually is," the sorcerer continues. "This leads me to believe it may have the reach of a long sword."

Navarre cannot believe his ears. Have these people gone mad? He distinctly remembers Sir Eber agreeing to warn him before he would draw the sword. He distinctly remembers Sir Suvali mentioning the legends that speak

of the mayhem and destruction the sword has caused whenever it was drawn. And what happened to the sorcerer claiming that drawing the sword would alert the enemy to its location? And, more importantly, why did the trio break a gentlemen's agreement?

The *chevalier* is the first to react.

"Messieurs," he says frostily. "I am at a loss for words. It was agreed that the sword would not be drawn."

"We drew it out of sight of the soldiers," the sorcerer says.

"That is not what I meant," the *chevalier* replies. "Why did you do this?"

"We have decided that I will use the Loremaster's wand on Eber if the sword should start exerting some sort of influence on him," the sorcerer says.

"Perhaps you have misheard me, *monsieur*," the *chevalier* says. "Why did you do this?"

"Because it is not for you to decide what happens to the sword," Sir Eber says bluntly.

The *chevalier* gives him a blank stare before turning to the sorcerer again.

"Have you forgotten, *monsieur*, that the enemy may have the means to detect the sword?," he asks. "That it was you who argued that the chances of the enemy detecting the weapon would likely increase if it should be drawn?"

"We took the required precautions," the sorcerer says.

"*Vraiment?*," the *chevalier* says. "Pray enlighten me as to exactly what it is that you did do to shield the weapon from the divine powers of, *disons*, the *Kettle of the Coven?*"

But the sorcerer continues to wriggle and writhe, slippery as an eel in a bucket of grease, unwilling or unable to answer the *chevalier's* direct questions. He repeatedly tries to change the subject, hurls accusations at everyone he can think of, or simply refuses to answer. Eventually, the *chevalier* puts an end to the whole thing – much, much too politely as far as Navarre is concerned.

"Your curiosity seems to have overcome your common sense, *monsieur*," he says coldly, before turning away from the treacherous sorcerer and his accomplices.

Navarre has followed the exchange with barely veiled disgust. What is to be done now? The trio can obviously not be trusted. Can the sword be left in the care of the brainless ranger? Can these men be given the responsibility of leading an army? Can they even be trusted as messengers? He is about to start yelling furiously when Sir Oengus plants his axe in a tree.

"Your excuses only make things worse, sorcerer," he growls. "To be sure, the peacocks here may be attempting to force their opinions on us but a man is a man and his word is his word. You want to draw the sword? Fine. But state your case like a man, here, in front of the whole crew, and don't go about it behind our backs like a thief in the woods."

"Well spoken, Sir," Navarre says, barely able to constrain his anger. "Gentlemen, you have broken your word and endangered our efforts in the process."

Upon which, with the party about to implode, the DM seems to decide that enough is enough. He informs our noble heroes that they continue their journey to Thuxra; that they spend the night in the open; and that they arrive at the gates of Thuxra at 11.00 hrs on Day 11.

He procures a map and points out that the town of Thuxra is little more than some barrows on a river protected by palisades. Although the town proper would count some 300 souls under normal circumstances, many more are now camping among the barrows and on a veritable fleet of barges on the River Dawn, currently making the place a veritable beehive of activity. With the others still reeling and barely able to look each other in the eye, it is the *chevalier* who decides that the show must go on.

"You there!," the *chevalier* yells at a man in armor, obviously a Palavan army captain. "What news?"

The man looks at the disheveled *chevalier* and his companions for a moment.

"Well?," the *chevalier* cries impatiently. "Out with it, man!"

The captain has another good look at our noble heroes and then seems to decide he'd better take no risks.

"My Lord," he says, with a slight nod of the head. "Most of what has happened is unclear. It would seem that most of the Thuxran barons are on their way to Palava following some unsettling news from there."

"Most?," the *chevalier* asks.

"It is so, my Lord," the captain continues. "Some chose to remain to defend their homes from the marauding hordes. Perhaps they prefer to fight on their home turf rather than commit to an uncertain war in Palava."

"Who speaks for Thuxra at the moment, captain?," Navarre asks.

"That would be His Lordship, Baron Cynfawr, my Lord," the captain says.

"Then you can take us there, captain," Navarre says.

"His Lordship left five days ago to lead the barons to Palava, my Lord."

"Are you saying that there is no one we can speak to at the moment, captain?"

The captain shrugs apologetically.

"What of the troops gathering in Palava?," the *chevalier* asks.

"They are what remains of the ducal armies of Palava, Bagabuxsha, Mim, Thuxra, and Dara, my Lord," the captain says. "All in all, some twenty barons from various duchies will be there by now. My Lord, information is scarce."

"What of Wyrns?," Sir Eber asks.

"From Wyrns comes news that the commoners have revolted, Lord," the captain says. "It seems to be under the rule of councils by all accounts."

"What nonsense is this?," Navarre asks.

"It is what most refugees seem to believe, my Lord," the captain says, nodding at the river.

When Navarre looks at the river, he sees Sir Oengus approaching.

"No sails on the lake," Sir Oengus says. "I've found one skipper willing to take us as far as the lake."

He turns to the *chevalier*.

"I'll need those diamonds of yours."

The *chevalier* looks at his companion in obvious consternation.

"Smartly now," Sir Oengus says. "I have to pay the man."

When no one speaks for quite some time, the *chevalier* seems to regain his composure.

"*Mais bien sur!*," he cries, hastily procuring the small bag. "My diamonds are your diamonds!"

"Follow me, lubbers," Sir Oengus says, taking the bag and starting back to the river.

List: Gold earring (20 gp); brass bracer with runes and symbols of suns, fire, and volcanoes in bas-relief (5 gp); a backpack-like flying apparatus (an accordion-like construct with many straps and belt for attaching it to a human body; allows for flight for as many hours as wearer has Constitution; 8 hrs of rest required between flights); a small pouch with the key to the flying apparatus; a scroll case containing a map of The Forest with heretofore unknown areas added to the rimward coast; *Sword of Shadows* (a gray short sword that casts the shadow of a long sword and appears to be able to hit a lot more than its length would suggest); a bag with 2,000 sp; a bag with eight diamonds (100 gp each)

List (XP): +835 xp

An Adventure in Five Acts

Part V

Act IV: Return to Apple Island

In which the DM informs our noble heroes that they spent four days aboard *The Lovely Theresa*, one in Big Beach, two on *The Black Owl*, and then four to get to where they are now. He also says that the capital of Thuxra has a combined population of 600 souls, spread evenly among the town proper and an outlying area dotted with numerous farms (SEE ILLUSTRATION #21).

Day 11, continued: The Palavan captain takes his leave and our noble heroes start after Sir Oengus.

"Gentlemen," Sir Suvali says, when our noble heroes are together again and about halfway to the river. "I have something to say."

When the others have stopped, the sorcerer falls to his knees.

"I ask your forgiveness for my behavior," he says. "Gentlemen, I am sorry. It may have been the thrill of flying around in that machine that sent my head spinning and led to my irresponsible behavior. Perhaps it was the events of the past week that drove me to hasty decisions I now regret. Whatever the reason, I humbly ask your forgiveness."

Navarre looks at the kneeling sorcerer with mixed feelings. He decides not to say anything for the moment.

"I see now that I should not have drawn the sword without conferring with all of you," the sorcerer continues. "I admit that I could not restrain myself and that it was a foolish act."

When no one reacts, he continues: "The decision was mine and mine alone. Sir Eber is not to blame. I approached him when he was tired and I played on his own desire to draw the sword. I left him no choice. For this, gentlemen, Sir Eber, I offer you my full and unreserved apologies."

The *chevalier* is the first to react, a tear in his eye.

"*Mon cher!*," he cries. "I, too, do not know what came over me to start acting like my father!"

The sorcerer politely averts his eyes. Navarre looks at the *chevalier* with a raised eyebrow.

"*Rise mon ami!*," the *chevalier* continues. "All is forgiven!"

The sorcerer looks at the rest of his noble fellows and most of them nod some form of agreement.

"I suggest we establish a council," he continues. "A council in which we all have one vote, except the King, who shall have two votes and the right of veto. Just like we were taught at the Academy."

"Hell, yeah!," Sir Oerknal says. "I like it!"

"I, for one, will pledge allegiance to such a council," Sir Eber says.

"Bravo!," the *chevalier* cries. "I agree!"

"I'm not one to hold a grudge," Sir Oengus says.

"Then it is agreed," Sir Suvali says, getting to his feet. "Now, before we go on, I would propose to you a change of plan. While we agreed to go to Sarazin and Dauberval to rally whatever remains of the armies there and then join the effort to retake Apple Island, I say a change is in order now that we have the Sword of Shadows. I believe that, from now on, we must avoid the enemy at all costs. They will look for us among the royalists and joining their armies is a risk we cannot take."

Navarre is not so sure about that. At the very least, it would mean that the enemy would have to deal with the royalists at full strength.

"Suppositions," the *chevalier* says. "But first, I am relieved that we can let the past be the past! As to your proposition, I would say that the notion that the enemy knows that we have the sword seems premature. While I admit that they will now know that the sword is no longer on the Isle of Bread, all they can know about us is that '*du monde*' took the sword. I say we still have the momentum and that we must keep it. That way, the enemy will have to deal with the advancing royalist armies as well as '*des inconnus*' with the sword – us."

"I suggest a twofold plan. First, we shall take our responsibility and rally the royalists in some unknown location.

Note that, this way, we will still remain out of sight of the enemy. Second, and depending on the outcome of this, we shall consider undertaking another mission – perhaps an operation behind enemy lines."

"And then let them know who we are?," Sir Oerknal asks.

"Non," the *chevalier* says. "We must give the enemy as little information as possible."

"I still think we should stay away from the royalists," Sir Suvali says. "So far, the enemy seems quite aware of what goes on in the realm and us joining the royalist army could betray their position. We must forget about the military side of things and begin operations behind enemy lines immediately."

"Piffle!," the *chevalier* cries. "How can they know about us?"

He turns to Navarre, who hasn't spoken a word yet: "*Mon cher*. Why so silent? What say you?"

Navarre turns to face the sorcerer.

"I accept your apologies, Sir," he says, with a formal nod of the head. "I applaud the idea of a council and I shall honor its decisions. As to your new plan, Sir, perhaps you can tell me what you think it is we should do 'behind enemy lines?'"

"Gather information," the sorcerer says. "Learn as much about the enemy as we can."

"Commendable," Navarre says. "But would you desert your people, Sir? Leave Mim and Palava to clean up this mess?"

"A river dies when its source is blocked," the sorcerer says.

"Wise words, *sans doute*," the *chevalier* says. "But how do they pertain to our future?"

"I say we stay on course as planned," Sir Oengus says. "We still have the element of surprise."

"*Tiens!*," the *chevalier* cries. "We must keep the momentum! Join the royalists and charge into battle!"

"We'll be easier to find if we linger in locations where they expect us," the sorcerer says. "We cannot risk the sword falling into enemy hands. We must watch our backs and act as effectively as possible."

"Can we do this on board?," Sir Oengus says. "We'll have to get to the lake in any case and the skipper isn't very likely to hang around much longer."

"Wouldn't that rather depend on the fee you seem to have promised the good captain?," Navarre asks, nodding at the bag of diamonds in the hand of his noble fellow.

Sir Oengus tosses the bag into the air and catches it again.

"Best be prepared," he says, grinning at the *chevalier*. "Right! Parley is over, lubbers! Go, go, move, move, confuse the enemy. Action everywhere and in all locations. Handsomely now!"

"Oerknal?," Sir Suvali asks.

"We compromise," the creature says. "We gather the armies of the peacocks and hand them over to the other peacocks. After that, we start looking for some answers. Get to the source, go rimward."

"Gentlemen," Sir Suvali says. "Your votes."

"Yea," Sir Oerknal says.

"Yea," the *chevalier* cries.

"Yea," Sir Eber says.

"Yea," Sir Oengus says.

"I abstain," Navarre says. Although he has promised to honor the decisions of the council, he has a hard time accepting that it now seems more than likely that he will not be able to lead his men in the fight against the enemy.

With this, our noble heroes continue to the river. When they enter the palisade, Sir Oengus suggests they buy supplies and so blankets, rations, ropes, cloaks, oilskin coats, gloves, and cases of quarrels are bought. The town is abuzz with people, from both Thuxra and Wyrns. When asked about the fate of Wyrns, the refugees fall over each other to inform our noble heroes of the unspeakable horrors they have witnessed there: ice giants running amok; witches invading; dragons in the skies laying waste to the land; bandits hanging all nobles they can get their hands on; Ulm himself being on a rampage, reaping souls for his shadowy realm. Infuriatingly, nobody seems to know what really happened on the other side of the river.

When our noble heroes get to the barge Sir Oengus has chartered, a stout man, obviously the captain, appears on deck and gruffly welcomes them aboard.

When the barge is on its way, the captain turns out to be as taciturn as they get – until Sir Oengus procures a large bottle of rum. However, the man has but little to say about the situation in Wyrns, especially when Sir Oengus starts talking rivers, barges, ropes, favorable winds, and the summer weather and the pair lose themselves in banter nobody else can understand.

Sir Suvali spends the rest of the day in the air – when he is not in the water or crashing onto the deck. Navarre decides not to remind the sorcerer of his own suggestion to keep a low profile.

With Sir Suvali thus occupied, the others try to make sense of the outrageous stories regarding the situation in Wyrns, eventually concluding that the tales about 'commoners having taken control of the duchies' actually seem the least improbable – however improbable they may be. They discuss logistics and conclude that it will probably take them six days to get from Thuxra to Dauberval by barge and that it will therefore probably take them a ten-day, perhaps eleven days, to get, perhaps, 20 barons and around 1,200 soldiers to some location on the duskward shores of King's Lake. They consider sending a herald with word of as much to the royalists in Palava, but the idea is abandoned when the *chevalier* points out that the whole operation would be blown if this herald would be captured.

Just before dusk, the barge reaches a jetty on the left bank, where a ferry connects both sides of the river, right on the border between Thuxra and Dara. Many barges are moored here and folk are seen moving on the shore

– bargemen, refugees, stranded passengers, merchants. Our noble heroes disembark and start for the the riverside inn.

"Attention mes amis!" the *chevalier* whispers when they enter the inn. "We are incognito. We shall be *fermiers!*" "I'm off for a fuck," Sir Oerknal announces. He heads to the bar and starts talking to the innkeeper.

Reacting to this by rising a single eyebrow, Navarre decides to see if he can get any information on recent events but, once again, doesn't really get anywhere. This time, the tallest tales speak of the people having risen up against the oppressor; of bandits ruling Wyrns; of three dukes being behind the whole thing; of ice giants landing in Big Beach; and so on, and so on. Of more interest is news that no barges can get to the lake because of an enemy blockade further downstream. Apparently, six barges manned by 'bandits' prevent all traffic from passing.

When he eventually gets to the table where most of his noble fellows are seated, the innkeeper is just putting some jugs of ale on the table.

"What," he ventures. "No wine?"

"Your health, Lord," the innkeeper replies, bowing slightly.

"Pas nécessaire, aubergiste," the *chevalier* says. "We are *fermiers.*"

The innkeeper has a good look at him and shrugs his shoulders.

"As you wish, Lord," he says, before starting back to the bar.

"Donnant donnant, aubergiste!" the *chevalier* calls after him, tapping the table. "How much for these *breuvages?*"

The innkeeper turns around.

"Not at all, Lord," he says. "Your bearded friend has already paid with gold."

"Le nain?" the *chevalier* cries. "But I have never seen the creature in my life!"

"Certainly, Lord," the innkeeper says. "All has been taken care of – a meal, beer, lodgings."

"Lodgings?," the *chevalier* asks.

"Best rooms in the house, Lord," the innkeeper says.

"The best rooms?," the *chevalier* exclaims. "But there is no need! We require no more than some sacks of hay!"

"Certainly, Lord," the innkeeper says. "I'll have them brought to your rooms."

This goes on for a bit, with the *chevalier* failing miserably to impersonate a farmer and the innkeeper wisely agreeing to everything he says. Obviously, the man has dealt with his fair share of nobles.

Navarre decides to leave his noble fellows to their little charade. He has a meal and some ale and then retires.

Day 12: The barge leaves at first light and the day passes without any random encounters, even though the traffic increases rather than decreases. At the end of the day, the barge drops anchor at another jetty with an inn that doubles as a general store. Some more supplies are bought and Sir Oengus, who has suggested that they may have to ram their barge into barricade if they want to get to the lake, acquires some nets, tar, torches, and tinder.

When our noble heroes get to the common room, Navarre starts asking around for news again, to find that, now, most people seem to agree that the commoners have revolted and that bandits currently rule the duchies.

"But why?," Navarre asks one of the men who has told him such a story. "What could the commoners possibly gain from such a revolt? How could they have organized their 'revolt' without anybody noticing anything?"

"They are men of Ulm," the man says. "A new era is upon us."

"That's what I heard," a second man says. "Every village has its own council, speaking justice, hanging the oppressors and confiscating their goods."

"These councils won't last," Sir Oengus says. "In the end, all hands be wantin' a single captain."

"I cannot believe it," Navarre says. "Every village? How would these people know where to begin? It will lead to chaos and indecision!"

"Sure enough," another man scoffs. "No beer's been delivered in four days! People's councils! Ulm take 'em all!" Navarre decides he has had enough and retires. Sir Oengus spends much of the rest of the evening fabricating tar bombs.

Day 13: As the day progresses, there is less and less traffic on the river until our noble heroes are the only ones still going downstream. At various locations along the shore, barges have dropped anchor and are offloading their cargo.

"Bandits downstream!," a man yells when Navarre asks him what he is doing. "They won't let nobody pass and I won't have these bastards confiscate my cargo for their bastard revolution! We're dumping everything here! Let the miller come and get his stuff himself!"

"How many men on the blockade?," Navarre hollers.

"Sixty!," the man yells back.

The barge enters the Lake District just after six o'clock that evening. On the left bank, our noble heroes see many people moving among the trees.

Sir Suvali takes to the air again and flies some ten minutes downstream until he gets to where the ferry must be. There are no barges blocking the river, although he does see some five or six of them moored on the Wyrns side. Furthermore, all manner of vessels appear to be transporting what must be hundreds of people across the river. From what he can see, they appear to be soldiers but he doesn't dare get close enough so as to be able to identify them.

"We can get to the lake," he says, when he gets back. "There's no blockade. Lots of soldiers, though."

"No blockade?," Navarre asks. "Soldiers? What banners?"

"Hard to say. They seem organized enough but I don't think they are the enemy."

"Then who are they?," Navarre asks. "The royalists from Palava? How did they get here so fast? Are they men from Dara on the move?"

"I guess we'll find out soon enough," the sorcerer says.

An hour later, the barge arrives at the lake ferry, where, sure enough, a veritable fleet of boats, rafts, and barges are getting hundreds of soldiers across the river. When they get close enough, our noble heroes recognize banners from Mim, Bagabuxsha, Thuxra, Dara, and Palava.

"By Olm!," Navarre yells. "They are the men from Palava!"

Sir Oengus drops anchor and our noble heroes find themselves ashore on the left bank about half an hour later, among many, many soldiers moving to and fro and waiting to board the vessels. Some are definitely wounded and most look tired, albeit quite pleased with themselves.

"Who is in command, soldier?," Navarre asks one of them.

"High-ups over there," the soldier says, pointing downstream.

Navarre starts walking downstream, with his noble fellows in tow. When he reaches to a guarded clearing, the *chevalier* rather unceremoniously pushes past him and addresses one of the guards.

"Hail the King!," he calls, straightening his back. "What is the plan?"

"Stand aside, citizens!," the guard replies. "This is a dangerous place. Lay doggo until we have cleaned up here."

"Who is in command?," the *chevalier* asks.

"That'll be His Excellency Duke Mim III the Younger to you."

"Sarazin," the *chevalier* says.

"Then you're on the wrong side of the lake," the guard says.

Navarre wonders if this means that Sarazin troops are on the move on the other side of the lake but this notion escapes the *chevalier*, who presently shows the guard his ring. The guard has a good look at it and then hollers a passing soldier: "Private! Take these brass to the officers' club."

"If you would follow me, Lords," the soldier says, starting downstream. En route, our noble heroes discuss what to tell the nobles when they get there and, more importantly, what not. They decide not to mention that they have the Sword of Shadows and to omit any details that might lend an air of exaggeration to their story – no magic, no giants, not a word about the strange map they found on the Isle of Bread.

About half an hour later, the company reach an impromptu camp of large tents among some deserted barrows. Soldiers and servants move about in an organized fashion and royalist banners fly everywhere. Navarre notices that the banners of his family are not among them, although he does recognize some Sarazin banners.

The soldier takes our noble heroes to one of the larger tents and announces them to a guard outside, who ushers them in. Inside, many nobles and officers are gathered around long tables laden with copious amounts of food and drink.

"What news?," Navarre asks an officer close to the entrance.

"No resistance to speak of," the man says. "Operation running smoothly. Now, if you'll excuse me?"

When the man leaves the tent, Navarre has good look around for any signs of his kinsmen. He doesn't find any but does recognize some notable barons and even some low-ranking members of a few ducal families. He concludes that the men and women gathered here must be about a third of the ranks just below the fine fleur of the nobles of the realm.

The *chevalier* addresses another officer.

"Sarazin," he says.

"Welcome, welcome," the officer says.

"You have fought bravely?"

The officer throws him a befuddled look as if he isn't quite sure what the *chevalier* meant – which few, if any, others are.

Then, a tall, lean, old man with a crooked nose and a burnished skin approaches. He is wearing a high-quality chain mail armor and a number of richly clad men follow in his wake.

"Here, here," the old man says. "What banter is this?"

The *chevalier* executes a grand gesture.

"Ah!," the old man says. "The second Sarazin! Scaralat, is it? Where are your men?"

The *chevalier* guffaws something unintelligible, neatly avoiding answering the question before continuing: "Is there anybody in command we can speak to? How many men?"

"*Monsieur*, I have the honor of introducing Duke Mim the Younger," one of the duke's entourage, obviously one of his barons, says in a formal tone.

"*Mon Duc*," the *chevalier* says, with an elegant bow.

"What of these chaps?," Duke Mim asks, looking at our noble heroes. "Can't say I recognize them."

Almost as an afterthought, the *chevalier* introduces his noble companions.

The man who spoke earlier clears his throat.

"Cintugnatus of Mim," he says, with the slightest nod of his head, before proceeding to introduce the rest of the duke's entourage, barons all. "Dejotarus of Bagabuxsha. Cynfawr of Thuxra. Odo of Dara. Corwin of Palava. Bomaris of Palava. Arioanus of Dara. Vanemir of Sarazin."

"*Mon cher Vanémir!*," the *chevalier* exclaims, hugging and kissing the baron. "*Merveilleux! Merveilleux! Mon cher! Quoi de nouveau de Sarazin?*"

"*Terrible! Terrible! Terrible!*," baron Vanemir cries, wringing his hands. "The paupers have revolted! We couldn't make it to the Fortnight! *L'infamie!*"

"*Inacceptable!*," the *chevalier* cries. "Is there any news of my father?"

"*Salauds!*," the distraught baron continues, his hands in the air. "They came at us from all sides! Raiders came from the mountains, plundering and pillaging, hitting us and Dauberval! We sent men to crush them but then bandits attacked from the rivers! It was all part of some nefarious plan! They blocked the rivers!"

"You speak of Dauberval, Sir?," Navarre asks.

But, like a true Sarazin, the baron does not appear to hear him and continues venting his indignation in a high-pitched voice.

And so our noble hero leaves the Sarazins to their excited exchange and notices Sir Montagum among the duke's entourage, a peasant hero and second in command of the King's Cavalry. The man must have been among those who escaped the besieged Military Academy now almost two weeks ago.

"My compliments, Commander," he says. "Is there any news from Apple Island?"

"No news to speak of, Sir."

"Unfortunate," Navarre says, gritting his teeth. "So you have not yet retaken it?"

"Preparations are under way, Sir," the commander replies in a measured tone.

"Perhaps I can be of assistance?," Navarre ventures. "I was on the island when the attack happened."

He proceeds to provide the commander with a summary of the events of that fateful night: that soldiers wearing iron armors invaded the island; that the King was murdered; that the invaders were highly organized and that they specifically targeted mages; and that it was Augustus Magister Rex who facilitated their escape from the island.

Since he isn't sure how the commander will react to the notion of iron-clad giants killing kings in one blow and magical spells going awry, he leaves such details out of his report.

"I have heard rumors about these soldiers," the commander says. "Of course, people say many things these days. Sir."

"Indeed," Navarre says. "Am I to assume that you have not yet encountered these soldiers?"

"All I can say is that the Academy was attacked by bandits, Sir," the commander says.

"And what of your fight?," the *chevalier* cuts in. "How many men are here?"

"We have cleared the river and prevented the bandits from attacking Palava," the commander says, again with some emphasis on the word 'bandits'. "I'd say we are some twelve hundred strong at the moment."

"*Mes felicitations, monsieur*," the *chevalier* says. "*Et maintenant?* Regroup and retake the island?"

"Exactly so, Sir. We head for Apple Island at first dawn – with as many men as the Duke sees fit. I'd say we'll be some two-, three hundred men in all."

"Count us in," Sir Eber says. "I'll be the first off the barge."

"Of course," the commander says.

"How far to the island?," Sir Eber asks. "Are there enough barges?"

"It should be about a mile, Sir," the commander says.

"Hmm...", Sir Eber says. "Too far to tie some boats together and have the troops march to the island."

Navarre turns to Duke Mim again: "Is there any indication as to how many men are still on the island?"

"Intelligence reports some minor activity there," the duke replies.

Navarre raises an eyebrow.

"Indeed?," he asks. "How many men do they say are on the island?"

"I'm sure the men will take care of whatever ruffians they may run in to," Duke Mim replies stiffly.

"Of course," Navarre says. "However, while there were certainly bandits among the invaders, I have also seen many rather well-trained and surprisingly well-equipped soldiers."

Duke Mim casts him an absentminded glance.

"Excellent, excellent," he says. "The men sent some two hundred peasants packing – dissolved some of these 'village councils'. Assure me there are no more than a handful of men on the island."

"That may be, Sir," Navarre says, rather miffed at the duke's apparent disinterest in the matter. "But I assure you that many soldiers were there that night. I have seen them with my own eyes. If you would allow me to speak candidly?"

The duke is obviously bored with the whole affair.

"By all means," he says, glancing at a dish with candied quails and gesturing a servant for a refill.

Once again, Navarre recounts the events of that fateful night, this time in much more detail although still taking care not to mention any details that could further alienate the intractable duke. He speaks of numbers, orderly formations, iron armors, organized advances, trained archers, targeted attacks.

When he mentions the enemy specifically targeting sorcerers again, the duke nods.

"Indeed," he says. "I have been told that some four or five sorcerers have been killed."

"All I am saying, my Lord, is that the scouts may not be fully aware of who or what may still be on the island,"

Navarre resumes. "If only half of the invaders are still out there and the scouts have not seen them, we will be in for an unpleasant surprise. The attack happened two weeks ago! A well-organized enemy will have had plenty of time to set up a trap."

"My dear fellow," the duke interrupts, emptying his glass and eyeing the quails again. "We'd better leave it to the men to deal with the situation, wouldn't you agree? It's what they're there for."

Realizing that the duke clearly seems unwilling to accept he could be walking into a trap, Navarre looks for support from his noble fellows and the assembled barons – only to find that most of them avert their eyes or, indeed, have already wandered off. Among the latter are the *chevalier* and some barons, who are presently perusing a table laden with a variety of choice viands and fine wines.

Furious, Navarre takes a deep breath. Then Sir Suvali nudges him.

"I'll go and have a look for myself," the sorcerer says under his voice. "Be right back."

Navarre nods but continues his attempts to convince the – ever-dwindling – group of nobles around him of the possible risks of the operation, meeting with little success.

After about an hour of this, Sir Suvali returns.

"The island is deserted," he says. "There's no one. No corpses. All I saw was a handful of looters hauling stuff around but that's it."

"What?," Navarre asks incredulously. "No one? No corpses? Where did everybody go? How?"

"I don't know," the sorcerer says.

"What mystery is this?," Navarre exclaims. "What was the whole thing for?"

"Maybe the stories about a revolution are true," the sorcerer says. "Maybe they did want to kill our kinsmen. Invade the duchies, kill everybody and then install their village councils."

"And then what?," Navarre cries. "Surely these people cannot expect us to lie down and subject to the rule of their peasant councils? Don't they know that such a situation cannot endure? I don't buy it. People capable of organizing an attack like this cannot be that stupid. Why waste so much time and resources on some fad? Who are these people anyway? And what about this whole Ulm thing? Giants? There must be something else going on!"

"Stranger things have happened," the sorcerer says, shrugging his shoulders.

“Hardly,” Navarre says. “Anyway, I’m off for a leak.”

He leaves the tent and heads to the lake. He has just finished when he sees what looks like a speck of fire on the island across the water. Unable to make out exactly what it is, he returns to the tent to find his noble fellows gathered at one of the tables.

When he tells them what he saw, Sir Oengus immediately gets to his feet.

“Anchors away!,” he says. “We must go to the island now. I’ll ready the barge.”

“Sit down,” the sorcerer says. “I made the fire to get the looters away from the trees. I had a look at what they’d been doing and found a mass grave.”

“A mass grave?,” Navarre asks. “Now you tell us? Mass grave for whom?”

“Hard to say,” the sorcerer says. “Judging by its size, I’d say it could contain a lot of corpses.”

“Anything else you haven’t told us?,” Navarre asks irritably.

“Not much,” the sorcerer says. “The whole place is a mess. All boats and barges at the jetties were sunk. That’s about it.”

“We should inform Mim,” Navarre says, getting up. “Try one more time.”

But when our noble heroes report Sir Suvali’s findings to the duke and his entourage, they seem unimpressed.

“I’m sure the whole thing will be cleared up tomorrow,” the duke says.

“We must send a scouting party to the island now,” Sir Oengus says.

“Perhaps accompanied by one of your men,” Navarre adds. “To avoid any misunderstandings.”

“We sail at first light,” the duke says, looking at Navarre with a weak smile. “Best to see things in the light.”

Navarre finally decides to give up. He turns his attention to a selection of superb wines and then to a number of damsels of unmistakable allure.

Day 14: Just after the morning rain, Navarre pays a visit to the barber for a shave. When he gets back to the tent, he grabs some breakfast, quaffs a couple of glasses of wine and dons his armor before joining some of his noble fellows on their way to the lake. Here, the duke’s soldiers are already embarking and it doesn’t take long before the first boat sets off – our noble heroes on board.

There are a total of 20 boats, each carrying around ten soldiers. When the fleet is about halfway, Sir Suvali takes to the air – to the loud cheers and applause of the duke and his entourage in the last boat.

When the boats get to the island, the soldiers are landed in groups of ten and spread out along the shore before moving inland in an orderly fashion.

Our noble heroes decide to go after Sir Suvali. They advance cautiously but meet no resistance and, when they get to the festival area, they find only collapsed tents, broken chairs and tables as a poignant reminder of what happened here two weeks ago. Items of clothing lie strewn about and there are the remains of several extinguished fires and similar debris. There is no sign of anything even remotely valuable – no weapons, no glasses, no cups, no cutlery, nothing. There are no corpses.

“Where is everybody?,” Navarre asks. “Where are our kinsmen?”

When Sir Suvali appears, he is once again in the company of the dogs he had to leave behind when our noble heroes fled the island.

“Found them in the forest,” he says. “Follow me, gentlemen. The mass grave.”

Our noble heroes follow the sorcerer to the edge of the forest, to an area of loose earth some 30 by 30 feet.

There are definite signs of digging after the fact, leaving some body parts exposed.

“Looters,” Sir Eber says. “We’ll need shovels.”

Sir Suvali flies back to the landing site and presently returns with some shovels. Sir Eber and Navarre take one each and start digging. After some time, they conclude there must be some four dozen corpses in the grave. They haven’t found anyone they know – indeed, it seems that the grave contains only the corpses of royalist soldiers and servants.

“No one,” Navarre says, wiping his forehead when he is taking a breather. “How many more of these graves do you think there are?”

“Don’t care,” Sir Eber says. “I’ll dig until I find my family.”

The noble duo continue their efforts, finding more soldiers and servants until Sir Oengus appears.

“All boats at the jetties have been sunk, most of them burnt,” he says. “We found some four mass graves – maybe there are more than a hundred people buried over there. We did some digging and found mostly royalist soldiers. Naked. No humanoids. No enemy corpses. No signs of the invaders at all.”

“I don’t get it,” Navarre says. “Where are our people?”

"Taken away," the *chevalier* says. "Maybe they will use them against us."

"My dear fellow!," Navarre cries. "Taken? How? Do you think they would go willingly? Take up arms against us? Preposterous!"

"There can be other ways to turn them against us," the *chevalier* says with a shiver. "In the service of Ulm."

It takes some time before Navarre gets an idea of what the *chevalier* may be on about.

"The walking dead?," he says, with a look of both anger and disbelief on his face. "Haven't we heard enough old wives' tales of late?"

"Everything points to a raid," Sir Suvali says. "In and out, take everything of value, leave no corpses. Let's go and see where the King was killed."

When our noble heroes get to the Royal Barrows, they find much of the same – some burnt corpses are in the ashes of long-extinguished fires. An inspection of the barrows proper informs them that all supplies are gone.

"I don't get it," Navarre says. "What in Olm's name went on here?"

"It was a foraging raid," the *chevalier* says. "An army travels on its stomach."

"A foraging raid?," Navarre cries in exasperation. "Travel where? Where are they now? What about our kinsmen? By Olm! Who are these people? Where are they going? Where did they come from?"

"It must be the Icy Waste," Sir Suvali says. "With the lands below the rivers back under control there's nowhere else they can be. They must have come from the Icy Waste as well. No one lives in the mountains except Blurh."

"So they passed Blurh...," Navarre muses. "I wonder what he will have to say about the matter."

"I'll go and have a look," Sir Suvali says.

"Perhaps we should all go," Navarre says. "Can you not use your magic wand again?"

Obviously shocked, the sorcerer starts speaking rather incoherently: "No!. Erm... I think not! I'll be safer on my own! You are needed here to convince Mim! Lead your armies! You see?"

Navarre casts his noble companion a suspicious glance but then decides he doesn't want to know.

"If you say so," he says, shrugging his shoulders. "It seems we are about finished here anyway. I suggest we get on with it. Rally our armies and join Mim to fight whatever is up there in the mountains."

"Let's check where they landed," Sir Suvali says, obviously relieved. "See what we can find there."

Our noble heroes subject the beach to a close inspection but find nothing they didn't already know. There were multiple landing craft and the tracks in the sand indicate that there must have been many, many invaders.

Realizing that this probably still won't be enough to convince Mim and the other nobles of the true nature and numbers of the enemy, Navarre decides to have another look at where he and the others fought the soldiers chasing Augustus Magister Rex.

When he gets there, he has a good look around but only finds more of the same until, finally, he actually does find some sign of the enemy: it is an arrow, fairly standard but of some quality, black and with red fletching, a iron arrow head painted red, and a band of red paint at the back of the shaft. Unable to connect the colors to any known banner, Navarre guesses that it must have belonged to one the various bandit or mercenary groups. Although he realizes that it isn't much, he still takes the arrow back to his noble companions. When he joins them, Sir Eber has just rolled a "1" on his *Tracking* skill and he presently points at a clear print of a booted foot at least three times larger than that of an ordinary man. An additional investigation clearly reveals that the giant came ashore, moved in a straight line to where the King was and then straight back to the beach.

When Duke Mim and his entourage arrive, Navarre shows them the arrow, which neither the duke nor his entourage say they recognize. They do appear to be somewhat impressed by the footprint.

"Uncommonly large foot I'd say," the duke admits, before turning to his entourage. "Gentlemen, that will be all! Get your men back to the camp and have them prepare to sail up the Blue River at first light tomorrow. Let's put an end to this damn' thing!"

"That gives us time to cross the mountains," Sir Eber says. "Check in on Blurh before that. The man must have seen something when these bastards passed him."

"Agreed," Sir Suvali says, lowering his voice quite considerably after a furtive glance at Duke Mim. "It'll take me more than eight hours of straight flying to get to Blurh and I don't want to do the whole thing in one go. Getting to Blurh may take me as much as twenty hours. That's almost a day and a night and that only gets me to Blurh."

"Me'?", the ranger asks. "You going alone?"

Sir Suvali starts stammering again.

"Well...", he starts. "It's like... You see? I'll be faster in my own... You..."

"Stop whining, mage," the ranger growls. "I want to be there when you get to the Icy Waste."

"Alright! Alright!," the sorcerer says hastily, casting another glance at the duke. "We'll leave at dusk."

"What are you chaps on about?," the duke asks. "Cross the mountains? Icy Waste?"

Perhaps the duke has been listening after all. Our noble heroes exchange some looks.

"We have his attention," Navarre says. "I say we show him the map."

When the others nod their agreement, Sir Suvali reaches into his robes, procures the map and unrolls it.

"What's this?," the duke asks, looking at the map with interest and then back at our noble heroes. For some reason, he doesn't seem very surprised at all.

"It's an extended map of the world," Sir Suvali says. "The enemy may have come from beyond the mountains."

"It is where the giants come from," the *chevalier* says.

"We'll have to cross the mountains if we find that Blurh has fallen and there's no sign of the enemy," Sir Suvali says.

"Best take care up there," the duke says. "Been to these mountains. Tall bastards. At least twelve thousand feet. Not for the fainthearted. Giant eagles in the sky and all that."

"This is no time for the fainthearted," Navarre says. "We will cross them if we cannot find the enemy."

"Let's put it this way," Sir Suvali says. "We'll start flying rimward and get back to you as soon as we find something of interest. Since we'll be moving a lot faster than the army, we'll have plenty of time to warn you of anything untoward before you get there. If I'm not back within, say, forty hours, you can advance as far as Blurh without any problems and make camp there. I'll report to you there if we find anything beyond the mountains. We'll leave tonight so that we will fly as much as we can under cover of the night."

"Gentlemen, I accept your proposition," Duke Mim declares. "Damned if we don't need all the information we can get and damned if you chaps aren't the ones to do it! You'll leave tonight and get back to me as soon as you have something to say. *Messieurs*, I salute you!"

And so it is that our noble heroes return to the army camp and spend the rest of the day preparing for their trip to the mountains, stocking up on supplies, polishing and checking their weapons and armors, and so on. Sir Suvali takes to the air just after sunset. The others have been reduced in size again and each is in his own pocket of the *mage vest*. It has been agreed that they will sleep while the sorcerer flies, except Sir Oerknal, who will serve as an extra pair of eyes.

Day 15: Some eight hours later, just before the morning rain and after he has flown a considerable distance up the Blue River, Sir Suvali decides he has had enough and lands in the forest. He wakes the others and instructs them to stand guard while he and Sir Oerknal get some sleep.

He wakes up again just short of eight hours later and, after a quick bite to eat, he takes to the air once more, his noble fellows back in the pockets of his vest. Now flying in daylight, our noble heroes sees the valley get narrower and narrower, the farms and jetties on the banks of the river slowly disappearing as they make way for a mixture of rocky slopes and dense coniferous forests. In the distance loom the snowy peaks of the mountains and the whole gives the landscape a rugged, even foreboding look.

About three hours later, they spot what appears to be a collection of buildings at a jetty on the downward bank of the river. As they get closer, they also discern a fortified hill a bit further up the valley. A high palisade runs across the top of the hill from forest to forest and the fortification is buzzing with activity.

"It's them!," Navarre says, excitedly. "By Olm! It's the enemy!"

Sir Suvali turns right and lands on some vantage point among the trees, from where our noble heroes observe the goings on for a while. There is no activity at the buildings near the jetty, which must be an inn of some sort. Tracks on both sides of the river run up to the fortification, the construct effectively blocking all access to the hinterland. Beyond the palisade, the tracks continue, the one on the duskward bank soon turning left and disappearing into the forest. On the dawnward bank, the track continues, turning into little more than a goat's trail when it reaches a steep cliff face still further up the valley. About halfway back between there and the palisade, a sidetrack turns into the forest to the right. In the hinterland, groups of bandits or mercenaries with dogs are seen, obviously patrols. There must be at least a thousand men on the fortified hill, some half of whom appear to be iron-clad halberdiers, the remainder being bandits and perhaps mercenaries in leather armor. From the palisade fly many black banners – the banners of Ulm (SEE ILLUSTRATION #22 and ILLUSTRATION #23).

"By Olm!," Navarre says to Sir Eber, who is right beside him. "How long do you think they have been here?"

"Building that palisade probably takes about three days," the ranger says.

"The cavalry!," the *chevalier* suddenly yells. "We must get back! The horses are no match for halberdiers! He will be cut to pieces!"

Navarre and Sir Eber look at their noble companion in amazement.

"What are you on about?," Navarre asks.

"La cavalerie!" the *chevalier* cries. "Mim will run his horses straight into the palisade and kill them all! They are uphill and behind that palisade! We must stop him!"

"The Duke may be many things but I don't think he'll be that stupid," Navarre says. "Poor? Yes. Pig-headed? Absolutely. But a complete idiot? No. The man has eyes like all of us, old fruit. Why would he order an attack that will lead to certain defeat?"

"Mais tu comprends pas!" the *chevalier* cries. "He will charge the enemy as soon as he sees them. He is *chevalier!*"

"Mim?," Navarre scoffs. "A cavalier? Nonsense! Even if he were, wouldn't that be all the more reason for him to know that he cannot win an uphill battle against halberdiers behind a palisade?"

However, as so often seems to be the case these days, the *chevalier* doesn't seem to want to hear him and continues rambling on and on about Mim running his horses into palisades and that he must be stopped.

Navarre is just about to ask him how he thinks to achieve this when the *chevalier* seems to reach a somewhat unconnected conclusion all on his own.

"That's it!," he cries. "We must stop the flow of the river! Deprive them of water!"

Navarre wonders how much his noble friend has been drinking.

"Stop the river?," he asks. "Stop a river? And how would we go about that?"

"Block the source!," the *chevalier* cries. "Where is the source?"

"Somewhere in the mountains back there, I says," Sir Oengus says.

"Mes amis!," the *chevalier* cries. "We have found our mission! We must find the source and block it!"

"I say we don't spend any more charges of the wand than absolutely necessary," Sir Suvali says. "You'll all get back to normal again in about three hours so we have just enough time left to get to Blurh and back."

"I concur," Navarre says. "We must find out what happened to Blurh. There must be a thousand men down there!"

"He may be with them," Sir Eber says.

Navarre considers this for a while.

"Whatever the case may be, we must get this information to Mim as soon as possible," he says, before turning to the sorcerer. "Since you seem unwilling to use the wand, perhaps you should get back to him alone. You can get us to Blurh before you go and even leave us there depending on what we find. Perhaps we can do something up there while you're away, even though we will have to wait until we get back to normal again. I don't want to be running for cover each time we come to the attention of a sparrow."

"Bah," Sir Eber says, flexing his muscles. "Have a little faith!"

An Adventure in Five Acts
Part VI
Act V: Diamond Castle
Part I: Against the Ice Giant

In which the DM informs our noble heroes that they are not in the forest on the dawnward bank of the Blue River but in the inn (**SEE ILLUSTRATION #24**); that Mim and his men have already arrived; and that the whole conversation about the extended map actually took place in the inn. He also tells them that the enemy camp is about 1,500 feet above sea level and the immediate hinterland some 2,100 feet; that the rest of the royalist army, some 300 men, will arrive in about three days; and that the whole royalist army will then consist of some 1,500 men.

Day 17: Not at all bothered by this strange turn of events, the *chevalier* continues his bewildering statements about blocking rivers and Mim letting his horses charge to a certain death. It must be said that this quickly gets the rest of our noble heroes back into the flow, which soon leads to yet another discussion about what to do next.

"*Messieurs*," the *chevalier* says. "Although we have the numbers and our horses give us the ability to move at speed, we are still at a disadvantage against heavy infantry behind a palisade. We must lay siege to the enemy and cut their water supply. Find the source and block the river."

"My dear fellow," Navarre says. "Have you any idea of the risks and the amount of time it would take to start searching for the source of a river behind enemy lines?"

"Gentlemen," Sir Suvali says. "An inventory! We have the ability to create some one hundred and thirty potions of sleep-inducing tea and the wand still has over sixty charges left in it. Then there is the flying apparatus..."

"*Merveilleux!*," the *chevalier* exclaims, clapping his hands. "We shall engage in covert action!"

"I will say it again," Navarre says frostily. "We need information first. What happened to our kinsmen? Who are the enemy? Where do they come from? What are their motives? What of Blurh? Is he aware of what transpires here? Can we call on him if he should still be holding out up there? Is he responsible for this? I say Blurh is where we must begin."

"The enemy is on terrain they know," Sir Suvali says. "We have magic on our side so we can engage in hit-and-run actions, choose our targets. We can be in and out again before they know what hit them."

"To what avail?," Navarre asks. "Nibble away at their numbers? Kill some patrols? It would hardly inconvenience them."

With the debate continuing like this, more and more nobles arrive at the inn. The innkeeper is running to and fro, taking orders, allocating rooms and then vacating them again to make way for new arrivals of higher station. Presently more than 100 nobles and officers are in the common room, discussing the situation and with opinions ranging from 'charging the rabble' to 'maintaining the status-quo' and allowing the enemy their territorial gains so that everybody can go home to restore order in the duchies. Still, by now, the consensus seems to be that there has been 'a revolution of the poor' and that 'peasant councils' have indeed taken control of large parts of the realm.

Of course, Navarre still isn't convinced. How could no one have noticed the commoners stirring? Do these people truly believe they can succeed? Pondering the situation, he comes across Sir Oengus and an officer discussing the impending arrival of troops from Dauberval, Sarazin, and Nisibis.

He stops to listen.

"That is, if she can get the men moving," the officer says.

"She?," Sir Oengus asks.

"Well, it is she who leads the men of Nisibis," the officer says.

Navarre flashes Sir Oengus a wide grin.

"*Mademoiselle* your sister, Lord Moon?," he says. "Congratulations, old fruit!"

"Well, it seems she's got more balls than you and your men put together, *old fruit*," Sir Oengus says. "Seeing as she's also currently commanding the Dauberval and Sarazin lubbers."

Navarre looks at him with a face like a lemon before regaining his composure.

"*Touché*," he laughs, slapping his noble fellow on the back. "Well played, *mon cher!*"

He turns to face the officer.

"And who of Dauberval is among them?," he asks the man.

"Alas, Lord," the officer says, "I have no more information."

So nothing new here.

Navarre gets back to the table, where the rest of his noble fellows are speaking to the innkeeper – who turns out to be quite the source of information. He informs our noble heroes that he established the inn 15 years ago when his father died; that his inn is the last stop on the way to Blurh, which he calls Diamond Castle; that barges can sail up the Blue River right up to the inn and that travelers must continue rimward on foot; that it takes one day to reach Diamond Castle via mountain tracks and trails.

"The Duke is obsessed with security," the innkeeper says. "Bandits ruled here before he arrived and it is said that it took him a lot of time to establish himself up there. When he finally did, he cordoned off the area around the castle, with his guards not allowing anybody in."

"Fifteen years, 'ey?," Sir Oengus says. "Have you noticed any recent changes in the color of the river? Seen any strange lights up in the mountains?"

"Can't say that I did," the innkeeper says.

"And what of Blurh?," Navarre asks.

"Last thing I heard the cordon was still intact."

"Indeed?," Navarre muses. "What about large amounts of troops moving down and upstream?"

"There were some."

"And you didn't consider that to be... unusual?," Navarre asks.

The innkeeper flashes him an apologetic grin.

"Any giants among them?," Navarre continues.

"I have heard rumors of such creatures," the innkeeper says. "I did see them haul barges up into the mountains, though."

"Come again?"

But before the innkeeper can repeat his remark, the *chevalier* intervenes.

"What about the height of the river?," he demands.

"I've never seen it as low as it is now," the innkeeper says.

"Where is the source of this river?"

"Somewhere up in the mountains, I presume," the innkeeper says. "Where else?"

"What about Diamond Castle?," Sir Suvali cuts in.

"I haven't been there much but it is a bizarre thing," the innkeeper says. "Not like a barrow, more like some construct of stone, with towers. The strangest thing."

"Ha!," Navarre beams to the *chevalier*. "I told you that castles are the future!"

"Philistines!," the *chevalier* mutters under his voice.

"About these barges," Navarre continues. "Did they also carry them from the mountains to the river?"

"Could be," the innkeeper says, shifting a little in his seat.

"Could be?," Navarre asks sharply. "Are you telling me that you didn't notice anything?"

"I prefer to stay well away from people passing my inn in large organized groups, if you don't mind my saying, Lord," the innkeeper replies, getting to his feet.

"Unless they knock on your door for drinks, of course," Sir Eber says. Sir Oerknal and Sir Suvali burst out laughing – apparently the ranger beat them to it.

The innkeeper grins some more and leaves the table.

"Perhaps Blurh is still holding out if this cordon is still intact," Navarre muses when the man is gone. "Where is this castle? Is it impregnable? Is it so far out of the way that the enemy didn't bother to take it?"

"Let's find out," Sir Eber says. "Let's go to the castle through the forest and see what's what."

"I like it," Sir Oengus says. "We shall approach the castle with raised visors."

"*Fil!*," the *chevalier* exclaims. "We must approach like thieves! Blurh might mistake us for the enemy!"

Navarre looks at his noble friend with a raised eyebrow.

"You seem to have developed an alarming penchant for furtiveness and larceny of late, old fruit," he says.

But the *chevalier* isn't listening. Apparently keen to remain on top of absolutely everything, he has turned his attention to Sir Eber and Sir Oerknal, who have started discussing bowel movements. He pours them some more ale and heartily joins in.

"He may have a point," Sir Suvali says to Navarre. "Blurh may have a very specific reason for the cordon, which could mean that he won't distinguish between royalists or rebels approaching his castle.

"So, I'll take one of you with me and fly to the castle to see what's going on. We won't waste charges and the rest will be their normal size if the enemy decides to strike tonight – Mim is going to need all the men he can get when the attack comes. I can always get back and collect the rest if we run into trouble up there."

"I'll come," Sir Oengus says.

The sorcerer needs only a fraction of a second to recover: "Navarre?"

"No need to ask," Navarre says. "I'm game for anything that could finally lead to the heart of this whole affair." Sir Suvali tries to inform the others of the plan but these hear but little of what he says, their guffaws ringing loudly throughout the room. Nevertheless, Sir Eber and Sir Oerknal agree to his every word, if only to continue their boorish exchange.

But then the *chevalier* suddenly seems to notice that something is afoot and that he is not going to be a part of it.

"Why only you, *mon cher?*," he asks Navarre, somewhat piqued. "Why not all of us?"

"You might want to consider actually listening to people when they are talking to you, my friend," Navarre returns, getting ready to leave. "And do not come to me with questions about plans in which I did not have a hand. Speak to the sorcerer if you must."

"*Sorcier!*," the *chevalier* calls to Sir Suvali, who is already halfway to the door. "Look for the source of the river, will you?"

"You'll be the first to know if we find one," the sorcerer yells back at him, leaving the inn without so much as turning to look at him.

21.00 hrs: And so it is that Sir Suvali, Sir Oengus, and Navarre move to a secluded spot some distance downstream, where the sorcerer procures his wand and reduces his noble companions in size once again. He puts them in the pockets of his *mage vest*, takes to the air and starts flying rimward.

When the sun sets about an hour later, the noble trio locate what must be 'Diamond Castle'. It is located on a high plateau and about a third of the way to the foot of the snow-capped mountains in the background. A large lake stretches from the castle proper to a precipice at the hubward end of the plateau. On its downward shore, only barely visible on the rapidly fading light, they see what appears to be a huge, deserted army camp.

The castle itself is a rectangular affair that actually comprises two castles merged together, the older of the two being the duskward and the newer the dawnward section. A river runs straight through the older section and empties into the lake. Clouds of steam smoke billow from the courtyard of the new castle.

When darkness falls, our noble heroes discern numerous fires burning in a perimeter around the castle and the lake, culminating in groups of several fires to each side of the precipice. There are no barges or boats in the lake and, from what they can see, getting anything larger than a canoe up to lake from the Blue River valley would be nothing less than a monumental task. There is no mine in sight, which leads our noble heroes to believe that it will probably be somewhere in the mountains at the back of the plateau. Apart from the fires and some lights in the castle, there are no signs of life on the plateau (**SEE ILLUSTRATION #25**).

"Let's go round," Sir Suvali says, starting a wide turn to the left.

Flying past the castle on the duskward side, our noble heroes notice groups of soldiers patrolling the walls and a large circus tent in the courtyard of the new castle. People seem to be moving in and out of it and great clouds of steam appear to billow from it.

"Is that steam?," Navarre wonders. "A hot spring?"

Continuing their tour, our noble heroes reach the back of the plateau, where they have to cross the river coming from the mountains.

"Let's check the encampment," Navarre says.

When they have flown past, our noble heroes estimate that it may be as much as a decade old and that it seems to have been deserted about a year ago.

"When was the last time Blurh was at the Fortnight?," Navarre asks.

"Three years," Sir Suvali replies.

"Hmm...." Navarre says. "It seems unlikely that Blurh would allow for such a camp to exist next to his castle if it was not his own. I think we can safely assume that he is actually behind all this."

Sir Suvali has made a turn to the right and, now, our noble heroes approach the fires burning on the dawnward side of the precipice. They hover in the air for a bit and clearly see men moving on the ground below – some arriving, some departing, some with dogs, some without them. When our noble heroes get to the other side of the plateau, past the second concentration of fires, they land at some vantage point to discuss what they have found.

"Was that a dam between those fires?," Navarre asks.

"Aye," Sir Oengus says. "Must be the reason why the river is so low in the valley."

"Makes you wonder how long that dam has been there," Navarre says.

"Let's ask one of the guards," Sir Suvali says. "Snatch one from one of the campfires, take him back to the army and start getting some answers."

"I would prefer a guard from the castle walls," Navarre says. "The men at the campfires may be just mercenaries and they may not know what is going on inside the castle. Remember that Blurh has a reputation for being paranoid."

"Too risky," Sir Suvali says. "There's too many people around that tent and too many guards on the walls. We'd risk being seen and shot at. What's more, the way back would be too long."

"Point taken," Navarre says.

"Agreed?," the sorcerer says. "We'll approach from the air and I'll cast my spell. We land when everybody's asleep and I'll use the wand on the first one we get to. I'll stash him in my pocket and head back."

"Let's do it," Sir Oengus says.

"One moment," Navarre says. "Chances are we witnessed a changing of the guards at that fire. I think we should make sure about that so we won't run into any nasty surprises. This will also give us the most time if things go pear-shaped."

The noble trio take to the air, fly past the dam again and land in a suitable spot to observe the goings on at the first fire. They have to wait almost all of two hours before Sir Oengus sees something move.

"There they are," he says.

And, sure enough, two men arrive and two others leave. When everything has settled down, Sir Suvali takes to the air, gets within range and casts his spell. Unfortunately, only one of them starts sagging slowly to one side.

"Draht!," he says, before casting another spell.

While it would have been nice if this would have led to both men being fast asleep now, the three-faced god seems to have decided against such a fortunate turn of events. Instead, after the sorcerer has cast his second spell, the first guard turns out to have all but slumped into the fire and presently the heat wakes him from his magical slumber.

Quick as a hawk, Sir Suvali lands next to him and touches him with the wand, just in time to prevent the man's screams from alerting everybody on the plateau. He grabs the squeaking guard, stuffs him into the pocket where Navarre is and takes to the air again, leaving our noble hero to deal with the problem. Indeed, Navarre has some considerable trouble getting the guard to stop struggling and screaming and he eventually has to put a knife to his throat.

"Shut – the – fuck – up!," he hisses.

The guard finally gives in and now Navarre has little trouble tying his hands and feet.

Now, the DM informs the noble trio that they end up in a smallish, comfortable cave at the edge of the plateau, where there won't be any random encounters, where there is a source of fresh water, and where they can recuperate and memorize lost spells. After Navarre has congratulated the DM on this rather excellent reference, Sir Suvali starts brewing some tea from the sleep-inducing herbs while Navarre starts questioning the agitated prisoner.

"Who are you?," he starts.

The prisoner flushes and straightens his back.

"I am John Soldier!," he says defiantly.

"In whose service?"

"I am descended from a long line of soldiers in the service of Blurh. But no more! We have freed ourselves from the yoke of the oppressor and the era of progress has begun! Nothing can stop us! The time of kings and dukes is over!"

"Is it?," Navarre says mockingly. "And who will replace the kings and dukes?"

"Councils of the people!," the prisoner says. "No more oppressors! From now on, all are equal and we will decide our own fate!"

"And what, pray, has been the fate of Lord Blurh?," Navarre asks.

"An unfortunate accident has led to the death of the oppressor Blurh and his wife and children some time ago!"

"Unfortunate indeed," Navarre says, gnashing his teeth and glaring angrily at the man. "And all this under the banner of Ulm?"

"The High Priest of Ulm is one of the leaders of the council," the prisoner says. "He is an engineer and he will bring progress to the people!"

"I see," Navarre says. "Well, it would seem that some are more equal than others in your little scheme. By what name goes this priest?"

"He is called mister Albert Murphy."

This is something Navarre didn't expect. Albert Murphy? The architect who built his father's mountain castle? What treachery is this? Why, the man has dined at his father's table, for crying out loud! Navarre has to take some time before he can ask his next question, through gritted teeth.

"And how fares dear old Albert?"

"Very well," the prisoner says. "He was educated at the Academy of Royal Engineers. He is a man of great knowledge!"

"So he is," Navarre replies. "What about the tent in the courtyard of the castle?"

"It is the entrance to the mine of the people!," the prisoner says.

"I suppose Albert Murphy is in charge of that as well?"

"It is he who has armed the people and led the revolt! He and mostly the giant."

"Ah yes. The giant," Navarre says. "Is he also one of the people?"

"He came with mister Albert."

"And how did that happen?"

"It was after mister Albert returned from the mountains, where he spent two years to free his mind of the confusion created by the oppressors. He returned with the giant when his plans for the revolution were finished."

"The giant who disappears every now and then?," Sir Suvali asks, smiling at the prisoner while stirring the tea.

"No, no," the prisoner says. "He lives in the castle."

"Who else lives in the castle?," Navarre asks.

"All the leaders of the revolution. Vincilli Litworth, the chancellor; mister Albert Murphy, engineer and High Priest of Ulm; and Serena... Fallen. She was a leader of bandits before she committed to the revolution."

"A sorceress?," Sir Suvali asks.

"Magic is banned!," the prisoner says. "It is the root of all evil!"

"And so it would seem," Navarre says. "Tell me. What is the function of that lake?"

"It was created when we built the dam," the prisoner says. "We brought rocks and trees and built it."

"Why?," Sir Oengus asks.

The prisoner hesitates.

"There is a beast in it," he says, after some time.

"Well?," Navarre snaps. "Spit it out. What kind of beast?"

"It is a creature of ice," the prisoner says. "A troll, an elemental. It was captured by the giant to serve the revolution."

Our noble heroes exchange doubtful glances. A creature of ice? Does such a thing even exist? Then again, they didn't really believe that giants existed until two weeks ago.

"It is sleeping," the prisoner continues. "Serena can put it to sleep and wake it up."

"Using magic?," Sir Suvali asks sharply.

"No," the prisoner says. "She is a herbalist – she uses herbs and her knowledge of nature to control the ice troll."

"So it is an 'ice troll' now?," Navarre asks sharply. "And how will this creature serve your little revolution?"

Again, the prisoner seems to hesitate.

"It holds the dam together," he says, eventually. "The dam serves the revolution!"

The noble trio take some time to consider how a dam could serve a revolution.

"We'll need some details, my good man," Navarre says. "How does it serve the revolution? Is it a permanent structure?"

"It can be partially opened," the prisoner says, again after having thought about his answer for a bit.

"For what reason?," Navarre asks.

The prisoner hesitates again.

"It is a good idea to let the water through," he finally says.

"I'm sure it is," Navarre says.

Then it hits him. It's a trap! The royalists have been lured into a trap! If the dam breaks, the resulting wave of water would utterly kill everything in the valley! But then what about the so-called 'army of the people'? Would the three leaders go as far as to destroy their own army? Could this be the ultimate goal of Albert Murphy? Why not? What better way to serve Ulm than to kill some 2,500 people at once?

"You say the ice troll in the lake holds the dam together," Sir Oengus says. "How does it do that?"

"It adds ice to the dam."

"So the dam is a construct of wood, stone, and ice?"

"It's not like that. The ice troll freezes the dam."

"So the dam is a man-made construct and the ice troll is just there to freeze it?"

"That's it."

Navarre is still pondering whether Albert Murphy is really planning to destroy his own army.

"Where are your leaders now?," he asks. "In the castle?"

"Each in their own tower," the prisoner says. "The giant has his own quarters because he is a cantankerous asshole. Serena was his prisoner when mister Albert found him."

"Some tea?," Sir Suvali says, offering the prisoner a steaming cup of the stuff.

When the prisoner is sound asleep moments later, Navarre shares his thoughts about the dam with the others.

"I know," Sir Suvali says, apparently suggesting that he thought of the whole thing first.

"Would they really kill their own men?," Navarre wonders. He ponders the problem for a bit until he suddenly thinks of something.

"How many men in the castle, you think?" he asks his noble fellows.

"Hard to say," Sir Oengus says. "Five hundred? A thousand at most?"

"Hmm...", Navarre muses. "If they still have men in the castle, it could mean the army in the valley is expendable. First, they wouldn't have to pay them. Second, they would neatly rid themselves of a lot of people they had fight for them in the name of this so-called revolution. Third, there would be no more royalist army. If they would still have some sort of coherent elite force in the castle, they would have little trouble dealing with some bickering barons in the duchies. The realm will be at their feet."

"Captains don't kill their own hands," Sir Oengus says. "It sends the ship adrift."

"You don't really believe this drivel about the people and revolutions, do you?," Navarre says. "There is no such thing. I'll bet you a hundred gold that these three have some other agenda entirely. They are obviously evil to the core so why would they care about some peasants and bandits?"

"That's the morning rain," Sir Suvali says, when the first drops start falling outside. "I'll have another look at the castle in the light and then we head back to the camp."

Day 18: The sorcerer's short flight does not yield much more information. When he returns and Navarre asks him whether it's Blurh's or Ulm's banners flying from the castle, the sorcerer says he didn't get close enough to see what's what.

"They were mostly black," he says.

"Great," Navarre says. "So are Blurh's banners. Black with some red."

"In that case I'd say they were Ulm's rather than Blurh's," Sir Suvali says. "Let's get back to the camp."

On their way back, our noble heroes keep their eyes peeled. When they are approaching the enemy camp, Navarre manages to roll "1" twice for something called an 'observation check' – just when you need them and all that – and he spots an expertly hidden barge just at the end of a track leading up and into the forest on the duskward bank of the river. Nets and piles of leafy branches are stacked against and on top of it so as to make it almost undetectable.

"Do you suppose this is how they are going to save their own men when they burst the dam?," he wonders. "Get them on barges and then flood the valley? And then perhaps sail back to King's Lake to finish their conquest?"

"Seems a bit strong," Sir Oengus says. "They'll need a lot of barges for that. Besides, that barge is pretty high up on the slope. I don't think the water will reach it."

"I must bow to your superior knowledge on the subject," Navarre says. "I have no clue at all as to the effects of this flood."

When they get back to the inn some two hours later, the noble trio report their findings to the others, which causes a bit of a stir. With everybody speaking and shouting at the same time, Navarre suddenly gets an idea.

"We must use their own trap against them!," he exclaims. "Get our own men to safety and break the dam before they can."

"I was thinking the same thing," Sir Eber says. "Is the ice troll part of the dam? Would we have to kill it?"

"I'd say it certainly has to be removed in some way," Navarre says. "How big is an ice troll? Does it function as some sort of stopper if it is a part of the dam and would using the magical wand on it do the trick then? Would killing it? Does anybody know how to kill an ice troll?"

"It'll probably die after I hit it a couple of times," Sir Eber says.

"Hmm...", Navarre muses. "Should we consider using the *Sword of Shadows* just to make sure that it dies instantly?"

"I will not draw the sword again," Sir Eber says.

"Commendable," Navarre says. "Alright then. Perhaps Suvali should shrink the creature first? Just in case it doesn't die after you have hit it a couple of times?"

Sir Eber looks at him with thinly veiled contempt.

"There's more," Navarre continues. "How do we get to the dam unnoticed and still pack a punch? We can hardly start fighting the creature when we are small – it just wouldn't work. And where is it? Even more important: how would we get out of the way when the dam breaks? There's no telling how fast the water will come through. Although I gather it would be fast."

"Bah," Sir Eber scoffs. "Talk and more talk. Let's just do it."

Navarre casts him a doubtful look. Has his noble fellow not heard a word he said?

"Perhaps we should see what Mim has to say before making plans," Navarre says. "We might need some considerable time to convince the man of all this and the glass is running empty. Maybe we should use the prisoner to convince him?"

"*Mon cher!*," the *chevalier* exclaims. "The man is *chevalier!* We can hardly expect him to listen to the tales of a peasant!"

Navarre nods.

"Point taken," he says. "I think we should speak to Mim alone. This whole 'revolt of the people' thing does seem to be at least a part of the plan and I think we would be wise to consider who we talk to. Some of the servants may have taken to the notion and the whole plan depends on the utmost discretion."

22.00 hrs: An hour after Navarre and Sir Oengus have reverted to their normal size and the prisoner has been fed some more tea, our noble heroes head for Duke Mim's room. One of the guards announces their arrival and they are ushered into the room, where they find Mim in the company of two more guards and two servants preparing him for the night.

Sir Eber is the first to speak: "Get these people out of here."

Duke Mim looks at him in startled surprise.

"I say!," he exclaims. "I will do no such thing!"

"I am afraid we must insist, Lord Duke," Navarre says. "What we have to say is for your ears only."

The duke considers this for a moment and then nods to the servants.

"The guards remain," he says. "I trust them with my life."

"After them," Sir Eber says. "We don't want anyone listening in on this out there."

"Move!," Sir Oerknal says, herding the servants out of the room like a flock of geese. "Go!"

He follows the servants into the hallway and shuts the door behind him.

"*Monsieur,*" the *chevalier* starts, bowing elegantly. "We have information of importance about the enemy."

"Excellent!," Mim says. "Out with it!"

"The *château* is in the hands of the enemy," the *chevalier* continues. "A direct assault is out of the question."

"Damn' nuisance!," Mim says.

"There is another option but timing will be of the essence," the *chevalier* continues. "There is a dam at the edge of the plateau with a huge reservoir of water behind it. The enemy is planning to break the dam and flood the valley, killing everybody in it. We must get our men to safety before this happens."

The duke seems to ponder this for some time.

"How certain are you of this?," he finally asks.

"We have seen the dam with our own eyes," Navarre says. "Allow me to draw you a map of the situation."

The duke gestures to one of the guards for a quill and some parchment and Navarre starts scribbling while the *chevalier* continues to answer the duke's questions about the castle itself. When Navarre has finished, the noble company gather around the map.

"Considering all this, *monsieur,* I suggest we break the dam before the enemy does," the *chevalier* says.

The duke studies the map for some time, with the noble quartet explaining things when required.

"We must secretly retreat our troops, get them to safe ground before the enemy can react," the *chevalier* says.

"Timing and discretion are of the essence. We must seal off the area and leave fires burning to create the impression of a manned camp while we retreat."

The duke nods.

"We'll have to move under the cover of darkness," he says.

"I must point out that we cannot be certain that the dam will actually break," Navarre says.

"Words," Sir Eber scoffs. "The opportunity is too good to ignore. We must use their own trap against them."

"How long would it take to get our men to higher ground?," Navarre asks.

"An hour, two at the most," the duke says.

"*Messieurs,*" the *chevalier* says, a solemn look on his face. "There is nothing to stop us."

"Gentlemen, the plan has merit," the duke says, extending his hand to each of the noble quartet. "I give you Mim's word and you have my full support. In return, gentlemen, I assume I can count on each one of you when this affair is over?"

"*Mon Duc!*," the *chevalier* cries, straightening his back. "House Sarazin is behind you!"

When his noble fellows also loudly voice their support for the duke's royal aspirations, Navarre nods. He doesn't care who will be King after this.

"We'll need some time to prepare," Sir Suvali says. "We'll get back to you when we're ready to move."

"*Allez!*," the *chevalier* cries. "*Messieurs*, when the enemy has been crushed, we shall move against the *château!*"

"Gentlemen," the duke says, donning a surcoat. "I will leave you to it. I will personally instruct my officers to be ready for immediate action."

And with this, he signals his guards and leaves the room.

As so our noble heroes return to their own rooms, left to come up with a foolproof plan. They agree that time is of the essence and that they must get to the dam as soon as possible. Unfortunately, this would involve them flying there and thus reducing most of them in size again, meaning that they will probably stand a poor chance of attacking the ice troll to any effect. And then there is the small matter of getting out in time if the dam should break. How fast will it break? Would they stand a greater chance of getting out of the way when they are large or small? What if they fly to the dam, have to wait for 24 hours to revert to their normal size and only then attack the ice troll? Surely this would give the enemy too much time, especially since there is no way of knowing their timescale? Should they try and get to the dam on foot? That would also take about a day and would lead to the additional problem of getting past the palisade and crossing the hinterland unseen. It is a true conundrum.

An hour has passed when we find Sir Eber and Navarre entertaining the feeble notion that Sir Suvali could perhaps reduce one of them in size and dangle him from a line so that he could try and kill the troll with the *Sword of Shadows*.

"We're not really considering this, are we?," Navarre says.

"No," Sir Eber says. "But only because I won't draw the sword again. Anyway, I don't care how we do this, large or small, as long as we do it and fast."

"Undeniable," Navarre nods. "I will say this, though: I will not be a part of this unless we can come up with a sure way to get out of the way when the dam breaks. I do not intend to die a fool's death."

"I'll do it," Sir Eber says.

"You'll likely die."

"So?"

"Don't be an idiot," Navarre says angrily. "What of your responsibilities? Your people are going to need you when all this is over."

"The people can take care of themselves," Sir Eber says. "They seem to be doing all right at the moment."

Navarre raises an eyebrow.

"Surely you jest, Sir?," he says.

But it doesn't look like his noble companion is.

"Gentlemen," Sir Suvali says, rising to his feet. "If you'll excuse me, I'm gonna have another look at the enemy lines. Just to make sure everything is still as it's supposed to be."

He leaves the room, leaving the rest of our noble heroes to continue discussing the plan and it becomes clear that they will probably have to get to the dam in reduced form. So how are they going fight an ice troll when they are the size of garden gnomes? How large is an ice troll? Will their little legs allow them to get out of the way in time when the dam breaks? Will the frozen part of the dam instantly thaw upon the death of the ice troll – its magic lost as Sir Suvali seems to suggest – or will it take time?

"Time flies," Sir Eber says when the bell strikes midnight. "We've been at this for two hours now and I say we get a move on, now, come what may. Where's the sorcerer?"

Has it been two hours? *Tempus fugit* indeed! Two hours! Has that allowed the enemy to find out about the plan using the *Kettle of the Coven*?

It is this what Navarre is thinking of when Sir Suvali bursts into the room.

"Alarm!," he yells. "Alarm! The enemy has moved to higher ground!"

Sir Eber is the first to react: "Get word to Mim! We have to move! Now!"

"I'm on it!," Sir Oerknal yells, grabbing his axe and charging out of the room.

"We'll have to move fast!," Sir Suvali says. "We must know what is going on and there is only one way to get to the dam in time. Gentlemen, prepare to be shrunk!"

Although he does see that he is left with little choice, Navarre still manages to utter a feeble protest before the sorcerer points the wand at him. Minutes later, the others already in the pockets of the *mage vest*, Sir Oerknal returns.

"He's gonna need two hours!," he yells. Sir Suvali reduces him in size and when the creature has climbed into a pocket of the vest, the sorcerer runs out of the inn and takes to the air.

Below him, orders are shouted and men start scrambling to higher ground in all haste.

Day 19, 01.00 hrs: When our noble heroes get to the dam about an hour later, there are more fires on both ends of it than before, which either means that the enemy has increased their vigilance because they found out that a guard had gone missing or that the game is afoot – or perhaps a combination of both. After several passes, our noble heroes conclude that there are at least 30 men to each side of the dam.

"We can't get to the dam from the plateau without engaging them," Sir Suvali says. "I'll have to lower some of you directly onto the dam if we want to get this over with."

"Why?," Navarre asks. "It would seem that the enemy is about to break the dam. Why not leave them to it?"

"To the castle, then?," Sir Suvali says.

"Yea," Sir Oengus says.

"Would there be any point at all if we were to stop the enemy from breaking the dam?," Navarre asks.

"Nah," Sir Oengus says. "Let them spring the trap and get rid of it. We might want to make sure they don't do it too fast, though. Mim will need another hour."

"Agreed," Sir Suvali says. "We'll wait to see what happens and get to the castle when the whole thing is over."

Our noble heroes do not have to wait long. They observe the goings on for over half an hour until Sir Oengus points at the castle.

"Sail ho!," he says. "The witch is coming."

On the other side of the lake, the gates of the old castle have opened and a group of some 60 people emerge and start for the lake in the light of their torches.

"I see no giant," Sir Eber says.

When the group is close to the dam, our noble heroes retreat to a vantage point on a cliff to the duskward side of it. The group moves to the middle of the dam and splits, with about half of it moving to the left and the other to the right, leaving only a smallish woman and a handful of people in the middle of the dam. The giant is still nowhere to be seen.

"So the witch is going to do it," Sir Eber says.

Although our noble heroes cannot exactly make out what is happening, it is obvious that the smallish woman engages in some activities and then there is a loud 'crack'. Instantly, everybody on the dam starts running left and right until there are no more people on it. All remains quiet for some five minutes when there is another loud 'crack' – and then another one, and another. Suddenly, there is a huge cracking sound and the whole lake shudders.

Seconds later, the dam breaks.

"Keep eyes on Serena!," Sir Suvali yells, rising into the air for a better view.

"Where's the troll?," Sir Eber yells.

With the water thundering into the valley below in apocalyptic fashion, our noble heroes try to keep track of their target while spying for the ice troll at the same time.

When the group with the witch starts back to the castle, no one has seen the troll. Did it wash downstream with the flood?

"They're on the move," Sir Suvali says from above. "We're going after them."

When they get to the castle and the witch and her entourage have disappeared, our noble heroes have to decide what to do. At this point, it is still about four and a half hours to the morning rain and some 22 hours before they will revert to their normal size.

"I'm going back to Mim and be his scout," Sir Suvali says. "Want me to drop you into the castle?"

"What else?," Sir Eber says. "Get us to the courtyard and we'll kill the giant and the rest of the leaders."

"I'd say that would be a little rash," Navarre says. "We have no idea how many soldiers are in the castle and I am not going to fight all of them in that courtyard. And most certainly not while I am this small."

"Then we'll start in one of the towers and work our way down," the ranger says.

"Wouldn't that sort of be the same thing?", Navarre says angrily. "What is wrong with you? Do you really want us to charge into the castle and start hacking away at the enemy when we're this small?"

Much to his surprise, Sir Eber grins apologetically.

"I'm just saying that we should stop talking and do something for a change," he says.

Navarre takes some time to calm down and then has a good look at the castle. He is the only one with some understanding of its layout and he notices that there is only one tower with a roof: the *pigeonnier*. There are no guards on it and it could be approached from the back in a bit of a blind spot for the guards on the walls.

"We could get to the *pigeonnier* unnoticed and wait there until we get back to normal," he says eventually.

"Even at our current size, we could probably handle a dove keeper if the worst were to happen."

"Let's have a look," Sir Suvali says.

After some scouting, the *pigeonnier* is indeed found to be the best place to wait for the magical effect to end. After a stealthy approach, the sorcerer drops his noble companions onto the ledge where the pigeons normally land and heads back to the army.

When he reaches the valley, he looks down upon a scene utter devastation. Whole sections of the rocky slopes and the forests on both banks are gone, carried away by the raging torrent. Even though the worst seems to be over, the river is still thundering through the valley with force, past veritable mountains of rocks, boulders, splintered trees, and other debris.

When he gets to the army camp just before daybreak, he finds everything gone except the inn. On both sides, the armies are scrambling to take up new positions in the valley.

He finds Duke Mim in the inn and informs him of what transpired on the plateau and that he left his noble companions up there to keep an eye on the enemy. The duke tells him that neither army suffered much from the flood.

"It would seem we are stuck here for the time being," he says.

"Okay," Sir Suvali says. "I'll get some sleep and fly back to the castle tonight. We are planning a move against the enemy and I'll get back to you with news as soon as we have achieved something up there."

He takes his leave of the duke and retires.

Navarre wakes up at the break of dawn. Our noble heroes are still in the *pigeonnier*, which takes up most of the upper floor of the tower, its only connection to the rest of it being a trapdoor in the floor.

He has slept for some four hours and decides to start observing the goings on in the courtyard below. He is just in time to see the giant emerge from a row of buildings on the other side of the courtyard, stooping low to get through what seems to be an enlarged doorway. It has a white skin and white hair and it is wearing a filthy, white hauberk. It stumbles about for a bit and then starts pissing into a barrel. When it is done, it picks up the barrel, staggers out of the castle and tosses the contents into the lake. It returns to the castle, picks up another barrel and drinks what seems to be most of its contents. When it is done, it stumbles back into the building it came from. It is obviously blind drunk.

"The other giant was black," Sir Eber says.

Navarre turns to face the ranger.

"An ice giant?," he muses.

"I say we poison the fucker," Sir Eber says, nodding to the barrel.

"Commendable," Navarre says sarcastically. "If somewhat beneath a peer of the realm. Pity we don't actually have any."

Since there is little else to do, our noble heroes observe the goings on in the castle for much of the rest of the day and they can now confirm that the banners flying on the walls are those of Ulm. The large circus tent turns out to be the center of activity in the castle. It is surrounded by many strange constructs and contraptions: hoists, cranes, and all manner of other contrivances with ropes and pulleys. Voluminous clouds of steam billow from the tent itself and there is a huge pile of what seems to be blue earth next to it. Maybe as many as hundreds of slaves come and go, operating the constructs, emptying buckets onto the pile of earth and then sieving the blue earth, all watched over by armed soldiers.

"At least now we know what happened to our families," Sir Eber says grimly.

"It is an outrage!," Navarre growls.

The castle is clearly composed of two parts, an old part to the right and a new part to the left, separated by wall with a gatehouse in it. The main entrances to the complex are in the rimward and hubward walls of the old castle. A bridge crosses the river running through the old part and on the far side are the stables and numerous

barracks where the slaves are kept and the soldiers sleep. The tent is in the new part of the castle, as are the giant's quarters and the stables. If the prisoner told them the truth, the three remaining towers of the new castle must be where the three leaders reside.

There must be hundreds of enslaved nobles, watched over by some two dozen soldiers. Another two dozen men are patrolling the walls of both parts of the castle and our noble heroes gather that there must be from 50 to 100 enemy soldiers in the castle. Judging by what they saw back in the valley, this would mean that the 'army of the people' there constitutes perhaps 95% of the entire enemy force. Since most of the soldiers in the castle are armed with halberds and wear the strange iron armor, our noble heroes assume these must constitute some sort of elite force (SEE ILLUSTRATION #26).

After some six hours of continuous observation, just when Navarre concludes that he has seen enough, something stirs in the courtyard. People start cheering and applauding loudly and now a smallish man appears. He is probably some 40 years old, of lean build, clean-shaven, and clad in spotless overalls. He benevolently acknowledges the admiring crowd and crosses the courtyard to the tent, where he starts inspecting the various constructs.

"There he is," Navarre says, gritting his teeth. "Albert bloody Murphy the traitorous architect."

It takes Albert Murphy about half an hour to complete his inspection of the courtyard, after which he disappears into the tent. Since it is still a long wait until our noble heroes will revert to their normal size and because he thinks that he has seen enough for the day, Navarre decides to get some more sleep.

23.00 hrs: It must be close to midnight when Sir Suvali turns up and finds most of his noble fellows fast asleep. Not so Sir Eber, who instantly jumps to his feet when the flying sorcerer appears, wide awake.

"Time to take the castle," he growls, flexing his muscles, tiny as they are at the moment. "The little architect is still in his quarters."

"Patience, friend," Sir Oengus says. "We still have to get back to normal."

"I say we liberate our kinsmen first," Navarre says. "There must be at least five hundred of them, most of them able warriors. We will stand a better chance against the soldiers if we have the numbers. We can get to the barracks via the wall and there are only two guards on it. We can get in through the roof. The operation will be fast and we will be at the other side of the bridge, which we can easily defend against the soldiers and giant when they attack."

"We must get the giant first," Sir Eber says. "Get the punch out of their attack."

"There are too many soldiers out there," Navarre says. "Even if we would make it to that building, we may be in bad shape when we get to face the giant."

"I won't sacrifice my family to the giant," Sir Eber growls. "He killed the King in one blow. He will crush all of them."

"I am sure your father would be honored to die for the King," Navarre says stiffly.

"Let's do both, starting with the giant," Sir Suvali says. "The giant is our most dangerous opponent, especially if he should get the chance to get into his stride."

"The giant must not be allowed to roam free," Sir Eber says.

Although he sees the point, Navarre is not convinced – he is not convinced at all.

"There is no way we can get to the giant's quarters without being spotted by the guards on the walls – not to mention everybody else in the yard," he says. "The giant will be out long before we get there."

"Then we use the walls," Sir Suvali says. "If we are careful, we only have to deal with two guards at the time. The route isn't that different from the one you propose to get to the slaves."

"Possibly," Navarre says. "But the end result will be different! If we free our kinsmen, we will end up with an army of trained fighters. In your case we will end up fighting a giant with enemy soldiers closing in all around us. We will not survive."

"Then we die," Sir Eber says.

Navarre casts the ranger an incredulous look.

"I did not think that was the purpose of this exercise," he says.

"We cannot take the castle," Sir Suvali says. "Not even with the help of the slaves and definitely not when the giant is still alive. Our mission must be to make it as easy as possible for Mim to take the castle when he gets here. We cannot allow the giant to wade into Mim's troops and start slaughtering them."

"I think we can get to the giant without attracting too much attention," he continues. "Even if he would come out before we can get to his quarters, I think we can still kill him if we concentrate our attacks on him. Job done as far as I'm concerned, whatever may come next."

Navarre has to admit that the sorcerer has a point. Moreover, if his plan would fail, it would alarm the giant and possibly lead to the death of a lot of his peers, whereas, if the plan with the giant would fail, at least the unarmed nobles wouldn't be in the line of fire.

"I say we get through that trapdoor and then onto the gatehouse wall," Sir Suvali says. "Get the first guard and drag him inside while I take his place in disguise and take the next guard. After that it'll be playing ticker with the wand. I can get to get to the next tower in no time."

"And how will you 'disguise' yourself?," Navarre asks. "You will need more than just a cloak. You may have to speak to the other guard."

"I am very good at disguising myself," the sorcerer declares.

"I suppose you are," Navarre says pensively. "Hmm... We could probably get into the building through the roof from the hubward wall. It might work."

The discussion continues like this until all of our noble heroes are back to their normal size.

"Let's go!", Sir Eber says.

He opens the trapdoor in the floor and disappears through it. The others follow and now our noble heroes are in a dark room. They have a hard time recognizing exactly what is in it until Sir Oerknal tells them that there are crates and racks with weapons everywhere. There are three doors: one to downward; one to the gatehouse wall; and one to duskward, to the old part of the castle.

The sorcerer speaks again: "Everybody ready? We'll take the guards one by one and replace each of them with one of us as we proceed. If we move quickly, we can cover more ground than you think."

Navarre still has his doubts but Sir Eber has already opened the door to the gatehouse wall and is presently confronted with the back of a guard who has just started moving away from him.

"Stay low and get him in here!," Sir Suvali hisses, unleashing his spell.

The guard is asleep before he can turn around and Sir Eber has dragged him into the armory even before he has had time to hit the ground. Quickly, the sorcerer dons the guard's cloak, grabs his buckler and steps outside. Sir Eber closes the door behind him, drags the sleeping guard to the back wall and moves back to the door again, setting it slightly ajar. The whole thing hasn't lasted ten seconds.

Outside, Sir Suvali is moving down the wall at a leisurely pace and approaching the second guard, who seems blissfully unaware of what happened moments earlier. When he is within range, the sorcerer casts his second spell, never breaking his stride while the guard collapses. Witnessing the event, Sir Eber opens the door, silently runs down the wall and drags the second guard back into the armory without making a sound. He takes the man's cloak and buckler, gets back out and starts walking down the wall.

In the armory, Sir Oerknal drags the second guard to the back wall, right up to where Navarre, the *chevalier*, and the first guard are.

"My turn," the *chevalier* announces, taking a buckler from one of the stands moving to the door.

Not wholly sure of what the plan was but pretty sure that it didn't involve the *chevalier* charging after the sorcerer and the ranger at this time and without a proper disguise, and with Sir Oerknal and Sir Oengus now also eager to join the action and moving to the door, Navarre is left with the problem of the two sleeping guards. He ponders the situation for a moment before he decides to cut their throats. All is fair in war and war and all that. What follows is a rather remarkable series of events involving the *chevalier* and Navarre replacing the sorcerer and the ranger on the gatehouse wall; Sir Suvali and Sir Eber finding the door to the second tower locked and clambering up to its roof using a rope; a short, muffled fight with the two guards up there; Sir Oengus replacing the *chevalier* on the gatehouse wall when his impetuous noble fellow has also climbed up to the roof of the second tower; a spot of a-guard-on-the-third-tower-looking-at-the-trio-on-the-second-tower-for-some-heart-stopping-moments-before-deciding-that-all-is-still-well – all of which has led to the following situation: Sir Oerknal still in the armory; Navarre and Sir Oengus on the gatehouse wall; and the *chevalier*, Sir Eber, and Sir Suvali on the roof of the second tower, where they have found a trapdoor in the floor.

"This is it," Sir Suvali whispers to his noble companions, of whom Sir Eber is on his knees next to the trapdoor. "I have no more spells and we've been pushing our luck. Eber, you and I get through the trapdoor and see if we can reach the giant's quarters via the courtyard. Scaralat, you remain here and prop up that dead guard against the hubward battlements so that you'll at least seem to be two up here."

"Certainly," the *chevalier* says, with more than a hint of irritation in his voice.

The sorcerer opens the trapdoor to allow Sir Eber to climb down the ladder thus revealed. Unable to see a thing, the ranger strikes a spark and sees that he is in a study *cum* bedroom taking up most of the floor. The air is dry

and parts of the room have been partitioned off with drapes and curtains; there are numerous bookcases and chests, one or two desks, some chairs, books and papers everywhere, a flight of stairs leading down, and a large four-poster bed with a sleeping man in a night-cap in it.

The man is probably bald, perhaps 60 years old and he has a short beard and it doesn't take a genius to know that this must be Vincilli Litworth, the Chancellor. Without much ado, Sir Eber stabs him in the heart when Sir Suvali steps down from the ladder.

After a cursory inspection of the room, the noble duo descend the stairs and end up on the ground floor. They open the door in the downward wall and run across the empty courtyard to the giant's quarters.

Sir Eber opens the door, lets the sorcerer pass and follows, closing the door behind him. The noble duo find themselves in a large room taking up most of the building – indeed, the inner walls have been torn down to create one large room. Some barrels and several piles of what looks like garbage are in various locations on the room.

Sleeping on the floor, its back to the door, is the giant.

Taking but a moment to take in all of this, the noble duo advance. Sir Suvali touches the giant with the Loremaster's wand reducing the giant to just over a foot tall. He lights a candle and Sir Eber starts hacking away at the miniature giant, which therefore suffers considerable damage before it can come to its senses. Indeed, it is already bleeding profusely when it finally manages to speak: "What, what...? Stop! What are you doing!? Who are you!? Stop!"

Without saying a word, Sir Eber continues hitting the miniature giant, now aided by Sir Suvali, who has drawn a sword.

"Master! Master!," the miniature giant yelps. "Stop hitting me!"

Sir Eber hesitates and stays his attacks. But Sir Suvali is not so easily swayed and he continues hacking away at the miniature giant, hitting it again.

"Stop!", the miniature giant squeaks, now desperately trying to shield itself from the sorcerer's relentless blows.

"I'll do anything! I'm your slave!"

Still the sorcerer keeps hacking away at the miniature giant, which is now definitely seriously injured.

"What the fuck!," the miniature giant yelps, finally trying to get away. "Help! Help!"

This wakes Sir Eber from his reverie and he starts hitting the miniature giant again until it sags to the floor, where Sir Suvali finishes it off. Instantly, the giant reverts to its normal size.

"Dead," the sorcerer says, already scanning the room for treasure and spotting two large, quality chests that stand out from the garbage. A quick inspection reveals a collection of smith's tools and what appears to be gear for survival in arctic conditions.

"Nice," Sir Eber says, picking up a huge hammer.

"Leave it," the sorcerer says. "We're getting out of here."

An Adventure in Five Acts
Part VII
Act V: Diamond Castle
Part II: Assault on the Castle of the Slave Lords

Day 20, just after midnight: With the noble duo thus occupied, Scaralat de Sarazin is looking at the sky, where dark clouds are gathering. When a fierce wind starts to blow, he huddles deep into his cloak and laments his failure to stand up to the sorcerer. *Pardieu!* What was the buffoon thinking, ordering him around like that! He is *chevalier!*

Suddenly, lightning strikes the third tower. Much to his delight, he clearly sees the bolt directly hit one of the guards on the roof before arcing to the three others, killing all of them outright. In his excitement, he throws all caution into the wind as usual.

"Friendly fire!" he hollers, to no one in particular. "Friendly fire! Hurrah! Where does it come from?"

He starts running around in an excited manner, frantically trying to see where the lightning bolt came from. Unfortunately for him, he rolls a "1" for yet another 'observation check', which seems to mean that he sees nothing.

Then Sir Oengus appears on the battlements, his eyes as big as saucers.

"It's a giant eagle!" he yells to the *chevalier* and pointing to the hubward sky. "There! Up in the sky! It's praying!"

Sir Eber and Sir Suvali have just made their way back to the dead chancellor's room in the second tower when the lightning bolt strikes. The ranger climbs to the roof, where he finds Sir Oengus right next to the trapdoor.

"Lightning strike!" the *chevalier* yells, approaching fast. "Four guards dead! Coincidence? Witchcraft!"

Sir Oengus is already halfway down to the steps to the chancellor's room, where Sir Suvali is busily gathering books and papers and stuffing them in a bag.

"It's a bird!" Sir Oengus yells. "A BIG bird!"

"Mmm?," the sorcerer mumbles, without looking up from what he is doing.

"In the sky!," Sir Oengus yells, before heading back up the ladder again. "It's calling down lightning!"

The sorcerer seems to consider this for a moment and then places the bag around the neck of the dead chancellor. He procures his magical wand and touches the dead chancellor with it in the hopes that he can shrink both the corpse and the bag. When nothing happens, he curses softly and looks up to see the *chevalier* stepping down from the ladder.

"*Mais c'est un boudoir!*," the *chevalier* says, quickly scanning the room for valuables.

"A bird?," Sir Suvali asks.

The *chevalier* startles.

"*Une pie?*," he exclaims, flushing. "*Moi? Pas du tout! Je...*"

"I meant the big bird and the lightning bolt," the sorcerer says.

"Ah!," the *chevalier* exclaims, presently dashing to the stairs in the corner. "The bird! *Suivez-moi!* A friendly darkness! Terrible forces! *Aux armes!*"

When Sir Eber has also made it back to the room again, the noble trio start climbing down the stairs.

Back in the armory, Navarre sees Sir Eber and Sir Suvali emerge from the giant's quarters alive and get back to the second tower unchallenged. Assuming that the mission to kill the giant was a success, he breathes a sigh of relief and turns to look down into the old courtyard under the darkening sky to re-evaluate his chances to get to the barracks where his kinsmen are kept.

Then lightning strikes the second tower. Startled, our noble hero turns around and then the *chevalier* starts screaming his head off. He turns around again to see the guards on the wall below him look up to the tower. He shakes his head and retreats into the armory to prepare for what is to come.

"What was that?," Sir Oerknal hisses.

"I think the giant is dead," Navarre says. "We'd better get to our kinsmen before Sarazin has alerted the whole castle."

"Okay," Sir Oerknal says. "We opening the door?"

"Good idea," Navarre says. "Maybe then I can finally see something in this damned room."

But they find the duskward door locked and it takes them some time to open it – to find that the wall they know to be there is some eight feet below them, something they somehow to have missed when they were looking at it from their vantage point earlier that day. About halfway down the wall, the two guards are now looking down

into the courtyard of the old castle.

"What the hell?," Sir Oerknal says, looking into the courtyard from the doorway. "The slaves are escaping!" And sure enough, although the noble duo cannot make out any details, it does seem that people have started fighting in the courtyard across the bridge.

"It's soldiers against slaves," Sir Oerknal resumes.

"What?!", Navarre exclaims. "We must get to them!"

"I'll charge the guards," Sir Oerknal says. "Lower me onto the wall and cover me."

When Sir Oerknal is on the wall, Navarre loads his crossbow and starts firing at the guards. When he misses his first shot, his noble companion has reached the first guard, who deftly parries his charge.

Down in the courtyard of the new castle, Sir Eber, Sir Suvali, and the *chevalier* have already reached the gate to the old castle. Although they, too, cannot be sure what is going on, it seems obvious that people are fighting across the river.

"*Parbleu!*," the *chevalier* cries, taking a few steps back. "*Qu'est-ce qu'y se passe?*"

"It's a fight!," Sir Eber yells. "They're killing our families!"

Without another thought, the ranger charges into the courtyard and to the bridge, screaming for his dad.

The *chevalier* shifts uneasily when he sees his noble companion depart in this manner and it takes him some time to regain his composure. He lights a torch and assumes a gallant stance and, now, in the light of the torch, things become a little clearer. Across the river, at the other end of the bridge, large numbers of unarmed nobles are fighting numbers of soldiers. More and more nobles and soldiers are emerging from their respective barracks, the latter hastily donning armors. Already, several of the nobles and at least one soldier are on the ground.

"Weald!," Sir Eber shouts, when he gets to the bridge. "To the castle! Fall back to the castle! We killed the giant! Weald!"

Far behind him, the *chevalier* also rises to the occasion.

"*Sarazin!*," he cries, without moving an inch and with his voice only barely audible over the shouts and screams in the courtyard. "*Sarazin aussi!*"

Some time before this, on the roof of the second tower, Sir Oengus is watching the giant eagle approach the castle. He climbs back into the dead chancellor's room and opens the door to the hubward wall to see that the giant eagle has landed on it. He runs to the creature and falls to one knee as if it were a King.

"How can I help?," he asks.

The giant eagle casts him a regal glance.

"I seek the *Kettle of the Coven*," it says. "Where is it?"

"I don't know," Sir Oengus says. "Maybe the witch has it."

"Where is this witch?," the giant eagle asks, glancing at the third tower.

"I think she must be in one of the two towers down there," Sir Oengus says, rising to his feet and nodding to the third and fourth tower. "Allow me to help."

"I will not stop you," the giant eagle says.

Sir Oengus tentatively moves past the giant eagle.

"Thank you, Lady," he says. "Thank you for your help!"

"Drink from the *Chalice of the Tree*," the creature says, spreading its wings. "Use the wand liberally."

"Wait!," Sir Oengus says, turning around before the eagle has taken to the air. "My Lady! Your name!"

"My name is Bandolo," the giant eagle says, after a moment's hesitation. "Wandering Bandolo."

"I am Oengus Moon of Nisibis!," Sir Oengus says.

The giant eagle throws him an amused glance.

"I know," it says, gracefully taking to the air. "I have been following you for a week."

Back in the old courtyard, the *chevalier* is jumping from one foot to another.

"To me! To me!," he cries. "House Sarazin is here!"

Next to him, Sir Suvali, obviously clairaudient, gulps down some of the novice's potion. Instantly, he feels ready to take on the world, the blood pumping through his veins.

Across the river, Sir Eber has reached the end of the bridge and he has already driven back some of the soldiers, allowing some of the nobles to slip onto the bridge and start running.

When they reach the *chevalier* and the sorcerer at the gatehouse, the *chevalier* starts gesturing to the armory.

"À gauche!" he cries. "À gauche! Weapons to the left!"

Then, finally, he starts running to the bridge himself, Sir Suvali right behind him with the novice's potion in his hand. When the noble duo get to the other end of the bridge, the *chevalier* executes a few flourishes with his sword, allowing Sir Suvali some time to hand the potion to Sir Eber.

"Drink!" the sorcerer yells. "Drink and follow me!"

Sir Eber gulps down some of the potion, hands it to the *chevalier* and charges back into the fray.

"We must get the leaders!" Sir Suvali yells. "Follow me!"

When the sorcerer starts running back to the gatehouse, the *chevalier* is right behind him.

"Sarazin!" he cries. "Sarazin!"

"Nisibis!" numerous voices come from the crowd. "Nisibis!"

And so poor Sir Eber is left to face the ever-growing horde of halberdiers in plate armor alone. Not that he seems to be in need of any help at the moment, mind you: when Sir Suvali and the *chevalier* reach the gatehouse, he has already killed two soldiers and wounded another so badly that the man can barely remain standing.

Lightning strikes again just when Sir Suvali and the *chevalier* enter the new courtyard, this time hitting and killing the two guards on the roof of the fourth tower. Then, they hear someone shout their names from the third tower. Looking up, they see Sir Oengus climbing to the roof of the third tower on a rope looped around one of the battlements.

"Where are we going?," the *chevalier* asks.

"Hold on," the sorcerer says, unfolding the wings of his flying apparatus. "We're going to kill the leaders."

And with that, he takes the *chevalier* up into the air and to the roof of the third tower. When they get there, Sir Oengus has already opened a trapdoor and revealed some steps leading into a dark room below. He climbs down the steps and ends up in a small room with many wardrobes, chests, coffer, and a large mirror. Piles of clothes are all over the floor and there are two doors: one in the hubward wall next to the stairs and another in the downward wall.

"Damn!," he says to the *chevalier* coming down the steps. "Someone's been dressing for the occasion!"

On the roof, Sir Suvali takes to the air again and heads for the roof of the fourth tower. When he gets there, he notices a trapdoor in the floor and opens it – to be missed by two arrows coming from the darkness below. Muttering a curse, he kicks the trapdoor back in place. Deciding that two men with bows are a little too much for him, he flies back to the old courtyard.

Just when he crosses the gatehouse wall, he hears Sir Eber bellow his name and call for medical aid.

In the armory, Navarre realizes that he will risk hitting Sir Oerknal if he continues firing at the guards and so he drops onto the wall below and charges into the fray. He manages to hit his target, just – albeit hard enough to send the guard off-balance and allow Sir Oerknal to finish him off. The second guard turns out to be a bit harder to kill, even though Navarre initially manages to inflict some serious damage. The man parries everything the noble duo throw at him for far too long until Sir Oerknal can finally deliver the killing blow.

Free to move at last, the noble duo turn their attention to the fray below, where the fighting has only intensified. More and more nobles and soldiers are coming from their respective barracks and it is hard to see who's who. What they do see, is that several nobles have reached the gate below them and that some of them are now opening it to the loud cheers of others.

"Back to the armory!," Navarre yells to his noble companion. "We must arm them!"

With this, he runs back along the wall and hoists himself into the armory, where he finds the room lit by torches and full of unkempt nobles, some of whom have already armed themselves. He has a quick look around but doesn't see any of his kinsmen.

"Form a line!," he yells. "Form a line! To the wall! We must arm our kinsmen! Get these weapons to the courtyard!"

The nobles take their time to react but Navarre and Sir Oerknal eventually manage to get them to form a line on the wall and start handing down weapons so the noble duo can throw them to the nobles below.

"Dauberval!," Navarre yells, when the weapons are received to loud hurrahs. "Dauberval! This way! Weapons! This way!"

But the whole operation has taken far too long and, now, Sir Oerknal stirs.

"When is enough enough?," he growls to Navarre.

"Keep at it!," Navarre cries. "There's much more!"

At that moment, the noble duo hear Sir Eber calling from somewhere down in the courtyard: "Dauberval! To me! Suvali! Medic! ... They are falling like flies!"

"That's Eber!," Sir Oerknal yells. "Where is he?"

"Dauberval! Suvali!," Sir Eber's voice sounds again. "To me!"

"That's it!," Sir Oerknal yells, dropping the weapons he is holding. "I'm outta here!"

And with that, he takes a great leap off the wall, landing quite badly. But he doesn't seem to bother and he gets to his feet without so much as a grunt. He picks up his double-bladed axe and charges into the fray.

"Out of my way!," he roars. "Lemme through!"

Back on the wall, Navarre has decided to take a more careful approach and presently lowers himself into the courtyard.

"Dauberval!", he shouts, when he gets to his feet again and charges after his noble companion. "Dauberval!"

At the bridge, Sir Eber has been wreaking havoc among the enemy soldiers ever since Sir Suvali and the *chevalier* left him there. He has noticed that the front line, although moving back and forth from time to time, is actually preventing the women and children from getting to the bridge safely. Furious and fully pumped up by the novice's potion, he continues to swing his sword and axe with deadly accuracy, cutting down soldier after soldier and slowly making his way forward until he and some other nobles finally manage to push the soldiers back far enough to allow some of the weaker nobles to get to the bridge.

"To the castle!," he shouts, planting his axe in another soldier. "To the castle!"

More and more soldiers are coming from the barracks, hastily donning armors and joining the fray. Clad in their iron armors and wielding halberds, they are cutting down nobles like flies – even though these are fighting with vigor and panache.

Fuming, Sir Eber seems to double his efforts. But, although he has already killed at least five and wounded many more, there seems to be no end to the soldiers for the time being. Worse, with more and more nobles now starting to cross the bridge and he is proving himself to be a force to be reckoned with, the enemy increase their efforts against him, and he has already suffered severe damage. But he continues to fight like a lion, cutting down two more soldiers and wounding a third in the next couple of rounds until, finally, after taking a couple of serious blows, he feels his luck may be about to run out.

"Dauberval!," he bellows. "To me! Suvali! Medic! ... They are falling like flies!"

He cuts down another soldier and repeats his call for backup. He is hit again and cuts down another soldier, who is quickly replaced by another soldier.

Just when he has parried a particularly vicious series of attacks, he notices Sir Suvali right behind him. The sorcerer is trying to smear some of the novice's ointment onto him but has to give up when he is told that things don't work that way. Then Sir Oerknal arrives on the scene, hurling himself into the melee, swinging his axe at one of the soldiers attacking the ranger and delivering a tremendous blow that sends the man reeling.

"Drink this!," Sir Suvali yells, handing Sir Oerknal the novice's potion just when Navarre arrives moments later and takes up a position on the ranger's right flank.

"There you are, Dauberval!," Sir Eber roars, cutting down his tenth soldier. "Ten!"

The noble trio now face perhaps a score of soldiers, with about ten more tending to the wounded behind the lines. The bodies of many, many dead nobles lie scattered in the courtyard. Furious at the sight, Navarre takes a swing at an advancing soldier, who deftly parries his attack.

"Eleven!," Sir Eber roars, working another soldier to the ground.

"Drink this!," Navarre hears Sir Suvali yell next to him. He accepts the novice's option handed to him, takes a step back and gulps down some of the concoction. He instantly feels its magic take effect and charges back into the fray.

"Dauberval!," he roars to the soldiers in front of him. "Dauberval! Surrender or die!"

"Piece of cake now!," Sir Eber yells next to him, cutting down yet another soldier. "Next!"

To his left, Sir Oerknal's axe bites deep into the shoulder of another soldier and, now, with the noble trio advancing slowly, ever more nobles are getting a secure access to the bridge. Cheering loudly, whole groups of them start running across the bridge and then out of the castle through the open gate in the rimward wall – the momentum inspiring the armed nobles returning from the new castle to start running for the gate as well. Indeed, only very few of them actually join the noble trio in the front line.

"Surrender!," Navarre yells, when he fails to harm his opponent. "Stand down and be judged!"

Next to him, both Sir Eber and Sir Oerknal are faring a lot better, inflicting great wounds on their opponents. The fight continues like this for some time and it doesn't seem to be Navarre's day – his opponents parry, evade, dodge, and even blunder their way out of most of his attacks. Fortunately, he doesn't suffer much damage himself. Sir Eber and Sir Oerknal do suffer considerable damage but they continue to cut down soldier after soldier in the process.

Then, after what seems like an age, the enemy, greatly reduced in number, finally start retreating.

"Victory!," Navarre yells. "Dauberval! Victory!"

At the other end of the courtyard, the few remaining fighting nobles break through the enemy line, which sends the medics and the wounded running.

"After them!," the nobles roar. "Kill them all!"

Navarre executes another fruitless attack and, then, when his noble companions cut down a soldier each, the enemy has finally had enough. Only a handful of soldiers remain, many heavily wounded, and now all of them start running.

"To me!," Navarre yells, still attempting to rally the nobles for an assault on the new castle. "Dauberval! To me! To me!"

"To the castle!," Sir Eber roars, turning around and charging back across the bridge, Sir Oerknal right behind him. "After me! To the castle!"

But it is all to no avail: with the enemy soldiers dead, wounded, or on the run, now all nobles are running for the gates. Breathing heavily, Navarre continues to try and rally them – looking for his kinsmen at the same time. But the *fine fleur* of The Forest continue their ignoble run for the gates and he doesn't see anybody he knows.

Then, finally, he sees his noble mother running past.

"Mother!," he yells. "Over here! Where is father?"

"Fighting the rabble, of course!," his noble mother yells, barely slowing down.

"Where is everybody going? We have to fight! Mother! Where is everybody going?"

When Duchess Dauberval stops running, Navarre runs toward her.

"We're going home," the duchess says, when he reaches her. "Rally our troops and come back to burn them all!"

Now, finally, Navarre realizes that his attempts to rally the nobles and storm the new castle have failed miserably.

"Of course, mother," he sighs. "How right you are. Off you go, then."

"I'm proud of you, son," his noble mother says, before starting for the gate again.

When Duchess Dauberval has disappeared, Navarre turns around and heads for the new castle.

Right after Navarre handed him the novice's potion, Sir Suvali left his noble fellows to it again and flew back to the new castle. He presently lands on the gatehouse wall and takes his time to have a good look around – to find that there are no more guards on the walls, that the courtyard is empty and that the giant eagle has disappeared.

He flies down to the courtyard and has a quick look inside the tent to find that it, too, is deserted. There is a huge hole in the ground, all manner of constructs and tools around it – obviously the mine. He leaves the tent and flies to the third tower, where he lands on the roof. After another good look at the gatehouse and the courtyard, he heads for the trapdoor and listens.

From below came the sounds of a fight and the excited cries of the *chevalier*, as reproduced by the DM: "Oh no! Pardon! En garde! Oh no! Stop! Stop!"

As stealthily as he can, Sir Suvali descends the stairs and ends up in the dressing room. He moves to an open door in the downward wall, the sounds of the fight becoming louder the closer he gets. He peeks around the corner into a corridor stretching rimward to hubward, just in time to see an iron-clad man fall back from a doorway across another corridor at the hubward end. The *chevalier* is in the doorway and two men wearing leather armors are throwing knives at him.

Long before all of this, in the third tower, Sir Oengus has kicked open the door in the downward wall to reveal a corridor running rimward to hubward, with another door at the hubward end. He dashes to the door, the *chevalier* right behind him, and opens it to reveal another corridor running at right angles to it. In wall opposite him is another door.

He opens the door, the *chevalier* still behind him, and enters a large room that takes up the entire hubward half of the tower and perhaps best described as a lavish, cluttered bedroom cum witch's laboratory. There are a huge bed, a large fireplace, and two smaller ones. Tables, benches, and desks are all over the room and line

the walls, laden with alembics, burners, mortars and pestles, pottery jars, and lots and lots of similar and related paraphernalia. Herbs dangle from the ceiling, draperies hang from some of the walls and *objets d'art* are everywhere.

At the back of the room is a smallish, buxom, healthy-looking middle-aged woman with a cascade of blonde curls framing a surprisingly pretty face. She is also brandishing a large bottle.

"Alarm!," she yells, hurling the bottle at Sir Oengus, who has already started moving. "Alarm! The parasites are here!"

The bottle crashes into the wall next to the door and releases a hissing cloud of acid, which Sir Oengus only partially manages to avoid. He cries out in pain and charges further into the room but the *chevalier* beats him to it.

"Charge!," the latter cries, charging past him and hitting the woman with his sword.

When Sir Oengus also reaches her and cuts his cutlass across her stomach, the woman sags to the floor, bleeding and gurgling. Still clenching his teeth against the pain, he hits her again and now the woman stops gurgling.

There is a moment of silence.

"Ssh!," the *chevalier* hisses, pricking his ears. He listens for a second or two and then tiptoes to the door, closing it and putting his back against the wall to the right of it.

"Sifflets!," he whispers, holding up three fingers. "Three men coming up the stairs! Find the kettle!"

Sir Oengus has a good look around the room but doesn't see anything he thinks could be the *Kettle of the Coven*.

The *chevalier* is listening at the door. When he doesn't hear anything for a while, he signals his noble fellow to ready his bow. Sir Oengus takes a position at the back of the room, facing the door and with an arrow knocked to his bow.

The *chevalier* opens the door and, seeing no one, he takes one step and thrusts his sword through the doorway in an attempt to hit anyone who might be hiding on the other side of the wall to the left of the door. Instantly, three knives flash and he hastily retreats and presses his back against the wall again, his arm bleeding. Sir Oengus releases his arrow in a reflex but the projectile just hits the wall on the other side of the corridor.

When nothing happens after this, the *chevalier*, still with his back against the wall, gestures his noble companion to take the right side and dashes across the doorway into the corridor, where he sees three men – one in iron armor and two in leathers. He lashes out at the man in the iron armor, who grunts when the sword hits him.

Sir Oengus drops his bow, draws his cutlass, charges through the doorway and hits a man in leathers to his right. The fury and speed of these attacks drive the enemy a few steps back and presently our noble heroes attack again, with Sir Oengus announcing that wants to crouch low in order to present as small a target as possible and then stab upward – to which the DM replies that "*wij dit in in dit spel abstraheren door een d20 te gooien.*" Both attacks draw blood again and, now, with the noble duo back to back, the fight is on. Some furious exchanges follow, with Sir Oengus taking some considerable damage and the *chevalier* remaining virtually unscathed.

"Thunder!," Sir Oengus growls to his noble fellow and gnashing his teeth when he is hit again. "Looks like I'll have to start wearing that perfume of yours!"

As if this was a sign, the *chevalier* presently launches a particularly unfortunate attack, sending him off-balance and allowing two of his opponents to hit him. Sir Oengus is hit again, leaving him with little choice but to retreat into the room. The *chevalier* regains his balance and executes a series of defensive maneuvers to cover his own retreat into the doorway, his opponent following closely. Now facing only the man in the iron armor, the *chevalier* manages to hit him again. In the corridor, the men in leathers start throwing knives at him.

In the witch's room, Sir Oengus, heavily wounded but not ready to give up just yet, is looking for things to throw for when the enemy should manage to get past the *chevalier*. Not being an expert in things alchemic, he decides on a large glass bottle containing what seems to be a large, hairless rat in a viscous yellowish fluid. He is right on time for presently the *chevalier* utters a muffled cry and falls back into the room. Without hesitating, he hurls the bottle at the door, hitting the man in the iron armor hard on the head and sending him back into the corridor cursing. When the *chevalier* is with his back against the wall again, he runs to the door and closes it with a bang.

Witnessing the event from his position down the corridor running rimward from the door, Sir Suvali realizes that the second door in the dressing room may well get him into the corridor where the men attacking the *chevalier* are

in at the moment. He moves back across the room and opens the door as slowly and silently as he can, just in time to witness the man in the iron armor move back to the door where he fell back from the *chevalier* earlier. To the right of this door is another man, in leather armor and with his back against the wall. Leaving his own door slightly ajar, the sorcerer moves to the other side and presses his back against the wall so that the door will hide his presence when it is opened further.

"Reinforcements!," he yells, hand before his mouth. "They're on the roof! Reinforcements!"

Moments later, the door opens and the man in leather armor comes through on his way to the ladder to the roof. When he is about halfway into the room, the sorcerer steps forward and touches the man with the Loremaster's wand, instantly reducing him to about a tenth of his normal size. The man panics and starts squeaking loudly, calling out some names, and running back to the door.

"Shut up!," a voice in the corridor hisses. "Who is this? Identify yourself!"

"Help!," the tiny man squeaks, still on his way back toward the door. "Help!"

When the man gets to the door, Sir Suvali emerges from behind it and kicks him in the back, sending the little man flying into the corridor.

"What the fuck!?", he hears the man in the iron armor holler. "Olaf? Is that you?"

"Help!," Olaf yelps. "Help! I've been bewitched!"

Back in the courtyard, Sir Eber has found no one to fight and he is now looking for a way to access the fourth tower. But he has not found a door in it and presently turns his attention to the four stable doors in the building taking up all of the downward wall next to it. He opens the first door and enters a large room, obviously the stables. In the wall to his left and far away in the wall to his right are a door each. He has just started trying the door on his left when Sir Oerknal enters.

In the witch's room, the *chevalier*, already having proven himself to be an able looter on multiple occasions, now also seems to have become clairvoyant. He opens the door again and finds the man in the iron armor staring at something on the floor. His sword flashes and he hits him in the back.

The man grunts, knives flash and then the fight is back on.

An Adventure in Five Acts
Part VIII
Act V: Diamond Castle
Part III: Castle Diamond

Day 20, continued: In the third tower, tiny Olaf is now also at risk of being stepped on by the combatants. He runs back into the dressing room, where Sir Suvali kicks him again, leaving him no choice but to start running back to the corridor once more.

"Help!," he squeaks when he gets there. "Help! I've been bewitched!"

Some way down the corridor, in front of the door to the witch's room, the *chevalier* only just manages to parry a furious attack from the man in the iron armor. With knives still flying past his head, he has a good look into both corridors to see what it is that he is actually up against. He counts three men: his iron-clad opponent and two men in leather armor, one behind him in the part of corridor to the other side of the door and the other way back in front of a door at the end of the other corridor to his right. Deeming this to be a bit too much for him alone, he retreats into the witch's room and closes the door behind him.

Sir Oengus is at the rimward wall and he has been collecting all manner of flasks and alembics on a table in front of him, one of which he now has in his hand.

"Could be acid," he says to the *chevalier*. "Open the door and I'll start throwing them."

In the dressing room, Sir Suvali is standing with his back against the rimward wall.

"Now what?," he hears one of the men in the corridor whisper. "They have witches!"

"Let's get back to the others," another man says.

The sorcerer hears the men start down the corridor and then sees them pass the door in the downward wall, the man in the iron armor with the tiny Olaf in his left hand. When they are past the door, the sorcerer sneaks through the rimward door, just in time to see the door to the room with his noble companions open, slightly at first and then a bit more.

When the *chevalier* opens the door again, using both the door and his shield to protect himself from the flying knives, he sees his opponents leave the tower through the door at the end of the corridor in front of him. When the last of them is gone and the door is closed again, he suppresses a sigh of relief, opens the door and steps into the corridor, to see Sir Suvali coming through a door to his left.

"I'm up to the roof to see where they're going," the sorcerer says when he Sir Oengus also appears in the corridor.

"Fine," Sir Oengus says. "We'll go after them, then, shall we?"

When the sorcerer is gone, Sir Oengus and the *chevalier* move to the door their opponents used earlier – to find that they cannot open it. They spend precious minutes pushing, pulling, kicking, and ramming the door until the *chevalier* loses his patience.

"*Mon Dieu!*," he exclaims. "*Merde!*"

"They must have wedged it," Sir Oengus says, drawing a dagger. "I'll see what I can do."

"Out of my way!," the *chevalier* cries, also drawing a dagger. "I'll do it!"

He starts trying to work the dagger between some of the thick planks of the door and fumbles about for a bit, furiously muttering under his breath. When this gets him nowhere, Sir Oengus tells him to step aside and sticks his dagger into the narrow opening underneath the door, wriggling it about until he runs into a wedge. He jabs and stabs at the thing for some time and then, after a lot more kicking and ramming, the noble duo finally manage to open the door.

"Ha!," the *chevalier* exclaims.

The noble duo step onto the wall outside and start moving. Advancing slowly, they approach the door at the other end, some arrow-slits in the wall above it. When they get to the door, they find it firmly locked.

The *chevalier* heaves a deep sigh and looks up at the battlements above.

"Grappling hook!," he demands. "I have had it with doors."

"Stand back," Sir Oengus says.

He swings his grappling hook and hurls it straight up into the air, missing the battlements by what must be yards. Behind him, the *chevalier* is tapping his foot impatiently when he hears Sir Eber and Navarre talking in the courtyard below. And is that Sir Suvali on the tower behind him?

"*Allo!*," he yells, gesticulating wildly. "*Allo!* This tower over here! Suvali! Over here! This door!"

When Navarre comes running out of the gatehouse, he sees Sir Oerknal disappear behind the large tent to his left. He runs after him, past the strange hoisting device with the cage, around the tent, to see that a door to the stables is open. He approaches and hears a loud bang, followed by Sir Eber and Sir Oerknal speaking.

When he enters the stables, he finds his noble companions at a door to his left.

"Locked," Sir Eber says. He takes a few steps back and hurls himself against the door, which doesn't budge.

"My turn again," Sir Oerknal says. He hurls himself at the door with force – to no avail.

"This isn't working," Sir Eber says, already in the doorway to the courtyard. "I'm going to get the giant's hammer."

When he reaches the second hoisting device at the back of the tent, he has a good look around for something he can use to open the door in the stables. He doesn't find anything and continues to the giant's quarters, where he collects the giant's hammer and a huge crowbar. When he leaves the building to get back to the stables, he notices four halberdiers in iron armor in the gatehouse.

"Enemies!," he hollers, alerting his companions in the stables. "We must close the gates!"

He drops the giant hammer and crowbar, draws his sword and axe and charges the advancing halberdiers.

Moments later, one halberdier is down and then another is hit by an arrow. The ranger hits the wounded halberdier with both of his weapons, sending him reeling and now another arrow hits one of the remaining halberdiers.

When Sir Eber has left, Navarre also has a go and likewise fails to force the door.

"Isn't there something in here we can use in here?," he says, rubbing his shoulder.

Sir Oerknal lights a small lamp and moves to the first box, where he finds some crates containing weapons. He rummages through them for a bit until he finds two crude halberds. He gets back to Navarre and the noble duo use them to try to and force the door, again without any success.

When they hear Sir Eber calling from the courtyard, they run outside and start for the gatehouse, Sir Oerknal to the left of the tent and Navarre to the right. When Navarre rounds the tent, he sees Sir Eber fighting three halberdiers. A fourth is on the ground and Sir Oerknal is already closing in from the left. Arrows come flying from somewhere to the left and presently one of them hits one of the halberdiers.

Navarre draws his sword and charges into the fray. His attack is parried and when Sir Oerknal also misses his man, Sir Eber does make both of his attacks count and another halberdier sags to the ground. Now, the two remaining men start moving backward and, when one of them leaves his flank open to him, Navarre executes a devastating attack, instantly killing him. When another arrow takes care of the last halberdier, the enemy have not managed to land a single blow.

Navarre runs through the gatehouse looking for more enemies in the old courtyard but all he can see there are what must be more than a hundred dead nobles. Behind him, Sir Oerknal and Sir Eber approach.

"Do you see any gold?," Sir Oerknal asks.

"There is nobody alive out there," Navarre says grimly. "We must get back to the castle and finish this."

"We must close the gates first," Sir Eber says.

But Sir Oerknal turns around and starts walking back to the new courtyard, so it is left to Navarre and Sir Eber to close the gates. This takes them some time and when they eventually get to where Sir Eber dropped the giant's hammer and crowbar, the hammer is gone.

"Olm!," Sir Eber growls. "My hammer!"

"The creature must have taken it," Navarre says. "Back to the stables!"

Sir Eber picks up the huge crowbar and the noble duo start for the stables. Halfway across the courtyard, Navarre looks up at the third tower, where he sees Sir Suvali looking down at him from the battlements and waving his bow at the fourth tower. He turns to the fourth tower and sees the *chevalier* and Sir Oengus at a door on the wall leading up to it, the latter swinging a grappling hook.

"The others are up there," he says to Sir Eber, pointing at the fourth tower. "We will go in through the stables. Attack from two sides and meet in the middle."

When the noble duo reach the stables, they hear the *chevalier* yell at them from above. Is there a hint of irritation in the voice of their noble fellow?

"*Allo!* '*Allo!* This tower over here!"

Moments earlier, Sir Oerknal did find the giant's hammer and crowbar.

"My hammer," he says.

He lifts the handle and starts dragging the huge hammer to the stables. When he gets there, he has a good look at the door and then at the hammer, estimating his chances. But then, considering who may be behind the door with arrows knocked, he decides he'd better wait for Sir Eber. He puts the hammer against the wall next to the entrance, picks up his lamp and starts searching the stables again. He discovers four large metal cages taking up most of the second box – obviously an impromptu cell block of sorts.

When the *chevalier* and Sir Oengus have left the witch's room, Sir Suvali climbs up to the roof of the third tower, just in time to see the man in the iron armor and his companions reach a door at the other end of the downward wall. They knock a couple of times, the door opens and they enter the tower.

The sorcerer has another look into the courtyard, where he observes Sir Eber rummaging through some items at the hoisting apparatus to the right of the tent and then walk to the giant's quarters. He turn his attention to the downward wall again, where the *chevalier* and Sir Oengus are now moving to the fourth tower.

Just when his noble fellows get to the door, the sorcerer hears Sir Eber sound the alarm in the courtyard below. He moves to the battlements to his left and sees his noble companion charge four halberdiers exiting the gatehouse.

He takes his bow and starts firing arrows – hitting at least two halberdiers before Navarre and Sir Oerknal come running. When Navarre cuts down the third halberdier, the sorcerer plants two more arrows in the fourth, killing him.

He puts away his bow and watches Sir Oerknal drag the hammer to the stables while Sir Eber and Navarre are closing the gates. Turning his attention to the *chevalier* and Sir Oengus again, he sees that they haven't made much progress. He looks down again and sees Navarre pass below. When he looks up at him, he waves his bow at him, pointing to the fourth tower.

Then, when the *chevalier* starts hollering, he flies to the roof of the fourth tower, attaches a rope to the battlements and throws it to Sir Oengus and the *chevalier* below. Next, he moves to a position close to the trapdoor so that he can kick it back into place again the moment the enemy should try to get to the roof and waits for his noble fellows to arrive.

Sir Oengus is just swinging his grappling hook again when Sir Suvali's rope comes tumbling down the tower wall. "Out of my way!," the *chevalier* cries.

He pushes past Sir Oengus, grabs the rope and starts climbing up the wall. But he hasn't even made it a yard up the wall when his hands slip and he falls back down and ends up sitting on his bum and with his legs spread wide.

"Zut! Zut! Zut alors!," he yells, before uttering a high-pitched laugh. "A-ha, ha, ha! Merde!"

Sir Oengus hurls his grappling hook a second time and now the thing settles firmly. He starts climbing up the tower wall but fumbles as well and also falls back down, right on top of the cursing *chevalier* and sending both men sprawling.

"Tonnerre!," the *chevalier* yells when it is all over. "C'est une impasse!"

Cursing, the *chevalier* gracelessly scrambles back to his feet and starts climbing up the rope again and, now, finally, he reaches the roof of the tower, quickly followed by Sir Oengus.

"Now what?," the latter asks.

"There's a staircase below the trapdoor," Sir Suvali says. "Archers at the bottom."

"We going in?," Sir Oengus asks, readying his bow.

By now, the *chevalier* seems to have regained some of his composure. Shield ready, he moves to the trapdoor and opens it slightly. No arrows come flying out and, when all he sees are some steps leading down, he opens it further – upon which two arrows come whizzing through the opening, only just missing the sorcerer behind him. He starts a slow approach to the top of the stairs, shield and sword at the ready – before he can no longer restrain himself.

"Charge!," he cries, suddenly charging forth at full speed – before executing a sharp but rather elegant turn when he gets to the top of the stairs and sees four men at the bottom of it, two with longbows and two in sturdy leather armors and brandishing shields and short swords.

Reacting to the *chevalier's* call-to-arms, Sir Oengus has also moved closer to the opening, out of the line of fire of the four men below and ready to start firing arrows into it. When the DM explains to him that he has only three hit points left and that the men can hit him in return if he can hit them, he retreats and puts his bow on the floor. "Oh dear," he grins, opening his trousers. "I do believe I have to take a rather urgent leak."

And with this, he rolls "16" and relieves himself down the opening, pissing all over one of the men below.

If anything, his forced retreat seems to have agitated the *chevalier* once more.

"*Merde!*", he cries, taking his bow from his back, knocking an arrow, and calling for a table to be brought to him.

But no one brings him a table.

"*Mon Dieu!*", he cries, exasperated, before approaching the opening and starting to fire arrows into it.

"I know," Sir Oengus says, closing his trousers. "I'm not going down there either. I mean, look at me!"

Sir Suvali does exactly that and notices that his noble companion does seem to be in a bit of state. He procures the jars with *Ilm's ointment* and smears some of it on Sir Oengus, who regains 11 hit points. When this is done, the noble trio start firing arrows down the opening, ducking for cover after each shot as enemy arrows whiz past them. Angry cries from below indicate that their own missiles at least manage to cause some consternation below.

But then the spirited *chevalier* changes his mind again. He puts away his bow, readies his shield and sword, cries '*chargez!*' again, and charges down the stairs. About three-quarters of the way down, he is met by two soldiers in leather armor who easily parry his attack.

Sir Suvali and Sir Oengus continue firing arrows into the opening, targeting the archers and then, with arrows now whizzing past in both directions, the *chevalier* finally manages to land a serious blow. Praying that his luck may finally change, he fumbles his next attack when his opponent hits his right hand, causing him to drop his sword. The poor *chevalier* utters an incredulous, high-pitched laugh and scrambles to pick up his sword, cursing loudly when he only just manages to retrieve the weapon. But he manages to follow up with an impressive maneuver and finally inflicts some significant damage on his opponent.

Long before all of this, Sir Eber and Navarre have joined Sir Oerknal in the stables and presently the noble trio are using the giant crowbar on the door. They have been at it for a while when Sir Eber finally manages to force the door with a mighty effort, revealing a narrow corridor leading to another corridor running at straight angles to it. At the intersection are five men in leather armor, two behind shields covering two archers with longbows and a fifth behind all of them and holding a bull's-eye lantern.

"Alarm!", the man with the lantern yells. "They have breached the door!"

Two arrows come flying down the corridor, one of them grazing Sir Eber's arm before he gets a chance to duck for cover. When Navarre and Sir Oerknal have also taken cover, to the other side of the doorway, the ranger removes his backpack and puts in on the ground. Two more arrows come flying through the doorway when he retrieves some flasks from it and starts lobbing them to his noble companions.

"Fire bombs," he says, lighting one himself. "I've got eight of them."

Navarre and Sir Oerknal light their projectiles and then three fire bombs fly down the corridor, hitting walls and soldiers, breaking and releasing a flammable oil that quickly ignites. Two of the soldiers get the full brunt of the attack and end up covered in burning oil.

Now, everybody in the intersection starts yelling and shouting at the same time: "Water! Water! Watch out! Pull back! Pull back!"

When the noble trio ignite three more fire bombs and hurl them down the corridor, they see two of their opponents frantically trying to douse the flames engulfing them, while the others retreat left and right into the second corridor.

Although Navarre and Sir Eber manage to hurl their projectiles to great effect again, Sir Oerknal fumbles his attempt and the projectile falls to the floor just in front of him. Incredibly lucky, the creature manages to stamp out the flames before the oil has chance to ignite.

Now being the only ones with fire bombs, Navarre and Sir Eber look into the corridor again where only the burning soldiers remain in the intersection, on the floor, and with only one of them still kicking and screaming. Smoke and the stench of burning flesh comes wafting through the doorway and our noble heroes have to wait until the worst of the smoke is gone.

"Let's go," Navarre whispers to Sir Eber at the other side of the door and lightning his fire bomb. "Left! Ready?"

The noble duo charge into the corridor, Sir Oerknal right behind them, right up to the intersection, where both soldiers have now stopped moving. Without looking around the corner, they hurl their firebombs into the left part of the second corridor as far as they can, hoping to hit the back wall to generate the maximum effect.

Moments later, more soldiers start yelling and screaming, indicating that at least one of the projectiles hit true.

"Are we going in?," Navarre whispers to his noble fellows. "We don't know what's in there."

"We'll have to go in anyway," Sir Eber says, shrugging his shoulders.

"Fair enough," Navarre says. "We'll take the right. Ready?"

"I'll cover you," Sir Eber says.

Navarre and Sir Oerknal jump to their feet and cross the intersection, turning right and charging down the second corridor, straight for two doors at the end, one in the left wall and one in the right, and with two soldiers positioned between them: one with a shield and a short sword and the other with a longbow behind him.

Targeting the second soldier but intercepted by the first, the noble duo make their attacks count, Sir Oerknal with considerably more success than Navarre. Behind them, at the other end of the corridor, a soldier starts yelling: "Reinforcements! Reinforcements! They're breaking through down here!"

The noble duo hit their opponent again and the man sags to the floor. The archer drops his bow, draws a short sword and lands a glancing blow on Navarre, driving him back. Sir Oerknal jumps to the fore and lands a terrific blow, sending the man crashing to the floor. With both soldiers down, Navarre turns around to see Sir Eber cut down a soldier and another man disappearing through the door in the downward wall, calling for reinforcements. He charges down the corridor, Sir Oerknal right behind him.

With his noble fellows off to the right, Sir Eber charges into the left part of the corridor, where he immediately runs into an archer frantically trying to douse the flames on his body. Behind the man are two doors, one in each wall, and with two men at the end of the corridor, one with a lantern and another with a shield and a short sword. The ranger cuts down the archer and now the soldier with the short sword advances and executes a professional maneuver, which doesn't quite work out. With his opponent off balance, Sir Eber makes both of his attacks count and the soldier sags to the floor. At the end of the corridor, the soldier with the lantern starts yelling for reinforcements.

But the first soldier isn't dead yet. He scrambles to his feet – but only manages a feeble attack and Sir Eber all but cuts him in half when both of his weapons inflict full damage. When he looks up, he sees the soldier with the lantern disappear through the door in the left wall, calling for reinforcements.

"After him!," Navarre yells, as he comes charging past the ranger.

When he gets to the door, he finds it locked.

"Oerknal!," he yells. "Where is the crowbar?"

"I'm on it!," the creature hollers, starting back down the corridor.

"I'll speed things up a bit," Sir Eber says. "Step aside."

With a mighty effort, the ranger kicks down the door, all but sending it flying into the room beyond. Navarre is the first through the doorway and he finds the room to contain an arms-rack, a stove, some stools and benches, and – believe it or not – a table with some dice on it. An open flight of stairs at the back leads to an opening in the ceiling.

Fully expecting Albert Murphy to be on the next floor and probably cowering behind a wall of archers – or worse – Navarre hesitates. But the blood is pumping through his veins and the adrenaline is still urging him on.

"Albert Murphy!," he hollers. "Do you hear me? The game is up! Surrender and we will be merciful!"

There is no reaction and now Sir Oerknal and Sir Eber enter the room.

"We gonna kill them?," Sir Oerknal asks.

"Let's do it," Navarre breathes. "You and I go first to attract their fire. Weald?"

"I don't like it," Sir Eber says. "We should secure this floor. But we'd lose the momentum."

"Right on both accounts," Navarre admits. "I say we keep the momentum and get the bastard before he has time to reorganize."

"I'll be right behind you," Sir Eber says, dragging one of the benches to the door in order to block it.

Navarre turns to Sir Oerknal.

"Ready? Go!"

He runs to the stairs and starts climbing them, crouching with his shield and sword raised high. When he is halfway up, he notices a wall to his left, reaching right up to the ceiling. In front of him, the stairs do not lead all the way up to the wall at the back and a small curtain is about halfway up that wall.

Never having stopped moving, he hears a sudden, loud cracking and splintering sound behind this curtain when he gets to the top of the stairs. Still crouching, he uses his sword to move the curtain to the right, revealing an arrow-slit in the wall behind it, a damaged shutter in front of it just coming to a halt.

There is a moment of silence and then a voice sounds: "It's me!"

Some time before this, Sir Suvali decides to see if he can somehow manage to get behind the soldiers at the bottom of the stairs, perhaps even to surprise Albert Murphy, who must surely be somewhere in the room below. Indeed, if he should be able to locate the man, perhaps he could even go as far as to use the Loremaster's wand on himself, enter the room through an arrow-slit and then use the wand against Albert Murphy?

He takes to the air and starts looking for an arrow-slit that could take him into the room. When he finds one, he peeks through it, finding it to be shuttered from the inside. Realizing his chances are slim to say the least, what with him hovering in the air and thus virtually unable to generate force, he tries to kick his way through the shutter anyway – and manages to do exactly that by rolling “02” on percentile dice. The shutter flies open and he has a look through the arrow-slit, just in time to see Navarre looking at it from the other side.

“It's me,” he says.

Now even more eager to locate Albert Murphy, he moves a bit further down the wall, turns a corner and manages to kick open the shutter behind yet another arrow-slit – rolling “05” this time. He has a look inside but sees nothing but darkness beyond. He considers entering the room anyway but then decides that he doesn't really want to spend the next day and night in diminished form and heads back to his noble fellows.

Recognizing the voice of Sir Suvali, Navarre turns the corner and rises to his feet, his back against the wall, which he now realizes must be hiding another staircase leading to the floor above. To his left, light comes from a opening further down the wall – as do the sounds of a fight, most notably the angry cries of the irate *chevalier*. Glancing around the room as he moves forward, he sees some bunk beds, torch holders, a door in the duskward wall. Sir Oerknal is right behind him when he peeks around the corner and sees three soldiers obviously engaged in a fight with the unseen *chevalier* on the stairs. Arrows come flying down the stairs and one of the soldiers sags to the floor, next to another with some arrows sticking out of his chest. The furious exclamations of the *chevalier* come from somewhere halfway up the stairs.

“We must be in some military section of the tower,” Sir Eber whispers behind him, nodding to the door at the back of the room. “Murphy's rooms will be down there.”

“There's at least two of them,” Navarre whispers to his noble fellows. “Ready? Go!”

The noble trio round the corner but the soldiers react quickly and parry most of their attacks – even managing to inflict some considerable damage on Navarre and Sir Eber. All in all, there turn out to be six enemy soldiers, three on the stairs and fighting the *chevalier* and with the rest now engaging Navarre, Sir Eber, and Sir Oerknal – two in leather armor and with shields and short swords and another in studded leather armor, a corporal by the looks of it.

“Daubervall!,” Navarre yells, when he misses the corporal again. “Surrender!”

“Zut!,” come the cries of the *chevalier*. “Zut et merde!”

Obviously as opposed to the irate *chevalier*, Sir Oerknal and Sir Eber make their attacks count and the corporal sags to the floor bleeding.

“Well...,” the ranger laughs, shrugging his shoulders at Navarre almost apologetically. “Next! Ha, ha, ha!”

Now, with our noble heroes attacking from all sides, the fight quickly turns in their favor. Halfway up the stairs, the *chevalier* finally manages to eliminate his first soldier – although not without suffering damage from a number of attacks himself – and then, just when he seems to be getting into the semblance of a stride, one of Sir Oengus' arrows takes out a second corporal and the remaining soldiers put their arms in the air.

“Surrender!,” one of them yells. “We surrender!”

“Drop your weapons!,” Navarre yells at them.

“To the wall!,” he yells when the soldiers have dropped their weapons, gesturing them to move away from the stairs and next to the door in the rimward wall.

When the men start moving, the *chevalier* comes running down the stairs and pushes past Navarre.

“Out of my way!,” he yells. “Where is your leader?”

“Which one?,” one of the soldiers starts. “We have the chancellor, Vincilli Litworth... then there's the giant, the witch...”

“Who do you think!?,” the *chevalier* screams at him.

“I don't know, do I?,” the soldier says, obviously not much impressed.

“Albert Murphy!,” Navarre yells at him, quickly losing his patience with the man and advancing. “Where is he?”

“He hasn't been seen for some time.”

“Where is his room?,” Navarre asks. “Is it on this floor? Take us there.”

“I'm asking the questions here!,” the *chevalier* yells, pulling the soldier to the right. “Where is the kettle?”

“The witch has it,” the soldier says.

Without another word, the *chevalier* starts climbing the stairs to the roof, Sir Oengus right behind him. The noble duo climb down the rope to the downward wall but then the *chevalier* seems to change his mind again and stops dead in his tracks. What if he would run into more enemies?

Back in the fourth tower, when the *chevalier* and Sir Oengus have left and the fight seems to have been fought, Sir Eber is inspecting his wounds. Although he is still feeling like a million dollars thanks to the novice's potion, some of the adrenaline has ebbed away and he realizes that he has suffered some considerable damage in the last half hour.

"How's about some of that ointment?," he asks when he sees Sir Suvali enter the room.

The sorcerer applies some *Ilm's ointment* and so the ranger regains 11 hit points.

"Where is Scaralat?," Sir Suvali asks.

"He would seem to be after the kettle," Navarre says. "For the moment."

"I'm on it," Sir Suvali says, perhaps a bit too fast, and leaves the room.

List (XP): +3,833 xp

An Adventure in Five Acts
Part IX
Act V: Diamond Castle
Part IV: The Final Enemy

In which Sir Suvali and the *chevalier* inform the others that they – and, consequently, Sir Oengus – did not leave the room at the end of the last session.

Day 20, continued: Again, Navarre asks the soldier where he can find Albert Murphy.

"Through that door," the soldier says, pointing to the only door in the room. "Will you go ahead or shall I lead?"

"I am not sure I appreciate your tone, soldier," Navarre says. "I would..."

"Where is he?," the *chevalier* yells at the second soldier.

"He was headed for the Great Hall last time I saw him," the soldier says.

Navarre opens the door and looks into a dark corridor running perpendicular to the room, with another door some way down in the opposite wall and another one at the end of the corridor in the right wall, past an open doorway just downward of where he is now. He enters the corridor, Sir Eber right behind him, and shines his lantern through the open doorway, down another corridor leading to a reinforced door in the outer wall of the tower.

The noble duo proceed to the door in the opposite wall. It is quite ornately carved and features Blurb's coat-of-arms.

"Albert Murphy!," Navarre calls. "Surrender to be judged by your betters!"

When there is no answer, he opens the door to reveal another corridor running straight ahead and ending in a wall with an ornate settee against it underneath an arrow-slit. To the left and right, red velvet curtains in archways hide what lies beyond and there is an ornate coat-rack on the wall just to the right. There is no one in the corridor and there is not a sound to be heard.

The noble duo enter the corridor and prepare to open the left curtain when the *chevalier* pushes past them. He draws his sword and opens the curtain to the right with it, his shield in front of him. Behind the curtain is large, dark room in which everything oozes quality and workmanship. There is a large fireplace in the downward wall and a number of sideboards sit against the hubward wall, a large, heavy table in front of them. Across from the table is a desk, surrounded by half a dozen boxes and chests, all open. Disorderly amounts of papers, parchments, and scrolls are on the table, the desk, and in and around the boxes and chests.

"It is a war room," the *chevalier* says. "There is nobody."

Navarre and Sir Eber open the second curtain to reveal an equally dark room, this one a richly appointed bedroom with a large, ornate four-poster bed against the duskward wall. There are skulls everywhere and the walls are draped with red and black curtains featuring the symbol of Ulm. There is no one in either room and there is no sound.

The *chevalier* moves across the corridor and into the bedroom. When he starts ransacking through boxes, Navarre and Sir Eber move into the 'war room'.

"He's not here," Sir Eber says. "Perhaps he went to the mine?"

"He could have gone anywhere," Navarre says, looking around. "Maybe there's a map of the castle in here."

When Sir Suvali and Sir Oengus appear with the captured soldiers, our noble heroes start rummaging through the papers, which turn out to contain intricate designs for apparatuses, contraptions, ships, military vehicles; extensive lists, endless calculations, complicated tables; notes on the creation of a 'national army', a 'national fleet', and similarly strange plans for the future; reports on the production and yield of arable lands and the diamond mine; numerous maps – sea charts, a map of the mine.

"I'll take these," Sir Oengus says, pocketing the sea charts.

"The mine is a single shaft into the ground," Sir Eber says, studying the map of the mine. "No other exits."

"The room is a mess," Navarre says. "I'd say he took some papers with him."

"I'll see if I can find something outside," Sir Suvali says.

He has just left the room, Sir Oengus right behind him, when the *chevalier* comes barging in again.

"Look for the kettle!," he cries. "We must find the kettle!"

"It is not here," Sir Eber says. "It's in the witch room."

Navarre starts looking through the papers to see if he can find anything about a 'mastermind', some traitorous noble who may be behind all this, but he doesn't find anything that would suggest there is such an individual. Sir Eber leaves the room and kicks in the last door in the main corridor, revealing a comfortable bathroom, with tiles on the walls and floor, a stool against the duskward wall, a brazier against the downward wall and two cubicles with curtains in front of them on the hubward wall. He enters the room and opens the curtains to reveal a luxurious bath in the duskward cubicle and a more basic one in the other. There is no one in the room and he gets back to the war room.

"He's not in here," he says to Navarre.

"Quite," Navarre says. "The bird has flown the coop."

"The soldier said he went to the Great Hall," Sir Eber says.

"Where is this Great Hall?," Navarre asks the soldiers.

"Down the stairs," one of them says.

"To the witch room!," the *chevalier* cries. "We must find the kettle!"

"My dear fellow," Navarre says. "I'd say that finding Albert Murphy is rather more important at the moment than finding your kettle. Go look for it all you like but I'm going to the Great Hall."

Navarre and Sir Eber tell the soldiers to lead them to the Great Hall. On their way down, they are joined by Sir Suvali and Sir Oengus and they move through the guard room and into the corridor, where they find a set of double doors, locked and barred from the inside.

"Stand back," Sir Eber says, sticking his giant crowbar between the doors.

When the doors finally open, our noble heroes look down into the Great Hall. It takes up the entire rimward half of the lower floor of the tower and right in front of them is a wooden balcony running the length of the hubward wall and continuing along the one to dawn, where a large table and some chairs overlook the hall below. Steps to either side of the door lead down to the floor below, on which are nine long tables. An ornate fireplace is against the rimward wall, some embers still glowing in it. The ceiling is domed and a large tapestry depicting a mythological hunting scene is on the duskward wall.

Navarre descends the steps to his left and gets to the floor below, which is tiled and covered with straw.

"There's no one here," he says, when he has had a good look around.

"A secret door?," Sir Eber suggests. "The doors were locked from the inside. There must be an exit."

Navarre starts looking for signs of one and, sure enough, after some time, he finds that some sideboards against the hubward wall seem to have been moved recently.

"There could be something down here," he calls to Sir Eber.

"Start pulling pegs and torch holders," Sir Suvali says, halfway down the stairs from the balcony.

Our noble heroes have to roll a lot of d6s and then, finally, they find what could be a secret door in the lower corner of the duskward wall. They remain at a loss on how to open it, though, until Sir Eber starts putting his giant crowbar in cracks and openings and eventually gets part of the wall to move.

"That's it!," Navarre exclaims, feeling the thrill of the chase again.

He pushes the wall further back and then to the left, revealing an opening with some steps leading down into the darkness. He draws his sword and starts down the steps, with Sir Eber only a short distance behind him.

"Albert Murphy!," he yells. "The game is up!"

The steps eventually end in a blind wall with an iron ring in it.

Navarre starts pulling and turning it, to no avail. Sir Eber has a go and then the wall moves, fresh air streaming into the tunnel. Behind the wall is a low, short tunnel leading to the left and ending in a grated door. The door is unlocked and, when our noble heroes exit the tunnel, they find themselves next to the gatehouse in the old castle. Albert Murphy is nowhere to be seen.

"Damn you, Albert Murphy!," Navarre calls, shaking his fist at the mountains in the distance in a bit of cinematic moment.

Sir Eber starts looking for tracks and quickly finds them.

"He went back into the castle," he says.

"He's long gone," Navarre says. "He won't be hiding in there with his cronies defeated."

"Okay," Sir Eber says. "Let's get the kettle first. Then we'll go after him."

The noble duo enter the tunnel again and get back up to the Great Hall, where they hear noises coming through the double doors. When they get to the doors, they find Sir Suvali and Sir Oengus rummaging through a

room across the corridor to their left – a small kitchen. It contains nothing of much interest and so our noble heroes head back upstairs, through the reinforced door and onto the downward wall. At the other end of it, a giant eagle sits on the parapets of the witch's tower.

"By Olm!," Navarre whispers when our noble heroes approach the majestic creature. "I've never seen one from so close!"

"Impressive, what?," Sir Oengus says. "She speaks!"

"Er..., do you speak?," Navarre asks the creature.

The giant eagle looks at him as if it is a bird.

"You must call her by her name," Sir Oengus says, setting after Sir Eber and Sir Suvali into the witch's tower. "It's Wandering Bandolo."

Navarre executes an elegant bow, well aware that Wandering Bandolo is a sorceress.

"Wandering Bandolo," he says. "I am Navarre Dauberval de Vergennes. Have we met before?"

The giant eagle looks at him as if it is a bird.

"As you wish," Navarre says. "Are you still looking for the kettle?"

The giant eagle looks at him as if it is a bird... and so our noble hero gives up and enters the witch's tower. He locates his noble fellows in a guard room below the first room to the left, where the *chevalier* is busy pocketing a load of silver and copper coins from a table.

"Doesn't say a word too much, what?," Sir Oengus says, when our noble hero comes down the stairs.

"I asked her about the kettle but she didn't say a thing," Navarre says.

"She speaks only when we are needed," Sir Oengus says.

"Quite," Navarre says, actually rather miffed that the creature hasn't spoken to him. "Found the kettle yet?"

"Not yet," Sir Oengus says.

When the *chevalier* has pocketed all coins from the table, he opens a door in the rimward wall to reveal a corridor running from dusk to dawn, with an open doorway to the right and a set of double doors in the opposite wall. The latter open to reveal a large kitchen taking up half of the lower floor of the tower.

"Maybe the kettle actually looks like an ordinary kettle?," Navarre suggests, when he and some of the others are searching the kitchen.

"Unlikely," Sir Suvali says. "Artifacts rarely look like ordinary items."

"Good," Navarre says. There must be at least a dozen kettles in the kitchen.

From somewhere down the corridor comes the sound of breaking wood. Moments later, Sir Eber enters the kitchen.

"It's a pantry full of supplies," he says. "No kettle."

"It must be in the witch's room," the *chevalier* says.

Our noble heroes get back up the stairs and to the witch's room, which they subject to a careful search, to no avail at all, although the *chevalier* pockets a large number of trinkets and bagatelles.

Then, Sir Oengus notices that the witch's body has been turned over since he last saw it.

"She must have had the kettle on her," Sir Suvali says.

"Then who took it?," Navarre asks. "Albert Murphy?"

"It's possible," Sir Eber says. "He will have had plenty of time."

"Then why didn't the giant eagle interfere?," Navarre asks.

"There may be many ways to get in and out of this tower," Sir Eber shrugs.

"Avast, mateys," Sir Oengus cuts in. "Looks like the kettle was in this 'ere barrel."

He is standing next to a largish barrel sitting in a puddle of water on the floor.

"Maybe Wandering Bandolo took it," Navarre suggests. "I mean... She is human, is she not?"

"Then why is she still out there?," Sir Eber asks.

"That isn't Wandering Bandolo," Sir Oengus says, a wide grin on his face. "It's only a guard."

When the laughter has died down, each of our noble heroes must roll d20. Navarre rolls a "2", upon which the DM informs him that he hears the giant eagle take off from the roof. He and Sir Oengus hurry outside and they are just in time to see the creature disappear into the night sky.

When they get back to the witch's room, Sir Suvali speaks.

"Gentlemen," he says. "We must start after Albert Murphy. Eber, you find his trail and I'll fly overhead to see what's what."

Our noble heroes leave the witch's tower through the door to the stables. They inspect the cubicles to their right in passing and find three strange, sturdy, elongated, old, cart-like contraptions in the first. They are relatively large and there seems to be room for some six passengers and a driver. A fourth contraption is obviously missing.

"They look like dog carts," Sir Eber says.

"They are," Sir Oengus says, looking into the second cubicle. "This is the kennel. No dogs."

"So Albert Murphy fled in one of these things," Navarre says. "That could mean that he moves quite fast."

"No problem," Sir Suvali says. "As long as he doesn't fly."

"Torture equipment," Sir Eber says, looking into the third cubicle. "A torture room."

This cubicle is directly across from the stable doors, which would mean that, if these were open, anyone tortured in it would be clearly visible to people in the courtyard.

"A torture room in the stables," Navarre murmurs. "What is the world coming to?"

Our noble heroes return to the Great Hall and leave the castle via the secret exit, just in case Navarre and Sir Eber missed anything when they first found it. When they leave the castle through the door in the old rimward wall, some torches appear in the distance. Moments later, some twenty men approach.

"Mim?," Navarre wonders. "Already?"

"Il trouvera ce qu'il trouvera," the *chevalier* says.

Navarre advances.

"Dauberval!," he calls. "Who goes there?"

"Don't shoot!," a voice comes. "We are royalists!"

The men turn out to be barons and knights sent back to the castle by the nobles who fled when Sir Eber was fighting the rebels in the courtyard.

"Is it safe?," one of the men, a baron, asks.

"I am Navarre Ard Dauberval," Navarre says, using his official title. "The castle is empty. Mim and his army are in the valley and I suggest you report to him. I claim this castle for Dauberval."

When the other players have stopped laughing, the baron speaks again.

"But isn't there an army between here and the duke?," he asks hesitantly.

"You will have to use your imagination," Navarre replies.

"Imagination?," the baron asks.

"Yes," Navarre says. "You will have to find a way around it."

"We are unarmed," another baron says. "We will not stand much of a chance against an entire army."

Navarre has to agree that the man has a point.

"Alright," he says. "Stay in the castle and hold it until Mim arrives. There is enough food in there to last you a month."

"We already fought some rebels on our way down here," one of the knights says.

"In a dog cart?," the *chevalier* asks.

"Yes."

"Rebels?," Navarre asks. "Plural? How many?"

"Three men on a sled," another baron says.

"How many dogs?," Navarre asks.

"Twelve," the baron says.

"Was there an old man with them?"

"It all went rather fast," another baron says.

The *chevalier* claps his hands in mock applause.

"Who is in command over there?," he asks.

"Eight dukes," the baron says.

"And my father?," Navarre asks. "Duke Dauberval?"

"He is there."

Navarre heaves a sigh of relief. At least his noble father has survived the ordeal.

"Will you take us to the castle and show us where we can find things?," another baron asks.

"My dear fellow," Navarre says, throwing the man an exasperated look. "It is simple enough. There is a gate and some towers. You will close the first and look for approaching enemies from the others. Now, if you will excuse us? We have to catch some rebels. Kindly inform our kinsmen of this when they get down here, will you?"

"You will run into them on your way," one of the knights says. "They are hiding not far from here."

"Well?," Navarre says angrily. "Lead the way, man!"

And so our noble heroes start further rimward in the company of two barons and two knights (SEE ILLUSTRATION #27). After following a dyke for fifteen minutes, they reach a meadow stretching far into the distance. Another fifteen minutes later, one of the knights calls out to some overgrown badlands about a hundred yards to dawn. "Areu!," he hollers. "Areu! The castle is safe!"

When some bushes start moving and the first of the nobles appear, Navarre advances, rather overcome by a sense of relief despite himself.

"Dauberval!," he yells. "Dauberval!"

More nobles appear and then Navarre spots his noble father among them. His step quickens.

"Father!," he says, falling to one knee when he reaches the duke. "The castle! It is safe!"

"The castle?," Duke Dauberval says. "Don't you mean our castle?"

"Yes, father."

"Splendid!," the duke says, turning to his peers. "*Messieurs...*"

But now the assembled nobles of The Forest start cheering and guffawing all at once, expressing their relief that their sons have survived.

"Our sons! // You have escaped! I'm be praised! // Good lord! // You have survived! We were certain you had perished! // Capital! // You have escaped! // Well played, old sport! // To the castle!"

When the initial enthusiasm dies down for a bit, Navarre addresses his noble father again.

"Father," he says. "Mim has a thousand men advancing from the valley below. I suggest you lead our kinsmen to the castle and hold it until he gets there. You will be safe there."

The nobles start yelling again.

"Mim! The parvenu! // What is he doing here? // But the man is a pirate! // Mim? I haven't seen him yonks! // Is Mim leading our armies? Olm help us! // To the castle! // The taxes must be raised! // Strict limitations must be imposed! // A firm hand! // A stern reprimand!"

"We need horses!," the *chevalier* joins in, obviously taken by the moment. "Horses!"

At some point, Navarre manages to get his noble father's attention again,

"Father," he says. "The rebel leader is Albert Murphy!"

"Who?"

"The architect!"

"What architect?"

"Albert Murphy!," Navarre cries. "The architect who built our castle! He dined at our table!"

"Ah!," Duke Dauberval says. "Yes. Our castle. I have to say that I am still getting quite a lot of comments on that thing."

Around them, the nobles have not ceased their prattling: "The commoners must be educated! // Preposterous! // Education? They sent our children to school with the plebs! It is an outrage! // You must take us to the castle!"

But then the *chevalier* seems to have had enough.

"*Messieurs, mesdames!*," he yells. "*S'il vous plait!* We must set after the rebel leader in all haste! Retreat to the castle and await the arrival of the royalists!"

He has to repeat this several times before the nobles start moving in a bit of a huff: "Surely you are not running away? // They are running! Again! // You cannot leave us behind like this!"

It is around half past eight in the evening when the nobles of The Forest are finally gone and our noble heroes can continue the hunt for Albert Murphy.

"Do we have enough supplies for a trip into the mountains?," Navarre asks. "We may have to spend days up there."

"I took some food from the pantry," Sir Suvali says. "We can last a day or two."

"Good thinking," Navarre says. "I say! Where is Weald?"

Sir Eber left his noble fellows and the yelling nobles long before this. He has found a goat's trail at the end of the meadow not far from where the nobles were hiding and he has started following it, leaving signs and markers for his noble fellows where necessary.

Sir Suvali takes to the air and soon locates the ranger some twenty minutes ahead. He reports back to the others, who start after their noble fellow on foot.

It is half past four in the morning when Sir Eber reaches a field of debris sloping upwards between steep cliffs to the left and right and ending in another. He lights a new torch and realizes he is in an old quarry. Finding no

immediate way out of it and having found no trace of Albert Murphy so far, he decides to wait for his noble fellows.

About half an hour later, just when the day breaks, our noble heroes are together again. With the sun appearing over the mountains, they see that they are now some way into the mountains. Snow-capped mountains glitter in the distance, the Three Brothers among them.

"So there is no trace of him?," Navarre asks.

"Not yet," Sir Eber replies.

"That valley up there seems the most likely way out of here," Navarre says, pointing to a prominent gap between two hills slightly to the left of the cliff at the end of the quarry.

The noble duo start looking for a way up until Sir Eber locates a goat's trail leading out of the quarry.

"We may have to get to the snow up there before we find anything," Sir Eber says, looking up at the mountains.

"Maybe he wasn't here at all," Navarre suggests. "Who says he hasn't slipped into a cave somewhere? Taken to the air?"

"I would have found something," the ranger says.

"Hmm...," Navarre says. "How long until we get up there? An hour? Hour and a half?"

"Does it matter?," Sir Eber says. "We'll just have to follow tracks and trails until we find him."

It is around half past six in the morning when our noble heroes reach the snowline and Sir Eber finally finds some evidence of Albert Murphy's passing.

"Sled!," he hollers, pointing to two lines in the snow with dog tracks between them.

"Yes!," Navarre says, clenching his fist. "Got him!"

"After him!," Sir Eber yells.

"I'll scout ahead," Sir Suvali says.

He takes to the air and the others start following the tracks, with Navarre and Sir Eber keeping their eyes peeled for possible hideouts and places to rest. By now, our noble heroes have been awake for more than a day and a night and most of them are beginning to feel the strain.

"We must keep going," Navarre says. "Albert Murphy will also tire. We'll have him when he stops."

And so our noble heroes continue their pursuit of Albert Murphy, following his tracks whenever they find them and relying on the expertise of Sir Eber and Navarre to determine where to go when they have lost them. It is well after five o'clock in the afternoon when they lose the trail and decide to start looking for a place to spend the night. A suitable spot is found in a cave-like opening some way up a narrow trail and our noble heroes set up camp.

When everybody has eaten, the *chevalier* leans back against the cave wall.

"*Messieurs*," he says. "*Mes felicitations!* We have taken Diamond Castle and our enemy is on the run."

"It has become quite an adventure," Navarre agrees. "I must say that it rather agrees with me."

"We have helped shape the history of The Forest, *mon cher*," the *chevalier* says. "That is what counts."

"I wonder if Mim has already dealt with the rebel army," Navarre muses, before adding that it is a good thing that the nobles are safely in the castle. Although he has not mentioned it, he still has considerable difficulty accepting that the nobles chose to flee Diamond Castle when they were freed instead of making a stand with the weapons he and Sir Oerknal had been throwing into the courtyard.

"We must have faith," the *chevalier* says. "Everything will return to normal when a new king has been elected."

"Quite," Navarre muses. "Politics. I would almost suggest that we should have say in who is to be the next king."

"A-ha-ha-ha!," the *chevalier* laughs. "Not at all, *mon cher*, not at all! By this time next year we will all be sipping *Lillac* on the Fortnight!"

Day 21, 08.00 hrs: After an uneventful night, our noble heroes are having breakfast.

"Where do you think he went?," Navarre asks.

"The Icy Waste," Sir Suvali says. "Our supplies will last another day."

"I'd say we'll need three days to get to this Icy Waste," Sir Eber says. "Progress will be slow."

"And we have no idea how far we are behind him," Navarre says. "Or how fast he is traveling, for that matter. I say we use the magical wand and fly to the other side."

"Impossible!," Sir Suvali says, too quickly. "The winds are too strong up there and we must stay on his trail and the wand only has a few charges left. We must save such ideas for emergencies."

Navarre casts the sorcerer an annoyed look but decides to let the matter rest.

"He could be on his way to the Three Brothers," he suggests. "He spent a lot of time in these mountains and he must know his way around."

"We must follow his trail," Sir Eber says. "There is no use guessing where he went."

"Hmm...", Navarre says. "I suppose we'll pass the Three Brothers anyway if we go on like this. There may be a trail if he went there."

"We will still need supplies," Sir Suvali says. "I suggest we take a vote. Continue or turn back and prepare properly."

"We would seem to have little choice," Navarre says. "We don't know what is in these mountains and we need proper clothing and food."

"No," Sir Eber says. "We cannot stop until we know where he is. It will end when it ends."

"And what if he entered the Icy Waste?," Navarre asks. "We will have to go back anyway in that case. I say we return now and start this thing well prepared."

"We can always get back if we should run into problems out there," Sir Eber says. "Suvali can use his wand and we'll be back in the castle within hours."

"No," Sir Suvali says. "The wand has too few charges left. I'll scout ahead and you will follow on foot. We still have supplies for one day and I can get new supplies from the castle at any time."

"Right," Navarre says, growing tired of the sorcerer's evasive maneuvers and rising to his feet. "It seems we will have to walk. If we are to continue, that is."

"I will fly ahead and see what's what from up there," Sir Suvali says. "When I return, I will fly back to the castle for supplies while you continue to follow the trail."

A vote is taken and Sir Suvali's plan is accepted. With his noble companions breaking up camp, the sorcerer takes to the air and he spots the Icy Waste almost immediately – a vast expanse of white in the far distance. He estimates that it will take him around three hours to get there and he takes some time to see what would be the easiest route for his noble fellows to take. He identifies some passable mountain passes, trails, gullies, and valleys and reports back before taking to the air again and flying off in the direction of the Icy Waste. Some three hours later, around the same time when his noble fellows finally find Albert Murphy's trail again, he reaches his point of no return. He turns back and rejoins his noble fellows at around two o'clock in the afternoon.

"There's a relatively clean route to the Icy Waste," he says to Sir Eber when he has landed. "No obvious tracks to the Three Brothers. He is going to the Icy Waste."

"*Mon Dieu,*" the *chevalier* says. "Ice giants."

"I'll get the supplies," Sir Suvali says. "I'll take your suggestions now."

Our noble heroes spend some time deciding what they will need in a frozen wasteland.

"Gentlemen," Sir Suvali says, when the list is finished. "You continue on foot while I fly back to the castle."

"Quite," Navarre says frostily, still rather annoyed at the sorcerer refusing to use the wand. "Let's get moving before the weather changes or something else wipes out the tracks."

"A single sausage would sustain us for many days if we were reduced in size," Sir Eber tries one last time.

"I will leave now," the sorcerer says. "It's less than two hours to the castle and I'll spend the night there."

"I'm sure you will," Navarre says.

It is around six o'clock in the evening when Sir Suvali returns with some of the necessary supplies (oil, lanterns, torches; tarpaulins, snowshoes, winter blankets, thick coats and cloaks; ropes, mallets, pinions; food, wine).

"Did they kick you out, Wyrns?," Sir Eber asks.

"The castle is under siege," Sir Suvali says, ignoring the quip. "The rebel army has split. Half of it is still in the valley blocking Mim's advance and the other half is laying siege. Bandits."

"Then the rebels are finished!," the *chevalier* cries, opening a bottle of wine. "Mim has them outnumbered in the valley!"

"Unless Murphy has some trick up his sleeve," Sir Eber says. "Maybe he has a way of getting ice giants to the castle."

"So everything now seems to depend on him," Navarre muses. "Still, his little revolution is over even if he were to retake the castle. The royalists will crush his army in the valley."

"All the more reason for us to find him fast," Sir Eber says, glowering at Sir Suvali.

"I'm going back to the castle," the sorcerer says.

"I think you should take our armors with you," Navarre says. "We have no use for them until we get to the Icy Waste and they only add to the weight we have to carry. If it's only a couple of hours from the Icy Waste to the castle, you can pick them up again when we get there."

"Okay," the sorcerer says.

Navarre hands him his armor and the sorcerer takes to the air again. Some ten minutes after he has left, he spots a large tree, picks a spot near the top leaves the armor right there before continuing to the castle.

Navarre, Sir Eber, Sir Oengus, and the *chevalier* spend the next three days traversing the mountains on foot, with Sir Suvali flying up and down with supplies – and leaving an armor in his tree each time he returns to the castle. He also brings letters from our noble heroes' parents. One of these is from Duke Dauberval, who expresses his displeasure at our noble heroes pursuing a commoner to the end of the world while The Forest is at war.

Day 24, 13.00 hrs: Navarre, Sir Eber, Sir Oengus, and the *chevalier* have crossed a third mountain range and are presently looking down a long, snow-covered glacier in a V-shaped valley leading down to a vast icy plain stretching as far as they can see underneath a gray sky – the Icy Waste.

“Good lord,” Navarre breathes, quite impressed by the view. “It exists!”

“Of course it does, lubber,” Sir Oengus says. “Maps don't lie.”

“I suppose you're right, old sport,” Navarre replies.

Our noble heroes decide to take a breather and are just finishing lunch when Sir Suvali arrives with a large pack on his back.

“Gentlemen,” he says, when he has landed and taken the pack from his back. “A sled. It just needs reassembling.”

And, sure enough, about an hour's work later, our noble heroes have assembled a long sled much like the carts in the stables at Diamond Castle.

“There is a large rift at the bottom there,” Sir Suvali says, pointing down the glacier. “Right where the Icy Waste starts. It runs from dusk to dawn and it's huge.”

“Captain on deck, lubbers!,” Sir Oengus says. “If there be somethin' to steer it'll be me as to do the steerin', by thunder! All hands on deck and sails away!”

Our noble heroes start down the glacier in their sled, with Sir Oengus at the helm. Although there is less wind on this side of the mountains, it is definitely a lot colder than before. While they find their progress much easier now, it is still not very fast and it is around five o'clock in the afternoon when they get their first good view of the rift the sorcerer saw earlier. It runs right across the bottom of the glacier and it must be about a hundred yards wide. Beyond is the Icy Waste – an endless plain of ice.

“It be another hour to the rift,” Sir Oengus says.

“I say we make camp here,” Navarre suggests. “We don't know what we will find down there and I'd rather find out with a full day ahead of us than with night falling.”

“Agreed,” the *chevalier* says.

“I will scout ahead,” Sir Suvali says.

A camp is made and then Sir Suvali makes his first outing to the rift. He decides not to get too close to it for the time being and so he can only determine that it is, indeed, a jagged rift in a thick layer of ice on the bedrock. It must stretch for tens of miles in both directions and, from what he can see, he estimates it to be at least one hundred yards deep. There are no signs of life anywhere.

He gets back to the camp for some dinner and takes to the air again when evening has fallen. When he returns, he reports that there are still no signs of life – no fires, no lights, no nothing.

Day 25: Around four o'clock in the morning, just before daybreak, Sir Suvali prepares for another outing to the rift. He finds the day to be exceedingly cold, perhaps close to freezing, and realizing that it is high summer in The Forest, he concludes that the mountains must be a natural barrier against the cold of the Icy Waste. He takes to the air and makes another pass over the rift, still finding no signs of life anywhere. He flies back to retrieve the armors he left in his tree and, when he returns to the camp around ten o'clock, he finds his noble fellows ready to go.

Our noble heroes reach the rift an hour later (**SEE ILLUSTRATION #28**). It stretches from dusk till dawn as far as the eye can see. When they look into it, they see many chunks of ice and rock wedged between its walls to either side but it is otherwise too dark down there to see the bottom. As Sir Suvali reported yesterday, the rift is cut right into the snow, ice, and bedrock, with the icy layer being some five yards thick.

“So where did he go?,” Navarre asks. “Did he go around it?”

“I didn't have time to read tracks,” Sir Eber says.

"You lost them, didn't you?," Navarre grins.

The ranger growls something unintelligible.

"So what is it to be, captain?," Navarre asks Sir Oengus. "Right or left?"

"I'll see what's on the other side," Sir Suvali says. "If he crossed the rift somehow, he may have left tracks there."

He takes to the air, crosses the rift and flies about for a bit but he doesn't find any trace of Albert Murphy. But then, when he is on his way back, he spots what must be a trail leading down along hubward wall of the rift. Getting a bit closer, he sees that it starts some distance duskward of where his noble companions are now. It must be 400 yards long and ends in a large cave entrance darkness another 40 yards down.

He returns to his noble companions and reports his findings.

"A cave!," Navarre exclaims excitedly. "It must be where he went! It must be where he spent his time in the mountains!"

Our noble heroes turn left and eventually reach the top of the trail, where Sir Eber picks up Albert Murphy's tracks again.

"It is no longer than a day old," he says. "It's a sled going down there."

"Got him!," Navarre says.

Our noble heroes start down the trail and find it to run along a natural fissure in the rock, with some steps cut into it where necessary. At the end, in the hubward wall of the rift, is a large hole – a cave entrance. It is some five yards high, high enough for an ice giant.

Drawing their weapons, our noble heroes enter the cave, a short tunnel that opens up into a large cave with a domed ceiling. The cave must be 30 yards across and there is a huge table directly to the left of the opening. Beyond it, in the center of the room, a large hole in the ground is surrounded by a number of chests and what appear to be low, standing stones. A weak light comes from the hole.

Bows at the ready, our noble heroes cautiously advance into the cave until they get to the hole, which they find to be quite deep. There are a number of... mounds of ice?... on the floor and a ladder is against the wall close to where they are now standing. The light is diffuse and exceedingly weak and it has no visible source – and the DM calls for Initiative checks.

"Initiative?," Sir Eber exclaims, perhaps, finally, slightly concerned for his safety. "The giant is dead!"

"There may be more," Navarre says.

"Ssh!," the *chevalier* hisses. "There is another opening at the back! There is a light!"

The ranger hurls his torch across the pit.

"Something moves!," Sir Suvali yells, pointing to the opening at the back.

A man wearing a thick coat has appeared in the opening, a bow in his hand. Having won Initiative, Sir Suvali casts a *Sleep* spell – to no effect at all – and then the man shoots an arrow at him, inflicting some considerable damage.

"Death to all sorcerers!," he yells. "They are here! Get them! Goddammit!"

The sorcerer dives to the floor behind a chest and Sir Eber starts for the archer while the *chevalier*, Sir Oengus, and Navarre release their arrows and bolts, causing the archer to curse again. Then, with Sir Oengus and the *chevalier* continuing to fire at the archer, Navarre draws his sword and charges after the ranger, who suffers some considerable damage, the archer taking a negligible amount in return. The ranger reaches the archer and hits him twice – hard – and then a second man comes running, this one clad in full plate armor and wielding a halberd.

With the arrows of the *chevalier* and Sir Oengus whizzing past to little effect, Navarre reaches the opening, which gives into what is obviously a smithy. There is a fireplace in each of its three walls, smith's tools and bellows are everywhere and there are numerous anvils, one of which seems to have been constructed of four anvils welded together (SEE ILLUSTRATION #29).

Against the far wall is Albert Murphy.

"Call off your dogs, Albert Murphy!," Navarre yells, dodging an attack by the halberdier. "It is over!"

"Go away!," Albert Murphy yells. "Assassins! Killers! Revolution!"

But, with Sir Eber landing a mighty blow on the archer and sending him sagging to the floor, Navarre has to leave Albert Murphy where he is and engage the halberdier. But he fumbles his attack – will it ever stop? – and then Sir Eber turns to face the halberdier.

"You again!," the halberdier roars to the ranger, turning to face him. "Bugger off, already!"

With the halberdier engaging Sir Eber, Navarre advances into the smithy, where a third man appears. "You there!," the man yells to Navarre. "Over here! Stinking wizards! Now take on someone your own size!" It is Olaf, the bandit lord who was reduced in size back in the witch's tower and who is now back to normal again.

With Sir Eber and the halberdier now fighting each other – Sir Eber suffering massive damage and hardly inflicting any in return for a change – Navarre charges the bandit lord and then Sir Suvali, who has been 'focusing on Albert Murphy' from behind his chest way back in the cavern, shoots a magic missile at the halberdier.

However, he does so only once before he starts shooting arrows again and the next round sees none of our noble heroes inflict any damage at all, while the halberdier once again inflicts substantial damage on Sir Eber. Olaf manages to push past Navarre and is now attacking the ranger, fortunately to no effect. Then, finally, Sir Eber manages to land some glancing blows on the halberdier and the man sags to the floor.

"Surrender!," Navarre yells to Olaf, missing him in the process.

"Deal!," Olaf yells, dropping his weapon and turning around to point at Albert Murphy. "There he is! It was him! I had no choice! I was forced into this by the brute!"

Navarre turns around and approaches Albert Murphy.

"Albert Murphy!," he calls. "In the name of the King! I arrest you for treason, inciting a revolution, and the murder of countless innocent men!"

"Well...," Albert Murphy says, sitting down on the floor. "Oh, well. It seems that we have come to the end of the road. Welcome to my humble abode."

The architect is a short, neat, but otherwise rather nondescript man. In strange defiance of the seriousness of his situation, he exudes an air of calm and confidence – much as if he were welcoming a party of friends for a pleasant soiree.

"I say...!," Navarre starts, suddenly at a loss for words. After all the man has done? The bloody nerve of him!

"Welcome?," the *chevalier* says frostily, pushing past him. "This is not my idea of a welcome."

"Ah!," Albert Murphy says amiably. "But you are! Such fine gentlemen like yourselves! Welcome! Is there anything I can offer you?"

"Gag him!," the *chevalier* cries. "He speaks in tongues!"

Albert Murphy makes the sign of Ulm and calmly allows Sir Eber, heavily wounded, to tie his hands.

"Good lord, man!," Navarre exclaims angrily. "A revolution!? What were you thinking?"

"I do not owe you an explanation," Albert Murphy says. "The future will prove that I was right. The vision was clear."

"*Des mots clair*," the *chevalier* says sharply. "You are a murderer of noblemen, of women. Even children you did not spare."

"Have you nothing to say for yourself?," Navarre fumes.

Albert Murphy calmly looks at each of noble heroes in turn but doesn't answer.

"No matter," Navarre says. "You will be judged for your misdeeds."

"Why did you come here?," Sir Eber asks. "What is was your plan? How does the Icy Waste fit into all this?"

"I was going to regroup," Albert Murphy says, still speaking as if he is engaged in some light banter.

"Then who else is here?," the *chevalier* asks.

"So many questions, gentlemen," Albert Murphy says soothingly. "Why, I..."

"And you had better start answering them, *monsieur!*," the *chevalier* cries.

"Are you people peers of the realm?," Albert Murphy asks. "Do you represent someone?"

"We represent the King," Navarre says.

"I would ask you to watch your tone, *monsieur*," the *chevalier* says.

Once again, Albert Murphy looks at each of our noble heroes in turn, still strangely unperturbed by the situation.

"What do you intend to do with me?," he asks.

"You will be brought before a court of law where you will answer for your misdeeds," Navarre says.

"That is grave news," Albert Murphy says solemnly. "I will not stand much of a chance in a court presided by a new king, even if I would cooperate. Perhaps you could be my judges? You have the right to do so in small council, if I am not mistaken. Maybe I can be of service to you in some way?"

"Are you mad?," Navarre exclaims. "Would you believe that we would negotiate with you?"

"He is stalling for time," the *chevalier* says, looking around the smithy. "Something is afoot."

"I feel it, too," Sir Oengus says. "We should get out of here."

"We will search this place first," Sir Suvali says. Some moments earlier, he has covertly cast *Detect Magic* on Albert Murphy and the smithy but he does not detect any magical auras.

While Sir Oengus and Sir Suvali subject the cave and the smithy to a search, the others discuss the possibility of judging Albert Murphy in small council, with each and every one of our noble heroes continuing to keep an eye out for anything that could indicate that Albert Murphy is, indeed, stalling for time.

"I'm not entirely sure how this small council would work," Navarre admits.

"We can condemn him to death and kill him," Sir Eber says.

"That is not quite what I meant," Navarre says. "The man should have some sort of counsel to defend him."

"Not me," Sir Eber says.

"Nor I," Navarre says. "I would not know where to begin. Still, judging him here would save us the trouble of taking him back across the mountains and into a war zone."

After some more of this, Sir Suvali and Sir Oengus return. They have located Albert Murphy's sled and his dogs in a niche rimward of the smithy and presently suggest that our noble heroes search the pit.

"There's something down there," Sir Suvali says. "A suspicious mound of debris against one of the walls. It may hide an opening."

"Well?," Navarre asks. "What's stopping you?"

"An exit?," the *chevalier* exclaims. "I knew something was afoot! We must get out of here!"

"I suppose it will not hurt us to prepare for when we should have to get out of here in all haste," Navarre says.

"Something is wrong!," the *chevalier* cries. "I feel it! We must go now!"

And with that, he starts for the dogs and the sled.

A palpable tension is now in the air. Indeed, Navarre thinks, come to think of it, the whole cave now seems to exude an eerie, almost imperceptible sense of... something. He has a good look around but he cannot put his finger on it. Strangely enough, the only thing that does come to mind, is... that he has been here before.

Preposterous! He has never been here in his life!

"It would seem that there is something wrong here," he says to the others. "I'll get Albert Murphy to the exit and keep him there. See if anything changes."

When he is gone, Sir Eber starts helping the *chevalier* with the dogs and the sled. This takes them a while and, when they are almost finished, they notice that Sir Oengus and Sir Suvali are nowhere to be seen.

Not long after Navarre left the cavern with Albert Murphy and Olaf, Sir Suvali and Sir Oengus descended into the pit to have another look at the supposed exit. They found the 'mounds of ice' on the floor to be coils of long metal chains coated with ice as if water has been dripping onto them and then froze. When they got to the mound of debris stacked against part of the wall, they found it to be mostly rocks and mud, which seems strange in a cave containing neither.

"Only one way to find out, lubber," Sir Oengus said. "Let's start digging."

The noble duo started removing the rocks and, sure enough, they soon found an exit hidden behind it. They dug some more until a large boulder blocking the exit was revealed, with the rest of the opening bricked up. Now, both have to make a saving throw against fear, which they fail. They are exiting the pit in all haste when the *chevalier* arrives.

"Get out of there!," he cries. "What are you doing?"

When Sir Suvali and Sir Oengus can think clearly again and have told the others of what transpired in the pit, we find our noble heroes gathered at the entrance to the cave, for it has now become clear that there is definitely something strange going on within it.

"We must deal with Albert Murphy first," Navarre says. "We cannot have him at our back if we should start investigating whatever it is that is in that pit."

"Agreed," Sir Suvali says. "Besides, Eber is no condition to do anything right now. Look at him. He can barely move."

The others agree, although the ranger says that there is nothing wrong with him, and so our noble heroes finish preparing the sled for what is now more and more looking like their impending return to The Forest.

"Maybe you should get Albert Murphy to Mim," Navarre says to Sir Suvali when our noble heroes are ready to leave the cave. "You can use the wand on him and have him at the castle in three hours. Save us a lot of trouble and all that."

"We must get out of the cave first," Sir Suvali says, in a typical reaction. "We must get to the mountains as soon as possible. Get some distance between us and that cave."

"Now is not the time to worry about our own hides, Sir," Navarre says, for once deciding that, this time, he is not going to put up with yet another of the insufferable sorcerer's attempts to get out of any and all conversations involving him – let alone the others – using any of the magic items at his disposal.

"Let's go," the sorcerer says.

Navarre looks him straight in the eye.

"Are you actually telling me that you are not going to use the wand and fly to the castle?," he asks, steel in voice.

The sorcerer smiles feebly and averts his eyes.

"I will do it," he says, after a dramatic pause for effect. "Just not at the moment."

Navarre has to restrain himself quite considerably.

And so it is that our noble heroes and their prisoners leave the cave and the rift and start back to the glacier.

"This is going to be a long trip, to be sure," Sir Oengus says, looking at Albert Murphy and Olaf huddled in the sled. "I says we kill them and be done with it."

"We are not savages, Sir," Navarre says. "The law dictates that he must have a fair trial."

The company are already some way up the glacier when Navarre addresses Sir Suvali.

"Perhaps you could find it within you to start getting Albert Murphy back to Mim, now?," he suggests.

Sir Suvali nods almost imperceptibly and tells Sir Oengus to stop the sled. Taking his time, he starts to brew up a broth from some of Theresa's sleep-inducing herbs and feeds it to Albert Murphy, who calmly undergoes the whole thing. He then binds and gags the architect, procures his wand, reduces Albert Murphy in size and stuffs him into one of the pockets of his vest.

"Gentlemen," he says, unfolding his wings.

"*Bon voyage!*," the *chevalier* cries when the sorcerer takes to the air.

Epilogue: The session has now more or less ended and so all that is left to say is that Sir Suvali delivers Albert Murphy in the hands of Duke Mim after he has made it quite clear to him that it was our noble heroes who took Diamond Castle – taking care to describe the heroic actions of all involved in some detail.

"Well played, my good man," Duke Mim says. "Is there anything you need?"

"We are on our way back," Sir Suvali says.

After this, he flies back to the castle, where he informs the besieged of the situation.

"You will have to hold out until Mim gets here," he says. "We will be here soon. The revolution is over, we just need to pick up the pieces now."

Back on the other side of the mountains, the rest of our noble heroes find that getting back up the glacier is quite a bit harder than gliding down from it on a sled. No one has ever driven a dogsled before – and definitely not up a glacier. When they finally decide to call it a day, Navarre shakes the hands of his noble fellows.

"Suvali must have delivered Albert Murphy to Mim by now," he says, raising his glass for a toast. "I say congratulations are in order."

"Gentlemen!," Sir Oengus hollers. "To changing times! We shall rule The Forest as the Table of Five!"

"Ha, ha, ha!," Navarre laughs. "Perhaps Albert Murphy was right after all!"

List: 120 gp in silver and copper pieces; numerous trinkets (gold, silver, diamonds, rings, a beaten silver coat-of-arms featuring a stag [Blurh])

List (XP): +500 xp

THIS ENDS "AN ADVENTURE IN FIVE ACTS"

Credits

Story: The DM
Inspired by: Absent friends
Cartography: The DM and the cartographer
Development: The players
Cover Art: Ivan Bilibin
Illustrations: Ivan Bilibin, PRF, the artists
Editing: The editor

Colophon

Part I – Prelude

Date: FRN 07-04-2017 (PRF1DEV)

DM: EMK

Players: Scaralat de Sarazin (F[Cavalier]2; BXM); Sir Suvali Ard Wyrns (F1, S1; RSO); Sir Eber Ard Weald (F1, R1; FRW); Sir Oengus “Moon” of Nisibis (F2; PRF); Sir Oerknal of the Forest (d; F2; DRK); Navarre Dauberval de Vergennes (F[Noble]2; FXW)

Part II – Act I: The Fortnight

Date: FRN 05-05-2017 (BXM2DEV)

DM: EMK

Players: Scaralat de Sarazin (F[Cavalier]2; BXM); Sir Suvali Ard Wyrns (F1, S1; RSO); Sir Oengus “Moon” of Nisibis (F2; PRF); Sir Oerknal of the Forest (d; F2; DRK); Navarre Dauberval de Vergennes (F[Noble]2; FXW)

Part III – Act II: Spelevaren op de grote rivier

Date: FRN 12-05-2017 (BXM2DEV)

DM: EMK

Players: Scaralat de Sarazin (F[Cavalier]2; BXM); Sir Suvali Ard Wyrns (F1, S1; RSO); Sir Eber Ard Weald (F1, R1; FRW); Sir Oengus “Moon” of Nisibis (F2; PRF); Sir Oerknal of the Forest (d; F2; DRK); Navarre Dauberval de Vergennes (F[Noble]2; FXW)

Part IV – Act III: The Sword of Shadows

Date: FRN 02-06-2017 (BXM2DEV)

DM: EMK

Players: Scaralat de Sarazin (F[Cavalier]2; BXM); Sir Suvali Ard Wyrns (F1, S1; RSO); Sir Eber Ard Weald (F1, R1; FRW); Sir Oengus “Moon” of Nisibis (F2; PRF); Sir Oerknal of the Forest (d; F2; DRK); Navarre Dauberval de Vergennes (F[Noble]2; FXW)

Part V – Act IV: Return to Apple Island

Date: FRN 09-06-2017 (PRF1DEV)

DM: EMK

Players: Scaralat de Sarazin (F[Cavalier]2; BXM); Sir Suvali Ard Wyrns (F1, S1; RSO); Sir Eber Ard Weald (F1, R1; FRW); Sir Oengus “Moon” of Nisibis (F2; PRF); Sir Oerknal of the Forest (d; F2; DRK); Navarre Dauberval de Vergennes (F[Noble]2; FXW)

Part VI – Act V: Diamond Castle, Part I: Against the Ice Giant

Date: THU 03-07-2017 (BXM2DEV)

DM: EMK

Players: Scaralat de Sarazin (F[Cavalier]2; BXM); Sir Suvali Ard Wyrns (F1, S1; RSO); Sir Eber Ard Weald (F1, R1; FRW); Sir Oengus “Moon” of Nisibis (F2; PRF); Sir Oerknal of the Forest (d; F2; DRK); Navarre Dauberval de Vergennes (F[Noble]2; FXW)

Part VII – Act V: Diamond Castle, Part II: Assault on the Castle of the Slave Lords

Date: FRN 18-08-2017 (BXM2DEV)

DM: EMK

Players: Scaralat de Sarazin (F[Cavalier]2; BXM); Sir Suvali Ard Wyrns (F1, S1; RSO); Sir Eber Ard Weald (F1, R1; FRW); Sir Oengus “Moon” of Nisibis (F2; PRF); Sir Oerknal of the Forest (d; F2; DRK); Navarre Dauberval de Vergennes (F[Noble]2; FXW)

Part VIII – Act V: Diamond Castle, Part III: Castle Diamond

Date: FRN 15-09-2017 (PRF1DEV)

DM: EMK

Players: Scaralat de Sarazin (F[Cavalier]2>3; BXM); Sir Suvali Ard Wyrsn (F1, S1>2; RSO); Sir Oengus "Moon" of Nisibis (F2>3; PRF); Sir Oerknal of the Forest (d; F2>3; DRK); Sir Eber Ard Weald (F1, R1>2; FRW); Navarre Dauberval de Vergennes (F[Noble]2>3; FXW)

Part IX – Act V: Diamond Castle, Part IV: The Final Enemy

Date: FRN 14-10-2017 (PRF1DEV)

DM EMK

Players: Scaralat de Sarazin (F[Cavalier]3; BXM); Sir Suvali Ard Wyrsn (F1, S2>3; RSO); Sir Oengus "Moon" of Nisibis (F3>4; PRF); Sir Eber Ard Weald (F1, R2>3; FRW); Navarre Dauberval de Vergennes (F[Noble]3>4; FXW); NPC: Sir Oerknal of the Forest (d; F3>4)

Front cover and title page: Advanced Dungeons & Dragons in **QUENTIN EF MEDIUM 63**; "Memory Aid" and title in **ITC AvantGarde Gothic Bold 23**; author in **ITC AvantGarde Gothic Bold 13**; text in *Times New Roman Italic 11*; "@ 2017-2021" in **AvantGarde Bk BT Bold 11**; TMW address in **ITC AvantGarde Gothic Bold 12**; "Edited" in **AvantGarde CTT Bold 11**; "1015" in **ITC AvantGarde Gothic Bold 15**; Map inside cover: "The Forest" in *Twin Century Condensed 124*; duchy names in *Sans 18*; river names *Sans Italic 18*; geographical features in **Sans Bold 23**; Text: Chapter headings in **AvantGarde Medium BT 12**; regular text, headings, and SEE ILLUSTRATION in **AvantGarde Medium BT 10**; "In which" in **AvantGarde Medium BT 9**; footnotes and lists in **AvantGarde Medium BT 8**; Illustration booklet cover: Advanced Dungeons & Dragons in **QUENTIN EF MEDIUM 63**; title in **ITC AvantGarde Gothic Bold 23**; author in **ITC AvantGarde Gothic Bold 13**; text in *Times New Roman Italic 12*; "@ 2017-2021" in *Arial 11*; TMW address in **ITC AvantGarde Gothic Bold 12**; "Edited" in *Arial 9*; Back cover: Text in *Helvetica 11* and *Helvetica 9*.

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by Some Players

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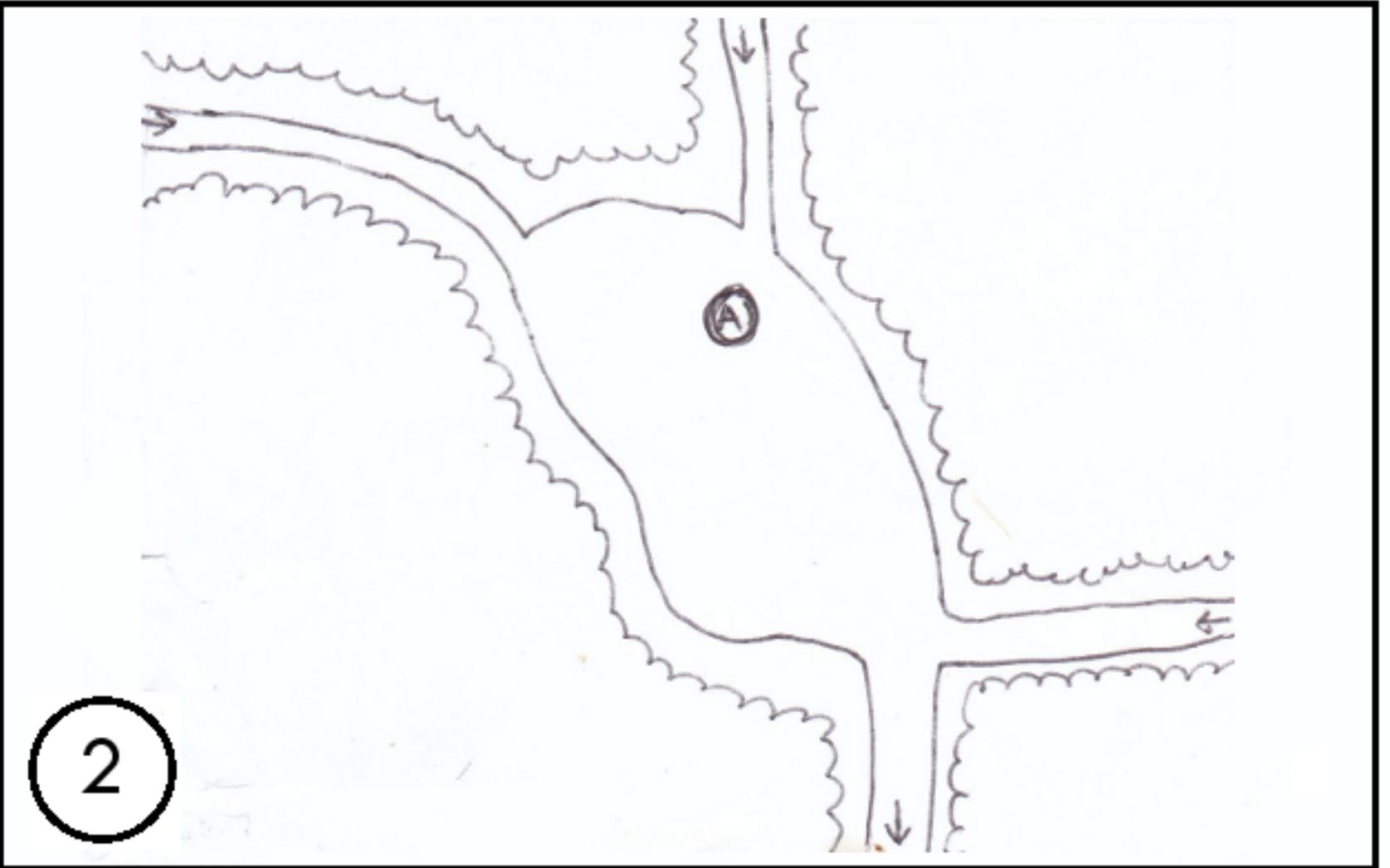
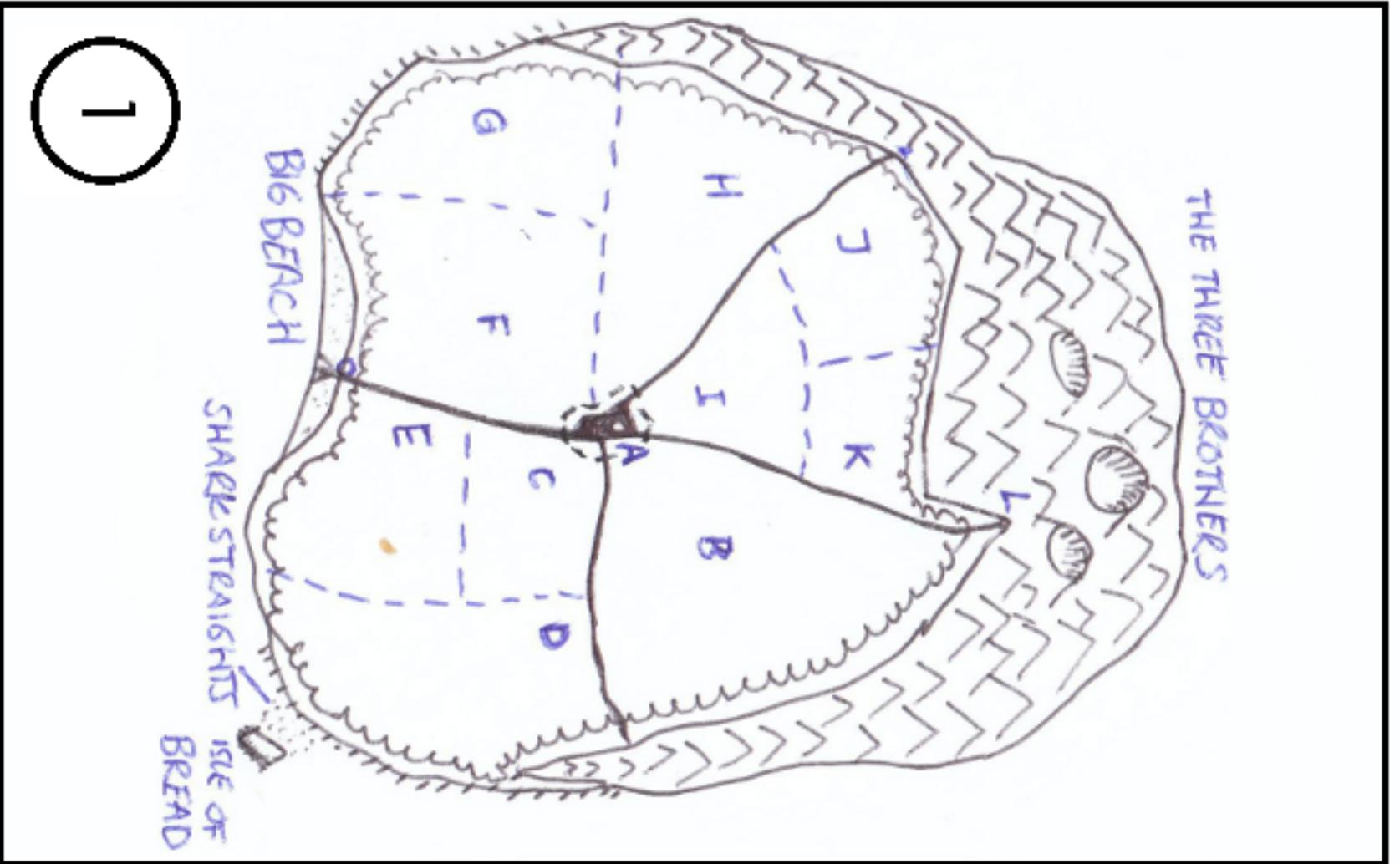
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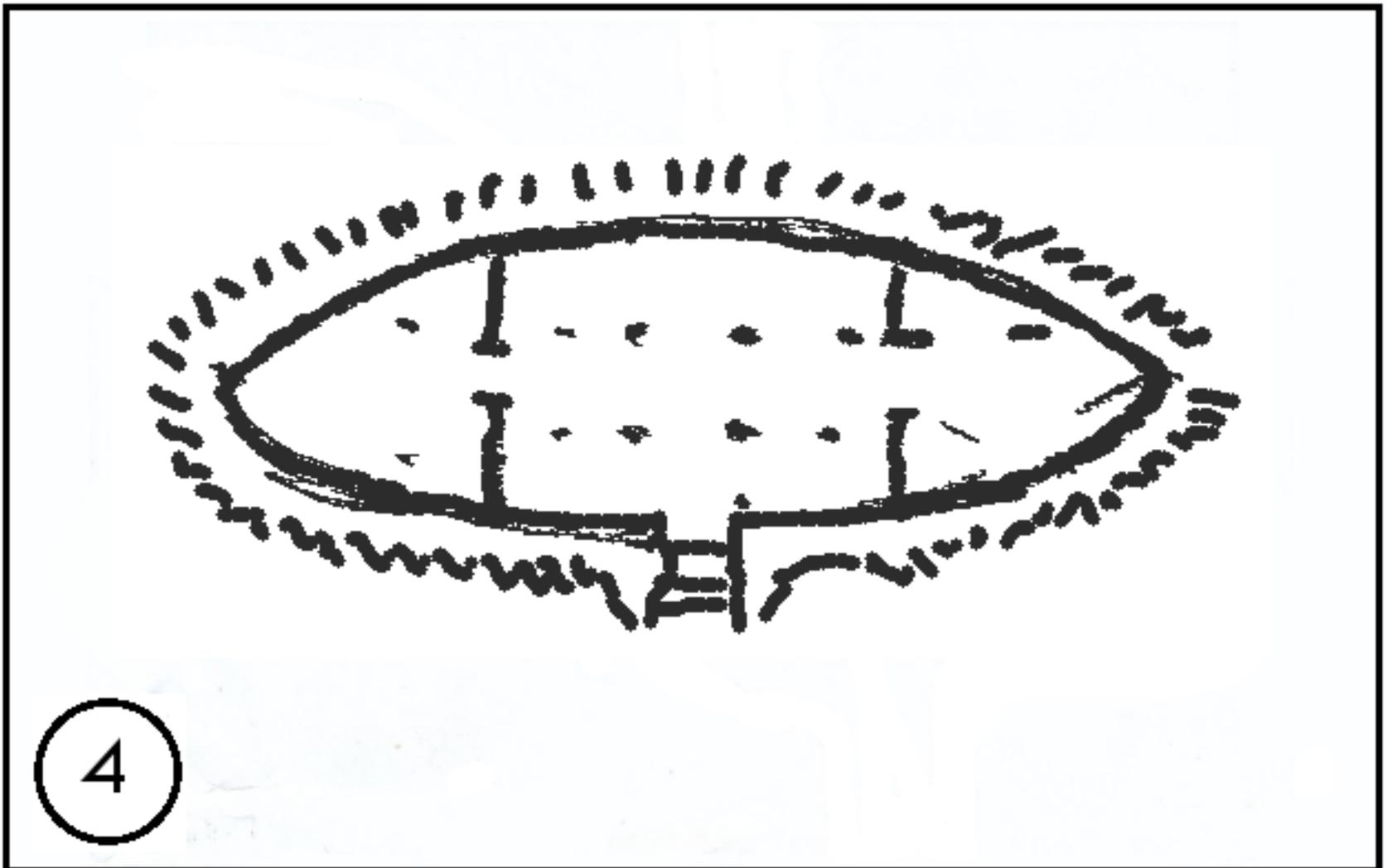
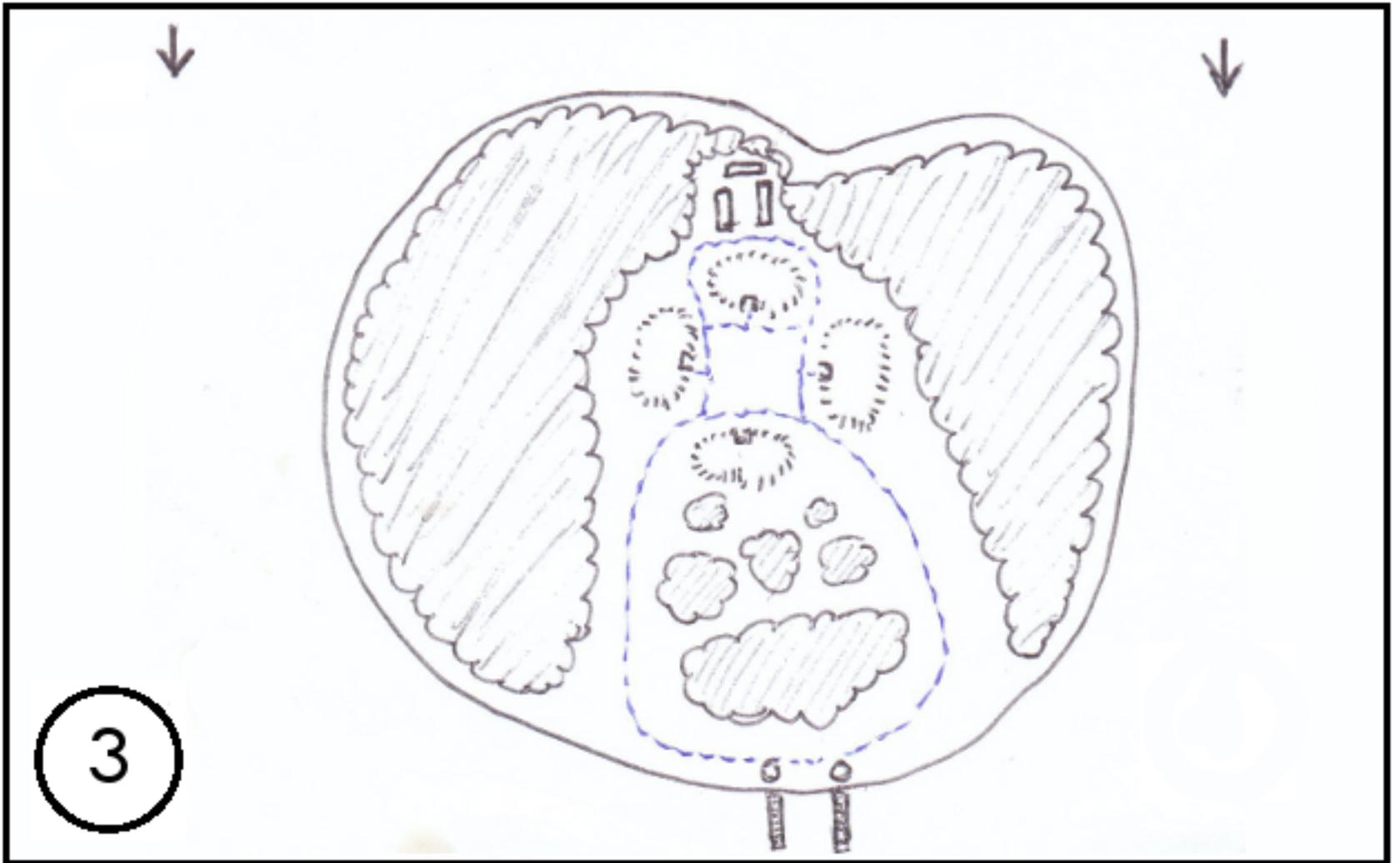
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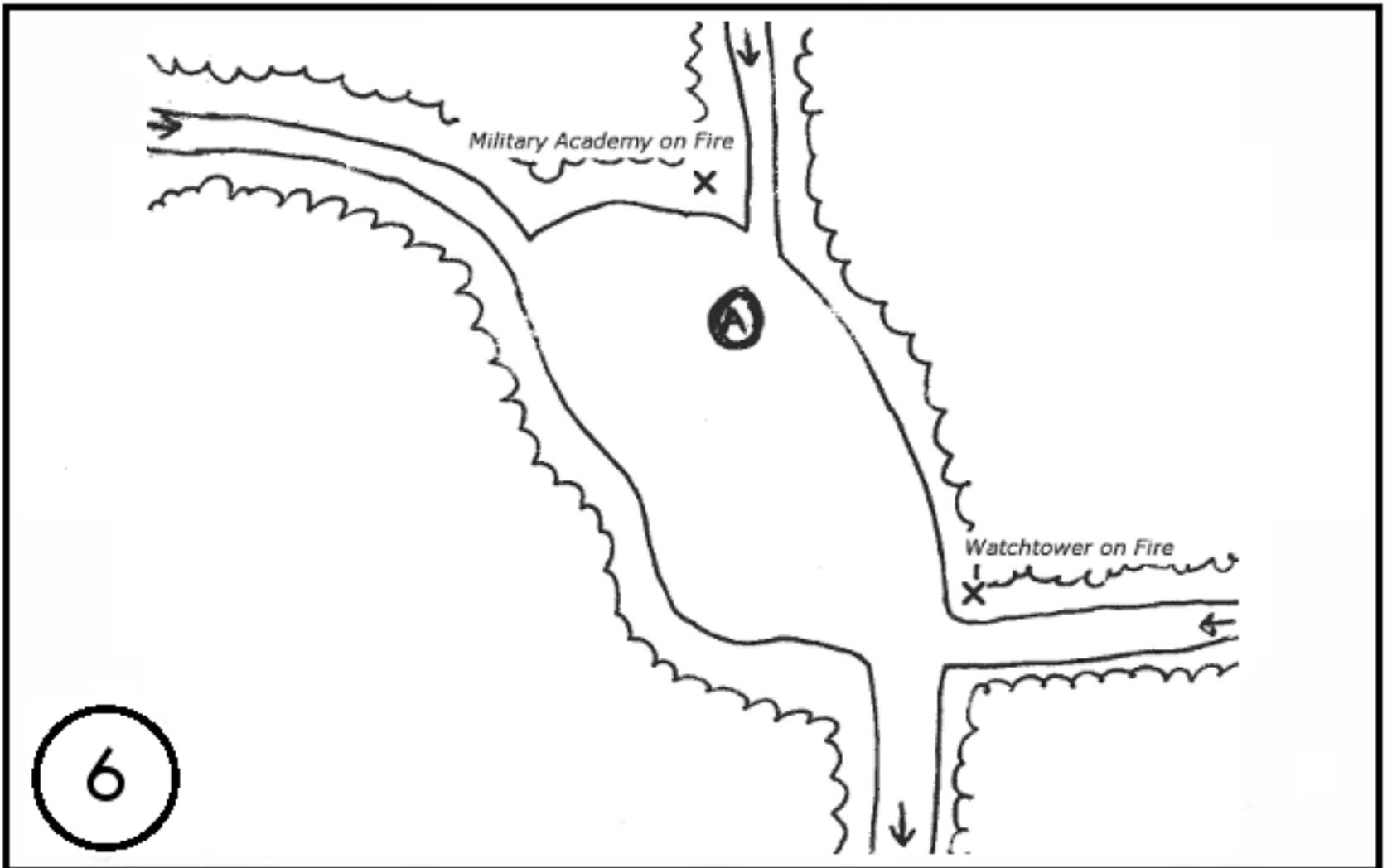
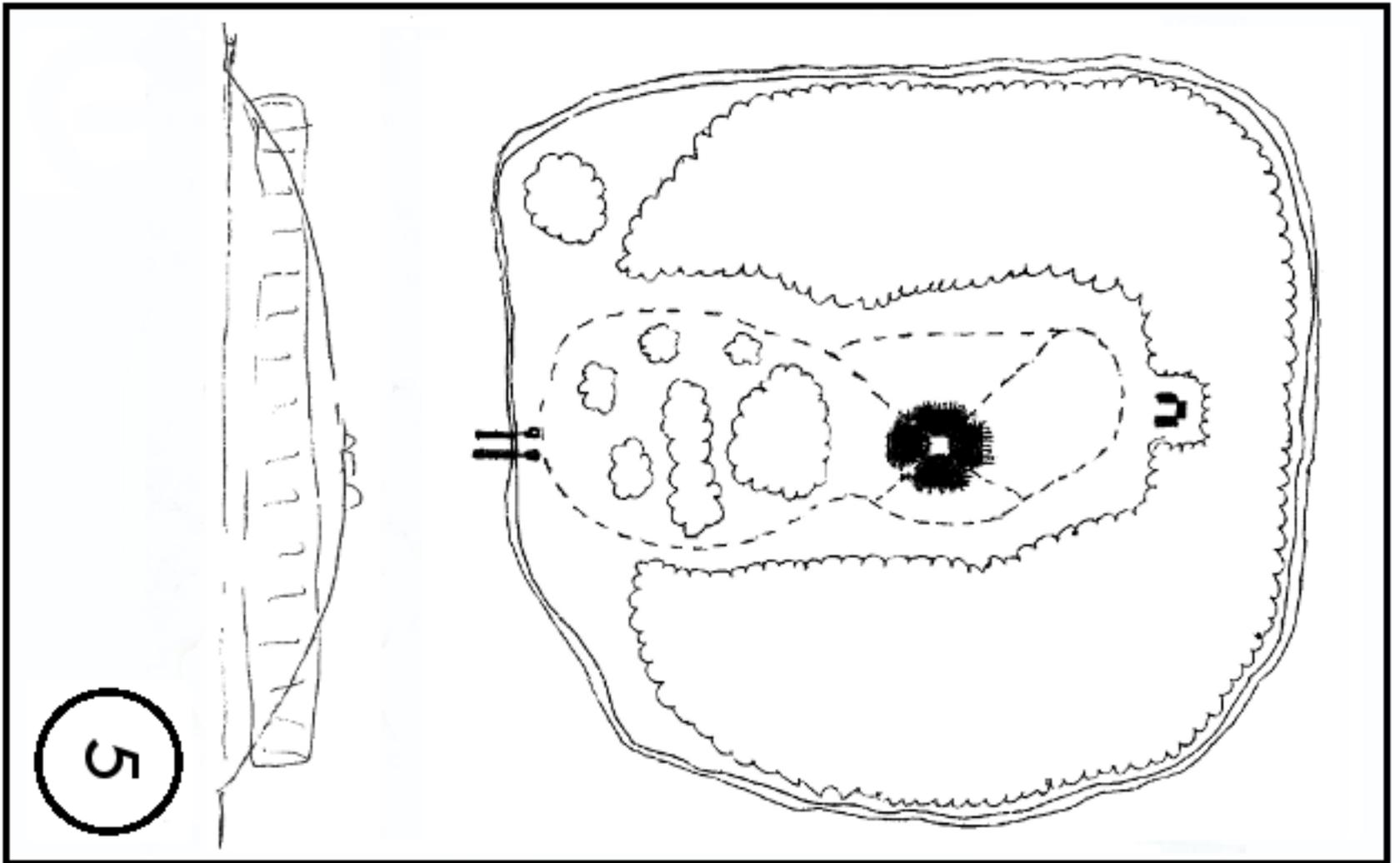
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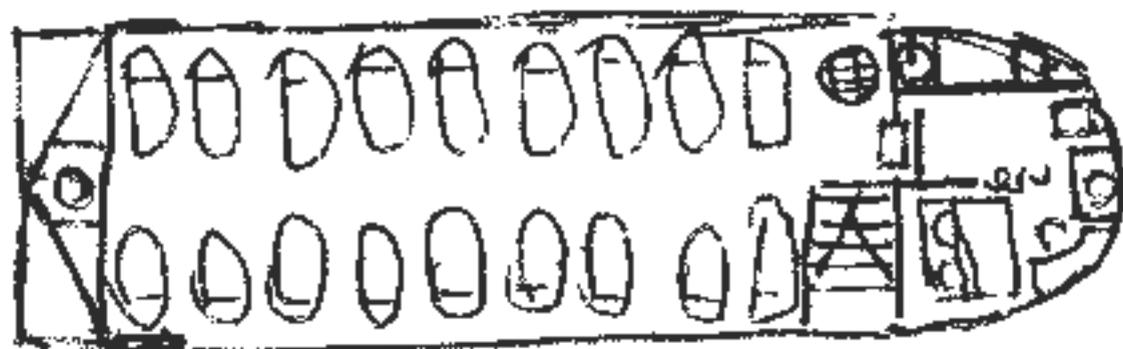
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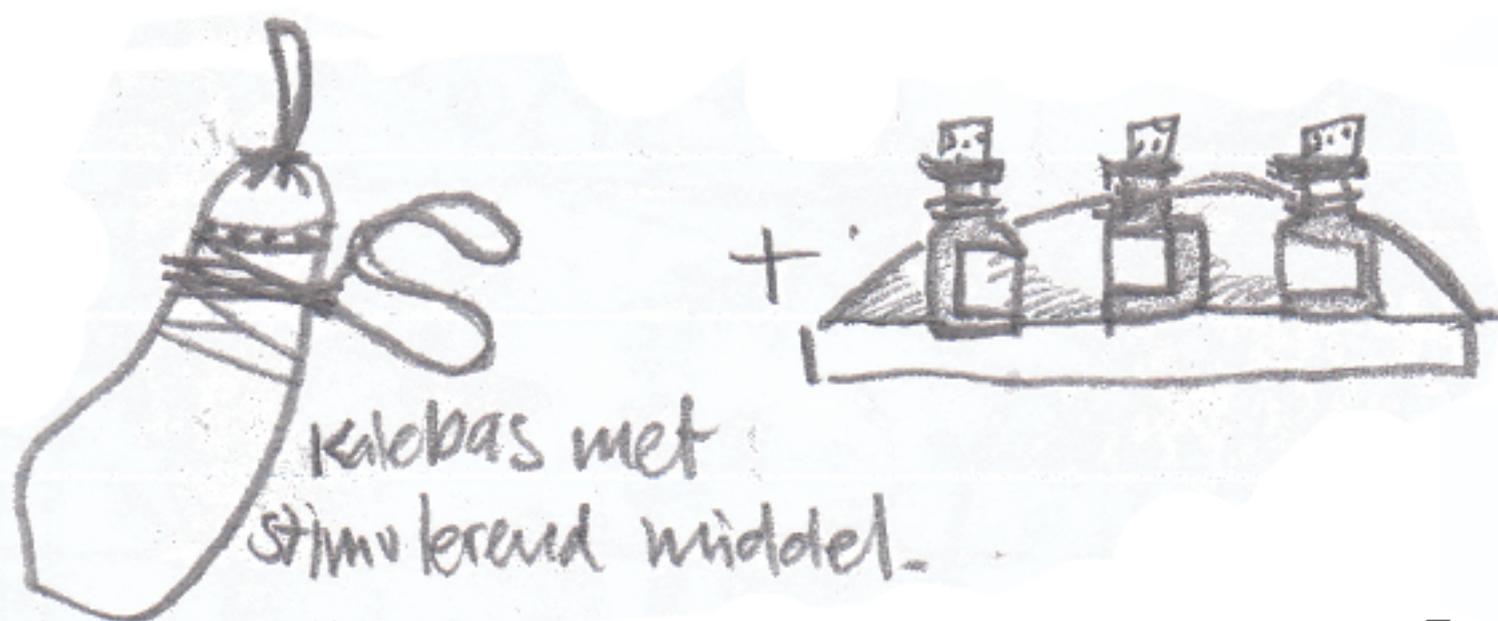








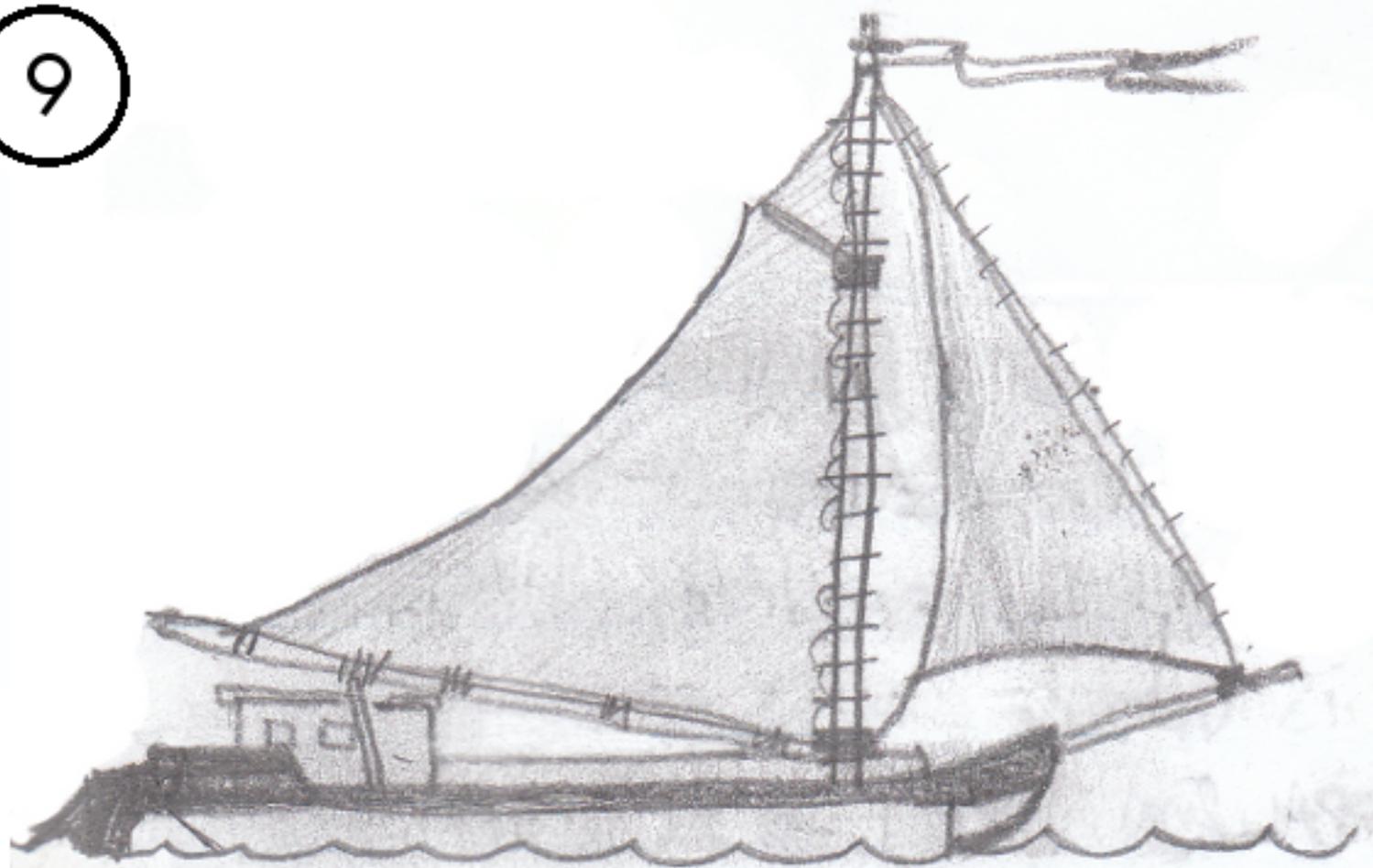
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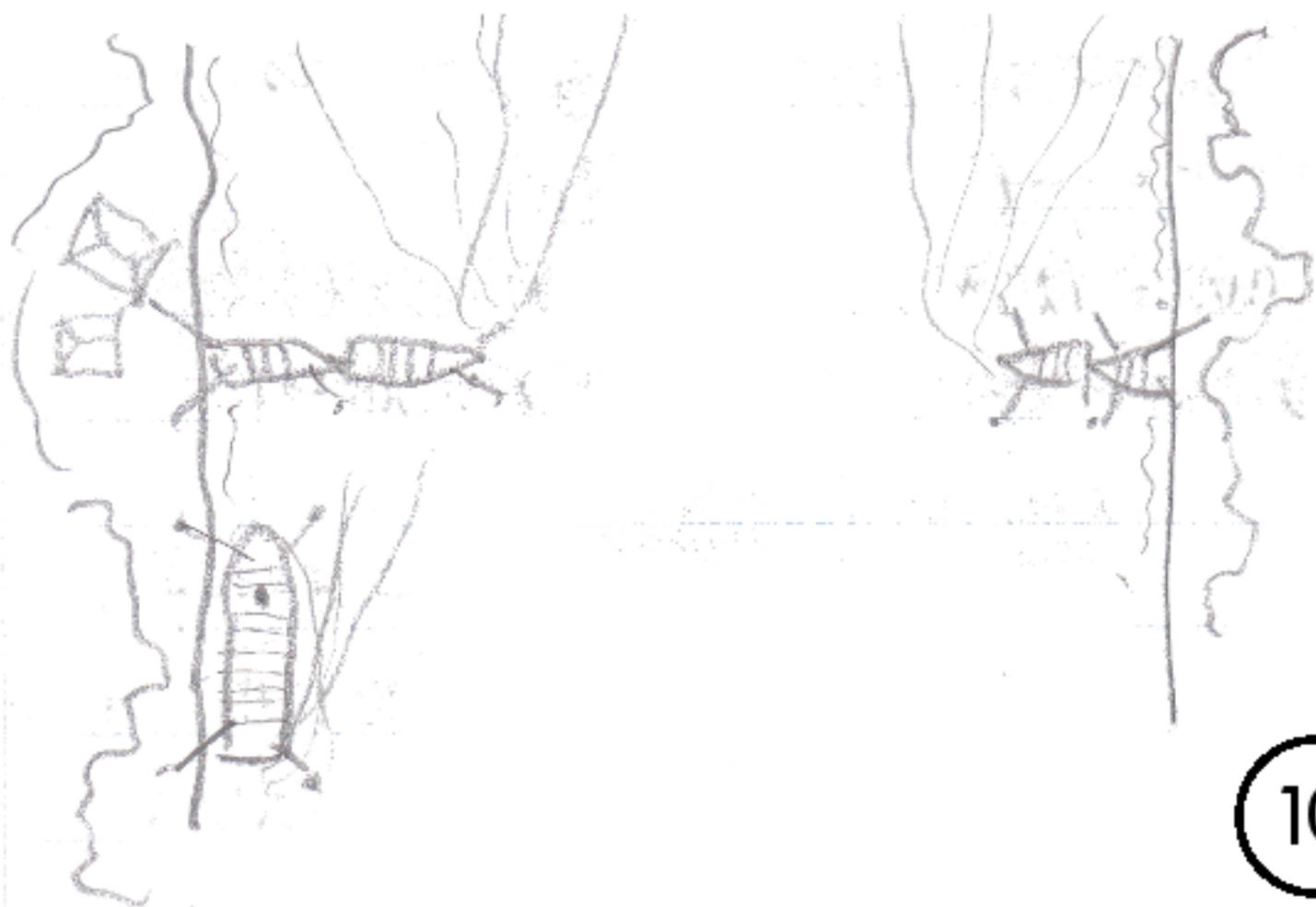
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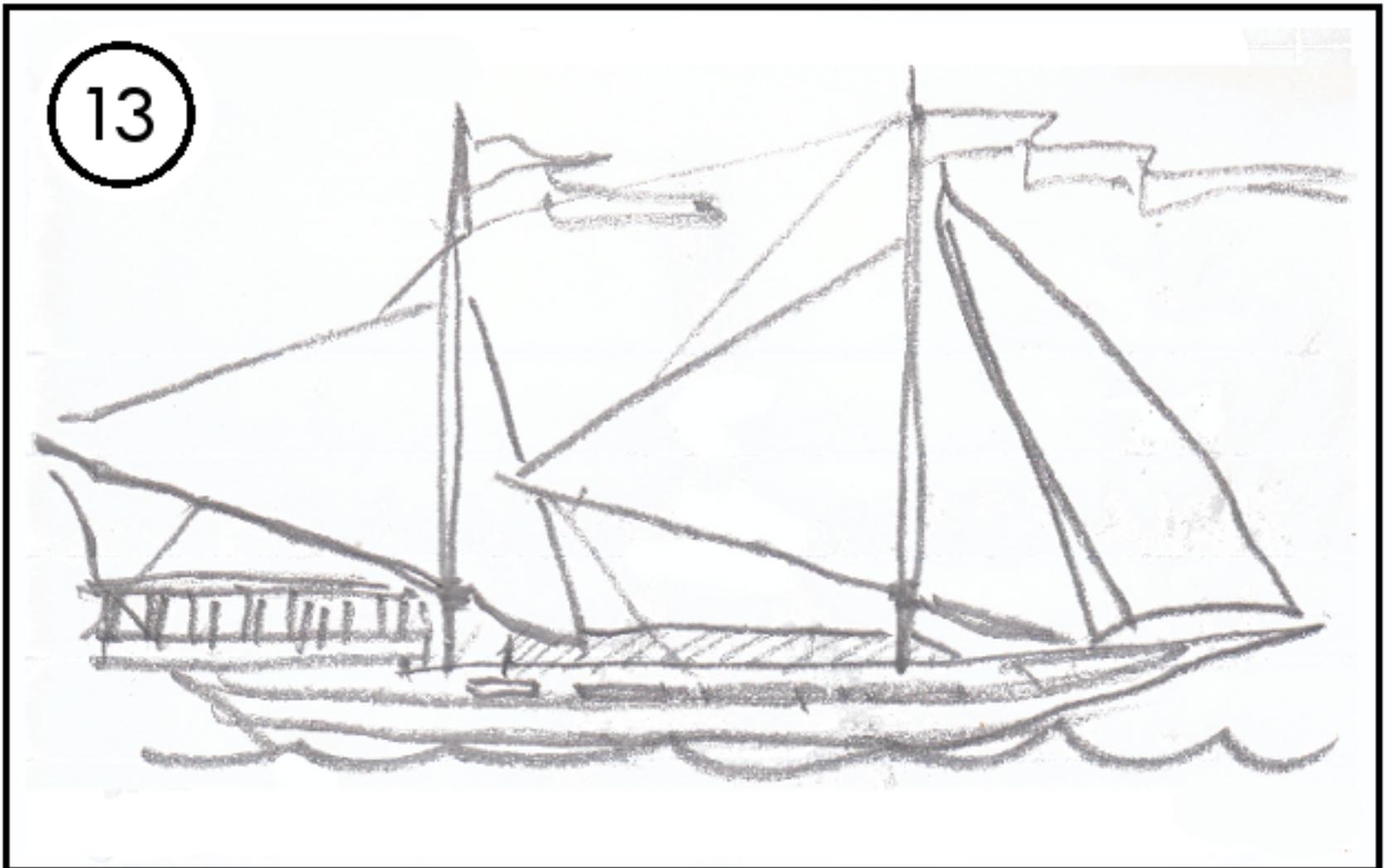
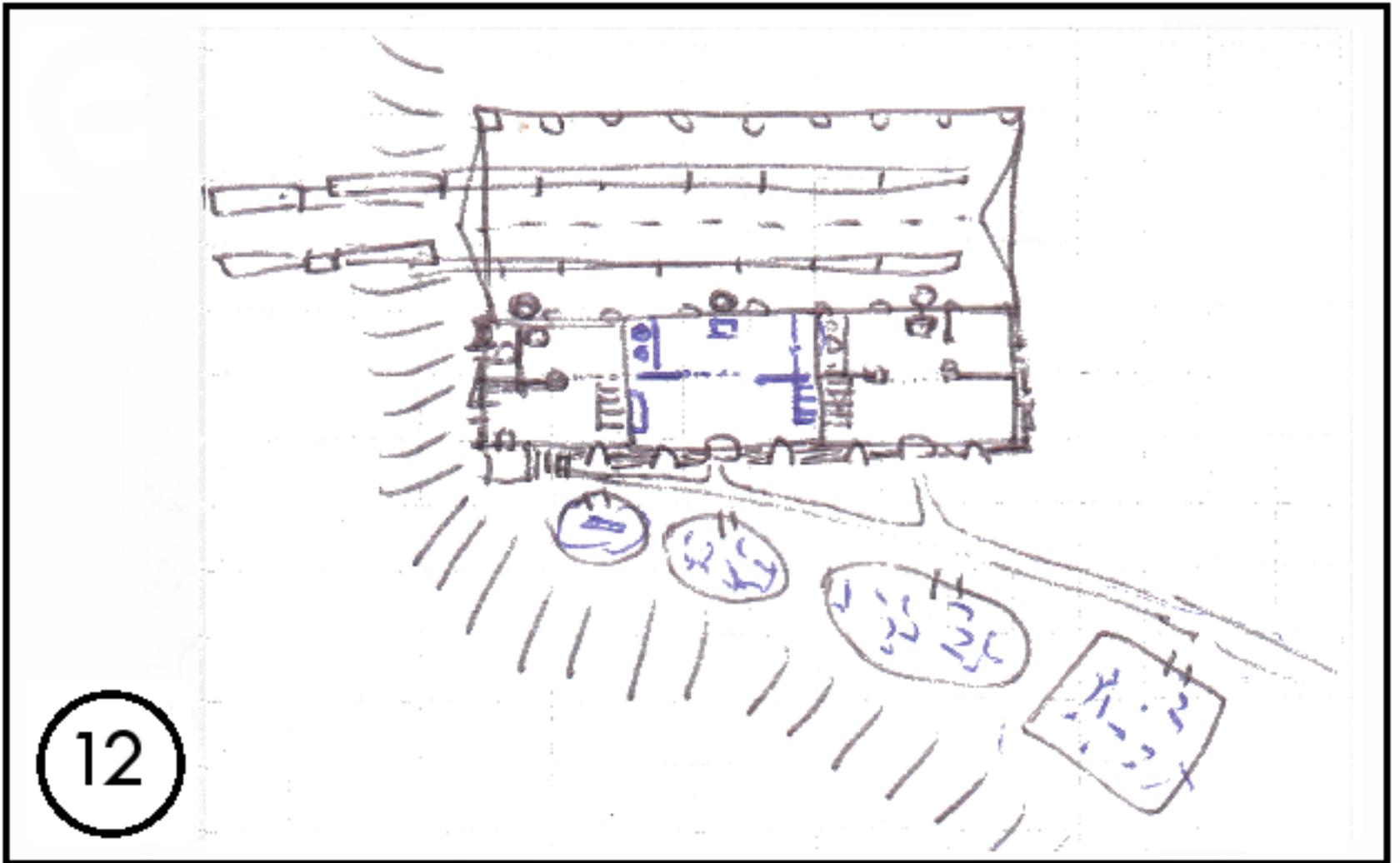
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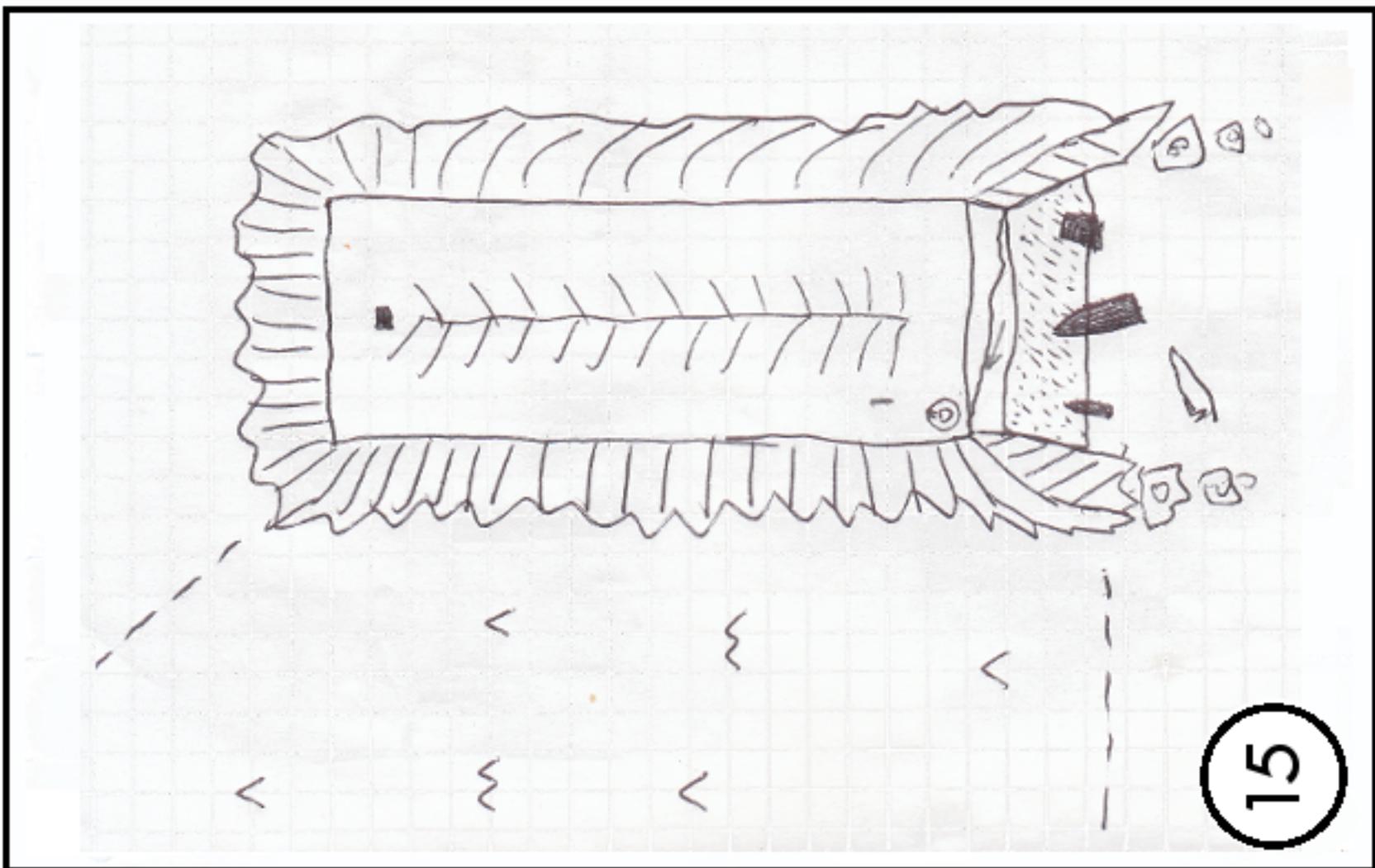
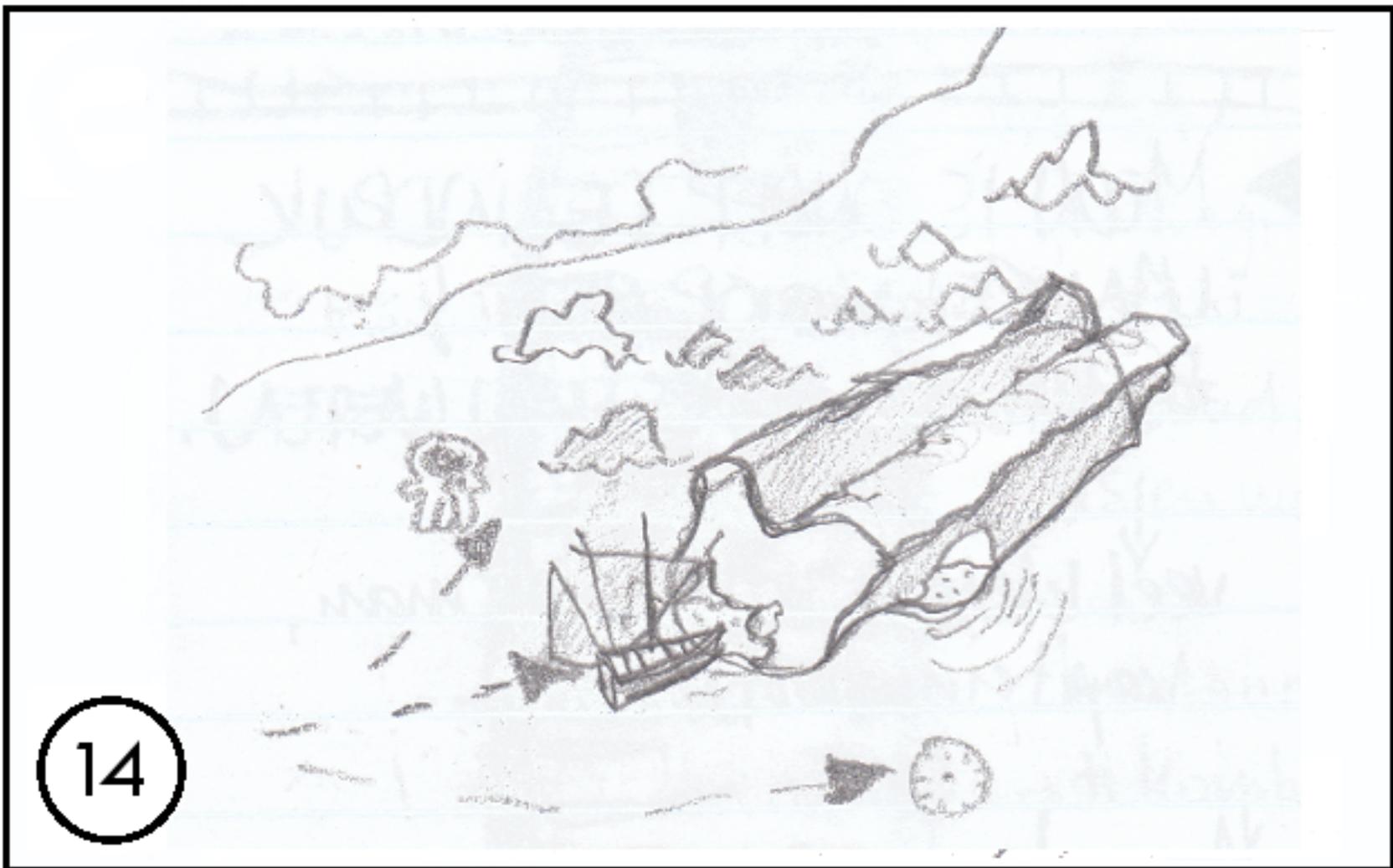


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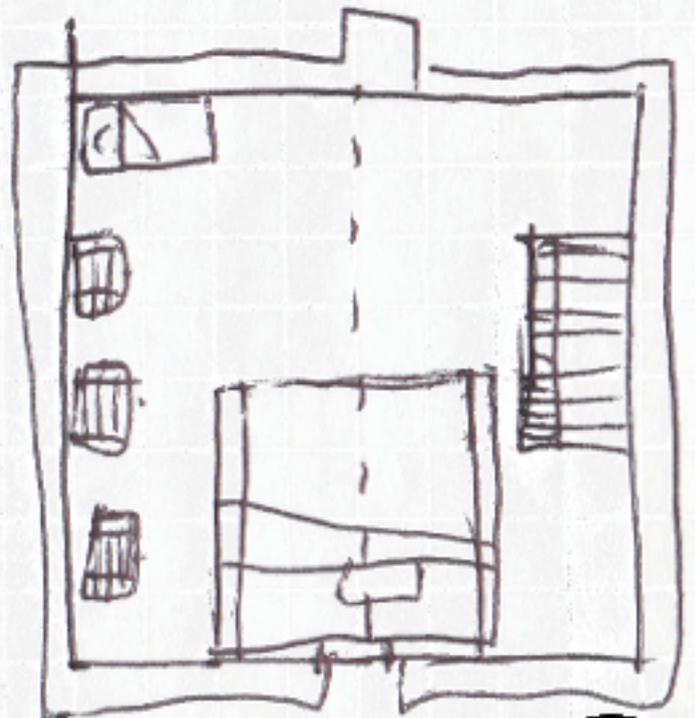
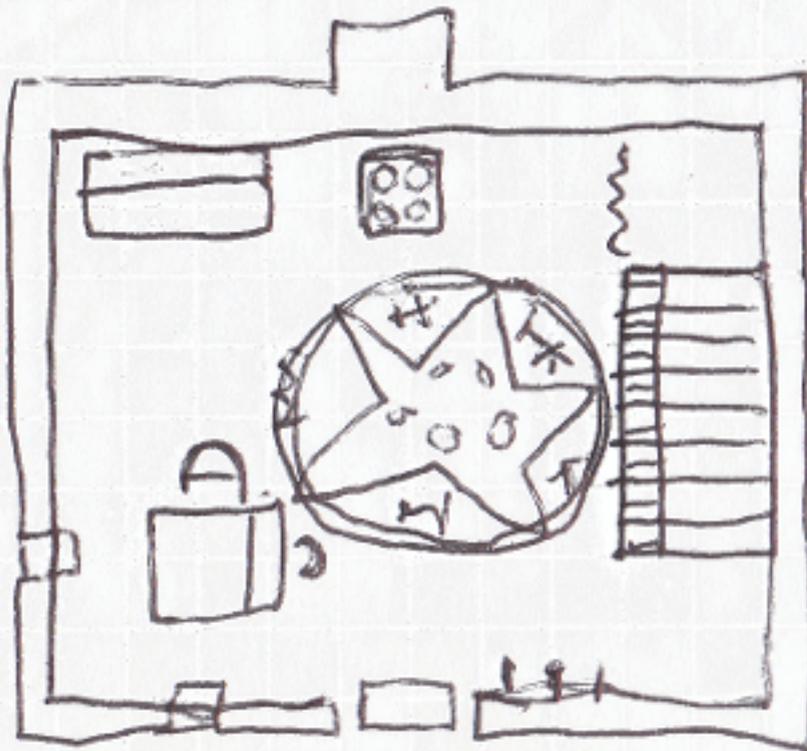


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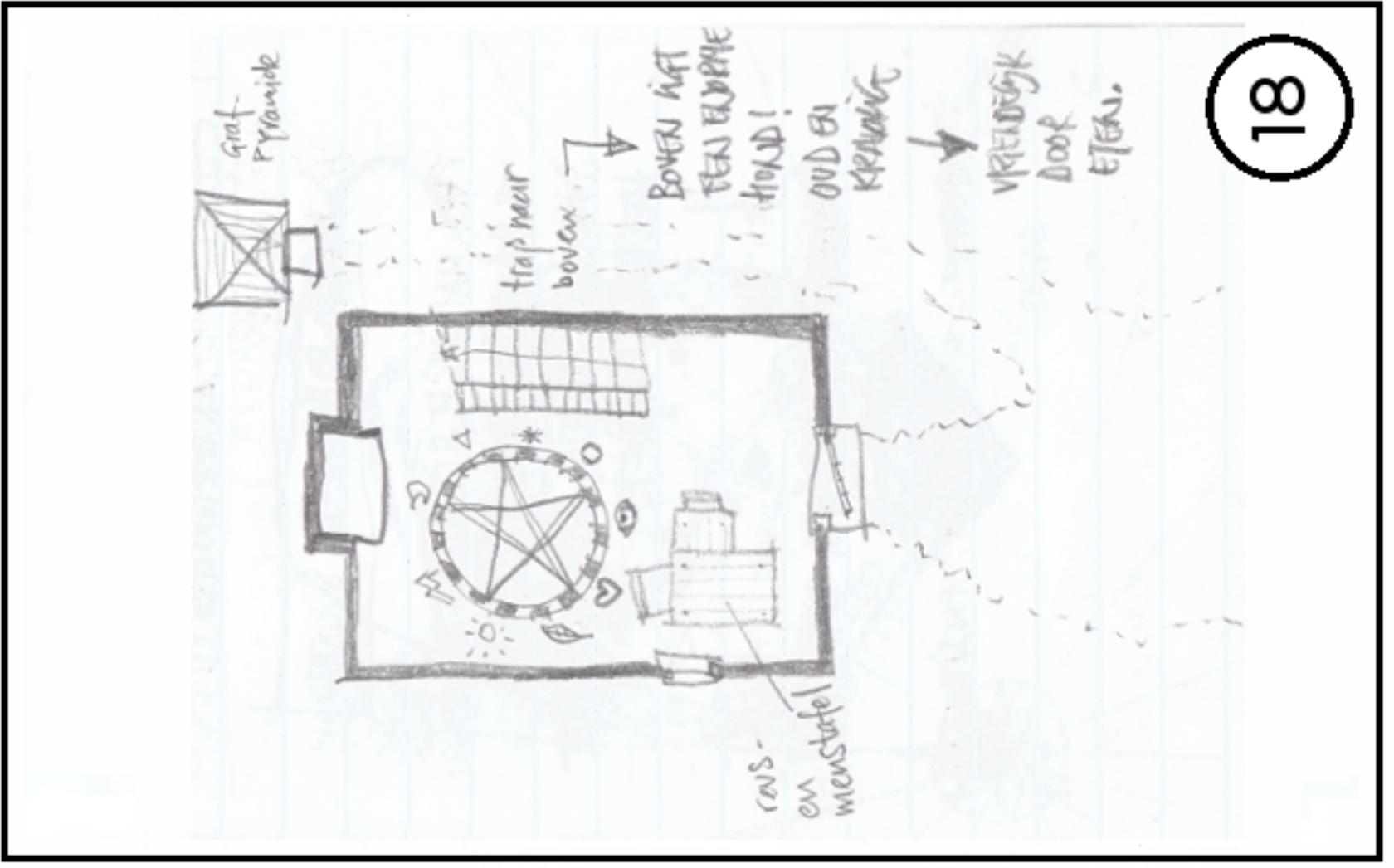




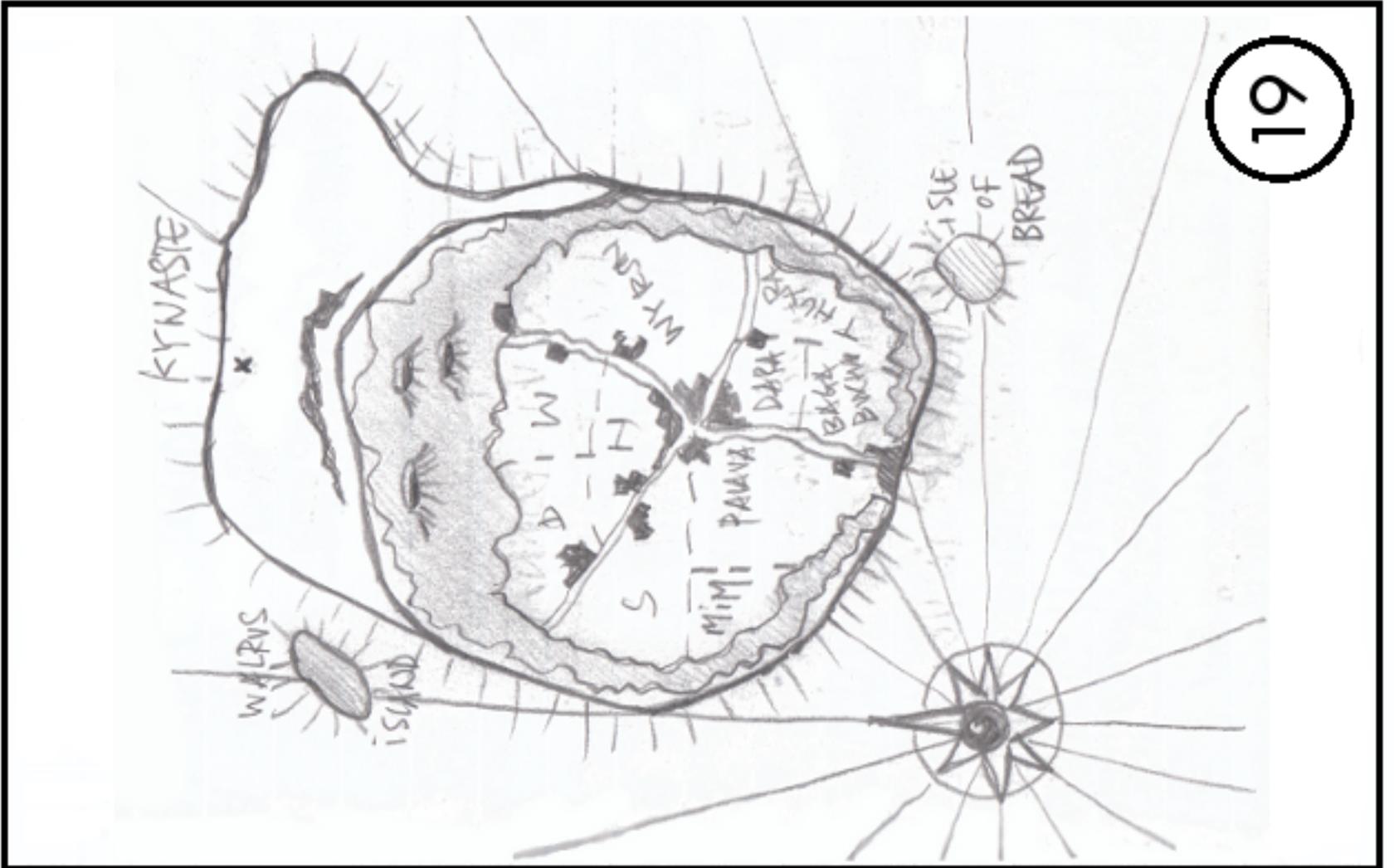
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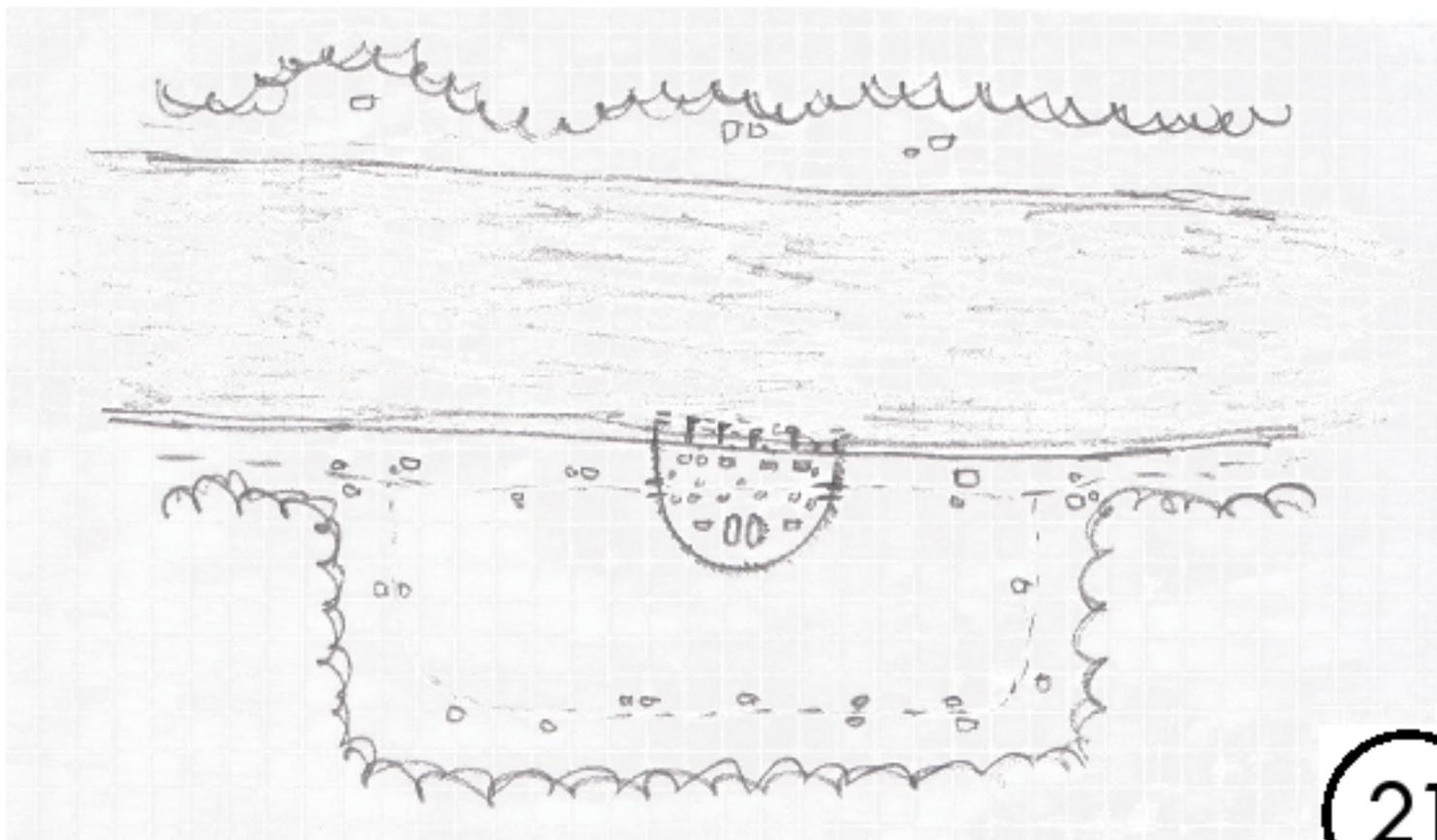
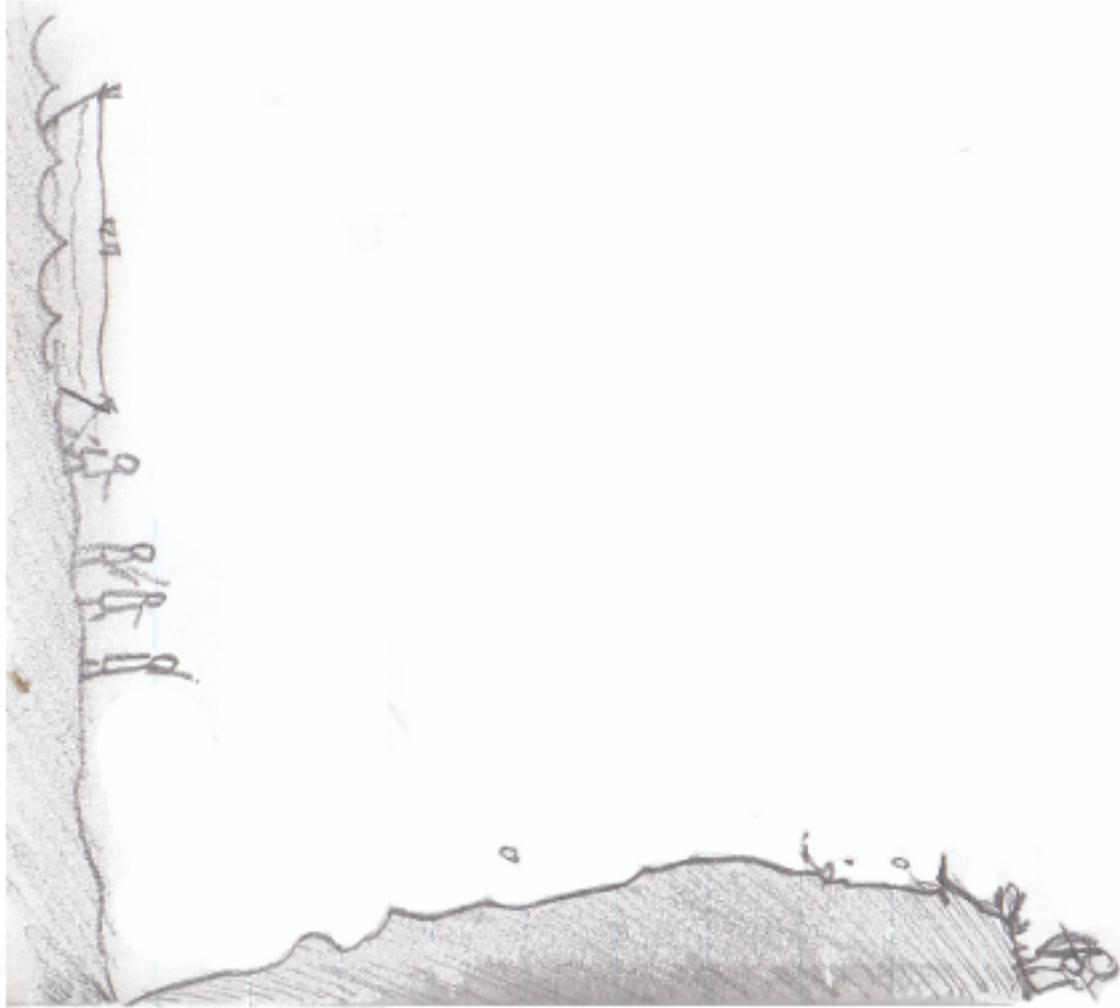


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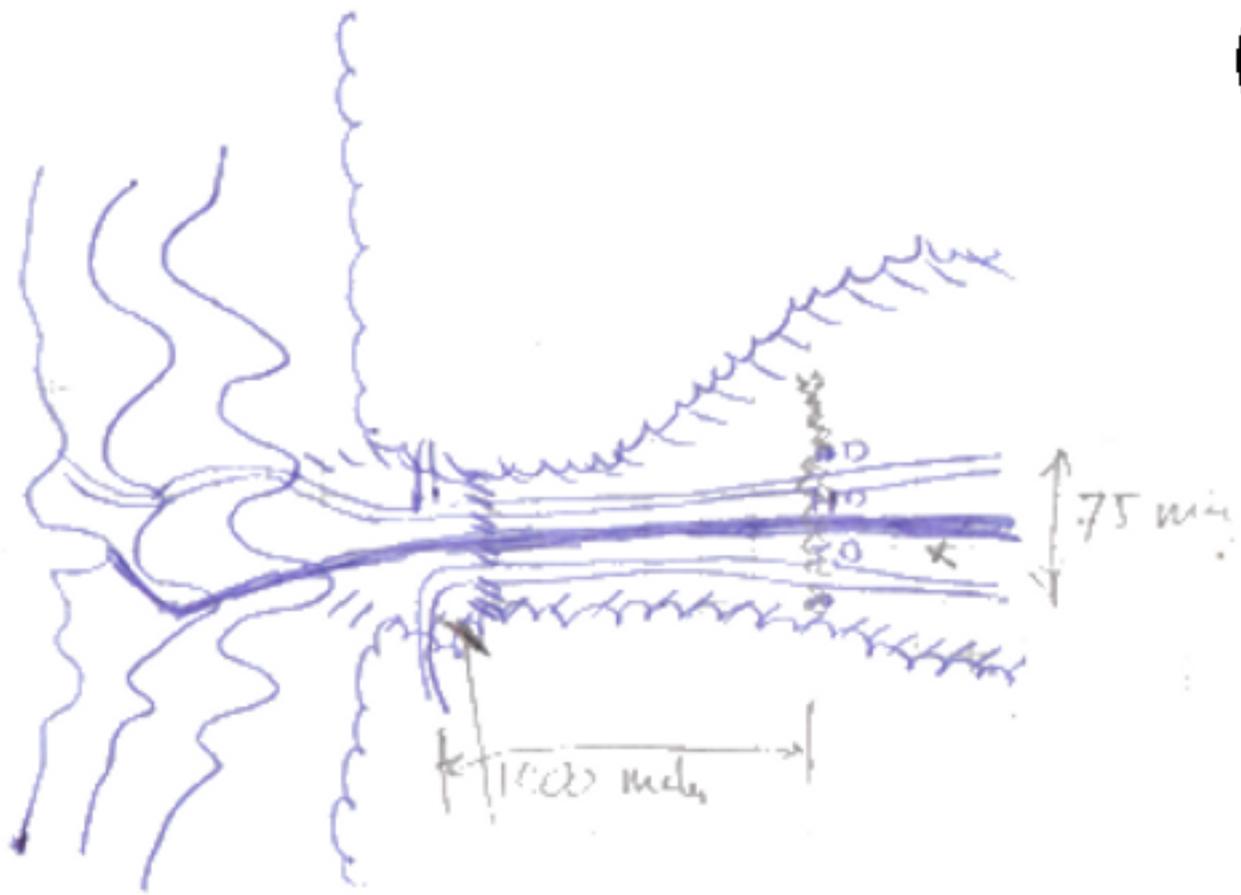
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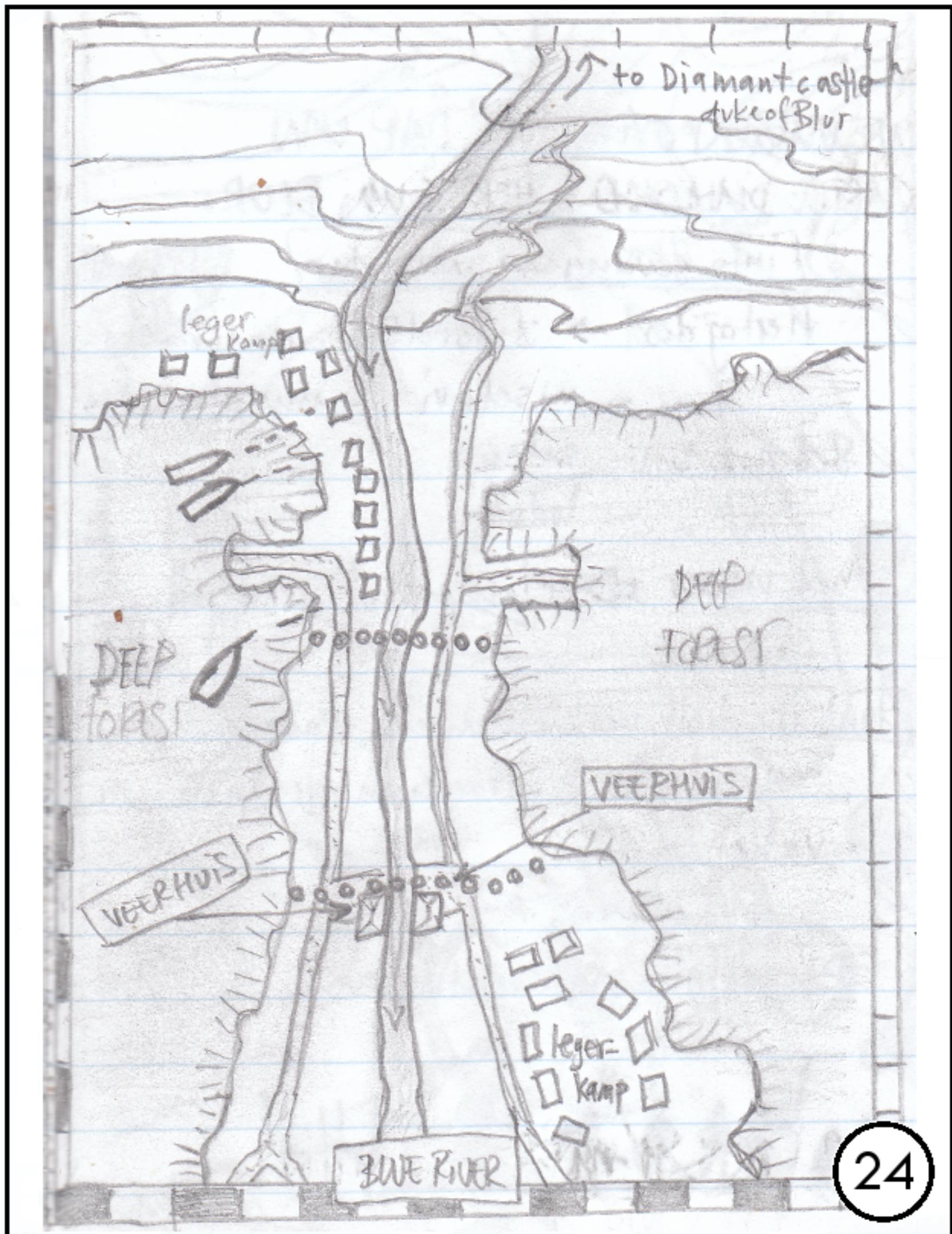
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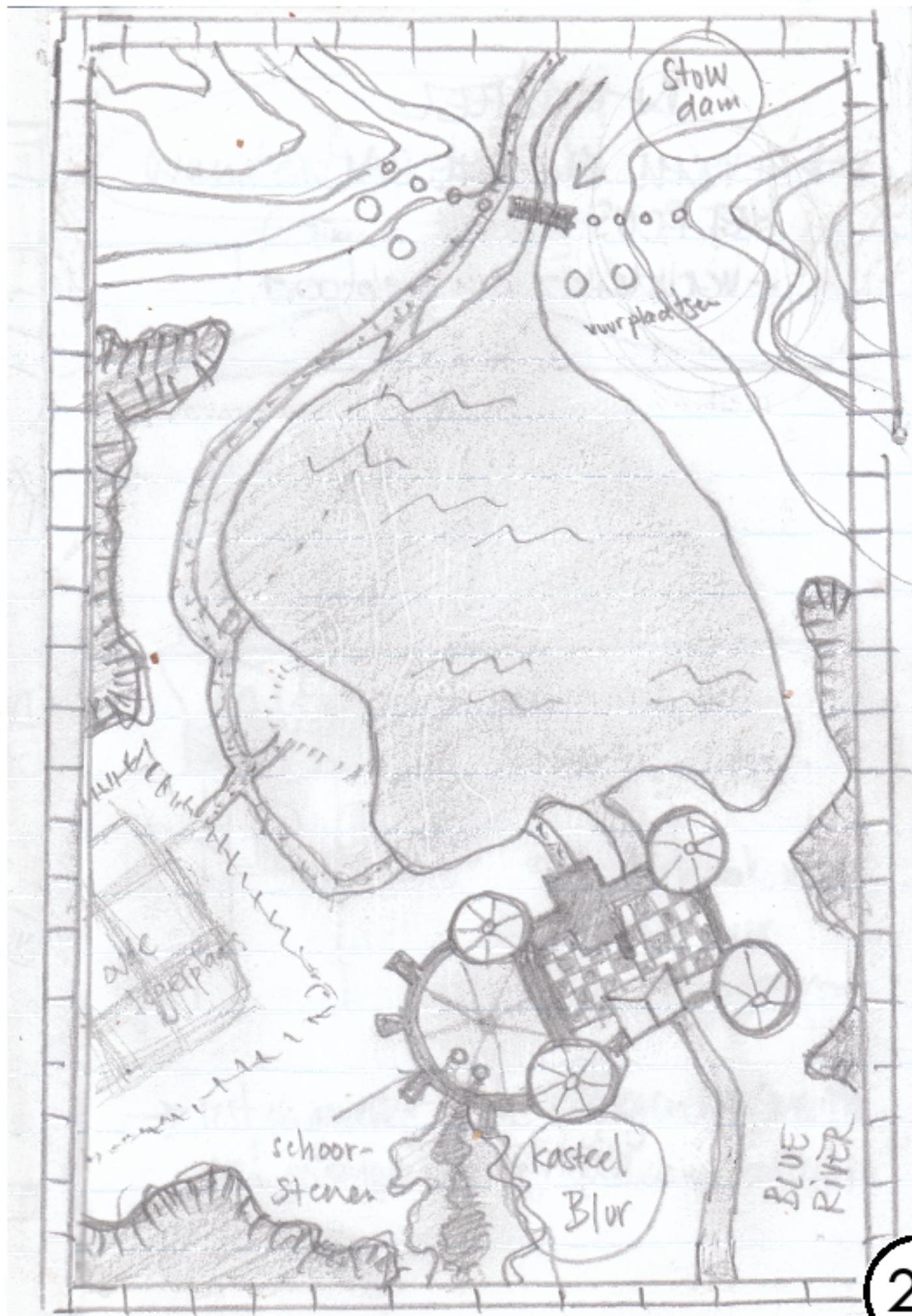
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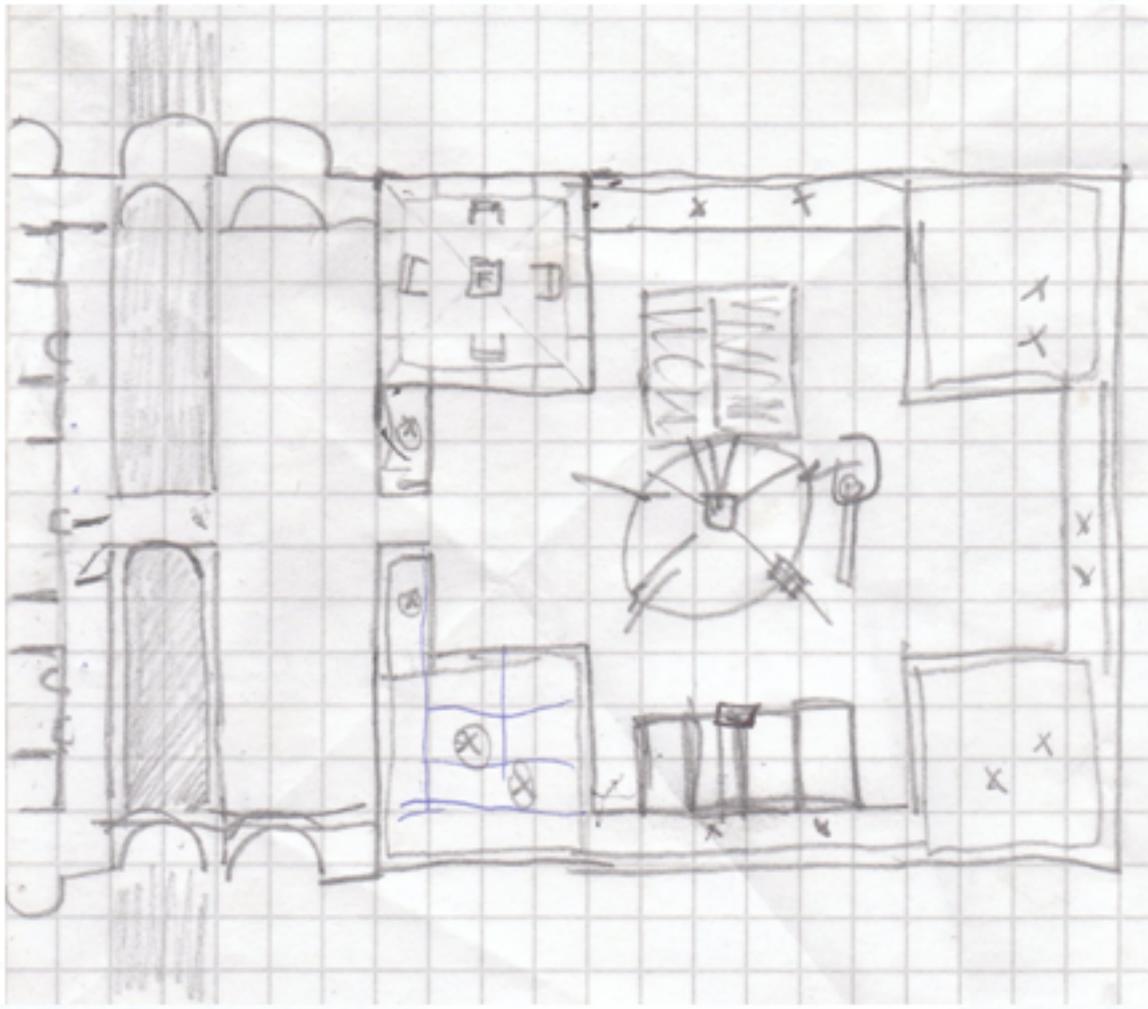


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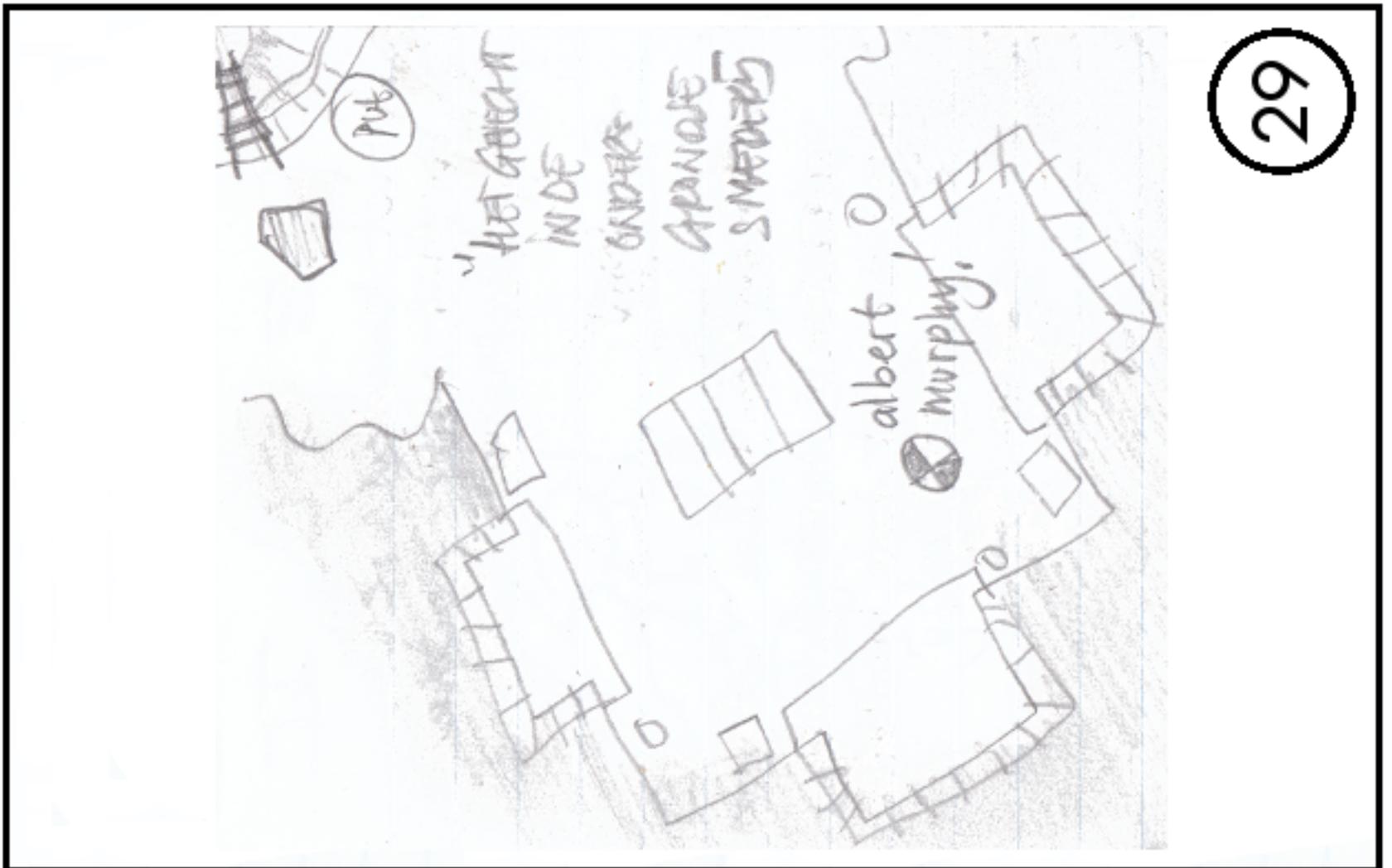
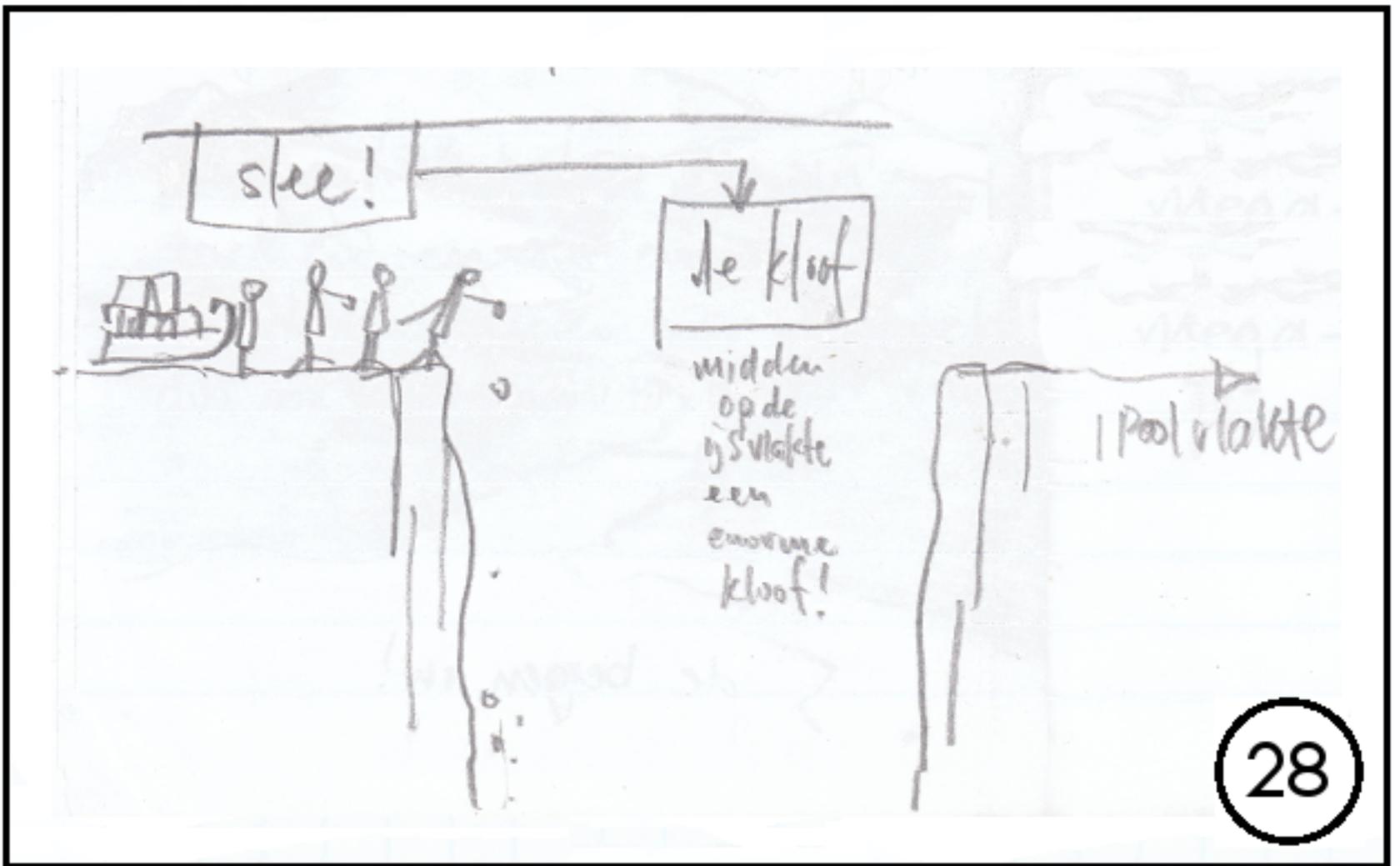


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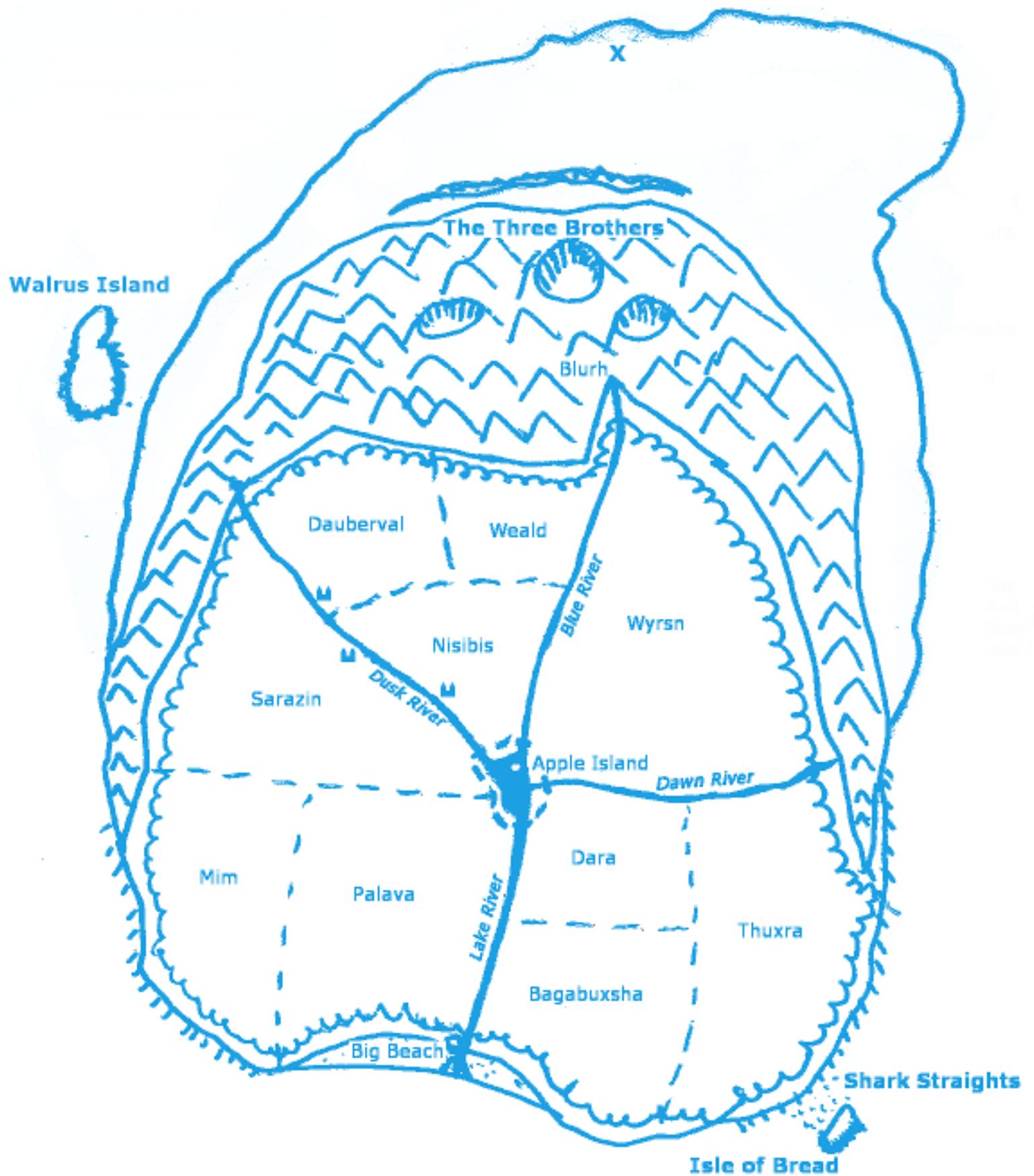


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The Forest





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