

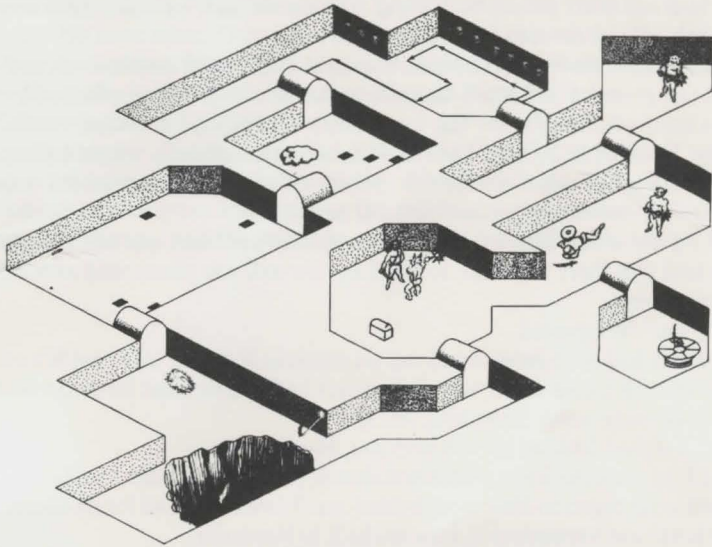


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CLUEBOOK



WHERE DRAGONS DWELL

I stared out across the darkness at the old man. Here I was, back in the same blasted muggy cavern. It was as hot as a demon's tongue.

The cowl of his red wizard's robe cast a shadow on his gaunt face, plunging his eyes into darkness. Still, I knew this was Mordamir, my old teacher.

"You're dead," I said.

I liked the sound of that, like I had the upper hand. It helped, since I couldn't remember why I was here.

"I live!" he said, "I live here where dragons dwell."

I wasn't about to believe this was a damn ghost. I've seen stranger things in life, but never ghosts. But because I don't believe in them, I was stuck for an explanation.

"Why do you haunt me?" I demanded.

"I'm trapped in the dungeons of Erinoch. The worm holds me here. You must save me."



He held out both palms, beckoning. The hands were just as I remembered them, only older, criss-crossed by large, blue veins.

"Don't forsake me now!" I heard him whisper, "This is my one hour of need!"

My heart pounded as I heard his voice again. As a boy, I was enchanted by this great wizard who taught me the foundations of magic. I emulated Mordamir. Actually, I wanted to be him. For me, Mordamir symbolized a wizard's discipline — the will that elements and spirits obeyed. I thought that was what I wanted: inexhaustible knowledge, powers honed to perfection.

But I grew older, and wiser, and eventually our ways parted. I began to understand that there was more to life than how well you summoned were-things and demon imps.

"Help me!" he repeated.

Mordamir had been generous to me. As much as I wanted to, I couldn't escape the thought. In a cold world, where monsters both human and inhuman roamed freely, generosity wasn't something you spit on.

"Yes," I sighed, looking up, "I'll help you, Mordamir."

"Of all my students, I was always proudest of you," he said with a smile.

A cold wind began to blow from behind me. I looked around for its source but the darkness was impenetrable. I turned back to Mordamir.

His hood was blown back and I could now see his whole face. I gasped — his pupils were narrow black crescents, like reptile eyes. A deep rumble shook the cavern and suddenly I faced not my old teacher but a magnificent dragon.

I stepped back and watched as it breathed in, filling its giant lungs through a beautiful copper throat. A stream of fire spewed forth and roared over and around me. For a moment, flames consumed the world.

I woke with a start. I was sitting up in bed, my wool blankets soaked with sweat.

"Damnation!" I grumbled.

This was the third night in a row I'd stood before Mordamir, and the third night I'd been consumed by dragon's fire. This couldn't go on.

I threw off the blankets and got out of bed. Mordamir, the old snake, still alive! Was it possible? He was ancient when I was his student four decades ago. Now here I was, a withering greybeard myself, talking with a man who should've been food for worms years ago.

I plunged my face into the washbasin. The icy water bit my skin as I rinsed the sleep from my eyes. Hell, I didn't want to look for anybody. I'd lived through enough danger for two lives already. All I really wanted to do was stay in this small cottage near the willow tree and hoe potatoes. No matter what gibberish I said in my dreams.



Well, these nightly visitations weren't events I could easily ignore. They lived a separate life from mine. They came out at night and entered my thoughts like a thief enters a house. Maybe they were just dreams of Mordamir. Or maybe they were Mordamir dreaming me. Dreaming of escape from death.

Either way, I wasn't getting any sleep.

I pulled on my thickest robe. The road to the dead city of Erinoch would be long — and cold. I looked out my window. A heavy mist was falling from the sky, collecting on the grass and bending the tall blades toward the earth. Thanks Mordamir. This was just the sort of journey an old man with rheumatism dreams about.



CHAPTER 1

MORDAMIR'S MESSAGE

I reached the deserted city of Erinoch at night. The entrance to the labyrinth was located in the center of the city amidst the ruins of what could have been a temple. A single white arch, adorned with images of dragons and flowing water, marked the narrow stairway that descended to the first level.

Near the opening, nestled beneath a gargoyle leaning angrily from the wall, lay a thin, well-worn book. I picked it up and held it up to the light. Flaking gold letters spelled out the title: *Codex of the Serpent*.

I sat down on the top step and opened the book. It was a journal written by a smooth, flowing hand.

"I, Mordamir..." it began. Very clever, I thought, that he would think to leave something for anyone coming after him. But that was typical of Mordamir — always thinking ahead.

I climbed down the stairs until I came to an iron door with a rusty latch. I forced the latch open and stepped into a small, well-lit antechamber.

The room was hexagonal. Carved into the walls, midway between the floor and the ceiling, were long, serpentine shapes that echoed dragon motifs I'd seen littered among the ruins above. Sputtering torches punctuated the carvings and bathed the stone in a soft light. On the far side of the room stood a humble wooden door.

Directly before me sat a round table made of stone — empty, except for a single candlestick and a grinning human skull that stared up and through me, as if watching a grotesque joke being played out in the rafters. This is the kind of dramatic welcome wizards are fond of. I think it's a load of crap, myself, but then I don't go in for that scary wizard business anymore.

I walked up to the table. The candle hissed and a grey plume of smoke shot into the air, taking me by surprise and causing me to leap back, sword at the ready. The cloud twisted and condensed, slowly forming the head of a bearded man. Though his cheeks had grown hollow, the lines and crevices deeper with age, the image was unmistakable — Mordamir.

I watched the mouth open and close: "Dunric, I'm trapped in the dungeons far below. You must rescue me!"



I didn't know Dunric from the Fell Weasel of Atmoor, but if he was also looking for Mordamir, then he was a friend too.

Dungeons are the kind of place where you need friends.

I turned and walked over to the door. The iron handle was cold and rough. I took a deep breath and pulled the door open.

ULINDOR

Immediately the stench of sweat and blood greeted my nostrils. Throaty grunts and the clash of swords echoed through the chamber. My spine tensed as I noticed a man splayed across the floor just a few feet away, his knees twitching with steadily decreasing urgency. I rushed to his side and peered into his face, just in time to see his eyes roll up and form a vacant stare. Whoever he was, he was dead.

A gold ring on his thumb glistened with magical allure. I pried it off and held it up to the light. Etched inside the band was a familiar name: 'Dunric'.

Congratulations, Dunric, you never made it past the first room. Thanks for the ring.

Slung over his shoulder was a small leather pack. I searched through it and found a thick parchment covered with the slender, convoluted script in which incantations are written. A Fireball spell, three shots.

Something didn't add up. This corpse was wearing armor and a shield — not the typical garb of some master of the arcane. This wasn't Dunric. More likely it was his servant carrying some of Dunric's belongings. But where was he going with Dunric's weapons?

There wasn't time to think about it. Out of the corner of my eye I saw movement — a figure, roughly man-shaped, was bearing down on me.

He stood a little over five feet, slightly shorter than me but broader. His sinewy, muscular body was covered with a mottled, snot-green hide that stretched from the tips of his clawed feet all the way up to two oversized, pointed ears. He was unadorned except for a steel bracer on each forearm and a modest loincloth made from the fur of small animals.

He didn't look too friendly.

Maybe it was the burning black eyes. Maybe it was the short, filed teeth. Or maybe it was the spiked mace he was hefting with both hands.



He swung twice at me — missed — and I fell forward, thrusting my sword. The awkward blade fumbled out of my shaking hand, and for a moment I panicked. The sword slipped forward point-first and plunged into his chest. The goblin just stood there — maybe he was slow, or stupid, or both — so I grabbed the handle, yanked the blade out and gave him another quick jab. He let out a short gasp and dropped to the ground.

Well, I wasn't the swordsman I used to be, but I had a hunch more practice was to come. There didn't seem any reason to start now, though, especially with a scroll of fireballs in my hand. I opened the parchment and read the spell. These would roast anybody's chestnuts.

I walked into the adjoining room. A barbarian was barely standing his ground against another goblin warrior. As I walked toward them, the goblin spotted me and wasted no time turning his attack on me. I sent the ball of fire roaring at his chest and stopped him in his tracks. He dropped to his knees and then fell to the floor without ceremony. Beyond the goblin's warm body, a barbarian — Ulindor, I knew from Mordamir's journal — eyed me through glaring slits.

"You must rescue Mordamir! He is trapped many levels below," Ulindor ordered. Something about him was suspicious. What did he know of Mordamir? Why hadn't he rescued him?

"Here is a key you will need. I must go now." He disappeared before I could ask questions. I took the key and used it to unlock a wooden trunk nearby. Inside was an odd assortment of items: gold, two pouches, a full water bottle, and a map. I opened both pouches. One was full of bait — the other was stuffed with reeking spores. Those would curl the toes of a noseless troll!

There were two doors in this chamber. Going through the closest one seemed too obvious, so I went east to the one farthest away. I walked back into the adjoining room and past the dead body — its tunic was brick red and beginning to harden.



GOBLIN LIEUTENANT

I entered the short hall and looked around. All was clear to the left, but to right stood another goblin, scowling. He wasn't howling and gibbering and making like he wanted to kill me. That in itself showed intelligence I wouldn't have expected from something with green skin. I walked toward him, hoping we could talk.

"Do you..."

"Stop! I forbid you to come any closer!" he said.

"Very well," I said, hurling a fireball at his head.

He dropped like a sack of flour. I stepped over him and rummaged through his pack. In it was a key and a note on rough stationery. The note mentioned deadly shades in one of the rooms.

Spilled behind him was a small pile of shiny coins. I doubted I'd need gold in this place, but I took them anyway. I could buy a cow with this kind of money.

HALL OF SKULLS

Stone skulls lined the walls of the next room. As if that wasn't suspicious enough, random tiles on the floor would occasionally sink, only to rise again seconds later. I smelled a trap.

I stood for awhile by the door and watched the tiles sink and rise over and over. I noticed a path of slightly worn tiles that ran along the right edge of the room. They didn't move. This had to be the safe route past whatever hideous death had been planned for the unwary.

I stepped onto the path and followed it carefully, skirting along the right wall. Toward the middle of the room I lost balance and stepped on a bad tile — one that triggered the spears. Arrows started flying from all directions, so I abandoned the safe path and ran like hell to get through the far door.



PITFALL

The next room was unremarkable except for three deadly pit traps in a line across the room. A compost pile had been slopped to one side — maybe someone thought I'd rather fall to my death than risk wading through a little manure. I stoically endured soiling my feet and walked over to the other door.

Before I went through the door, I stopped and thought that a pile of dirt like the one I'd just sunk my toes in would be perfect for planting spores. Wisely I chose not to do that here. Those spores not only smelled bad, they looked nasty—I didn't want to be around when they sprouted.

IN THE DARK

The dark room. This is where the shades were and I would need light if I was going to get past them. I noticed there were unlit torches on the wall. I hated to waste a fireball lighting torches, but like an idiot I'd forgotten to bring a tinderbox.

I stood facing right and conjured a fireball spell at the middle of the angled corner wall. The fireball flew over the fixtures and the torches caught.

I took advantage of the new light to check my map for pitfalls. Five of them were logically spaced across the room — I would need to hug the wall to my right to get by.

I scanned the room and noticed two shadows creeping across the floor toward me. They smelled my blood. I stood by the door a bit and waited for them to draw closer. When they closed to within ten feet I ran along the right wall. As I ran, carefully trying to avoid pit traps, I noticed a few objects in the left side of the room. It was too tempting! I veered over and scooped up another spell — a charm of some sort — and a shiny amulet.

The way to the door was clear. I hurled myself at the latch only to discover the door was locked.

"To hell with locksmiths!" I yelled, fumbling for the right key. I managed to get the door open with the key I took from the goblin lieutenant and leapt into the next room.



HALL OF MILLENNIUM

The hay looked soft. Real soft. I collapsed into a deep sleep without even thinking about getting ambushed by goblins or shades. Dreams are always disjointed and this one was no exception.

I drifted into an uneasy slumber and let questions float and pop like bubbles in my mind. Where was Mordamir? It could take me days, even weeks to reach him — would I be able to do it? I dreamed of bloody pitfalls and skewering spears, of a blonde pixie being kidnapped.

“ANA!” I awoke with a start, yelling a name I’d read in Mordamir’s journal. Ana? The damsel? She looked frightened and helpless.

I lifted myself to my feet and discovered my left leg was dead. I stumbled my first few steps deeper into the room. I rested my weight on my right leg and shook my left to wake it as I walked. It felt like a thousand needles were working their way into my toes.

I looked down at my poor pin-cushioned feet and, only a few feet away, a gem embedded in the floor. It was a deep amber knot with irregular marks in an upper facet. Any gem left unturned could’ve hidden Mordamir’s whereabouts — and let’s face it, a gem the size of a biscuit is hard to pass up — so I wedged my staff beneath it, hoping I could pry the sucker out.

I pressed down slowly at first, then with all my weight. I bounced on the staff several times, balancing with my feet and hands. Finally I stopped wavering and just laid there face down, staff butt pressing in my stomach. It wasn’t going to move today. It probably wouldn’t move this century.

I pulled my staff out from under the gem and stood back. It laid at one end of a curved measuring device carved into the floor. At the other end was a beam of sunlight that broke through a tiny window in the dungeon wall.

This had to be a mechanism of some kind. I studied it for a moment. The sunlight moved along the measuring line toward the gem. At that point, something happened — a rope fell from the ceiling, a parade filed in through the door, or animals began to speak.

I watched the beam of light a little longer. It wasn’t moving with the time of day — it didn’t look like it was moving at all. I stepped back. The measuring line didn’t measure hours, but centuries! At this rate, the beam of light wouldn’t reach the gem for another seven centuries.



I didn't have a day to wait, much less seven centuries. I needed to find a way to trigger this thing now.

"Something shiny." Mordamir's journal helped me once more. I pulled out the amulet I was carrying and held it up to face the light stream. The reflection cast a shivering white dot on the wall above the gem. Guiding the dot down, I rerouted the beam onto the irregular facet and it kissed the gem, showering the ceiling with red and yellow lights.

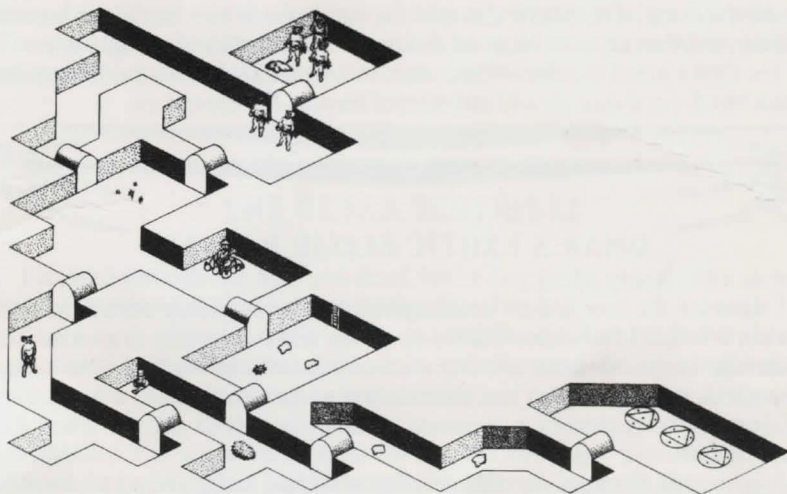
A plume of dust and heat billowed up into the room as a passage opened up in the floor. I fixed my eyes on the opening, waiting for some horrific billion-eyed creature to spring out and end my journey all too soon.

Dust flecks drifted and sparkled settling comfortably on the stone floor. This was it. It was just an opening with a ladder going down to the second level.

I sighed a deep sigh. My head swam with doubts about this whole quest. I convinced myself that nothing ahead of me could be harder than victories I had just won. I didn't know then that the effort behind me was a five-penny pumpkin toss compared to what I was about to face.



CHAPTER 2



SLIME

A blob of the green stuff gurgled menacingly in the corner. Another slithered across the floor toward me. I've never liked fungi, and the kind that can bore a hole in a horse is especially loathsome — maybe the fact that you couldn't hack or stomp on it had something to do with it.

I saw something gleam in the dim light — a gem. I dashed for the fist-sized stone and whisked it into my pack. The slime scurried quickly toward me, but I faked it out by starting in one direction and then quickly rushing in another.

I kept one eye on the slime and the other on the door. Then both eyes unavoidably fell on a dust-caked pile of brittle bones.

Poor sap! I said. I shuffled through them with the toe of my boot and uncovered a gold-handled sword encrusted with jewels. A long, ornate "S" decorated the tempered steel on both sides of the blade just above the handle.



This was Solundul, the elven sword of agility. I knew then that the bones I stood over once supported the flesh of Arinar, a great Elven Lord. I hoisted the sword above my head, watching it split the murkiness in two. My fingers burned slightly, and then my arms loosened and the sword was suddenly as light as air.

The slimes jolted to mind — both were rolling quickly toward me, hungry for warm blood. I gathered my wits and skipped through the upper door.



OMAR'S EXOTIC ELIXIR BAZAAR

I slammed the door and collapsed against it. A sweet melody drifted through the air, one that I hadn't heard since my youth. A bearded fellow in a turban sat peacefully in the corner strumming a lute. I remembered the tune. The words (though the merchant didn't sing them) told of a weasel that tricked a mouse into stealing a piece of cheese for the weasel's dessert — only to discover it was the main course.

I approached the man. An odd collection of bottles, sacks, and pottery vessels were carefully displayed before him. He looked up at me and flashed a full set of golden teeth.

"Greetings, *effendi!* I am Omar Nadir al Kahlil, elixirsmith to kings and student of the apothecaries to the ancients." He smiled like a fox nibbling the head from a chick.

"I've got something you need," he said with a wink.

"How do you know what I need?" I growled. He shrugged and continued.

"You can't venture safely in these parts without my slime oil for boots, a bargain at only 80 gold pieces."

"WHAT?" My voice cracked in disbelief. "80 gold pieces? Forget it!" I walked away in disgust at the outrageous price — never mind that I only had 70.

"Wait, *effendi!*" he yelped. I grinned for a moment out of his view, and then turned and walked back to him.

"All right. 60 gold pieces for my oil," he said.

Already having pushed my luck to its limits on this journey, I bought the oil and ventured deeper into the room.

Several bright lights flashed before me. I remember Mordamir's words — these were will o' the wisps, spirits that preyed on the living. I rummaged through my



pack and found a scrolled charm marked “WOW.” I wasn’t sure that stood for Will O’ the Wisps or was just an expression of disbelief before the incorporeal. As the wisps drew close, I read the first part of the scroll. Whatever it meant, it worked. The wisps suddenly grew calm and began dancing in the air around my head. I proceeded to the door in the northeast corner of the hall.



THE OUTER VESTIBULE

I stepped through the door and stood before two goblin guards. Five stripes scarred into their left arms indicated high rank.

The guards glared fiercely at me but didn’t move. Perhaps they were intimidated by the wisps that followed me into the vestibule — or maybe they were more concerned about protecting whatever was behind that steel door.

I removed the Charm spell from my pack and reread the time-worn incantation. The words issued from my lips and the magic prodded the wisps forward. As I read the last line, the scroll dissolved into gossamer threads of dust and fell through my fingers.

The wisps floated forward and nipped at the flesh of the goblins. Slowly the guard on the right sank to his knees and fell face down onto the cold stone. The second guard kindly repeated this gesture and the wisps returned to their posts around my head.

I searched their bodies and found a leather satchel bulging with a familiar dust. I dipped my tongue into the dust and a warm feeling consumed me. I knew this substance — I used to nip it from Mordamir’s alchemy laboratory when he was away. I called it Dust of Complaisance, and it was guaranteed to put you in a mellow mood.

I stuffed the dust into my pack. Now I had to confront whatever the guards were guarding. I put my hand on the doorknob, said a quick prayer to whatever damned spirits resided in this place (surely my prayer wouldn’t be heard by anyone else through these cursed walls), and opened it.



GRESH THE ~~WISE~~ DEAD

My nose met with a stench from hell. It could've been the three goblins holding court in the room, or it could've been the large pile of dung to my left. Either way, it smelled worse than most French cheeses.

One of the goblins was thin and wrinkled and wore the purple robes of royalty. Before him stood two powerful goblins with heavy maces. They looked like twin demons vomited up from the bowels of hell.

It sure would be handy if the goblin king were dead, I thought. My goblin worries would be over.

I set my sights on the large pile of refuse and remembered my spores. Oversized spores probably grew quickly, so I'd have to plant them in the dirt and get out the door without getting caught in a scuffle.

I looked up at the goblin trio who were busy scowling at me. I began to slowly inch over to the left.

"I, er, maybe we can talk. You know — not kill each other," I said, reaching behind my back and pulling the tattered bag of spores from my pack. I untangled the leather knot with my forefinger.

I moved over until the pile of dirt was directly in front of me.

"In fact, I've brought you a gift," I continued, slowly stepping up to them.

Both goblin guards snarled and started toward me. I dropped the spores onto the dung and broke for the door. I heard the goblins close on my heels as I reached the latch. I have to keep them in here!

I threw open the door and sailed through the portal, slamming the door shut with my foot. I crouched in the Outer Vestibule, sword drawn and waiting. If the spores didn't do their job, I'd have hell to pay. But nobody followed me out. Soon all I could hear was the sound of my lungs expanding and contracting involuntarily.

I reentered his highness' room and saw the last surviving guard collapse to the floor. Several large mushrooms had sprouted from the dirt and sprayed more deadly spores in all directions.

I rolled over the bodies of the two guards looking for anything, but no luck.

"Give me water..." the goblin king murmured. "I give you... information...peace..." I only had one bottle of water, but the promise of peace and alliance with the goblins was worth it. Their help might make the rest of my journey an extended vacation.



I held up his head and poured the water into his half-open mouth. He swallowed weakly and smiled. "I'll tell you how to..." he whispered, "Next level...three jewels... slime...rock becomes one...floor...right, left, center..."

His body relaxed in my arms. I eased his head to the floor and placed his arms along his side. I was allied with the goblins, but only I knew it. Other goblins would think of me as the guy who killed their king.

BACK AT OMAR'S

I shuffled back into the big hall. Ahead of me was a wooden door with words carved into it. I squinted and drew closer. My toe landed on something hard and uneven and I fell spread-eagle on the uneven floor. I turned my head to see the sly object which caught me unaware. A stone, a simple rock, had sent me sailing to the floor.

I almost picked it up and sent it on its own sailing jaunt, but I held its roughness in my palm and remembered the king's hint about a stone. I dropped it into my pack, climbed to my feet, and approached the door.

"GUARD — TOLL AHEAD" was my first interpretation of the door's message. Hope it doesn't cost more than 10 gold, I thought. After I'd fought my way through the next room, however, I figured out what its real message was: "GUARD — TROLL AHEAD."

THE WESTERN CORRIDOR

I heard a faint clicking sound moving my direction from just around the bend. The sound skipped and stopped — it sensed me too.

I stepped up to my left wall and froze. I watched the nearest corner for signs of whatever I was about to fight. The rounded edge of a horn appeared, and then slowly, a second horn and two angry black eyes. This was one of the Shendrak trolls, the formidable opponents Mordamir had warned me about.



He burst into full view and charged toward me. His fetid odor preceded him, and I gagged for a moment. You don't know the word stink until you've whiffed a troll.

My sword thrust forward and the troll ducked to his right. He was not toying with me — I was marked for death. Straightening, he delivered an up-slicing gash to my side. My eyes widened as the burning sensation of pain filled my ribs. Anger shot through my temples, sharpening my reactions. I delivered two quick jabs to the troll's lungs.

He staggered a moment as he clutched the holes in his trunk, and then sunk to the floor like used laundry.

LINDLI'S QUARTERS

I passed through the door into another long hallway. Off to my left sitting in the corner was a small dwarf in a rich red jacket. He didn't seem to take notice as I shut the door behind me. Instead, he continued chipping away on a red gem the size of my fist.

He needed no introduction — Mordamir had often spoke of the mad dwarf who protected the labyrinth. This was Lindli, the master locksmith of Erinoch.

I sighed heavily and approached the dwarf.

"Don't bother me," he said tersely, "I'm cutting a gem. Yes, you need it. No you can't have it. I wouldn't give it to anyone, least of all you. Go away."

I liked him already. Irritability is a virtue only lunkheads don't appreciate. Unfortunately, I needed that gem — I'd have to temporarily alter his endearing personality.

I reached in my pack and rummaged through stones and spells, finally coming upon the small quilted satchel full of dust. I opened it, dug my fingers in deeply, and sent a handful cascading on his head. Before I could speak, he smiled.

"Let me help you. Please take this gem," he spouted.

"Well, I wasn't..."

"No, really, I insist. Take it and go with my blessings. Good luck."

Before I could thank him he stood up and touched a hidden lever in the stones. The corner rotated and Lindli disappeared into the wall.

Powerful stuff, that dust. I closed up the new gem in my pack and turned to go.



Directly before me was a most welcome sight: a pile of hay. Soon I was lying on the soft, warm pile, drifting off to sleep.

I dreamed about the goblins. They seemed reasonable. If I could somehow show them my goodwill, maybe they'd take a warming to me.

I awoke refreshed but a little stiff. As I stood, I almost crumbled over my sleeping leg.

"Damned limb!" I muttered, limping down the corridor.

I opened the nearest door and stood facing a pile of slime the size of a hefty cow pattie. I shut the door and sat down. I had slime oil, and this looked like an opportunity to use it.

I poured out the slime oil into my palms and rubbed it into every crease on my boots. Slime was an enemy you didn't take chances with. The thirsty suede drank up the thin oil and immediately started to dry. There wasn't much time. I opened the door and stepped into the Eastern Corridor.

EASTERN CORRIDOR

The oil fended off two attacks of slime! It was unfailingly effective.

This being the first time I'd seen slime since I found the stone, I tried several combinations of King Gresh's hints. He mentioned gems, slime, the stone, the floor — all elements I had here.

I dropped one gem, then the other, and watched the slime gurgle around them with disinterest. I picked up the gems and tried dropping the stone. The slime took to that like a goblin to moldy cheese. It burned the stone with its acidic fluid. After a second, the slime slid off of a perfect chunk of vermilion ice — another gem.

The oil on my boots was getting patchy, so I picked up the shiny gem and tossed it into my sack. I ran to the door at the end of the corridor and twisted the doorknob — it was locked tight.

I cursed thieves for inspiring the invention. I looked over my shoulder to check the location of the two blobs. They were right behind me hungrily gurgling. Keeping my eye on the slime I scratched the bottom of my satchel several times, fumbling for the key the goblin king had left for me. I shot the key into the waiting lock and flew through the door, leaving the key behind.



LINDLI'S LOCK

Serene peace. Total silence. No screams, no stench, no blood. Something was wrong. I had grown used to entering these rooms with a tense body and an intense mind. Peace was sadly disorienting.

I stood before three large circles carved into the floor that spanned the entire width of the room. Each circle contained its own triangle and four small, gem-sized depressions.

“Three gems...floor...right, left, center...” Gresh’s words echoed in my memory. I walked over to the right triangle, stood on its left side, and dropped a gem in the center. Nothing.

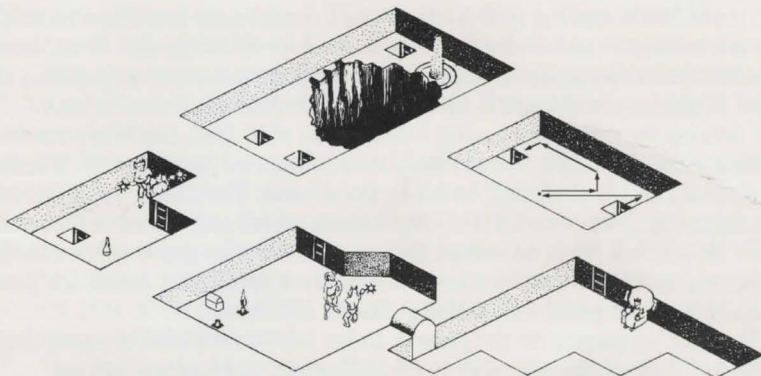
I walked around the middle triangle, then dropped the second stone in the center of the left-most triangle. Silence.

“Confound it!”

117 tries. It took 117 attempts to figure out that I only had to put a gem to the right of the first triangle, one to the left of the middle triangle, and one in the center of the right-hand triangle to trigger the trap door that led to the next level.



CHAPTER 3



I dropped down to the floor of the third level antechamber. I stood next to the dragon's escape route. The immense hole cleaved the room neatly in two. I could feel the hot breath of the underworld rising up the shaft. It was stronger here than on the surface, and I realized there was no way I could cross the cavern on rope.

On the far side of the hole was a four foot wide circle out of which streamed a beam of intense red light. It was a strange device of some kind, but I wasn't sure what its purpose might be. Next to the beam of light I could see an opening in the floor for a ladder.

Fortunately, there were two ladders on my side of the chamber. The closest ladder seemed like the obvious choice, so I chose the far one. That's the sort of thing wizards call wisdom.



TROLL ATTACK

I descended the ladder into the Southern Vault. In the middle of the room, a goblin and a troll stood wearily exchanging blows. They noticed me, but neither was willing to disengage his opponent to question what I was doing there.

Just a few feet away was a chest. Whatever they're fighting over might be in there, I thought. I walked over to it and heaved the lid up. There wasn't anything



a goblin or troll would want inside, but there was something for a wizard — a Fireball spell, two shots.

I immediately read the spell — one of these dumb brutes could have come after me any minute — and circled the room to the door on the far side. It was locked. The mechanism demanded intricate knocking combinations on two indents in the plate. It was too complicated to figure out, so I circled back around to leave.

I noticed the goblin was having a tough time of it. Well, this is my chance to make a friend, I thought. I lined myself up with the troll and threw him a fireball. It exploded on his chest and he fell to the ground. The goblin jerked his head toward me in shock. I smiled. He just nodded his head and walked to the wooden door. He watched me as he walked, then reached the door and knocked in a tight rhythmic pattern onto the unusual lock. He stopped just before he passed through the open portal and nodded in thanks. Excellent.

The troll lay gasping on the ground. In his belt was the kind of sturdy dagger trolls use to challenge each other to duels. That was worth taking, so I did.



PROTEAN RING

I climbed up the ladder and crossed the antechamber to the second portal. I crossed my fingers and hoped that this ladder would lead to the next level of the dungeon, but that was like asking for a benevolent deity to watch over me — in short, a little too much. I climbed down into the narrow hall of the Northern Vault.

The chamber was unimpressive except for a small alcove where two goblins were busy pounding each other into hamburger.

“What do two goblins have to fight over? Dead vermin?” I asked with a laugh, but neither looked my way. These two were intent on killing each other. The big one on the left leaned back and began swinging violently at his shorter opponent. I watched as the spiked mace whistled across the small goblin’s stomach. A long, red smile opened along his abdomen. Horror spread across the little goblin’s face. He dropped his mace and sank into the corner, straining to hold his spilling entrails.

The big goblin turned sharply and marched toward me. To hell with that, I thought, showing him my palm.



“Eat fire, suckface,” I said, blasting him with my last fireball.

The goblin fell with a crash. Immediately his skin turned from a dark green to a light brown. I blinked for a second. This wasn't a goblin — this was a troll!

Good trick! I thought. How'd he do that? I walked over to him and noticed a fine, golden ring on his index finger. I pulled it off his thick knuckle and slipped it onto my own hand. My forearms darkened and my fingernails were suddenly long, pointed, and dirty.

Ah, the Protean Ring! I remembered reading about this in Mordamir's journal. I took it off and put it in my pack. This could come in useful.

Across the room was a ladder going down. I stepped onto the first rung and noticed a bottle nearby. There was something suspicious about it — it was full of something green...something green and slimy. I figured I didn't need any pets, especially ones of the man-eating variety. And it wasn't even housetrained. Nah, better to leave this bottle behind.

The chamber I stepped into was made up of two rooms connected by a short passageway. I walked down the passage to the small room. A goblin shot his head around the corner and glared at me.

“Stop!” he growled. “I forbid you to come closer!”

“Right, Okay,” I said, wheeling about. He had something to guard or he wouldn't be so rabid letting me near. But I wasn't going to let him stand in my way.

I got out of his view and slipped on the Protean Ring. Warts, green skin...yeah, it still worked.

I walked back up the passage. The goblin watched me for a second and then started picking his teeth. I was keeping far enough away that he couldn't see through the illusion.

There was a chest behind him. I strolled over to it and opened it up — fortunately it wasn't locked. Inside were small sacks of powder bound with rope. Troll Bombs! Mordamir had mentioned these in his journal as well.

I looked up at my goblin brother. He was ignoring me, still busily dislodging food bits from his fangs. I quickly threw the bombs in my pack.

“That was simple,” I said, removing the ring. There wasn't anything left to do in this area — I'd have to go and try to get that lock open in the Southern Vault.



GOBLIN KING REVISITED

I returned to the Southern Vault. The troll's body was stinking up the place. Only a new, putrid scent spiced the odor.

I stepped through the door into a large, irregularly shaped hall. Along the far wall was a throne covered in tattered red velvet. In it sat...the Goblin King!

I thought I'd left him for dead. Apparently, there was something in that water that did more than quench your thirst.

"We've met before, old man," he said. "Because you helped me, you may pass. But I warn you, we are at war with the trolls. Up the ladder, over the spikes, is troll territory. Very dangerous."

I had some questions for him, but I was feeling uneasy about the troll bombs stowed in my pack. Some guard might figure out someone ripped them off, and they'd come looking for me. I bowed slightly and took my leave.

HALL OF SPIKES

I watched as the six foot spikes silently rose and fell. If you were in the wrong place at the wrong time, one of those spikes would take the long route through your body. Just the thought of it made me wince.

Another oversized red gem winked at me from the floor by the left wall. If it was just worth gold, I would've left it for the first fool brave enough to risk getting skewered. But these gems seemed to have very specific uses. If I didn't get it now, I'd probably have to come back for it.

I spent several minutes observing the spikes and was pretty certain there was a safe path to the gem. A couple more minutes and I made out another path over to the other side of the room. It was tricky — I had to walk carefully along the diagonals of the stones, first over to the gem, and then backtracking to the middle of the room. A dark grey stone marked where the two paths split. Spikes slid up and down on all sides. I turned and cautiously walked up to the wall, and then followed the perimeter around to the ladder.

I didn't waste any time climbing down. Even combat, I thought, would be better than a six foot lance from below.



THE RITUAL KNIFE

I descended into a narrow corridor that ran about fifteen feet before opening into a large room. I crept along the wall to the end of the corridor and peered around the corner. Two trolls stood protecting their territory. One half-watched the door with drooping eyes while the other idly paced in the middle of the chamber. Both looked bored with their post but even more bored with each other.

I drew the ritual knife from my pack, gripped it by the pommel, and flung it out into the middle of the room. It hit the floor with a sharp ring. There was utter silence for a moment, and then two deep growls erupted simultaneously. I glanced around the corner again in time to see both trolls charging toward each other with drawn swords.

"Predictable as the stars, but a lot dimmer," I chuckled to myself. The door was only a few feet away. I trotted swiftly over to it and tried the latch. It creaked open and I slid through the portal.

TIME STOOD STILL

I closed the door and chuckled out loud. Too easy, I thought.

A heavy snort echoed behind me. I spun around. A troll was thundering toward me, his lips twisted into a snarl. Sensing easy prey, a second troll was close behind him. His lips were twisted into a smile.

There was no time to lose. I dropped my staff and reached into my pack for a troll bomb. The troll was less than six feet away. I threw down the bomb and stepped back. A cloud of fine, rancid-smelling powder shot into the air. The troll hit the cloud and froze in his tracks.

The second troll let out a cry and charged faster. I grabbed another bomb and aimed it at the floor, once again stepping back as the white powder erupted before me. There was no way this troll could slow down. He skidded into the cloud and stopped, every muscle rigid with paralysis.

I scooped up my staff and rushed toward the door just ahead of me. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a humble, green bottle sitting in the middle of the



floor. I slowed down, stopped, and looked back. Both trolls still held their statuesque poses. A decision, I thought — risk everything for a stupid bottle that could just be another dose of green slime, or make for the door before both trolls were moving and pissed.

To this day I wonder how the bottle won out. I ran over and picked up the vessel. Inside was a thick, orangish liquid that was anything but green slime. Orange slime, maybe. I took a deep breath and twisted off the cap. The bottle remained motionless. Nothing crawled out and scurried up my arm. I held the bottle up to my nose and sniffed. It smelled sweet, whatever it was.

The sound of thick toenails on stone interrupted my analysis. Both trolls were mobile again and heading toward me. Stupid bottle, I thought. I tipped it up and guzzled down the contents.

My skin began to tingle and everything I carried immediately felt lighter, almost weightless. Magic Muscle Potion!

Both trolls were almost on me.

“You guys don’t learn, do you?” I said, lobbing another troll bomb at the closest one. Once again he made a hard stop in the cloud. I sprang for the door. The second troll had to make a path around his petrified comrade, and by that time I was gone.



TELEPORT DEVICE

I slammed the door behind me and almost broke the lock bolting the blasted thing shut. The strength potion was really starting to kick in. I turned to see what this room had in store.

A big troll was casually walking toward me, twisting his sword in the air and grinning as much as any troll can grin.

I walked over to him and let him take a few swipes at me. His blows whizzed harmlessly over my head. Now it was my turn. I pulled back my blade and sent it crashing down on his collarbone. He screamed and stabbed frantically at my chest. He may have hit me, but the potion was numbing all pain. I drove my sword deep into his sternum. He clutched at it and fell backward, crashing onto the floor.

I walked over to the pile of straw and laid down. Sleep came quickly, and I dreamed of the goblin king.



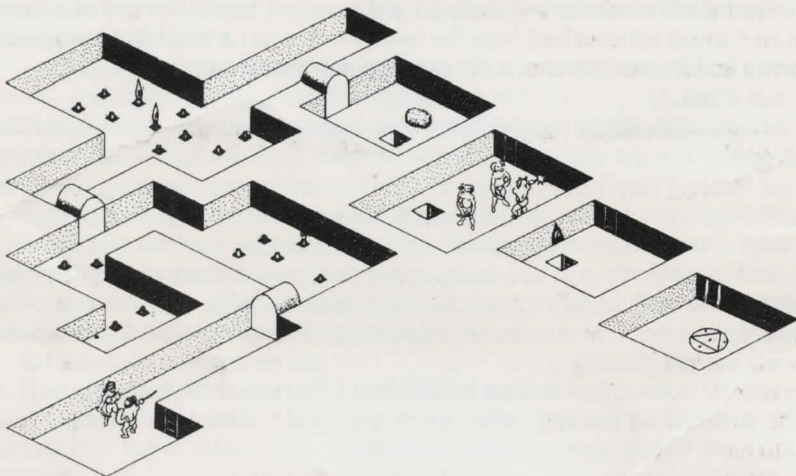
Bright light pried open my eyes. I yawned and walked over to the shaft of light streaming through a hole in the floor. All I had to do now was figure out how the damned dwarf's mechanism worked. I stuck out my hand then jerked it back when I sensed extreme heat from the red light. Was this a trick? Was I supposed to step into it anyway, whatever the temperature? The supreme act of faith?

Screw that.

I took out Mordamir's journal and began reading. Mordamir had sketched the teleport device and written: "Red gems look best in purple light." Just then the shaft flickered purple and I smiled. I leaned forward to step into it, but it quickly turned back to a blazing red. Only purple for a moment, I thought. It suddenly glowed lavender, then a deep purple again and I jumped into the soothing cool light. I dropped my gem and snapped from existence. I reappeared in the first room and walked out of the shaft. As I descended the ladder nearby I notice the heel of my singed boot. I had barely made it out of the shaft before it turned back to burning red. Sheesh.



CHAPTER 4



ULINDOR REVISITED

I dropped to the floor of the antechamber into the breeze of a troll's blade. Still groggy from my nap I was caught unaware.

I flashed my blade into the trolls eyes, blinding him. I jabbed him once quickly between the ribs, feeling his heart thud around the tip of my blade before I withdrew. The pain only seemed to make him madder.

His jaw clenched and he drew back to stab when suddenly his eyes widened and he dropped to the floor. A knife protruded from his back. Ulindor stood arms akimbo about five feet behind the troll's body.

I took big steps over to him.

"Thank you my fr — ..."

"We're even now, wizard," he interrupted. Grim bastard, this Ulindor. "Here you will need this." He wrestled with a large red throw rug, tamed it, then handed it to me. It smelled like the hooves of a thousand wet camels.

"It is dangerous to tread even one step in the next two rooms without it." He



hoisted the carpet into my fumbling arms. "Beyond that and three ladders down is the exit."

The carpet unfurled as if it had a mind of its own. I hopelessly wrestled with it. By the time I had it under control, he was gone. The rug wedged tightly under my arm, I walked down the corridor to my right and out the door.

ANA'S RING

Just inside the door, I unrolled the tapestry. It hung in the air about three feet above ground. Though flying was not my favorite way to go, it was nice to sit for awhile. A knotted fiber column stood about four inches out of the red weave and when I poked it, the rug and I moved forward slowly. It took a little practice to master my technique, but soon I was able to whiz around the hottest fire spout. The strings along the rug's edge gently dangled beneath me and swung a little with each move.

Around a corner wall to the right I could see a sliver of a door — Another room! Avoiding fire-spouts and shades, I moved the stick in the door's direction. When I finally came to it, I could see that the room I was in extended further to the left. Fire spouts spewed and coughed large columns of flames too close as I investigated the far corridor. The rug had already been singed in eight places and a fine layer of soot filmed my exposed skin.

I navigated around the spouts down the corridor and at the end found a woman's garment. Alas, it wasn't my size. I picked it up and a very small, delicate gold ring fell from its folds. It had a filigree design of a high wizard's family crest and an inscription: "To Ana, so harm will never find you. Your loving father, Dunric." By this evidence I couldn't tell if harm had come to her, but it did make one's eyebrow rise.

I tried to put the ring on my thumb out of habit — that's where wizard's keep their best — and it just wavered on top of my nail. I could only get it about a raisin's length down my pinky. This Ana must be small as a pixie, I thought. I kept the ring hoping to either figure out its secret or trade it later for some new boots.

I tied the ring to the outside of my pack and slowly turned the nose of my rug back the direction I came and headed for the wooden door. Slowly I navigated around the remaining spouts. I guided my rug right up to the doorknob and lost



my balance a few times. Maneuvering a rug through a door would be tricky, I thought.

I hopped off the rug and rolled it up as it hovered in mid-air. As soon as I curled the last end around, it dropped to the floor and popped open.

"Combing a python would be easier than this," I mumbled. I unfurled the rug all the way and it rose again to its three-foot high resting place, where I proceeded to reroll it. Just before the last lip, I stood next to the rug, put my arm around the middle of the roll and pushed the lip down. The cumbersome carpet tucked under my arm, I squeezed through the door and into the next room.



PIXIE DEN

Ulindor said it was dangerous to travel by foot here, and he was right. As I stood inside the door, a wide undulating ridge began at the right-most arm of the room and exploded tiles up off the floor. My lower jaw dropped as the underground creature sank lower and ended the ridge at the left arm of the room. I hopped on the rug before the last tile shard hit the floor.

I had drifted forward a few feet before a wisp of blonde hair attracted my attention. A small pixie peeked her head out from behind a corner to my left.

"Hey babe!" I called after her. I pushed the control stick full forward to reach her, but she was gone. Just air and silence.

Damn, I thought. She probably could have given me something useful. Like a clue to Mordamir's whereabouts. Oh well. I didn't see anything but shattered tiles and fire spouts in that room, so I flipped the rug around and cased the room to the right.

I was cold and noticed my crossed legs were slightly cooler than before. I looked closely at the rug and realized that it was disappearing beneath me! A drafty wind had taken up residence where knots and fibers used to live in peace. Not good. I carefully raced the carpet around to the door in the only section I hadn't explored and got two steps away from the door before the rug completely disappeared. I fell hard to the floor on my tailbone, causing my temper to race up the back of my neck, over my head and down my face, slamming my teeth together with a velocity that only made me more pissed off.



I was only two steps from the door and almost forgot about the danger lurking beneath me as I walked to it and fiercely kicked it open. Unfortunately, my assault on the portal didn't make my tailbone feel any better. I opened the exit and passed through, ready to dice anything that tried me.

REST ROOM

Nothing greeted me but restful silence and another pile of soft straw. Thank the gods. I laid down, but tossed restlessly for about an hour before I went to sleep — my heart was still thumping from the anger, and my butt felt like a porcupine had taken up residence there. Soon I drifted off into a dream the likes of which only history can create.

I dreamed of Erinoch before the disaster. It was home to a vibrant community of peace-loving people that pitched pennies into the fountain of youth, and played in its water everywhere. Then the dream took a nasty turn.

All went dark and Mordamir's sinister face appeared in the middle of the blackness. His eyeballs peered through squinting lids. His mouth was a tight purse that never opened.

I can't say exactly when I awoke — I had to drift awhile in blurry consciousness before I could come to. I stood on the hay and took in a couple of cleansing breaths, meditating on my dream. The closer I got to Mordamir, the scarier my dreams reported him. What the hell was this about?

Sounds of fight and trouble from below broke my thoughts as I stood at the top of the ladder. Regaining my senses, I drew my sword and descended.

COMBAT HALL

This place looked like a troll combat practice room. A Shendrak combat instructor was finishing off a goblin to my left while a student stood nonchalantly in the corner humming, his weight on one hoof and legs crossed.



He didn't notice me in the shadows when he looked side to side like a thief, then stole a booger from his snout.

"Where I come from, they cut your finger off for that," I said. He whipped his head toward me, finger still pointing up. I admit I'm not good at intimidation. This was a good example.

He smiled wretchedly and came toward me swinging his knife in a circle. They must learn that at the academy: '...Exhibit lack of fear by swinging your blade around as you approach the enemy...' But I'd already seen the trick, and knew that this novice would be easy to knock over. It was his teacher that I wasn't so sure about.

We thrust at the same time and missed. He looked at me and chuckled a little. His dagger shot out across my robe and I barely had time to arch forward out of the way. I shoved my knife against his throat and flipped my blade back and forth with a loose wrist. He dropped to the floor and gurgled a few dirty words.

The larger, tougher troll had just finished with the goblin and watched me fell his charge.

"Excellent," he said walking toward me. "Another of Mordamir's students."

Questions raced — how does he know Mordamir? What does he mean 'another' student? How did he know the fighting technique? What the hell's going on? The troll tricked me into losing concentration on my battle. He was good. But not good enough. He approached me with a marble stare.

"Don't move," he said as he continued walking. Mind games were the last thing I expected from a troll. Before now I didn't think they had capabilities beyond walking and killing.

For the first time, fear began to incapacitate me. Against the troll's order, I moved. He was almost upon me so I lodged my right toes under the student's body and flipped it into the teacher's legs, sending him down. I moved faster than greased lightning and ran to a ladder across the room.

I looked over and saw the angry master throwing the body off of him with a yelling grunt. I wrapped the arches of my feet tightly around the sides of the ladder and slid down out of view and into the next hall.



ANA AND DUNRIC

I stood at the bottom facing the rungs for a moment — I hadn't breathed in the last five minutes, and I was ready for a rest. Where was a random pile of hay when you needed one?

I turned around to face the room and the challenges therein, but no one slashed me, no one dropped onto my back. There were tiles, a few bricks, a ladder through the floor, a small hole in the wall, and a girl leaning halfway out of it.

"Sir, can you help me?" She pleaded with a smile. "I was kidnapped by a man who muttered only 'Mordamir's orders.' I escaped using a ring my father gave me, but now I've lost it. Did you find it?"

I lifted up my arm and swung the pack underneath it to my front. She watched me excitedly as I untied the knots and slid the circlet off the strap. I held it out in my open palm.

"Ana, I presume?" I said. She took the ring as if it were a newborn mouse and placed it on her finger. She fumbled in her pocket.

"Here, take this ring in return." She held out a large gold thumb ring. It felt comforting to have the empty place on my thumb refilled. She continued to speak: "I heard the unpleasant little dwarf..."

"Lindli?" I interrupted.

"I think so. He said 'Clockwise, three rings around the triangle.' Could that be a clue to this exit puzzle?"

"I don't know what else it would be," I replied. I looked at her deeply — her innocent brown eyes and long soft tresses causing a slight ache in my heart that washed down to my gut. I tried the hip wizard approach: "Hey, are you busy for the next millennium?" She cleared her throat, apparently in shock.

"I must go now. Goodbye," and she was gone. She was used to better, I thought. Or younger. I stood there for a moment with my thumb in the air wearing the new ring, an alluring eyebrow up.

I wiped the grin off my face and descended down the ladder, thinking about my lonely future. I wanted to follow Ana into that hole, but holes weren't in the cards.



LOCKSMITH'S FOLLY

I looked out over a tile floor. Carved in it to my left was another of Lindli's contraptions — a triangle and circle combination like the lock on level two.

Ana gave me a hint from Lindli: "Clockwise three rings around the triangle." I had three rings on me. I thought then that this would be easy.

I walked over to the first pit to the left of the triangle and dropped a ring. I walked clockwise then to the pit on the right of the triangle and did likewise. Then down to the pit beneath the triangle and dropped the third ring. Nothing happened.

I sat and contemplated the lock for several hours. Hours may have turned into days. It was hard to tell. Occasionally I tried variations on the clockwise theme. I tried rolling each ring in the groove of the circle clockwise. I tried pushing the three rings with my nose around the triangle clockwise. Nothing worked.

I conceded that I had failed and could not, in fact, get this lock open. I started up the ladder to fight and bleed my way back to Lindli for help.

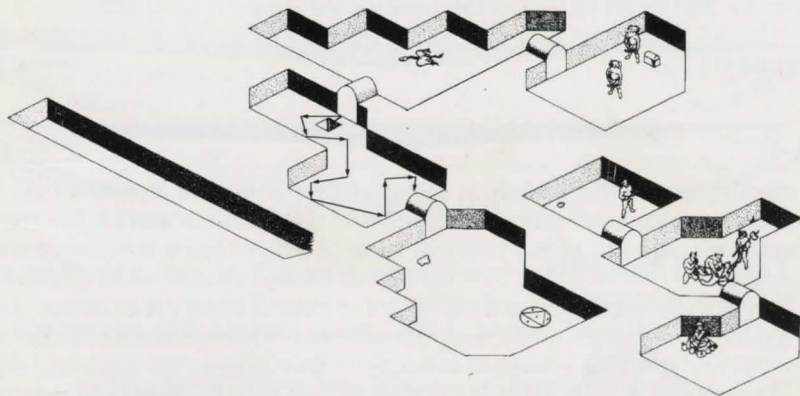
I had put both feet on the ladder when my thigh knocked my pack, sending Dunric's ring rolling along the floor. I didn't want to lose it in a wall crack somewhere, so I flew to the floor and began to chase it as it rolled around the triangle.

I chased the ring, swiping at it often to try to pick it up. I completed three rings around the triangle (I was moving in a clockwise direction) when I heard a deep rumbling nearby. The portal to the next level opened.

The three rings were three circles. I had to walk three times around the triangle. Of course.



CHAPTER 5



THE WAR COUNCIL

Across the room, a goblin warrior was pacing in front of the door. As I stepped down from the ladder, he left his post and marched over to me.

"My leader wants to talk with you," he growled. He did a perfunctory about-face and marched out the door.

I quickly scanned the room. A couple feet away, a large spotted egg sat nestled between the stones on the floor. I scratched my head. This could be the guard's breakfast. Or a gift to me. Or maybe just be a spotted egg in search of a mother. I walked over and picked it up. Who knows? Maybe I'd want breakfast a little later. I shoved it in my pack and followed the guard out the door.

In the next room, a goblin war council was hunched around a large map. A high-ranking officer motioned me over.

"We need your help," he said in a deep, guttural voice. "Long ago, in the Age of Dragons, there was a great spring in these dungeons, a Fountain of Youth. Now only a trickle of the enchanted water flows, and a norlac — water monster — blocks our access to it altogether. The norlac also blocks your access to the deepest level. You see, we both need the monster killed..."



The goblin officer proceeded to lay out a plan in which I would distract the norlac while they opened a sluice gate that would wash him down a whirlpool. I liked the plan except for the fact that I was the one serving as squid-bait.

"Um...I'll think about it," I said, but the goblins were already too busy making war plans to hear me.

OMAR AGAIN

I wandered through the only door in the room and was startled to see Omar and his bizarre bazaar spread out on the floor.

"Greetings, old friend!" he sang, "I have a potion you need. Sixty gold pieces!"

"Sixty!" I exclaimed.

"Perhaps effendi would prefer to patronize another elixir merchant?" he said.

"I would prefer to," I replied, "But Omar the snake is the only merchant..."

"No need to explain, effendi" he interrupted, "Now, sixty gold pieces, please."

I opened my bag and counted out sixty shiny gold coins.

"I am your humble servant," he said as I grabbed the potion.

"What will this do for me?" I asked.

He held both hands about two inches apart. "Make you very, very small."

I nodded and left Omar's room of wonders. The war council continued to argue bitterly about the best way to assault the trolls. I wandered around the room looking for a door out of here — there wasn't any.

The war council was too busy to give me any advice, so I opened Mordamir's journal. He'd sketched this room and indicated that a tiny mouse hole was the only way out of this level. He also mentioned that the potion I just bought poisons you as well as makes you small. The only known remedy was water from the Fountain.

Funny that Omar didn't mention any side-effects — like paralysis, suffocation, death...

I didn't have any water. What was I going to do? Step through a mousehole and hope there was a bottle of the Water on the other side? Yeah, right. Did I have a choice? No...

I looked about the room and spotted the crack Mordamir had described. Uncorking the bottle, I stoically walked over to the hole and slammed the whole beverage.



“Delicious,” I thought as the world wavered and the stones I was facing grew a hundred feet tall. I threw the bottle aside.

BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

The mousehole was now a cavern. I could go ahead and run through to the other side, I thought, but I realized I might still be small when I got there — and who knows what might be waiting to eat me. I decided to wait until the potion had nearly worn off before I passed through the wall.

I counted to ten before I began to feel my body starting to transform again. I bolted through the crack. On the other side, two trolls — each about a thousand feet high from my point of view — patrolled the room. At the far end of the chamber was a chest.

The potion began to wear off. Once again, the world wavered and I expanded into the room. I immediately began to feel weak — the poison was sucking life from my legs and arms. I stumbled over to the chest and flung open the lid. Among books and strange objects was a bottle.

It didn't matter what was in the bottle. I popped the cork and raised the bottle to my lips. Sweet, cool Water poured down my throat. My limbs began to feel strong again as I guzzled the contents. I tossed the bottle and hastily scooped the chest's contents into my pack — a note, a strange sensor device, and a spellbook that lets you cast weak fireballs.

One of the witless trolls noticed me and came charging over. I drew my sword. He slashed recklessly at me, howling with battle fervor, but I stayed calm, waiting for the right opportunity. It came in the form of an exposed rib. He screamed as I sank the tip of my sword into his side. I quickly pulled it out and delivered a backhand slash to his neck. He dropped his sword and clutched at his throat. I delivered a swift kick to his stomach, then watched him fall to the floor.

His comrade growled and charged at me. I hurried through the door and bolted it behind me.



FLYING DEATH

In the center of the room, two bright red reptilian creatures were sailing through the air on leathery bat wings. I'd never seen these before. Maybe they were the troll version of parakeets.

One of the flying lizards suddenly veered off and swooped at me, taking a small mouthful of my shoulder with him. I winced as I ran across the room to the door. It was locked. Just then another attack nipped my ear.

Damn critters. I reached for the spellbook in my pack. These fireballs would be weak, but I'd have as many as I wanted for a couple of minutes.

I read the spell and torched the lizards with a stream of rapid-fire fireballs. Two burning reptiles plummeted to the ground along with a flutter of purple ribbon. I walked over to the ribbon and found it was connected to a single iron key. Naturally, the key fit the door.

I set my hand on the latch and remembered that I'd also found a note in the other room. I pulled out the note and opened it.

"Notice," it read, "Flying lizards can be trained just after they hatch. Use bait."

I remembered the egg I was carrying around with me. Great! I could have a little pet. Something I could feed a cat to every once in awhile. While I was here, I pulled out the sensor and took a look at the instructions that were with it.

The note read: "Worm danger in room after flying lizards. The only safe path is left, down, right, down, left, down, right, up, right, down. Sensor pitch rises according to danger. Sensor lasts only a short time."

I turned the latch and stepped into a large, open hall. Directly before me was a ladder going down. This can't be the ladder to the next level, I thought — that'd be too easy. Nonetheless, there might be something useful down there. I decided to explore it before I braved the worm room.



HALL OF FOREVER

As I stepped on the floor of the narrow passageway, I thought I heard a deep voice bellow “PREPARE TO MEET THY MAKER.”

I probably just dreamed that part.

I walked for what seemed like an eternity but in reality was probably less than 20 minutes. Eventually I realized that I could starve and/or dehydrate if I walked much further down this endless corridor. I turned back to see how far I’d come, and I gasped.

There was the ladder just thirty feet away, even though I’d walked twenty minutes down this corridor to get to this spot. My skin crawled. Some twisted imagination was at work here, and I didn’t want any part of it. I quickly ran for the ladder.

WORM DANGER

There was only one safe path through this room, and I had to stay on it or I’d be worm bait.

I activated the Sensor and a low pinging sound broke the silence as I started forward. Everything went fine until the pitch of the sensor became shrill; a high-pitch shriek that jangled my nerves — I leapt backward. The sensor pinged low again. I understood. As long as the sensor pinged low, I was on the right path. I walked around, taking a step back and trying a new direction each time the sensor sang its warning. As I explored I began to sweat, knowing that the sensor would not last forever. If it stopped while I was in the center of the room...

I followed the difficult path until I reached the wooden door. The Sensor stopped just seconds afterwards. I realized there was no easy way through this chamber — you simply had to be fast, but not so fast that you strayed from the safe route. However, once you knew the route, the room was easy. In fact, you probably didn’t even need the Sensor at all.



TRAINED LIZARD TRICKS

I walked halfway across the Portal Chamber when my pack suddenly gave a violent shudder. I looked down to see a homely red lizard head pop out of my pack and blink at the world it had just been born into. It smacked its tiny chops — just a few seconds old and already it was hungry — and crawled out of the pack.

The lizard clumsily took to the air and began flying around my head and into walls. I stood watching, amused by the spectacle of this innocent and entirely voracious creature, until I noticed a blob of green ooze rolling toward me. Slime!

I had to get out of here. At the far end of the hall was another of Lindli's famous mechanisms. If it worked like all the others, I'd have to set something down within the inscribed circle. Unfortunately, there wasn't much time to experiment.

I ran over to the circle and began searching through my pack for likely items. Just then, I heard the sound of stone rolling. About fifteen feet away, an opening appeared in the floor.

Yow! This was easier than I thought!

I strolled confidently over to the ladder, only to watch the opening close up the moment I stepped off the circle.

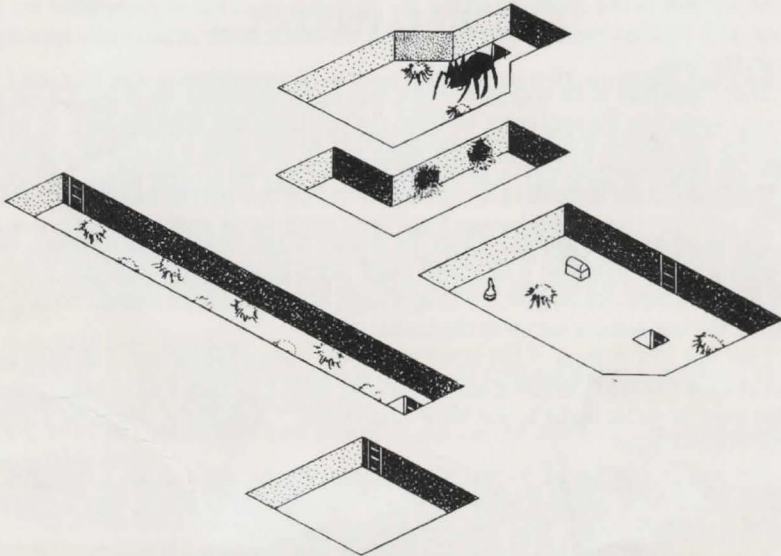
The slime gurgled ever closer.

I panicked. How could I stand on the circle and get down the ladder at the same time? At that moment, my red little friend came hovering near me. That was it! The note said I could train him with bait!

I whisked the bait from my pack and dumped it on the mechanism. The young flying lizard fell on its first meal like the food was going to run away. I stepped off the mechanism. The lizard was heavy enough to keep the entrance open! I ran around the slime, over to the ladder, and down.



CHAPTER 6



SPIDER'S LAIR

I took only three steps into the room and my boots were already swathed with cobwebs. It was difficult to move as they glued themselves down with each step. I stopped to touch one of the strands — it was thick and sticky, like lute wire covered in drying maple syrup.

I walked forward, lifting my boots off the ground with decreasing difficulty. I was out of the bed of cobwebs and they were coming off my shoes and catching on the more ragged cobblestones.

I scraped the soles of my boots clean on several of the more craggy rocks. I was busy scraping when I heard a squeak like a wooden wheel with a split. I turned to see two long, spindly legs reach out and test some fibers. I stood and watched for a moment, then closed my mouth and swallowed hard trying to repress the sensation of doom that washed over me.



The spider that belonged to those legs had to be the size of an ox, if not larger. The joints on the legs alone were the size of two fists. I skirted over to a more shadowy part of the room expecting the immense arachnid to come after me as soon as it smelled me, but only the legs of the black death occasionally appeared from the hole.

There appeared to be only one — the legs never extended out of both holes at once. I rushed to the wall space between the two holes and drew my back up to it, waiting. As soon as I saw the limbs reach out of one hole, I crouched and dove into the other, praying like mad the whole time that I'd be able to see the other side.

She stood fourteen hands high in the middle of the room. A black widow. Her compound eyes were like a thousand black gems gleaming through me. I stood for long moments waiting for her to approach, but she made no charge, no attack. Maybe she was a decoy set up by the trolls?

I put one foot in front of the other and slowly inched toward her. I stopped as I noticed the masses of webbing and cotton-like balls. Egg sacs. Full of baby spiders that were probably eager to eat their first victim. I thought it would be a good idea to avoid them.

The spider continued to just stand there. Maybe she's dead, I thought. I watched her front spindles, knowing that if she intended to attack, they would be the first things to move. They lifted slightly off the floor.

Suddenly she reared up on her hind legs. I leapt back, my heart trying to expand and contract simultaneously. A silvery, thick net splattered on the spot where I'd stood just seconds before.

It would take her a couple of seconds to build up more web. I leapt forward, screaming.

She flailed wildly trying to defend my blows. With one swipe I gashed about forty thousand of her million eyes. She lowered to the floor and launched her head forward twice. Her fangs sank deeply into my right calf and I felt her venom blossom into my bloodstream with each puncture. She raised up and I saw her soft underbelly before me. I hacked wildly at her abdomen.

Surrendering to death, she flipped backward and orange ooze drained onto the floor.

"Fresh squeezed," I said, watching the pool spread.

I eased past the widow's lifeless structure and around her egg sacs. Had I a torch, I would've made campfires of her young.



LEVITATION

I dropped into a nightmare of webbing and egg sacs. To my right was a web-covered trunk, and across the room sat a bottle.

I approached the trunk hoping to find some good fortune inside, but when I reached for the latch, I saw a thousand wriggling grains of black sand — baby spiders! I watched as they swirled and massed around the lip of the trunk, moving with one mind. I'd have to get them off before I opened this trunk.

I walked widely around a nest, lifted the bottle to the light, and shook it gently to determine its contents. It was clear. More water! I opened the bottle and sniffed deeply.

I doubled over, coughing.

“WHOA!” It was alcohol that smelled like it had aged eight thousand years. This stuff could knock a dragon on its butt.

I carried the bottle over and poured it out on the chest. The spiders died a predictable death.

I tossed the bottle against the far wall and pulled up the trunk lid. There was nothing inside but a rolled up scroll with a new red ribbon tied around it. It was a levitation spell, and a tiny note told of more egg sacs in the next room.

I took the spell in hand and the information to heart as I headed for the ladder in the next room.

HALL OF WEBS

My boots made no noise on the last three rungs of the ladder — they were eternally swathed in sticky netting. Quilts of white webbing blanketed the floor and lower walls and swept up the corners like mammoth waves crashing on a high cliff. Egg sacs sat randomly about five feet apart and extended down the dark hall further than I could see.

The floor seemed to move with ravenous baby spiders marching in all directions beneath the layer of net. Walking there would have been a sure death.

“Im Mordamirum est nocturnus...” I intoned the levitation spell with a shaky



voice glancing frequently from the scroll to the dark passage. I didn't think I'd make it through this one. As soon as I finished, the scroll turned to dust and poured through my fingers like sand. I brushed the dust from my palms and stepped off into the air. I hung there above the silver floor — the spell was working.

Gently I eased forward, but as I gained confidence, I also gained speed for fear the spell would run out. That would have sealed my fate.

I weaved through the corridor, careful not to pass over the tall egg sacs heaped to the same height as my dangling feet. It seemed like it took an eternity to maneuver down the corridor, but soon the end was in sight.

I blinked in shock as I saw the floor webs stop and cobblestones peep out from underneath them. Beyond that was solid stone and a safe place to land. I stumbled a little when my feet met with the floor. I had no choice but to descend the ladder there — I wasn't about to go back the way I'd come.

REST ROOM

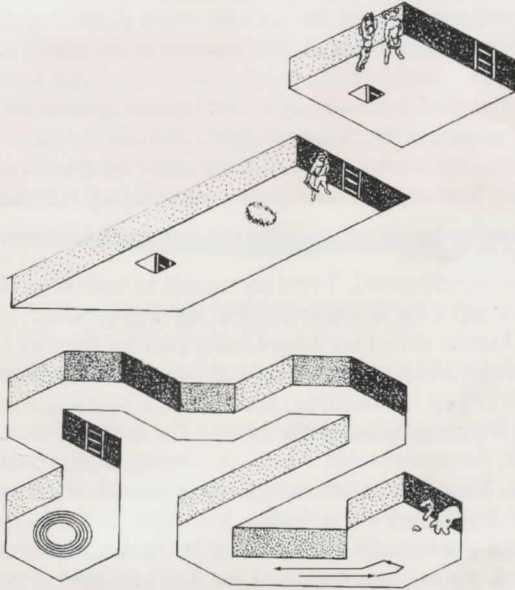
I smiled when my eyes met a long-needed pile of hay. I stumbled over to it and tapped it gently with the tip of my boot. Nope, no spiders there. Made sense — the black widow could've never gotten through the crawl space leading in.

I set down my staff and fell to my hands and knees. My aching left hip was the first to touch the hay, and the rest of my body followed. I drifted from consciousness to the corner of my mind where dreams are lived out, thinking about the goblin's plan and the norlac I promised to help wash away. It could work, I thought, if everything comes together.

I woke up feeling refreshed. Something in the air smelled of water. With water nearby, I knew I was nearing the end of my quest.



CHAPTER 7



DUNRIC

As I climbed down the ladder, I glanced over my shoulder to survey my newest challenge. Across the room, a man was shackled to the wall. He wore a purple skull-cap, indicating a wizard of high rank. My heart leapt. Dunric!

To the right stood a familiar troll — it was the fierce instructor who was giving lessons in skull-splitting. He was obviously on another chapter now — killing men in cold blood.

He pointed a short sword at the soft flesh below Dunric's ribs. He hissed as I dropped onto the dungeon floor. Without warning, he pushed the steel deep into the prisoner's stomach, giving the hilt a cruel twist before pulling out a glistening crimson blade.



Dunric's mouth fell open and emitted a long gasp.

"You bastard!" I screamed.

The troll leered and charged. No time for mind games today. He raised his dripping sword high above his head. A violent swing whistled past my head. The troll's flank peeped into view as he pulled back his blade for another pass at my neck. I thrust my sword forward, agile with the kiss of Solundul. The point slid neatly into his midsection. He slumped slightly and I jabbed again. A painful howl filled the room and his blade lashed out at me again. I stepped aside and brought down my weapon hard on his skull, lightly misting myself with bloody vermillion rain.

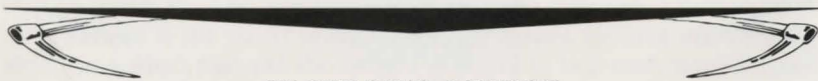
I hurried over to Dunric.

"I am Dunric," he whispered, "I sent my servant to warn you...Mordamir isn't a prisoner...he kidnapped my daughter...If I had my ring I could..."

He breathed heavily while I scrounged in my pack for the ring I'd found on his servant. I removed it and pushed it onto his thumb. He took a deep painful breath and began muttering an incantation.

I watched as Dunric's manacled hands wove the spell, his fingers drawing the runes of strange elemental beings, his palms binding hidden forces to the prime material plane. Then his hands went limp. I moved close and noticed his breathing had stopped. Dunric was dead.

At his feet were three scrolls. He'd used his last gasping breath to create spells — the only hope for his daughter. And for me, I thought. I placed the three scrolls in my pack and proceeded down the ladder.



ULINDOR'S DEMISE

Ulindor was waiting for me at the bottom. A scowl spread across his face as he recognized me, and I watched him slowly loosen his buckler.

"Dunric talked, didn't he?" Ulindor said. "I'll have to kill you."

"I'm sorry you see it that way," I said, lunging.

The blade sliced into his right shoulder. Didn't expect that from an old man! I thought.

I grinned.

He swung quickly, and I felt his sword dig into my thigh. The fury started to rise in my blood.



“Thick skulled barbarian! Go ahead and lick your master’s hand. You’re so stupid you can’t smell the treachery and evil on his fingertips! He’ll kill you too, if I don’t!” I yelled.

I brought my blade up to his throat and sliced it as easy as hot steel through butter. He fell back onto a bed of hay and rolled over with a groan.

“This bed’s taken, loser,” I said.

I rolled his corpse off the straw and onto the cold stones. After flicking the bloody hay away I laid down for a quick nap.

THE NORLAC SLUICE

A large mossy barrel was lashed to the bottom of the ladder. It floated in the rushing water as if waiting for me to climb on.

Nearby, I could hear the rush of the vortex as it sucked water down into countless underwater rivers.

I mounted the barrel uneasily and began paddling down to the norlac.

My feet dragged small, turbulent wakes in the water as I approached the norlac’s resting spot. Maneuvering was tricky — my staff was both an oar and a rudder and not very good for either.

“Ancients help me,” I breathed.

The squiddish thing lay draped over the ladder, his bulbous eyes shut. Not a lot of action for a squid down here, I thought. I’d have to get his attention somehow.

I paddled closer, waiting for the moment when he’d take notice. I looked up to the stones in the ceiling and saw a goblin hanging there. He urged me on. I paddled some more.

The norlac instantly submerged from view — he was coming for me. The goblin dropped to the sluice gate and when he tried to open it, clanked the lock loudly. It was jammed! He struggled with it and looked over his shoulder at me, waving me onward. I jerked the stubborn barrel back upstream, whipping my oar through the murky water with the fury of a troll fight. The barrel rang with loud thuds as I kicked it with my heels, urging it forward like my old steed, Gomer. One swift kick and we were a memory, I thought. Damn....

The bubbles of the norlac were only a few lengths behind me. I cut corners sharper than was safe and skimmed along walls at my meager maximum speed. As



I rounded a last turn, I jerked my eyes from the water in time to catch a glimpse of my escape ladder rushing by. I watched it pull away behind me for a moment and frantically searched for another way out.

My eyes darted from brick to brick in the walls while my hands mechanically pushed the staff at my side. The only thing driving it was my instinct to survive.

New spindrift mixed with old sweat as I became aware of a low wet groan echoing from beyond the next turn. The sucking, gurgling maelstrom caught me in its tide and pulled me in faster than I could think.

I remember the barrel disintegrating beneath me as I violently spun through water and suffocating foam. The white bubbles blurred my vision — then, blackness.



CHAPTER 8

REVIVAL

A hazy green smear slowly focused. A goblin! My muscles tensed a little while I struggled for clear vision. Suddenly I coughed hard on the water being poured into my mouth. I gasped deeply for a few moments then turned to see who had revived me with the water of life.

I was lying alone on the warm floor.

I stood erect and noticed a trunk over to my left. Inside were more gold pieces, a blink spell with six uses, and a fire protection spell. Fire protection...the dragon was near. And so was Mordamir.

THE EMPTY ROOM

The ladder led down to an empty room. I stood for a moment, waiting for something to happen. A rumbling, regular breathing filtered up from the floor beneath me. Only a dragon could make such a sound. I pictured it looking up, sensing my movement. My imagination ran wild. The dragon might explode through the floor any moment, engulfing me in its hungry mouth and chewing my bones like soft breadsticks.

I skirted along the walls, looking for hidden doors and cobblestone triggers, but this room was emptier than a desert without sand. I walked out into the middle of the room, hoping I might find a trap door. I found it, all right.

In the center of the room, the floor gave way. I instinctively turned my staff so it was parallel to the ground. Miraculously, the staff caught on the edge of the pit trap and for a moment I hung in the air. I frantically tried to swing out, the dragon's voice now an audible roar rushing up through the black chasm. My heart pounded with the familiar fear of the tomb.

And then the staff broke.



MEETING MORDAMIR

Down I fell. Conical stalactites whizzed by my head and pulled away from me. I rolled over in mid-air and saw the flat tops of jagged hundred-foot stalagmites rushing up to greet me.

I stretched out an arm and barely caught the top of a natural stone tower. Solundul dropped further into the bowels of hell. My arms and ribs screamed with pain as I dug my nails into the crumbly platform and boosted myself up.

To my left was another sheared off rock formation. On it was a pile of charred bones, the skull sitting atop wearing a black grimace. I was trapped on an island of stone in a sea of darkness.

A low rumble shook the air and tickled the pit of my stomach. I looked beyond a horizon of angular rocks and saw the spiny tops of a dragon's head rising behind them. My eyes never left the dragon as I reached into my pack and retrieved my six Blink spells. I readied them for a harrowing onslaught.

She rose to a majestic height and looked coldly upon me. Her eyes shone merciless gold and her jaw was flushed with blood.

She reared back, filling her mighty lungs with air. She lifted her nose slightly, ready to deliver her first fiery attack. This was the moment to act. I disappeared into my first Blink spell.

I fended off her next five attacks the same way, each time uttering the Blink spell only when her chin was raised.

She was growing weary of my tiny intrusion into her lair. She took two deep breaths — this next attack would be a long one. I hastily read the spell of Fire Protection. The dragon blew a long stream of fire that singed the edges of my beard, but the flames glanced off me like a cool wind. For the moment, I was safe.

The serpent heaved wearily. Her strength was low, but I was out of spells. I had only one last trick.

"Cower, serpent!" I yelled.

I held up the amulet created solely to destroy her species. The dragon gasped and withdrew, eyeing the amulet with hate.

Suddenly, across the gaping chasm, a fiery coil struck a stone island. Mordamir stood with outstretched arms. His eyes flashed wildly.

"FOOL!" he yelled.

"Yes, Mordamir — for risking my life to save you!" I retorted.



“Read the words!” He ordered.

“Say you’re sorry,” I replied, stalling for time.

Blood rushed to the veins in his forehead.

“Fine,” he said, “I’ll just take back my amulet. I have other students who will come. Prepare to die!”

I readied my six statue spells for Mordamir’s favorite and most effective attack — lightning.

Mordamir put his hands to his knees and called to the earth at the top of his lungs. His hands shot into the air. Several violet bolts pierced the darkness and disappeared overhead. I counted a heartbeat before intoning a Statue spell. My body immediately went rigid and the lightening ricocheted off my stone cap.

Mordamir unleashed two more bolts, both of which the Statue spell defrayed with ease. He glared and bent down over his other knee. The position looked very familiar. In the days of my apprenticeship, I’d seen Mordamir perform the Sonic Blast with gruesome results. Now I was his enemy and it was my head he wished to explode like a melon.

I grabbed the last scroll in my pack and spoke the two words that made up the Sonic Protection spell. Then I covered both ears and shut my eyes.

Mordamir blasted the caverns with a shattering pitch which was only intensified by the rounded cave walls.

I opened my eyes in time to meet two more lightning bolts with Statue spells. This left me with one last Statue.

Mordamir smiled wickedly and pointed to the pile of charred bones. They sprang whole into the air, clutching a ghostly scythe. I activated my last Statue spell just before the phantom swung the scythe at my neck. His ghostly blade passed through me as if I didn’t exist.

I came out of my stance and stared hard at Mordamir, angry at his betrayal and my sacrifice.

“You have no more defenses, my student,” he taunted.

“Do not toy with me, Mordamir, I have no patience for you.” I said.

“What a pity I wasted so much time on you.” He was going to try my patience anyway. He told me his secret and revealed to me his shapechange into Omar the elixirsmith. “Do I remind you of a merchant perhaps? Who do you think left you those chests?” I had been led like a lamb. My temper rose as he laughed through his last words. “As long as I have this amulet, the dragon won’t attack me.”

I smiled. Dunric had known what to do all along. Mordamir, the cunning planner and master deceiver, hadn’t expected this.



I spoke the Magnetic Hands spell, tossing the scroll into the air and clapping my hands on it as it fell back within reach. My palms warmed with magnetism. I called the amulet from Mordamir's hands.

It slipped out of his fingers and sailed quietly over to me.

Fire burned in the dragon's eyes. She leaned forward and breathed a long stream of fire at Mordamir.

I bowed my head in exhaustion and sadness, not thinking about how I was going to get out of here. I heard a rustle of something behind me. I had no more fight left in me and resigned myself to a certain death. I heard a rustle again and as I turned to face it, heard a voice from above.

"Hey! Are you busy for the next millennium?" Ana called.

She slid down a rope from above to my lonesome stalagmite and landed with the grace of a fairy. She opened her arms wide and we rode up the rope together and out of these treacherous caverns forever.



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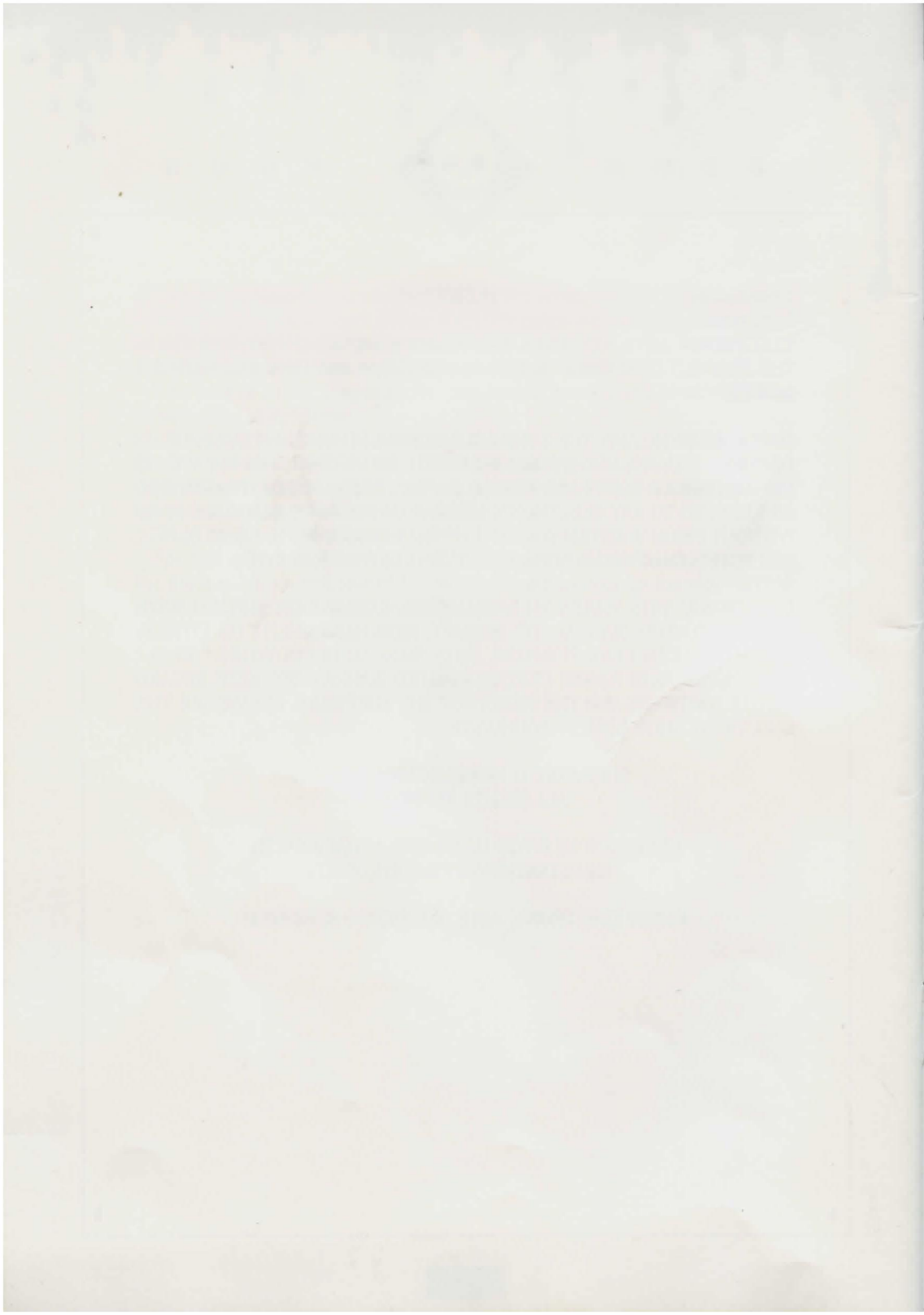
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