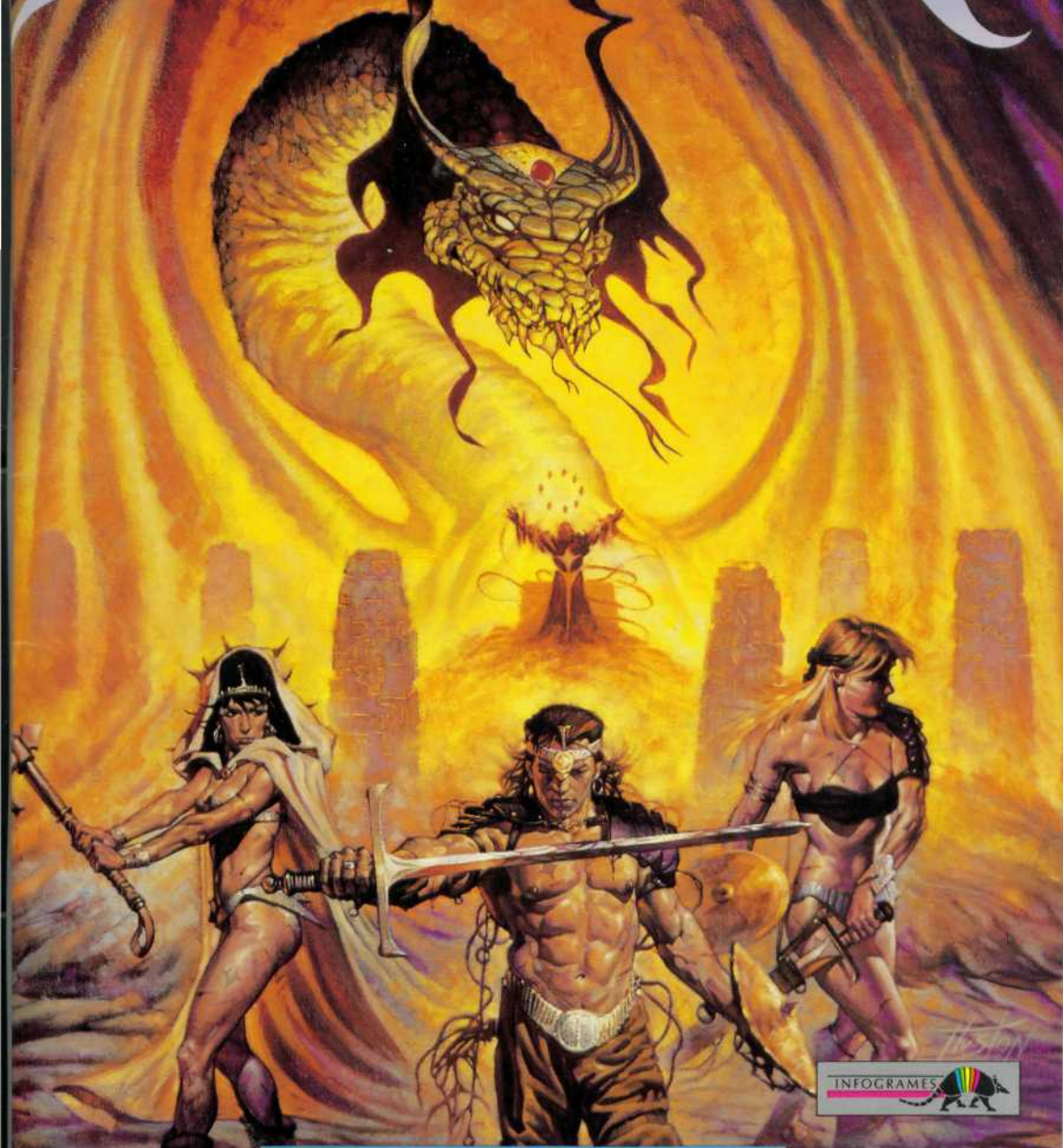


DRAKKHEN™



DRACONIAN

DRAKKHEN™

by Francois Marcela Froideval

Illustrations by Olivier Ledroit

DRACONIAN™



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ANHAK DRAKKHEN

THEY WERE BURNT BY SUNS
THEY BATHED IN MOONS
THEY ARE THE LORDS OF LIGHT
THEY ARE THE LORDS OF THE UNIVERSE
THEY ARE THE FATHER'S TEARS

THEY ARE FOUR
THEY ARE FOUR
THEY ARE TWO TIMES FOUR
THEY ARE EIGHT
THEY ARE EIGHT
THEY ARE ONE TIMES EIGHT

HE SLEEPS, IT IS SAID,
THE SLEEP OF THE DEAD.
FROM LIKENESS' BREATH
IS ILLUSION BRED.

(TRANSLATED FROM THE BOOK OF WORM)

HUZHUL MEKTHUL

"THE PROPHECY"

WHEN THE LAST HAS FALLEN AND IS NO MORE
THEN NOTHING CAN BE AS WAS BEFORE.

A MADMAN WILL, IN PROUD DISPLAY
OF VAIN UNWORTHY COURAGE, SLAY
THE LAST OF MY SONS.
ON THAT DAY MUST ALL COME TO AN END.
A BATTLE WITHOUT REASON,
A SWORDSTROKE WITHOUT GLORY;
THE OLD ORDER THEN WILL BE AS DUST,
AND SWEEP AWAY.

WHAT HOPE MAY THERE BE?

*AGHNAHIR HURTHD
THE PRIME FATHER
"SUPREME FIRST DRAGON"*

"The world was not made in one day or in seven,
but in a mighty gushing breath of fire
which spewed life, knowledge and the powers
onto all the places of the world."

*From the heretical writings
of Khantrace the Accursed.*

"Unless a serpent devours a serpent,
he will never be a dragon."

Latin dictum.

"Four elements form the universe.
Two poles govern these elements.
These eight principles proceed from All.
All is as the phoenix."

*METHRATON
Ultimate Magus.*



The Paladin

Long had the paladin erred across the world. First he had consulted the infamous magic tomes and met the old and learned men mantled with the dust of many ages. Finally he had talked with travellers, pouring sour wine for them in stinking ill-lit taverns.

Later he ordered his finest palfrey saddled, donned his silver armor, buckled the flame of justice that was his sword, raised up his lance and, surrounded by his squires, set off towards the fires of the orient.

The journey was long. They crossed seas, rivers, deserts, dark forests and wondrous realms. The years went by, yet the paladin was sure of his quest and would not turn back.

One after the other his squires fell by the wayside, until only one remained, as stubborn as his lord.

After seven long years of strange odyssey they came to the farthest region of the known universe, that accursed place where the flat earth withers into terrifying nothingness and which is called Nethennia.

Then, finally, did the paladin smile.

He advanced boldly into a stony desert where the sparse vegetation seemed to moan under near unbearable oppression and what few animals there were slunk hungrily with tails between legs. The paladin's gaze was fixed on a jagged mountain whose tortured peaks clawed at the sky. The squire began to tremble; the very wind seemed to howl dire warning.

As night fell, the paladin came to the foot of the mountain. Taking up shield and heavy sword, he entrusted his mortal soul to the indifferent god he worshipped and, followed by his terrified squire, began to climb.

They scrambled their way up the steep and rocky face, soon reaching the wide mouth of what appeared to be a cavern fit for the biggest of giants to dwell in. The paladin entered the maw of the cave and hurled his proud challenge into the dark depths. The moaning wind swept up the echo, mocking him with the ghost of his defiant cry. The air was heavy and foul with fetid reptilian stench. At the paladin's feet laid white bones and broken armour, half-covered in great tatters of ophidian slough.

From the blackness of the cavern a deep and sustained rumble shook the very walls. The breathing of the beast! The paladin moved forward, dread clutching at his brave heart. A sound of slithering caught his ear and he raised his eyes to where, behind a wall of stalagmites, gaped the monstrous jaws of the last of all the DRAKKHENS!

The mighty head measured a full fifteen feet in width. The monster's eyes were the size of a child, its teeth as long and sharp as swords. Noisome flame-streaked breath belched from the enormous mouth.

The astonished paladin staggered back. The beast, massive as a great oak, surged forward, smashing the wall of stone spikes. The dragon's gigantic tail whiplashed, whistling a hair's breadth from the astounded paladin and cracking the cavern's rock floor. Then as it unfurled its wings; he realized with terror that they spanned at least a hundred feet.

A fearsome gurling escaped the monstrous throat. Suddenly the giant reptile's head shot forward and great goutts of smoking fire leaped at the fleeing paladin. Seeing its victim had escaped the deadly flames, the dragon roared in fury.

The paladin stumbled out of the smoke-filled cave and turned to face his enemy. The squire, half-hidden behind an outcrop of boulders, hadn't moved a muscle. Petrified with terror, he watched the stupendous beast of legend appear from the dark opening. The mountain itself trembled beneath the wrath of the assault. The mighty jaws were pointed at the cowering squire, who could only watch as the cavernous pit of fire loomed over him. The gigantic jaws snapped shut, silencing the squire's wail of despair for all eternity.

The scaled giant then stood on its hind paws and, stretching its neck up to the sky, unleashed an ear-shattering roar of triumph to the heavens. The proud cry was, however, cut short. The knight, using the opportunity provided by the monster's moment of victory, had run up to the dragon and plunged his sword into the huge belly. Burning gore splashed him, the legendary dragon gore that was said to grant immortality! But a blow from a sword, however mighty, is no more than a pin-prick for a DRAKKHEN. The great worm made ready for the fight. The ensuing dance of death was a thing of horror. The paladin would dart between the powerful lashing blows of the dragon which pulverized the surrounding rocks, filling the air with clouds of dust and flying shards of stone.

The knight struck again and again with his sword, almost in despair at the seeming hopelessness of the combat: his weapon inflicted mere scratches in the unutterably tough hide of the beast.

The dragon was in a frenzy of wrath. How could this miserable creature dare even to confront the mightiest of the mighty, the last and greatest of all the DRAKKHENS! Its rage was boundless: claws, teeth, tail and fiery breath exploded in a maelstrom of destruction. And yet the puny enemy escaped doom, hiding beneath the dragon's very guts. Around them, bushes burned and the rock themselves seemed to melt.

Many hours did the combat go on. The paladin was covered in the thick gore of the DRAKKHEN. His body had been dreadfully scorched and torn. The dragon was also exhausted; the slightest movement of its enormous mass now cost more and more of the precious fluid of life. Its overwhelming breath had turned into hoarse panting without even a suggestion of the roaring flame that a few hours before had turned all it touched to cinder. The gigantic tail and wings no longer beat majestically. For the first time in all the long history of the world, the creature's eyes contained an expression of astonishment. Gasping, it collapsed to the blackened bloody ground. There before the DRAKKHEN stood the paladin, leaning fiercely on his dripping sword and struggling for breath bathed in blood and sweat, his shield a twisted lump of smoking metal. The two combatants looked in wonder at each other for a time, marvelling at one another's force and endurance.

Finally, the man walked up to the mighty head of his foe. The creature was about to address the paladin, offering the deep and eternal bond of friendship that only a DRAKKHEN may know, when the sword rose in the air and swung down, ripping through the dragon's thick jugular.

The beast screamed, feeling its life spurting onto the ground in steaming jets of blood. With one blow, it tore an arm from the knight and, in a final surge of energy, beat its marvelous wings and flew lumbering into the sky. The mighty animal's screams were added to the mournful howling of the wind. The DRAKKHEN circled high above the mountain, the immense eyes contemplating its vast and indescribably ancient domain for the last time.

The dragon flew around and around for what seemed an age to the tiny speck below that was the paladin. Gradually, though, the mighty beast's view was clouded by a thickening mist, the opaque fog of death. Then the wondrous monster began a soaring dive, roaring its strange deathcry into the ether of the world:

— ANHAK DRAKKHEN AGHNAHIR HURTHD!!!

The great mass hurtled into the boiling lava of a volcano, sending flashing plumes of fire high into the air. The last of all the dragons would not have its head stuck to gather dust on the knight's trophy-room wall.

Wincing with pain that he had not had time to feel during the terrible combat, the paladin bound as best he could his frightful wound and gazed upon the final flight of the dragon. As the last of the DRAKKHEN plummeted into the lake of fire, a deep rumbling shook the air. It was as if the world itself cried out in agony. A vice of fear tightened around the knight's heart. This happened on the 10th day of the Griffin.

The dragon's treasure consisted of a single prismatic gem. The paladin set off with it on his long and perilous journey home.

He was more than a little surprised to find the flagship of the Emperor's fleet waiting for him as he reached port. His surprise was even greater when his welcome aboard the splendid ship turned out to consist entirely of a great many sharp halberds pointing at him.

After a less than agreeable crossing, the paladin was eventually dragged from the dark hold and onto the forecastle. When his eyes had become used to the brightness of the light, he noticed the great beacon that burned permanently atop the Imperial Palace, announcing to sailors from every nation that they were entering the greatest port in the known world.

He was thrown onto the quay with no more regard to his dignity than a slave would receive and was then marched to the Palace by a contingent of the Black Guard.

The Emperor stared down in angry disgust at the uncomprehending knight. The mightiest of the world's kings and magicians stood around the imperial throne. The paladin stood and, boldly flouting the most elementary of court tradition, began to speak with as firm a voice as he could muster, "Majesty, I have slain the great dragon and . . ."

He got no further; a guard silenced him with the hilt of his sword. The Imperial Arch-Wizard finished the paladin's sentence,

". . . And like a vainglorious lackwit did I, by that most foolhardy gest, seal the fate of my world which now enters its death throes! Not only that but I proudly murdered the dragon by foulest treachery. Be proud of your esteemed servant, my Lords! . . . So proud are we of you that your reward will not wait!"

Turning to the Emperor, the Arch-Wizard said simply, "I declare this knight to be guilty."

Then, in turn, each of the assembled kings pronounced judgement on the paladin and unanimously found him irredeemably guilty. They turned to the Emperor of the world who, after a short silence, pronounced sentence in a voice whose calm iciness struck deepest dread in the paladin's heart,

"He is guilty. Take him to the place of hanging. While life is yet in him, let him be drawn, quartered and thrown to the mangiest of the city's curs."

All was done as the Emperor had commanded, except that the starving dogs turned their backs on his bloodied remains.

Thus perished the paladin who had slain the last of the dragons on the 12th day of the month of the Dragon. The kings of the world, the Arch-Wizards and High-Priests met in the Landsraad. No echo of what they said ever reached other ears. On the seventh day, the doors opened and they returned to their dying realms.

On the eighth day four people arrived and were received in private audience by the Emperor. They had been sent by the highest kings.

You remember the day; you were one of the four.

Vhal Hart Hann Jürgen von Wessenmayer

The first part of my name means that I am Arch-Priest of the One. The second part means that I belong to one of the oldest families in the Empire.

I have always faithfully and proudly served the Empire. My first loyalty, however, is to our God, the ONE. I wear the blue robe that is the symbol of his majestic power. I have the immense honour to officiate in the Temple of the Imperial Palace. It is many years since I last left the capital.

I had determined to pass the last third of my life in the service of our lord, within these walls, detaching myself from time from earthly vanities and the incessant struggles for influence and power.

How great then was my annoyance upon hearing the astounding news that MAGIC HAD CEASED TO EXIST! What I took to be no more than a grotesque rumour was alas confirmed as truth when the Arch-Wizard asked for an audience with me.

I received him instantly, for he is not the kind which may be left waiting. His hieratic features were pale. A nerve in his left eyelid made him wink involuntarily and often. Hardly had he accepted the seat I offered, than he began talking rapidly in a voice almost empty of expression.

"Jürgen (he is one of but three people who call me by my first name), "do you remember the ancient Tsinn song that says what will happen on the day the last dragon dies?"

"Naturally, 'Magic will be no more' ", I answered.

"Dear friend, that's precisely what has come to pass! The last DRAKKHEN has been put to death by an errant knight. It was the last magic vision I saw before my powers went from me."

"I thought all dragons had long since died off!"

"They had. Except for one. We weren't worried in the least. It was an enormous specimen, extraordinarily strong. We protected it, just for the principle, but no one could have imagined a knight wanting to slay it!"

"Strange that I never heard tell of the beast," I mused.

"That was a very closely guarded secret. Part of the protection. To be honest, we didn't really believe the old Tsinn song."

"Quite", I nodded. "What do you expect of me, dear fellow?"

"Make enquiries! Seek advice from the One. Magic must not be allowed to die; the very existence of our world is based on it. Already I can feel the signs of a vast disease that will eventually wither the world. None will survive! Do you realize that I, Arch-Wizard of the Empire, am now rendered quite powerless?"

His voice had become a racked whisper. His eyes gazed inward at the horrifying void of infinite despair. In tones which I hoped were comforting and firm, I assured him that my fullest attention would henceforth be directed at finding a solution and that in the meantime he should take some much-needed rest. The door closed limply behind his bent figure, leaving me to face the immensity of my own anguish. I dressed in the ceremonial robes reserved for the most solemn of occasions and, accompanied by the Grand Priests I had sent for, made my way to the Holy of Holies.

The gravity of the situation became clearer with each day that passed. The palace has been the scene of feverish comings and goings. Reports of catastrophies have arrived incessantly. One of the March garrisons fell to a barbarian raid that would normally have been repelled with ease; the defenders had counted on spells that the magician was unable to conjure. An entire fleet was lost with all hands in a violent storm, all because the Admiral's Wind-Wizard was incapable of a simple charm of protection. Palaces, architectural marvels built with magic, have crumbled to dust.

Our world has been collapsing about us. My apprehension was added to by the Emperor's attitude; he appeared calmly confident that a solution would be found. For my part, I couldn't see where the answer lay, unless the One had communicated his godly intention to his Imperial Majesty. Slowly, though, I realized that such was not the case; the Emperor was merely doing what the circumstances required of him: calmly he has been taking decisions and issuing orders, laying the foundations for a world without magic.

The One has kept silent. Nothing, it seemed, would halt the death of our world. Helpless wizards, driven to hopelessness, have taken their own lives. Yet more have been stoned or burnt to death by a furious populace, convinced that the magicians had turned against them. Enemies have taken long awaited revenge on sorcerors now incapable of defending themselves. A wizard tyrant was put to death by subjects whose families had suffered under his cruel yoke for seven generations.

And since the fateful day on which the last of the DRAKKHEN was killed, we Priests have too lost our power. My spells have deserted me. The One has been quite out of reach. We continue, however, to behave as if we were unaffected by the catastrophe; the Emperor expressly asked me to act out this pretence and I gave the appropriate instructions: magical objects and artefacts, such as scrolls of force, are to be used as they would normally be; the populace must believe in the undiminished power of the Clergy. I marvel at his Majesty's unruffled calm; will he be able to see the world through the tempest?

One afternoon, on the 7th day of the month of the Dragon, the SOL COM1 HMS SHADRAC, a vessel we had given up for lost, limped into port. It was in a frightful condition, scorched black where it hadn't been entirely consumed by flame. The ovation given it by the sailors and workers in the port could be heard clearly as far as the highest towers of the Palace. It seems the ship's Wind-Wizard took command at the death of the captain. I watched from my balcony as the Black Guard surrounded the sorely battered ship. The magician was escorted to the Palace by a company of the Gold Guard!

I rushed to the Throne Room as fast as the dignity of my office would allow; that a simple sorcerer should receive such a welcome intrigued me greatly. The SHADRAC must have accomplished a highly important mission.

I was allowed admittance, but only after a guard fell to the floor in considerable discomfort. His colleagues' reluctance then miraculously evaporated (I'm liable to lose patience with guards who cannot interpret orders with a minimum of flexibility).

Standing near the Emperor, I witnessed one of the strangest audiences I have ever known.

Briefly, the wizard recounted the outline of the harrowing voyage. Then he handed the ship's log to his Majesty and declared that the details of the adventure could only be divulged in strictest privacy. To the unspoken indignation of the assembled dignitaries, the Emperor asked to be left alone with the ship's magician.

Several days later, on the 9th of the month of the Dragon, the imposing bulk of the fleet flagship sailed into port. Its cargo was of doubtful quality: the paladin who had ended the life of the last of the dragons. The Black Guard marched the fellow to the palace where he was thrown before the Imperial Throne. Everyone knows what became of him.

Even I voted for his death. The treacherous swine deserved it more than any low cut-throat. His head rolled in the dust on the 12th of the month of the Dragon.

Later, when the Emperor called the meeting of the Landsraad, I was present beside the illustrious assembly of kings and mighty lords. What is said behind the aged doors of the Landsraad is secret, and so I will refrain from any account of what arguments and bitter disagreements there may have been during those seven long days when an amazing plan was laid and the fate of the world was truly settled.

Four heroes were required to carry out the quest. I volunteered and, to my surprise, all my friends approved. Even my enemies, for reasons I prefer not to speculate upon, agreed to my being one of the four chosen. The names of three other valorous and true-hearted heroes were selected and they were sent for.

The next day, after some hours of earnest prayer to the One, I donned my metal-blue battle-robe and chose what weapons I would bring. Then I made my way to his Majesty's apartments, where I found three of the Empire's most illustrious heroes.

We were ushered into the Privy Council chamber, where the Emperor was already waiting with the Arch-Wizard. His Majesty told us the strange tale of the SOL COM1 HMS SHADRAK.

Afterwards, he gave us the SHADRAK's log, which is hereafter reproduced.



Sol com 1

HMS

Shadrak

The imposing silhouette of a Sol com 1 (First Line commercial vessel) is one of the most impressive hallmarks of Imperial power. Indeed, these craft are almost as redoubtable as a Line fighting ship, which accounts for their unusual name.

Huge in size, these vessels are loaded to the gunwhales with the empire's most precious trading goods and have room to spare for not a few passengers.

Apart from their excellent seaworthiness, these ships feature a superstructure reminiscent of a veritable fort. They carry three companies of Sea Hounds (300 soldiers trained in all the arts of warfare at sea) and a battery of battle machines, one of which is the famous steel ram.

As if such fearsome defences weren't sufficient, these ships never sail alone and are always escorted by a number of well-armed and swift frigates. Each Sol com 1 boasts its wind-wizard whose responsibility is to ensure an ever-favorable breeze.

Add to this a crew of elite sailors and it is easy to understand why old seadogs say of someone particularly arrogant that he's "as proud as the skipper of a rorqual" (nickname given to the Sol com 1).

SOL COM 1 LHYNN CLASS: HMS SHADRAK

length: 400 feet

width: 75 feet

masts: 3

oars: 2 rows

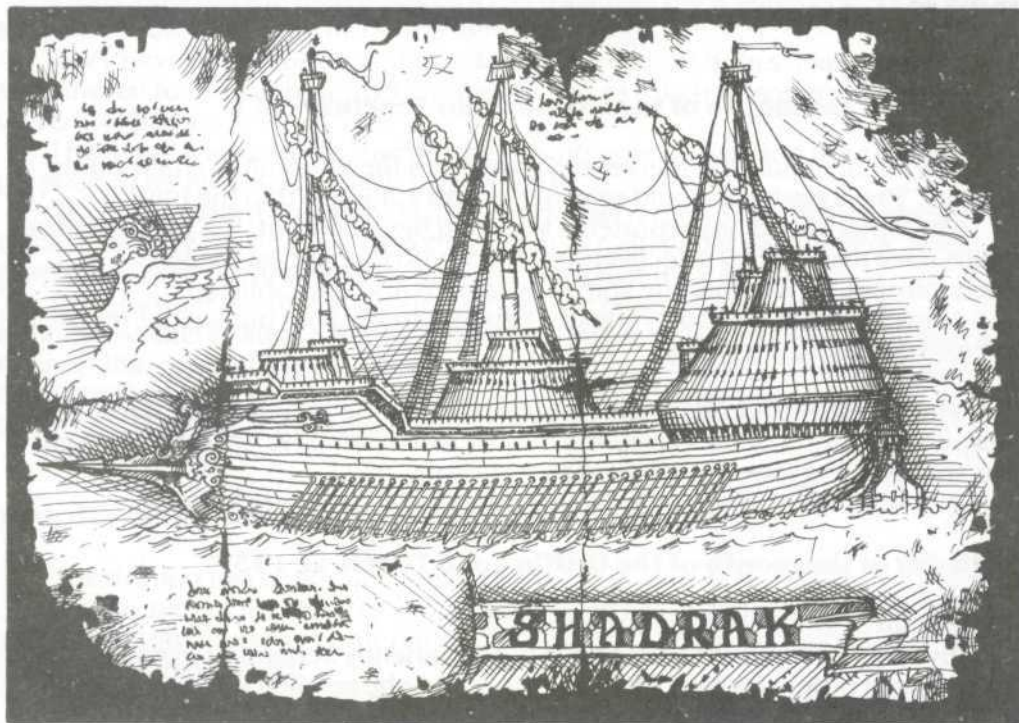
crew: 150 hands/800 galley-slaves/300 soldiers

passengers: 50 to 100 people

catapults: 10

ballista: 20

heavy crossbows: 100





Log of the Shadrak

**FIRST LINE
IMPERIAL COMMERCIAL VESSEL**

10th day of the month of the Griffin anno Tenebrae 133

The escort squadron has veered away from the Shadrak to chase pirate vessels. The squadron should return to escort station within the hour.

The wind-wizard has reported a worrying development. His wind-control spells have lost all their effectiveness. He can no longer cast the least enchantment. As a result, the ship is becalmed and immobilized.

I have ordered the Galley-master to begin rowing but our weight renders the exercise almost useless.

MIDDAY

The escort squadron has not returned. I assume they also are becalmed. Despite the efforts of the Galley-master, we are making no headway; indeed, our ship is being towed northward by a current.

The wind-wizard has retired to his quarters. He appears to be ill.

11th day of the month of the Griffin anno Tenebrae 133

We have drifted throughout the night.

My assumption is that our escort is permanently separated from us. I have given orders for the battle machines to be readied for an eventual attack from pirates. A third of our soldiers stands watch.

The galley-slaves are exhausted. They have struggled many hours against a strong current, and the Shadrak is heavily loaded. Since their deaths would seem pointless for the present, I have ordered the Galley-master to rest them.

The wind-wizard has not yet quit his quarters. I have been informed that he has eaten nothing since the beginning of our troubles. I fear he may be seriously affected. We have drifted throughout the day.

12th day of the month of the Griffin anno Tenebrae 133

Another night of drifting. The current that drags us unwaveringly to the north appears on none of our charts!

I have just spoken with the helmsman. He has never heard tell of the strange current.

The crew is restless. They mutter that the wizard is accursed. Luckily, a priest travelling as a passenger has laughed at their superstitious fears, and this appears to have reassured them a little.

MIDDAY

I have been to the wizard's quarters. The fellow was dead drunk! He's being sobered up. The day has passed much as I had expected: no wind, just this damned northbound drift.

13th day of the month of the Griffin anno Tenebrae 133

Of what mocking God are we the playthings? No escort. No wind. No magic. Just this hateful current.

I have ordered the galley-slaves to be driven as hard as may be. Perhaps a supreme effort will free us of the eternal tugging.

They have been rowing at the fastest rate for eight hours. Many have succumbed to the infernal rhythm. We are just as much prisoners of the current as before.

I have put a stop to the rowing; there is no point in wasting lives to no purpose. If we are fated to drift, then so be it!

The wind-wizard ate supper with me. He has regained control of himself but not, alas, of his powers. He told me that certain of the passengers, also practitioners of the arcane arts, had, like him, lost their ability.

He informed me that in his opinion we are prisoners of a magical tempest, whatever such a damned thing might be, and I sent him away with a noncommittal grunt. If it helps him to believe such poppycock, then I'll not discourage him. How anyone so incompetent could have been assigned to this ship, I'd be more than interested to know!

We drift still.

14th day of the month of the Griffin anno Tenebrae 133

The drifting has continued unabated.

Shortly before 11 o'clock, a lookout spotted a kraken to starboard. Fear swept through the crew. I ordered Action Stations and the scorpions and Greek fire were readied.

The monster has stayed close to us for hours. Its enormous back glitters blindingly in the sun. The beast is all of three hundred feet in length and its scales bristle with spikes. It sometimes raises its prodigious head to look at us. Its jaws gnash like claps of thunder. Several of the crew have vomited at the sight of its repulsive maw.

The situation is indeed remarkable. Our ship moves to the tune of an unknown current. 300 soldiers, armed with harpoons and crossbows or standing by the battle machines, stare uneasily at a titanic sea-monster which seems content to swim alongside, with no intention of attacking.

Shortly after 5 o'clock, the kraken suddenly bellowed, lifting its gigantic head clear of the water. Then it fell back heavily, sending a great fountain shooting into the air before diving to the sombre depths where it lives with the other hideous creatures of the deep.

We remained at our posts for another hour. Then the men were allowed to return to normal duties.

My opinion is that the beast was intimidated by the great bulk of the Shadrak. I am unsure that we could have survived an attack.

Despite the unending drift of our vessel, the hands and soldiers are of good heart and carried themselves bravely.

15th day of the month of the Griffin anno Tenebrae 133

The lookout was hanged from the yardarm this morning. The Shadrak ran aground through his criminal negligence. An enormous shock threw me from my bunk. I held a hurried meeting with my officers. This island is uncharted and none of us had ever heard tell of it. Luckily, the ship has suffered only minor damage. A few days repairs should be enough. In spite of today's events, the crew is of good cheer.

I sent three cutters to the island to stock up with fresh water. The wizard accompanied the landing party. I intend to use these days of forced immobility to explore the island.

The landing party has returned with good water. The wizard reported his astonishment at the cliffs which, according to him, show not the least sign of weathering. It is, he says, as if they had been created yesterday! This absurdity tends to confirm my low opinion of the man. Perhaps the loss of his power has also addled his wits.

We no longer drift, for which we are all more than thankful.

16th day of the month of the Griffin anno Tenebrae 133

I chose 250 soldiers and twenty of the ship's crew to accompany on a mission of exploration to the island. Twenty of the passengers also volunteered to go ashore, although I'm at a loss to know what purpose they may serve. There are among them a dozen knights, a priest and two magicians. The magicians are, like our wind-wizard, bereft of power.

Two hours were spent transporting men, equipment and a score of horses to shore. After ten minutes march we came across a small river.

I am, I'll own, more than a little excited by this adventure. May it be that we have chanced upon a grand new continent? It is not inconceivable that if such were indeed the case, his Imperial Majesty could think fit to name me Governor of this fresh land. A title is not impossible.

We have marched in a great plain covered in a luxuriant vegetation of a type unfamiliar to all our party. We have met nobody since our landing; it may be that the continent is quite uninhabited.

The animals we have seen are strange: small scaled beasts and wondrous birds. One of my officers claims he spied a large beast that fled at our approach. This land is vast enough to boast any number of mighty animals.

As night began falling, I ordered camp to be set up. Great fires have been lit around our encampment to frighten off any roving creatures. The wood in these parts is very resinous and burns readily.

One of the soldiers brought an intriguing fact to my attention: the branches have not the usual rings by which one may tell the age. This constitutes a new vegetable species, without any doubt!

The cold is a little bitter. It is true that the Shadrak drifted far to the north. The night sky is clear and starry. Despite my excitement, I must be very tired for one of the constellations appeared to move before my eyes!

17th day of the month of the Griffin anno Tenebrae 133

We were awakened during the night by a bloodcurdling scream. Two of our guards had disappeared. Another claimed to have seen a monstrous winged beast carry them off into the air. I doubled the guard.

The remainder of the night passed off without incident.

We raised camp at nine o'clock and continued our march north.

By evening we had made good progress and with only one unhappy event: five of our number were swallowed by a giant plant. I have the strange notion that we are being observed, by the sky! What is even more mysterious is that our magicians share my impression; I have noticed them studying the heavens. We have, however, seen nothing untoward.

The land is pleasant and, were it not for the oddness of flora and fauna, we might be in one of the rich provinces of our beloved Empire. Streams abound and their water is excellently sweet and clear. The priest has suggested we live off our provisions, for some of the men have fallen sick from eating the local fruits.

I thanked the priest for his counsel and readied for sleep. Tonight I shall sleep with my sword by me.

18th day of the month of the Griffin anno Tenebrae 133

Once more we were awakened by noise and screeching. I took my sword and ran to the source of the commotion. Horror! One of the soldiers' tents was ripped to shreds and its unhappy occupants crushed or with several members torn from their bloodied corpses. The officer of the watch reported twelve dead or missing.

A soldier pointed out enormous prints in the ground, made by some prodigious beast. The knights became very excited and swore they would cut the animal in two should it venture to return. I said nothing and went back to my tent.

When morning came, I was informed of the disappearance of one of the sorcerors. This was troubling news. His colleague said the poor fellow had remained awake to study the stars. The monster must have claimed him. The knights were disappointed; they too had stayed awake.

We set eyes on our enemy for the first time today. It is a flying reptile of the worst sort. One of the soldiers killed the beast with a fine shot from his crossbow.

We entered a great valley. There are fields and crops! I own to feeling somewhat disappointed. This is not, after all, an unknown continent. The magician said the crops are of a kind he has never seen. In the distance stood a small village. We made for it.

The villagers must have fled at our arrival. All the houses have been freshly abandoned as in some fires still burn in the hearths.

What looks to be a handsome castle stands some way off. We shall perhaps meet somebody after all.

Here ends the log of the SHADRAK.

Having read the contents of the ship's log, I concluded that the mysterious island was perhaps the source of all the problems assailing our world.

The Imperial magician ushered in a tall, tired and scholarly-looking man whose clothing and air left me in little doubt as to his identity.

"Good day, my lords", he began, "You don't know me and yet I feature regularly in the log you have just read. I am none other than the wind-wizard of the Shadrak!"

Although all present had certainly understood who the man was before he so pompously introduced himself, we all exhibited the admiring surprise he clearly expected. Everyone was impatient to learn the secrets of the mysterious island. After the ritual of greetings had finally been dispensed with, the magician seated himself and began his tale.

"Our party set off for the castle the captain had seen. There we did indeed have an encounter, though not of the kind the captain had been hoping! The knights had naturally taken up position at the head of the column. They were the first to see the dragon spying on us from behind a tree."

The wind-wizard's sigh announced what was to follow.

"They charged the beast. The combat was frightful. Horses whinnied in terror, knights roared ancient war cries and the dragon spat jets of searing flame. Acrid smoke shortly hid the scene from the rest of us.

Our soldiers then raced to the fray. Their admirable formation crumbled under the onslaught of the dragon which suddenly appeared from the sulphureous fog and wrought havoc on the hapless ranks. Several knights, black with smoke, harried the monster from behind."

The wizard paused, picturing in his mind scenes that few could imagine seeing in this life. Then he looked at us in turn, slowly nodding as if to say that what dismay we felt was as nothing compared to the horrors he had survived! His audience was indeed deeply impressed and all were eager, none more so than I, to hear the rest. Assured of our undivided attention, the sorcerer took up his narrative once more.

"At that moment, when all seemed lost, the massive gate of the castle swung open and out poured a band of fighting men in armour. Their shouts were in a tongue I had never heard. The captain and rearguard of our troop rushed to join with them and thank them for their timely arrival. The strangers' officers were taller and better armed than their soldiers. At last, despite the mighty carnage the dragon still made, the tide of the battle would soon turn!"

The wizard again paused to regain breath and drink from a steaming cup.

"All at once I saw our rearguard, those who had rushed to greet the newcomers, turn tail and flee! Their captain too began to race back to where we waited; but, being heavier and slower than his men, he had not got far when an officer from the castle raised a strange barbed sword and hacked the captain's head from his shoulders!

"I had noticed certain of my powers returning to me since our landing on this strange continent. Wanting to understand what was happening, I uttered a minor spell of close sight and then it was that the hideous truth became clear! The faces of the castle soldiers were those of dragons! Their commanders were veritable winged dragons, though much smaller than those told of in our legends, covered in strange and glittering armour. They threw themselves on our party with all the ferocity of their kind; after all, were we not attempting to slay one of them?"

I stole a glance at the three heroes chosen, like me, for the perilous mission that we were soon to set out upon. All of us were astounded, our eyes wide with wonder. As we turned astonished with questioning eyes to the Imperial wizard, he coughed to hide the beginnings of a grin; he was enjoying our amazed reaction; he recognized in it his own emotions on hearing this incredible tale for the first time. I suppressed a shudder and turned again to the wind-wizard who had resumed his story.



"...The faces of the castle soldiers were those of dragons!... They threw themselves on our party with all the ferocity of their kind..."

"I at once turned to the priest and our companions, suggesting we beat a hasty retreat, since we could serve no useful purpose by staying to be slaughtered by these new and powerful enemies. We ran for our lives just as the dragon-men broke through the ranks of our soldiers with great ease. Our soldiers were fighting bravely but were no match for their foes, the smallest of whom stood a good head above our men. My last sight of the bloody scene was of hordes of winged dragon-men, glittering in their strange armor, flying from the windows of the castle and brandishing immense weapons!

One of the surviving soldiers later recounted the rest of the battle to me. The knights managed to slay the dragon. Then they turned to attack the dragon-men. The commander of the remaining soldiers formed his men into a square. Their first flight of crossbow bolts cut swathes in the dragonoid ranks. Only the enemy officers seemed invulnerable to the hail of steel. They, however, soon had their work cut out as our knights tore into them! One of the winged giants, a great warrior as it later turned out, fell with three lances through him.

Our soldiers, seeing that their enemy, despite their astonishing appearance, were not invincible, set to fighting with a will. The crossbows were dropped and lances were raised. They formed a phalanx and bore down on the Drakkhen line.

The dragonoids were unaccustomed to fighting as a disciplined unit, surely because of their savagely independent nature. They were no match for the fighting machine that our lads formed and they began retreating toward the safety of their castle. Alas, it was then that fresh regiments of winged creatures poured from the windows and dived onto our phalanx, breathing clouds of fire. What was left of the horribly burnt formation broke in confusion. The dragon-men threw themselves into the breached ranks and gave vent to their fury. The flying ones, dragon knights, landed and drew ghastly weapons. They waded into our men and cut down all about them. From their throats came a blood-curdling croaking chant, a litany of death whose every repetition was punctuated by the death of one of our men. The words of their war chant were told me by the survivor. I don't know what meaning they have, but they are these: 'ANHAK DRAKKHEN AGHNAHIR HURTHD'.

Our soldiers were now maddened with fear. When the last of our knights fell before a Drakkhen Knight, all resistance fell away and every man ran for his life. Men run faster than drakkhen but the winged ones harried them cruelly from the air. Very few made good their escape. The man who told me the tale only survived by playing at being dead!"

The wizard rested again and drank another cup of steaming brew. His manner, which I considered principally playacting, was beginning to irritate me and I sighed, raising my eyes to the ornate ceiling. The sorcerer missed nothing, as I had expected. Heaving his own sigh, filled with a great deal more expressiveness than I could ever hope to communicate, he set down the cup and went on.

"Nothing that had so far happened was as horrible as what next took place. Like beasts of prey, the drakkhen set about feeding on the bodies of their victims! Some of the wounded were also devoured.

The soldier who later told me all this was quaking with fright and watching from half-closed eyes the dragonoids as they came closer to where he lay. Then he saw three creatures fly down from the highest tower and come to land in the middle of the carnage. Two were red dragons, stupefying beasts. It was, however, the third that riveted my friend's attention.

The dragon creature measured no less than eighteen feet in height and wore shining golden armour. In its forehead, beneath the magnificent helm, shone an enormous gem. The stone was a blood-red ruby which glistened with a hardness only matched by the beast's eyes. No sooner had this colossal dragon landed than all those present fell to their knees, crying 'HAKK! HAKK! DRAKKHEN!'



“...From their throats came a blood-curdling croaking chant, a litany of death...”

The chief, the dragon in golden armour, answered with a grunt, 'HAKK'. He lifted one of the human corpses and examined it. Satisfied, he carelessly threw it back to the ground and burst into raucous laughter like the cackling of thunder. The assembled host followed suit and the air shook with their screeching hilarity. My informant then fainted, for at that moment a drakkhen began rummaging for choice meat in the very pile of crushed corpses under which our poor soldier was hiding! Our friend cannot have been too appetizing, for he later awoke in possession of all his members and managed to escape during the night."

That tasteless attempt at grizzly humor only added to our horror and we stared dumbly at the wind-wizard. His description of the chief of the dragon-men, the drakkhen in golden armor, froze the marrow in our bones. We were to confront that monster! Not one of my three companions would have failed to volunteer had they known these facts beforehand; of this I am sure. For myself, as the One is my witness, I do not know whether I would have had the courage.

Questions poured from us. There were so many things that his tale had not made clear. The sorcerer would answer none of them; he raised a hand to call for silence and returned to the telling of his adventure.

"I, as you will remember, had fled with the other non-combatants a while before the awful slaughter took place. Deprived of all but the most rudimentary of spells, our presence was at best useless. We galloped for several hours and halted only when our exhausted horses could gallop no more.

We set up camp in a well-hidden hollow. There were more than ten of us. Our group boasted a magician, a priest, a great lord, seven soldiers and two merchants, one of whom had an impressive knowledge of languages. None felt in the mood for talk; we were too weary to do more than take care of the horses before collapsing into a dreamless sleep.

We set off again no more than four hours later and soon entered a region of swampland. Our progress was slowed considerably. Food was no problem: the magician was able to conjure a modest ball of flame, sufficient to roast a small reptile we had killed.

In the far distance we saw a great serpent, a huge slithering monster with snapping jaws. Happily, he didn't notice us and we were able once more to continue our uncomfortable journey.

Finally we saw a village on the horizon and my companions elected to make for it. The three days we had spent fleeing from the dragon creatures seemed enough to ensure a healthy distance. In any case we had no provisions left and two of our band were poorly. The priest assured me they were in need of care and rest. I agreed to the plan. We had no choice but to hope that the village would extend us a friendlier welcome than we had received at the castle! We entered the village warily, under the astonished stares of the locals.

The villagers were generally somewhat taller than most humans. Their features were not entirely unlike our own, the principal difference being their scaly green skin and pointed ears.

One of the villagers came up to us and spoke in a tongue with guttural accents. The merchant who was our interpreter looked at me helplessly. The priest and the magician, however, shot astonished glances at me. I myself was more than a little surprised, for the being had spoken in the high tongue of the ancient arcanum, the age-old language of magic! We understood him.

Hospitality was offered us. The being prepared a meal. He was the village chief. In spite of his willingness to answer our many questions, we learned little, since they were no more than ignorant country folk. They paid allegiance to a princess whose castle stood in the middle of marshland. We also learned of a large town situated in the centre of the island. The chief told us that his race was very ancient and rigidly divided into castes of which his was the lowest.



“...In its forehead, beneath the magnificent helm, shone an enormous gem...”

We remained some days in the village. It was during that time that the surviving soldier joined us and told me of the fate of his comrades. We were terrified to learn of what mettle the superior castes were made and we considered our future with some trepidation.

Along with the priest, I used our visit to improve my understanding of the ancient language. The villagers seemed contented enough, even though they were poor. We found them rather displeasing to the eye, yet less ugly than other reptilian races we know. Their females were particularly repulsive. I was a little shocked by this grotesque parody of humanity.

One remarkable phenomenon struck me particularly: while these creatures were clearly of an ancient race, they had no memory whatever of their past! Could it be they had been created from thin air?

By common accord, I and my companions decided to bring the visit to an end. My idea was to set out for the important town the villagers had mentioned to us during our conversations. Some of our group wished to return to the Shadrak and set sail for our capital. I argued that his Imperial Majesty would not be best pleased to learn we had deliberately neglected an excellent opportunity to gather intelligence about this new and fascinating island. The priest was of the same opinion and between us we had our way.

All our party were in good health and we set off in reasonable spirits. Our pace was faster than it had been before because we were rested and because we travelled along a small road. On either side, the swamp had been transformed into muddy fields where the drakkhenoids toiled energetically in the culture of a kind of grain. The peasants lifted their heads and stared in wonder as we passed. I wonder whether they found us as monstrous as we thought them. They were always most reserved and never engaged in conversation with us, although quite happy to be civil.

Eventually we saw the gigantic outline of a walled city. The moment was solemn and all felt apprehensive. No one had forgotten our first encounter with the drakkhens. Were we to be torn to bits and swallowed? The gates to the city were unguarded. The traffic was dense; peasants with carts or animals of various sorts poured in and out of the town. The great number of these animals added to our conviction that the drakkhen fed principally on meat, very likely raw.

The architecture was unfamiliar; the smallest door measured twelve feet in height. We were observed with curiosity. Our horses also attracted attention. The drakkhens had no horses, using instead large reptilian pachyderms with smooth hides. We noticed some drakkhen soldiers in the distance.

They were taller than the rest of the townsfolk, being perhaps eight feet tall. The inhabitants were of several different colours.

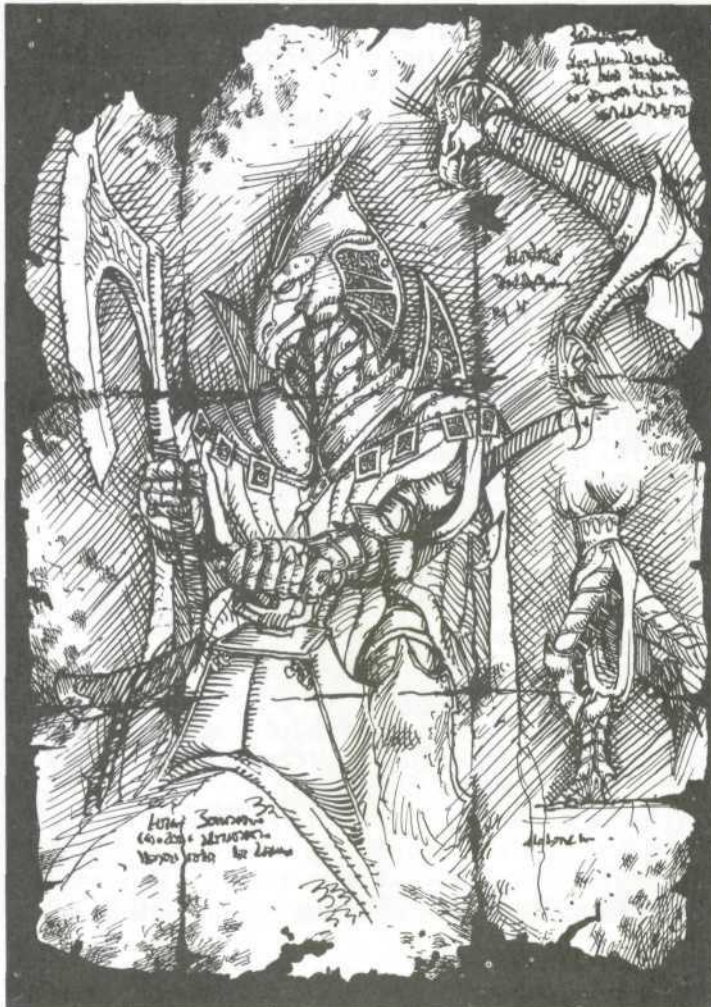
Seeing what looked to be a tavern, we went in to order a meal. The other customers fell silent on our entrance. A servant motioned us to take our place on a long bench before an enormous table. The fare we were served turned our stomachs: thick strips of raw meat floated in a yellowish liquid. The ale was drinkable. It was green and salty but not disagreeable to the taste. My suspicion that it was also strong was confirmed when, after a single mug, several of our group began showing signs of drunkenness.

The priest asked me if he might visit a building he had noticed in the central square and which he took to be a temple. I agreed to his request, suggesting that he take along the soldier who had survived the bloody slaughter.

Hardly had they left than the silhouette of a drakkhen stood framed in the doorway. He was dressed in elaborate spiked armor and carried a lethal-looking weapon covered in extravagant painting. A magnificent helm completed his equipment. The few parts of his body that were not protected by armor bulged with sinewy muscle. The figure radiated ruthless power and our consternation was great. His barbed weapons were immense, and yet appeared tiny in comparison with the bulk of their owner.

Upon his entry, the customers all stood and bowed low their heads, greeting the newcomer with a guttural 'Hakk! Hakk! Drakkh!'

After a few confused seconds, during which our failure to salute the honored visitor went not unnoticed, we copied the others as best we could, although wrapping our tongues around the strange shape of their words was no easy matter.



“...we noticed some drakkhen soldiers in the distance...”

The drakkhen turned and took several steps in our direction. Looming over us, he demanded to know who we were and what business we had in the city. His raucous, freezing tones turned our blood to ice. His fetid breath turned our stomachs.

I bowed and replied that we had been shipwrecked and were presently seeking the means to return to our homeland. The drakkhen appeared to accept my explanation and asked more questions, enquiring about the our country and its customs. His eyes glittered with intelligence; it was clear that we were not dealing with some mere brutish dolt.

Noticing we hadn't touched the meat dish on our table, he grabbed it up and swallowed it all with gusto, smacking his reptilian lips in obvious relish. The servant placed an enormous tankard of the greenish drink before him and the drakkhen gulped it noisily to the last drop. He broke wind and grunted in loud satisfaction. I politely averted my eyes during this uncouth display. He continued to assail me with all manner of questions, most of concerned military matters. I endeavored to give away as little information as I could without arousing his suspicions. He gave no sign of disbelieving me. Yet, being a crafty interrogator, he must on several occasions have been close to tripping me up in my own web of deceit as I almost contradicted lies I had already told! With great luck, I was able to spin enough yarn to patch up the holes in my story.

After two hours of this exhausting conversation, he suddenly stood and bid us farewell, ordering our party not to quit the city until the lords had reached a decision concerning our case. This prospect filled me with unease. We waited another two hours for the priest to return.

In the meanwhile, the tavern had filled with drakkhen. We were, it seemed, something of an attraction. After paying for what we had been served, we left.

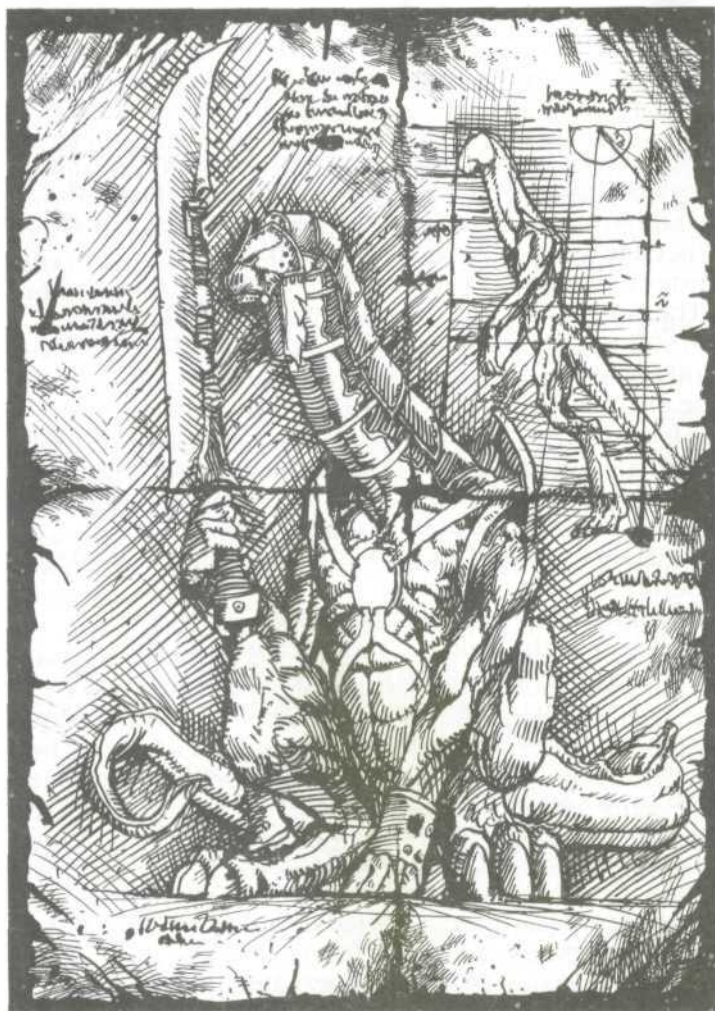
A drakkhen soldier was waiting outside the tavern door and asked us to accompany him. We promptly obeyed, not wishing to incur the wrath of the officer who had so impressed us with his power. After a lengthy march, we came to an imposing and handsome building guarded by many blue-skinned drakkhen soldiers. We were led through the massive gates and into a courtyard where our horses were tied up alongside the curious beasts they used for mounts. A woman dragon, oddly beautiful I own, and wearing soldier's gear, led us to our apartments. They were most comfortable and the windows afforded a view of what was clearly a river port.

The beds were of a great size and most sturdy of construction. One of our group lay down and looked for all the world like a child on his parents' bed. A splashing sound attracted my attention. It came from a finely worked dragon's head out of whose mouth trickled a steady stream of water. It was remarkably fresh and good to drink, if a little metallic.

The dragon lady asked us to keep to our rooms for the time being. We were quite extenuated in any case and had no intention of leaving. It was also clear that the priest had something important to tell us, since the fellow fairly hopped from one foot to the other."

The sorcerer chose that moment to indulge in another of his irritating pauses, drinking deeply from his cup of steaming beverage. We watched with what forbearance we could muster; my three companions were as keen as I to learn what was to follow. All four of us were impatient to know that wondrous world of talking dragons! The wizard finally set down his mug and took up his account.

"Our sleeping quarters were separated by a vast central room furnished with a table and oversized chairs. We settled down to hear what the priest was dying to relate. Here is what he told us"



"...his
raucous,
freezing
tones turned
our blood to
ice, his fetid
breath
turned our
stomachs..."



The Priest's Tale

What we had seen was indeed a temple. We entered and followed a long corridor with marbled floor and sculptured walls. The sculptures depicted dragons flying, interlaced with runic devices. There were no guards. The air was cool and heavy with incense of a particularly acrid confection.

At the end of the corridor we came upon an oval antechamber of staggering proportions. The ceiling reached quite forty-five feet in places, I'm sure of it. Four dragon statues, standing on either side of the two doors, held aloft a sphere. A spiral bas-relief ran around the entire room, from floor to ceiling. The motifs were all drakkhen and seemed to relate an epic allegory. Tearing my eyes from the magnificent spectacle, I wandered toward the other door. Through the opening a stunning vista took my breath away: stretching as far as the eye could see, columns in the form of winged dragons held up a blue crystalline vault. At the base of each column burned an enormous brasero. In the distance, I could see drakkhens moving towards a vast altar almost hidden behind clouds of incense.

They moved slowly, swaying with a kind of spiral action. Their eyes stared as though in a trance. And all the time they chanted in guttural rhythms "ANHAK DRAKKHEN AGHNAHIR HURTHD". The effect of the monotonous repetition was almost hypnotic. We followed the creatures as far as the altar, taking care not to disturb their incantations.

The dragon columns seemed to stare at us. Their giant heads were lowered and in each of their brows sparkled a gem. No one of the statues was the same as its fellows. All known and imagined kinds of dragon were represented, and many more besides that have never appeared in any book nor crossed any mind of man. Some had malevolent expressions while others gazed down with kindness. Still others seemed infinitely sad or even playful. Their eyes were precious jewels as big as a man's head.

The sheer scale of everything in that place was overwhelming. I felt as if I was witnessing a history so ancient that time itself had forgotten its existence. Man had no place in that universe. From the crystalline ceiling fell pillars of light that bathed the statues in strange unreality underlined by the insistent chanting.

I shook my head, breaking out of what had almost been a spell. To my horror, the guard who had accompanied me on this expedition was chanting the drakkhen verse, his eyes wide and staring at something beyond vision. The fellow swayed and turned in grotesque imitation of the drakkhen. I took hold of the man and shook him so hard the teeth near flew from his gaping head. He broke free of the trance, but his eyes held the troubling look of someone who has known mystic ecstasy!

Keeping the dazed soldier in the corner of my eye, I walked up to the altar. It was a gigantic golden stele held up by four kneeling platinum dragons. Behind the altar towered a statue of truly god-like proportions, representing a dragon. Its age was clearly beyond understanding. It gazed down benevolently upon the faithful, a smile on its lips. From its ruby eyes eight tears had flowed and they were represented at various places on the dragon's body, following a line. Its arms were lifted and the hands were opened in a sign of offering, to each side of the altar. Its outstretched wings formed the vault of the huge chamber which was oval in that place.

The statue was seated on a throne of jade. The dragon's tail spiralled as far as the altar. The workmanship of that statue was prodigious and worthy of the finest craftsmen and artists anywhere in our glorious empire or any human civilization. The overall impression that radiated from that majestic marvel was one of tranquil power, calm benevolence; the contrary of everything we have attributed to dragons, their cruelty and supreme indifference.

I was lost in wonder before the stupendous glory of the statue when a voice, cold and vibrant with power, addressed me.

"Who are you, my son? Why are you here?"

A drakkh in priestly garb was standing by me, waiting for my answer. When I had recovered from the fright occasioned by his startling interruption of my rapture, I saw that, far from glaring at me as one would at some foul profaner, the priest's gaze was kindly. I mumbled a vague and, I confess, meaningless reply, darting a glance at the soldier. The fool had once more fallen into a trance and was chanting and swaying, quite oblivious of my predicament.

"Don't worry for him", the priest said. "Come with me, human; there are questions I would like to ask you and I may have answers to some of yours."

I was intrigued to learn that the drakkh knew my race. A shiver of apprehension ran down my spine; did he know that man's greatest enemy had always been the dragon? I decided the best course was to comply. We left through a door hidden by the giant statue. I dragged the soldier along after slapping him smartly about the face. He stumbled at first, then left his trance. We passed through a kind of sacristy and into a smallish chamber. The priest sat in a great armchair and bade us do likewise, pointing at two other armchairs.

I felt a little ridiculous with my feet dangling in the air, as if I were a child before his parent.

The drakkh reflected an instant, closing his double eyelids. Opening them quite suddenly, he began to speak.

"Human, your garb suggests that, like me, you are of the priesthood. It will therefore be difficult for you to believe what I'm about to say, and yet I do not lie. Neither I nor any of my kind harbor hatred towards you, in spite of extreme provocation."

An expression of reproach, which I understood only too well, was clear in his piercing gaze. He went on.

"Before the beginning were only shadows, void. The father blew life on each face of every world, creating the stars and this world, which he peopled with immense creatures that were free. It was the era of giant reptiles, for which beasts all was but forage. In his magnanimity, the father of all then made the race of those that are in his image, the drakkhen."

I almost fell from the giant chair upon which I was perched!

"We reigned", continued the dragon priest, "for millions of years, over the lands and over the submerged continents. We were free and all the world obeyed us. We gave thanks to the father of all for having made us free and content. But the great dragons, our masters, were unsatisfied and wished to create. It is said that they created men and all the other intelligent creatures of this world. I do not know if that is true but I believe it to be so. Once more the great dragons grew bored and chose to dream. Long did they dream, so long that when they awoke, nothing was as it had been. The large reptiles had vanished; the drakkhen and the humans were to be found nowhere! The great dragons unfurled their splendid wings and flew into the skies, seeking. They found survivors who spoke to them of fiery rain, eternal frost, famine and disease.

The great dragons came together and invoked the father of all. He appeared to them and said that they had made sentient races and for that sin of pride, he had punished them; henceforth they would struggle to survive and their enemies would be the very races they had themselves brought into being. The father then added that one day he would grant them forgiveness for he loved them still.

The great dragons were dazed with shock, which is why, instead of reacting with energy, they looked upon the frost-covered world and went back to their palaces to dream of past glory.

Naturally, the Eternal Winter eventually came to an end and the dragons awoke from their long slumber. Their surprise was indeed great for the races they had made covered the lands of the world and had created their own civilizations.

The great dragons quit their palaces in the mountains and clouds and in the entrails of the world. They would visit their children and receive their filial affection. The children, though, had all but forgotten them. The dragons lived on in tales only, as beasts of terror, and they were hated.

Thus it was that the humans and others, seeing the dragons appear before them, thought the great ones were launching an attack. The humans fought off the dragons with all the fierce and desperate violence of utter terror. Dragons fell at the hands of their children and countless men were killed. So began the enmity between man and dragonkind.

In other places, however, the children honored the memory of their dragon parents and received them with respect and love. The great ones taught their children the runelore and magic art that is one aspect of the ancient high language of the drakkhen. Thus did magicians and priests come to be in these places. The great ones sent their loyal children to destroy those who had forgotten their fathers.

The war was long and terrible beyond imagination but, with the help of magic and the great ones, the chosen sons did destroy the armies of the wicked sons, and the wicked were all but wiped from the face of the world. Those few who survived hid in deep caverns or on mountainsides.

Then came the Golden Age. The sons and the fathers lived in peace, blessing the name of the father of all. All lived in fair cities about the gorgeous palaces of the great dragons. Golden indeed was that era and all we know of it teaches us that it was a time of sweetness and contentment.

Then did the great dragons, pleased with their labor, choose to sleep once more, for they longed to dream. The exiled races chose that moment to wreak vengeance. Spewing from the darkness of the world and from the tops of mountains, the cursed creatures fell upon the peaceful civilizations and laid them waste. The priests and magicians called on the great dragons to awake and come to the rescue of their children but the sleeping ones dreamt on. The magicians and priests turned their powers onto their enemies and slew countless numbers of them. Thus did the Golden Civilizations escape complete destruction but they were reduced to hollow shadows of what they had been and were almost without power. The arch-magicians and high-priests declared the dragons to be accursed and to be the symbol of hatred, cruel force, betrayal and suffering. New gods were found that resembled the human faithful. Temples were erected and the new gods were given life and they in turn gave life. And the age we are presently living through is known as the Age of Men.

The great dragons finally woke up. Everything had changed. Only a few scattered and insignificant peoples paid homage to them. Men had overrun and mastered the continents and the seas, with the other races the great ones had made.

And when the dragons left their palaces, they were set upon and slain for men had learned the lessons of the drakkhen and had outstripped them in magic and mechanics. Their weapons were frightful engines of destruction and no quarter was given!

The palaces were pillaged, the children massacred, the fathers cut down. The great ones fled their palaces and sought refuge in the cracks and belly of the world, where they fought the children they had banished. However, the father of all, in his palace in the stars, looked upon the great dragons in their hour of destruction and wept for them. He knew that soon the last of them would perish, screaming his deathcry, the message passed through all time from father to son and that would seal the fate of the world and bring forth a new era: THE GREAT AGE OF DRAGONS! THE NEW BEGINNING! THE ANHAK DRAKKHEN!"

Pronouncing these last words, the dragon-priest was transfigured, his face shining with mystic fervor! An oppressive weight threatened to crush my heart. The universe was on the point of crumbling to mocking dust about me. It sounded so clear, so inevitable! I fought to breathe, my head nodding in numb acceptance. The golden voice of the dragon-priest, brilliant with shimmering antique harmonics, once again filled my poor ears.

"I feel sorrow for you, human. Several weeks past, THE HUZHUL MEKTHUL, the prophecy, was accomplished. The last of all the father dragons was butchered by an errant knight. It was an act of folly for your kind. The message was shouted by the dragon as he died. The father of all was true to his word and set the new age to replace the old. I was reborn to prepare the father's glorious return. The rebirth has taken root.

That is why this world seems so strange to your eyes, human, and the people have but confused memories of their past! Like me, they have been brought back to life, chosen from the most faithful servants of the father.

The isle upon which you stand will grow without stopping until it covers the world. Your lands will be swallowed and are doomed! Soon your kind will be a vague shadow in the history of time. The drakkhen princes are raising the armies that will tear like bolts of lightning in your midst, ripping life from your lungs, drowning your children in their own blood. Thus will the process be hastened.

Know this, human, that neither I nor any of my kind harbor hate for you. This is destiny. The father's will must come to pass!"

The dragon-priest stood and gazed down on me with pity. I understood that all had been said and that our fate had in truth been sealed. I stood and bowed, then turned to leave with the soldier. From behind me, the golden voice said a final and mysterious sentence:

"Priest! It is told that the father shed eight tears, but that is not so! Nine did he shed. One of them was for the other races! I hope you grasp the meaning of what I have just said . . ."

To be truthful, I did not understand what he had meant. However, I thanked him a last time and we quit the small chamber. Passing before the giant statue of the dragon that stood before the altar, I looked at it again and was filled with profound emotion. I bowed to the enigmatic idol, and it seemed to me then that a bright tear was welling in its wonderful eye.

"Following the troubling tale of the priest", continued the wind-wizard after again taking refreshment, "we stayed silent for some time. I thought hard and came to the conclusion that there was no time to be lost; we must return with all speed to the Shadrak and warn the outside world of what was afoot."

I, Vahl Hart Hann Jrgen Von Wessenmayer, was dumbfounded by what I had heard. I glanced at the Emperor and, from the strange gleam in his eye, gathered that he took the tale completely seriously. After all, had I not myself lost my priestly powers? My companions were silent and grim as the sorcerer began again to speak.

"Hastily we established a plan of action. Although night was falling, we could not stay another moment than was absolutely necessary; it was vital we bring our news.

The drakkhen woman returned at that moment and informed us that their prince would receive us the following morning. I answered that it would be an honor for us to meet his highness. As soon as she had left, however, we set to preparing our departure.

The priest told us that it was his desire to remain on the island, perhaps even within the temple. We thought him reckless in the extreme, but we let him have his way since he seemed sure of his desire.

As night fell, the magician cast a teleportation spell that he had in the form of a scroll. We were suddenly standing in the port. There we said farewell to the priest and stole a boat. The magician had no more movement spells, so we raised the sails as quietly as we could. The port was unguarded, which allowed us to work speedily. I managed to conjure a spell of breeze and a goodly wind saw us away in no time at all. When land was lost to view, all hands set to maneuvering the small craft and I strengthened the wind in our modest sails.

We reached the rivermouth at dawn and we headed for the Shadrak. I was convinced that the drakkhen would not think to search for us so far from the city.

Two days later the massive bulk of the Shadrak came into sight. It was not aground and seemed shipshape. Indeed, the ship was preparing to set sail. We shouted and waved until the crew of the large ship spied us. Great was their joy as they helped us aboard. They had given up hope of ever seeing us again. Only a handful of those who had taken part in the great battle had found their way back to the Shadrak.

The First Officer took command and ordered we set sail for our capital. One of the survivors had saved the Captain's log. The crew worked with zeal, only too pleased to be leaving that accursed island. If they knew the whole truth! This time, the winds were with us and we made good speed. After a few days, the lookout saw the Imperial Palace beacon and all aboard gave a great cheer. We were home at last!"

It was the 7th day of the month of the Dragon.

"And so, gentlemen, you know as much as any man does. Our Arch-magicians have toiled to check the story, and alas, the dragon-priest seems to have told the truth!"

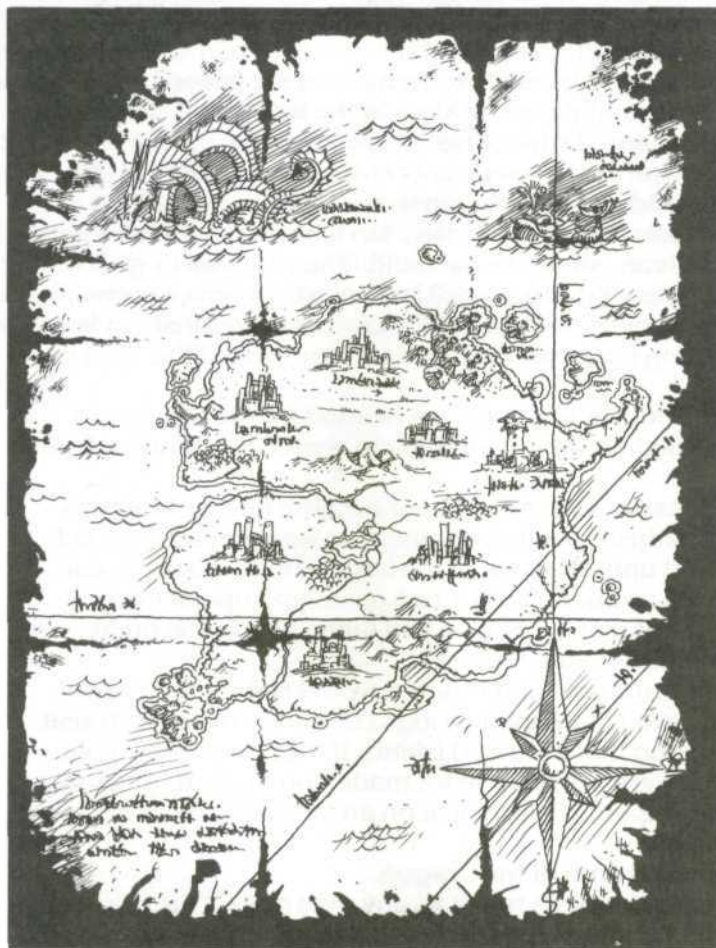
The deep voice of the Emperor had spoken for the first time in hours. He went on.

"You have volunteered and been accepted for this mission. You are among the finest the Empire can muster! The fate of our civilization lies on your shoulders. Succeed, and I will make kings of you all. Fail, and you need not bother coming home. Go to that island and find our priest. Solve the enigma of the tears and of the ninth amongst them. If you talk, if you must needs talk in the name of our race and our people, know that the wisest of you", he pointed to me with his heavily ringed finger, "may speak with the authority of my name, and his word shall be my bond!

Now go! Lose no time. The Imperial Barge awaits you at the port and will transport you."

As one man, we bowed low before our Emperor and left to prepare our baggage. It has been many years since I last used my leather pack. I trust my lazy servants have thought fit to keep it greased . . .

On the 21st day of the month of the Dragon.



"...the fate of our civilization lies on your shoulders... go to that island and find our priest..."



The Book of Spells

"Dear disciple, bear in mind that contained in this book are the oldest, most mysterious revelations. It is urged that these revelations ought to be used only with wisdom and discretion. Note also to guard the secrets of the forces that we use. And destroy your book of spells as soon as you sense yourself falling into hands from outside the fold. According to the path you will take, high magic, Theurgy, certain spells will remain strange. But see to engrave them on your memory in order to hand them down to your disciples so that the noria of transmitting the High Knowledge will never be broken off.

Damned shall be the blasphemous layman who touches these pages without permission!"

ORPHIDIO, Archmagus of Methraton.

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HEAL MINOR

To call upon the Dragon, you raise your soul towards him and think of his unutterable patience before laying your hands on the wound. Meditate well on the force of his heart and leave his warm blood to run into the body of the injured.

This spell only demands a small amount of energy and will be enough to heal a small wound.

(Key H)

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LIGHTNING

A spell of great force which throws fear into the heart of those who set eyes upon us. The spell of lightning is quick, terrible, tremendous and fatal.

Pray to the Dragon, inhale his breath, then violently project the energy by your hands. The chosen enemy will find himself in distress and confusion. The spell is terrifying, but little tiring. It progresses with the speed of your steps.

(Key I)

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INVISIBLE

Creating this spell is difficult. You must call on the Dragon, then melt with him to finally concentrate on the non-being. If you succeed with this spell, you will disappear from the eyes of the enemy. A costly spell that will progress with your steps.

(Key I)

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CURE

Here again, for healing, it is the heart of the Dragon where you must plunge and his vital energy that you will disperse on the wounds of the injured you wish to soothe.

Know well that this spell is the only one which you can draw for to heal infections, illnesses and poisons.

The spell is not very expensive and can be extremely useful.

(Key C)

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LIGHT

The initiate is not satisfied with artificial light and darkness. That's why you will take greatest care whilst praying to the Dragon to concentrate on his miraculous breath from which you keep only the feeblest part. Then you let it flow calmly from your hands. The more your soul grows hardened, the more this spell will be of use and profit for you. As it is easy to handle, this impressive spell will not cost a lot.

(Key L)

7FJVDDN **STRENGTH**

We are more able to raise the pages of a spell book than the feet and weapons of soldiers. If it should prove necessary, bear in mind that is all that is required is to call on the Dragon and plunge into his heart.

Your force will be multiplied and your enemy surprised. The spell is little straining and follows your steps.

(Key 2)

7NΛVJΓ **SHIELD**

When your enemies' fervor is large and your clothes seem so flimsy, pray to the Dragon and clothe yourself in his hide and scales. You will then find yourself shielded and you will laugh at the enemies' blows.

The spell costs little and follows your steps.

(Key 5)

J<Jw< **LANGUAGES**

To understand all the unknown dialects and the most unspeakable tongues, you call on the Dragon and concentrate on the ears that understand all. Then, your soul will open up to the most secret phonemes.

This spell is useful, and never neglect it!

(Key B)

NV<J]< **HEAL MAJOR**

Proceed as already described. But take good care when you take the strength of two heart beats and let them flow from your hands, because the wound is difficult to heal which will strain you a little bit more.

But you will notice with joy that the persons you concentrate on will recover.

In case of serious wounds it will be necessary to apply it several times.

(Key J)

w]]]>[J **UNLOCK**

Hidden mysteries and closed doors alike are intolerable for us! Call upon the Dragon, caress his tail, then touch with its end the lock that resists.

The door will open unless a magician more powerful than you has sealed the door before.

This spell costs little and can reap great rewards.

But I say to you, now do not try to unlock my doors with this charm or it will cost you dearly.

(Key U)

<∩ƒ∧∫<ƒ **ANTIMATTER**

There are creatures that the positive force of the Dragon cannot distress, they even feed on it. Here, by denying the Dragon, you will manage to generate this negative force provided by his hate and anger.

When the gloomy force fills your body, intone the song of Death and blow the icy coldness of the non-matter onto your enemy.

You will realize that the negative or living dead creature will be destructed once and for all.

The spell is of average cost but essential, especially if you study necromancy.

(Key 3)

∫<∫<∫∧∫ **PARALYSIS**

There again, it is the doing of the eyes of the Dragon, that you shall master, channel and let flow from your eyes. Chant the whistling words of the Great Worm.

The effect is immediate, but the duration of this spell will depend on your strength.

This spell is very precious. Take great pains to protect it and not to place it into the hands of others.

It is only effective against a creature. Don't mistake your enemy!

(Key 4)

∫>∫∫ **LOCK**

This spell is the opposite of a former one.

This time you will have to knot the Dragon's tail to lock the door and the spell will cost you a little more.

(Key V)

∫∧∫∫∫∫∫ **DISPELL**

Again, pray to the Dragon and focus yourself on his wings. Then make them beat towards what you wish to disperse. You will not wait long for the result.

The spell is expensive but extremely effective.

(Key 5)

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RESURRECTION

This is perhaps the most fascinating of all the spells.

Pray to the Dragon and plunge yourself into the heart and impregnate yourself with his power. Form one single soul with him. Fill up with his vital energy.

Then, concentrating on the person whom you want to bring back to life, let the strength you are loaded with, trickle into him. Then the miracle will happen.

This spell is very expensive and you will take much time to master it.

(Key X)

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BLINDNESS

In the middle of the Dragon's soul there is a zone of darkness where everything melts and gets lost.

You will have to focus on this place.

When you are near to this terrifying zone, take some of the blackness in your hands and project that shadow on your enemy's eyes. He will be stricken with darkness and becomes blind.

This spell will cost only little and allows you to get the better of your opponent.

(Key O)

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TELEPORTATION

You shall let the Dragon's vital force take all your body, then drag you in a rapid spiral to the spot you have chosen.

Be warned, this spell is expensive, tiring and difficult.

But the effects are incomparable and make this spell the most powerful one.

(Key T)

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IMPROVATION

When you will have become strong and artful in riding the Dragon, perhaps you won't be content with your weak human abilities. So when impregnating yourself with the total force of the Dragon, you will be able after a short moment to use this power in order to strengthen yourself and increase permanently the power of one of your characteristics.

But do not make use of this spell too often, for it is very expensive and can even turn against you, rendering you as weak as a child in the chosen characteristic.

(Key D)

