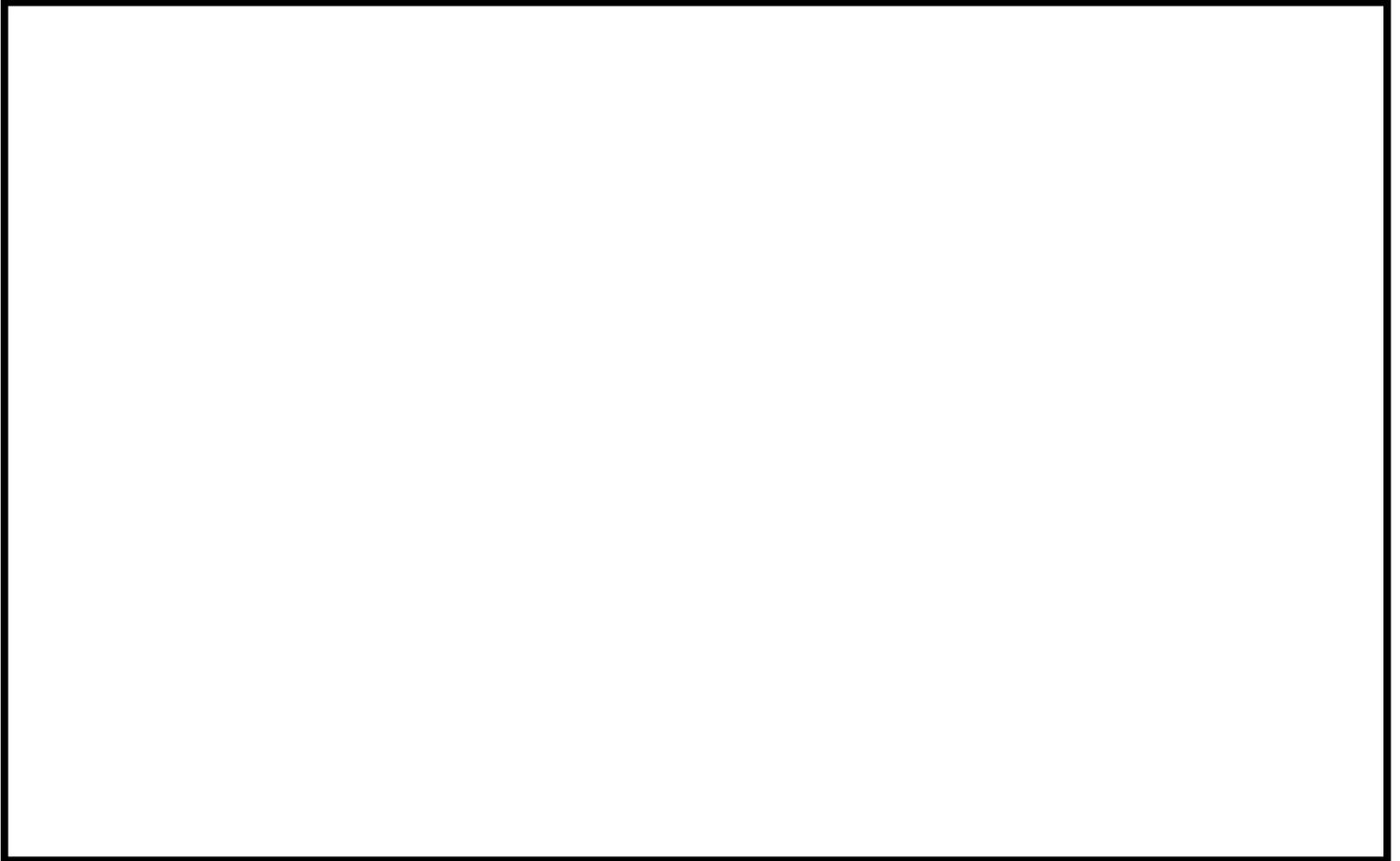


THE VOLCANIC HILLS: A Regional Guide

Anthony Herring



Book Eight of the Lost Books Of Talislanta

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CHAPTER ONE

Born of Fire

THE TIME BEFORE TIME

In the earliest reckonings of Talislantan history, the First Folk ruled much of the continent. Known also as the Drakken, the First Folk were a race of reptilian humanoids of giant stature. They knew nothing of magic, but they knew how to forge black iron and developed a complex written language.

The Drakken preyed upon and subjugated mammalian humanoid savages known collectively as the Wild Races or Wild Folk. Enslaving entire tribes of Wild Folk, the Drakken constructed citadels and cities of cyclopean structures fashioned from immense stone blocks. With none to oppose it, the Drakken Empire spread across central Talislanta in the name of Satha, the Dragon Goddess.

During this age, the region that would later become known as the Volcanic Hills was a land of lush jungle. Full of brightly-colored flora and fauna of countless variety, the rainforest was virtually a living thing unto itself. It seemed a kaleidoscopic sea of trees. Swaying in the hot winds like waves, the jungle climbed the sides of black and red volcanoes and filled valleys and fissures.

Chief among the volcanoes was Dragonrock. Even into the modern era, the titanic volcano has loomed above the region. It snakes a tongue of smoke as black as pitch high into the Talislantan sky. The glow from

Drakken Symbology

The First Folk employed a written language of strange glyphs and sigils. The script is three-dimensional: whether carved into stone or stamped into metal, a symbol with the same shape reveals subtly different meanings depending upon the depth to which it is engraved. Drakken are known to have carved and stamped their runes into black iron armor and weapons, large silver discs likely used as currency, and mysterious glyphstones – flat stones measuring up to thirty feet in height, ten feet across and three feet thick. Fragments of broken glyphstones may still be found scattered about the central plains of Talislanta.

As one might expect, deciphering the ancient language of the Drakken is no simple feat and has driven many modern scholars to the brink of mental collapse. Having few samples to study, collectors would likely pay well for relics bearing Drakken symbology. Kharakhan giants know the secrets of the sigils, but claim it cannot be taught and must be intuited by the individual, much to the additional consternation of New Age scholars.

its lava fountains colors the bellies of heavy grey-green clouds a deep orange.

It was upon the slopes of Dragonrock that the Drakken constructed one of their most elaborate edifices. Here, they built a vast temple to Satha, a fertility goddess whom the First Folk revered as the mother of all reptilian life. Scholars to this day dispute the name of the temple. Translations of Drakken symbology place the names of “the Clutch-Hold of Satha” and “the Womb of the Dragon-Mother” as popular favorites among historians. Depictions of the structure’s network of lava tubes leading to the fiery, molten pool of the volcano may have had some influence upon linguists attempting to translate the name.

THE ARCHAEN AGE

During this age in Talislantan history, a distant tribe of Wild Folk came upon a type of lore unknown to the Drakken – magic. These Wild Folk, who called themselves the Archaens, grew swiftly in power among the tribes and established an empire covering much of western Talislanta.

It was during the Second Millennium of this age that the Archaens dared to assault the Drakken Empire. Their attack was ill-conceived, for Drakken sentinels atop the towering Watchstone took notice of the Archaen host, allowing ample time for the Drakken forces at Golarin and Kharakhan to unite and meet the invaders.

The Archaen host was routed from the plains. Seizing the opportunity to utterly vanquish the invaders, the Drakken hordes pursued the fleeing Archaens to their city of Arcanopolis. The fabulous city – built of green stone and Archaen magic and called the City of Secrets by some – was literally smashed to the ground by the giant reptilians and their war machines. For many years, Drakken would boast that they left no stone standing atop another at Arcanopolis.

Those Archaens who survived fled to another of their cities, that being Phandril, a city of glittering towers and home to renowned magicians of the age. In Phandril, the Archaens plotted revenge and alliances against the Drakken. Eventually the Archaens negotiated an alliance with the Wild Folk tribes, who bore no love for the Drakken themselves.

Armed with new weapons of war and Wild Folk allies, the Archaens once again assaulted the Drakken Empire. Their magicians eliminated the threat of the Watchstone by concealing it in clouds, allowing the Archaen host to attack with surprise. Caught unaware and overwhelmed by hordes of Wild Folk, both from without and as part of a rebellion of Wild Folk slaves within, the Drakken Empire fell to the swords and magic of the Archaen host.

This war had great impact upon the Volcanic Hills. At the Temple of Satha, a climactic battle ensued in which the Archaen magicians combined their might in such an awesome display of destruction as to cause the temple to split in half. Great columns and engraved blocks of stone tumbled down the outside of the volcano, while other massive walls and towers of the temple fell within the volcano’s molten heart.

As if awakened in anger, Dragonrock erupted, belching a great mass of lava, rock, gases, and debris high into the sky. In a rush of fiery wind, the rainforests burned to ash in an instant. Lava flowed into new, wide rivers of fire. The sky hung heavy with clouds of ash and dust.

Those Drakken who survived this second, disastrous war fled south. They traveled across a land bridge, now submerged, and passed from Talislanta, leaving the continent to be ruled by the mammalian humanoid races for the first time in its history.

THE GREAT DISASTER

Little is recorded as to what may have transpired in the Volcanic Hills during the Third and Fourth Millennium of the Archaen Age. Considering that it was an inhospitable land of torturous terrain and active volcanoes, it is no wonder the region was largely ignored by the Archaens.

The world-altering cataclysm known as the Great Disaster did nothing to enhance the appeal of the Volcanic Hills among civilized folk. The terrain was made even more arduous as more volcanoes rose from the jagged earth, spewing forth clouds of noxious gases and rivers of flaming lava. Storms of aberrant magical energy swept through the Volcanic Hills, further altering the flora and fauna there.

THE AGE OF CONFUSION

Survivors of the Great Disaster abandoned the ruins of their fallen cities and scattered into the wilderness. Many of these survivors were from various species of beings created by Archaen magicians and alchemists. No longer enslaved or imprisoned, the neomorphs were free to carve out an existence among the Wild Folk and other savage races populating Talislanta.

One such race of neomorphs, known as Raknids, thrives to this day within the Volcanic Hills. Thought to be a frightening crossbreed of demon and scorpion, Raknids serve the wishes of their queens within hives scattered throughout the region.

Some believe the Saurans, a race of reptilian humanoids similar in appearance to Drakken, though smaller, were themselves created by alchemical hybridization. If Saurans were created in this manner, it is still debated as to who may have created them: Archaens or perhaps even Drakken.

Another theory holds that Saurans are actually the offspring of those Drakken who never fled Talislanta. Through the generations

they grew smaller in stature, resulting in the Saurans of today. Perhaps aberrant magic unleashed by the Great Disaster aided in this transformation.

THE NEW AGE

Even now, in the New Age, the Volcanic Hills region remains largely unexplored by civilized folk (namely those of Archaen ancestry). The land is inhospitable to all but the hardiest people and those specifically suited for it, such as the Saurans and Raknids.

Magic and the Drakken

Scholars of Drakken culture have noted an absence of the knowledge of magic throughout their history. Ultimately, this inability to comprehend the ways of magic – or simply the lack of possession of the knowledge of magic – contributed to the downfall of their empire at the hands of the spell-wielding Archaens.

However, recent discoveries of ancient texts and relics recovered from the Volcanic Hills have cast new light on the subject and prompted heated debate among Talislantan historians. According to one theory, the Drakken brought back more than just treasures and slaves from the razed City of Secrets during their first Archaen War – they also recovered the knowledge of magic.

This theory is based heavily upon the ravings of a Djaffir merchant who claimed to have discovered the ruins of the Temple of Satha. Among its ancient lava tubes and hidden corridors, the Djaffir is said to have beheld engravings depicting Drakken priestesses conjuring demonic servitors and experimenting with alchemical vats.

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Even so, Djaffir and Orgovian merchants ply their trade with certain Sauran tribes. The Kang Empire also has its eye upon the Volcanic Hills. The land is rich in red iron ore and other natural resources desired by the Empire, which views the Saurans as a threat to be exterminated.

The Kang and Saurans have a history of open warfare. In the year 432 of the New Age, the Quan were still the masters of the Empire and the Kang were their servants. During this time an army of Saurans mounted upon land dragons in full battle armor invaded the Empire. Though moving slowly, the Sauran juggernaut advanced steadily toward the capitol, smashing all within its path. Only the cold winter weather brought the Saurans to a halt, forcing them to retreat to their warm homeland.

In response to the Sauran assault, the vengeful Kang longed for a bloody counterattack, but their masters held them in check. The Quan ordered the construction of outposts equipped with heavy siege engines along the border. These fortifications have successfully thwarted the attacks of Sauran war-parties to the present day.

In the modern era, the Kang control the Empire and have expanded their influence into the Volcanic Hills. They seem intent on either driving the Saurans and Raknids into the Wilderlands to the west or exterminating them altogether. The Kang use fortified mining outposts within the region as staging areas for assaults and raids deep into Sauran and Raknid territories. While the Sauran tribes remain fractious and isolated, and the Raknid queens continue to oppose one another's aims, the Kang take advantage of their enemies' disorganization. However, both the Saurans and the Raknids are ripe for a leader among them to step forward and amass an army. The future of the Volcanic Hills would appear to be one of warfare and bloodshed.

Magic and the Drakken (continued)

While considered suspect at best, the Djaffir's testimony does mesh with the theories of some historians who believe the Drakken of the Second Millennium attempted to breed an army of reptilian warriors in response to the first Archaen War. Such scholars claim that the Drakken attempted to crossbreed members of their own species with those of the Wild Folk and possibly even with Archaen prisoners of war. According to this theory, these experiments in alchemical hybridization resulted in reptilian humanoids of smaller stature: modern-day Saurans, Sauruds, and Satada.

If the Drakken had indeed stolen the knowledge of magic, or at the very least had taken magicians as slaves, it is quite possible that they were able to employ arcane arts and alchemical hybridization in their crossbreeding endeavors. A temple to a goddess of fertility constructed at the heart of the Drakken Empire would seem a logical place to develop and protect such knowledge and experiments.

The Djaffir merchant seems to have been confused as to the exact location of the entrance of the ruined temple. Maps created based upon his testimonials have apparently differed or been in error – none who have led expeditions to the Volcanic Hills using such maps have ever returned.

CHAPTER TWO

A Traveler's Guide

WHO WOULD DARE VENTURE INTO THE VOLCANIC HILLS?

Considering its natural hazards and hostile inhabitants, the Volcanic Hills does not attract large numbers of travelers from other regions. Whether driven by greed, religious fervor, or some other personal motivation, travelers with the requisite disposition to venture to such a place are a rare breed. Nevertheless, such individuals do exist. Described below are the most common sorts of travelers one might encounter in the Volcanic Hills.

MERCHANTS AND TRADERS

No matter how desolate or remote the region, where there is a profit to be made, one will find traveling merchants and traders. The Volcanic Hills are just such a place, where a profit waits to be had but one must be daring and clever to gain it.

One such profit lies with the Saurans. Among other things, the reptilians measure wealth with firegems, a type of ruby found only in the Volcanic Hills. Certain Sauran tribes deal amicably with Djaffir and

Orgovian merchants, exchanging uncut firegems for high-quality metal tools, fabric, enchanted items, and other goods.

Firegems

The rich color of firegems ranges from brilliant orange-red to deep purple-red. Due to volcanic activity, seismic disturbances, and erosion caused by storms, Saurans find the precious stones literally lying on the ground. While firegems may be rare and expensive in civilized areas, they are plentiful within the Volcanic Hills – their rarity among outsiders is directly related to the dangers of such individuals acquiring them.

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Saurans also offer other items for trade. These include goods made of red iron: armor, weapons, simple tools, and trinkets. The reptilians may even sell red iron ore and ingots to those merchants wishing to trade in raw materials.

In recent years, Saurans have learned to gather molten lava from the shores of the Rivers of Fire and transform it into volcanic glass through a primitive alchemical process. This obsidian can be created in a kaleidoscope of colors and thicknesses. Saurans have only begun to explore its potential uses, namely in the creation of razor-sharp blades, spearheads, and jewelry.

Another Sauran trade good of note is Raknid venom, a substance used to create a type of paralytic poison. Saurans also make a profit by trading dracs and draconids, both as eggs and trained adults, which some wealthy folk prize as exotic pets.

EXPLORERS AND TREASURE-SEEKERS

A mysterious place of legend to civilized folk, much of the Volcanic Hills remains uncharted. Over the past several years, influential persons in the Seven Kingdoms have awarded prized commissions to cartographers in the hope of acquiring accurate maps and details of the region. As of yet, no such brave mapmakers have returned to either claim the fee or deliver the surveys.

The Volcanic Hills is known more in tales and legends than by firsthand account. Those with the motivation to seek out lost treasures may find such stories of interest, particularly those of the secret cache of relics of the wizard Erendor (see sidebar, next page) or those tales mentioning the fate of the lost expedition of the magician Sassan.

Firegems (continued)

The importance of firegems among Saurans should not be underestimated. The reptilians consider the stones to be gifts containing messages or blessings from the goddess, Satha. Priestesses of the species gaze into firegems when performing ritual prayers and auguries. What may seem to be an occluded or imperfect specimen to a trader may be highly prized by a Sauran. Among other peoples, firegems hold value as stones in jewelry, an ingredient in potions of fire resistance and incendiary powder, and as a component when enchanting items with properties of elemental fire.

Many cultures, including Saurans, attribute various qualities to firegems. Kang associate the stones with blood, courage, and victory, and wear them in bands and rings designed to hold their hair in a queue. Romance, passion, and power are all thought bestowed upon the wearer of firegems, according to the Zandir.

When trading for firegems, one would do well to look for stones that shine with red beams in daylight and glow at night – both are thought to be signs of superior quality. Orgovians employ scales and a flat stone when testing firegems. After rubbing the firegem upon the flat stone, if the stone is marked and the firegem has not lost weight, the gemstone is considered extraordinarily valuable.

One may also hear Rajan and Dracartan folktales about the fabled Dragon's Grave, where it is said that ancient land dragons go to die. Over the centuries, treasure hunters and ivory traders have searched in vain for the Dragon's Grave.

The Legend of Erendor

During the Third Millennium of the Forgotten Age, Archaens constructed sky-cities. These fabulous structures of translucent domes, spires, and causeways floated among the clouds high above Talislanta. Soon, the old cities on the surface were abandoned and left to a mere handful of dissident magicians and outcasts who would struggle to survive among the Wild Folk and beasts ravaging the continent.

One such sky-city was named Elande, which was also known as the City of the Four Winds and the City of the One Hundred. Elande was called the City of the Four Winds because of the skill of its inhabitants with regard to the creation of windships and levitationals. The name of the City of the One Hundred was given to it due to the fact that it was originally populated by one hundred of the best and most gifted magicians of the first sky-city, Aeon.

Each of the One Hundred was a master of various fields of the arcane arts. All of them were charged with the duty to compile information about aspects of the Archaen world: sampling, identifying, and cataloging the flora and fauna to be found on the surface below. They stored their accumulated knowledge of the magical and the mundane in crystal orbs, enchanted tablets, alchemically preserved tomes and scrolls, and even kept live samples magically held in stasis.

In those lost days, Elande hovered above a realm of lush fields and a brilliant crescent sea surrounded by towering mountains. In the modern era, this region is known as the Sinking Land, an endless bog of muck bordering the northern mountains of the Volcanic Hills.

The magician Erendor was of the One Hundred. Legends of the Quan and other peoples relate how, one day, while peering into the dimming eye of a dying specimen within his laboratory upon the upper terrace of one of the towers of the sky-city of Elande, Erendor had a vision. In this vision Erendor foresaw the coming of the Great Disaster and the resultant doom of his beloved home.

Fearing both the ridicule of his esteemed colleagues, who would surely mock him as a delusional doomsayer, and certain death when the cataclysm would strike, Erendor prepared to abandon his glass tower among the One Hundred. Having specialized in the study of the life forms found in the Volcanic Hills, Erendor knew the region well and chose a network of caves there to construct a secret hideaway.

The legend states that Erendor avoided detection by working only at night to stock his underground shelter with his most prized treasures and enough provisions to last several years. Growing increasingly paranoid, the magician protected his hidden trove with numerous and devious traps.

Apparently, Erendor's frantic state was ultimately his undoing. According to the tale, the hapless sorcerer became ensnared in one of his own traps. While he screamed and raged and died a slow death, the Great Disaster also screamed and raged on the surface above him.

Gamemasters can learn more about Erendor in Chapter 8.

PILGRIMS

The Orthodoxists of Aaman claim that somewhere within the Valley of Mist one will find the Well of Saints (see Chapter 3). Water from the well is said to cure all ills, including the otherwise incurable and dreaded Red Death, and to instill divine inspiration upon the imbiber. Whether as an edict of the Orthodoxy or to cure an impurity or to gain spiritual aalms, Aamanians of all castes make pilgrimages to the Well of Saints.

The typical Aamanian pilgrimage is an organized and structured affair with warrior-priests serving as leaders and guards. There may be a mere handful of pilgrims and priests, or as many as dozens of Aamanians, including entire families, making the perilous journey. It is not uncommon for Aamanian merchants and witch hunters to accompany a caravan.

HUNTERS

Both Saurans and Raknids are, upon occasion, hunted by folk bordering the Volcanic Hills. Araq hunting parties mounted upon dual-headed duadir sweep into the region from the Kharakhan Wastes, and every living thing they encounter is considered prey. Kang view the hunting of Saurans and Raknids as a sport worthy of gaining khir or "honor in battle".

Saurans may be hunted for their hides, which leatherworkers craft into cloaks capable of protecting the wearer against heat and flame. Their horns are sought by alchemists who powder them and use them in poison antidotes, and by artisans who scrimshaw the horns and sell them as talismans to ward against poison.

Raknid venom sacs are the prize of some hunters. The venom brings a worthy price among alchemists, who use the substance to create paralytic poisons and antidotes to paralysis.

A Note to Travelers: Sauran Threat Displays and Appeasement

Although generally slow-moving and torpid, Saurans are prone to sudden mood swings and bursts of energy. These mood swings range from shows of affection to angry displays leading to physical attacks, depending upon the situation.

When threatened or angered, the reptilians may hiss loudly, lash or quiver their tails, or hold their gaping mouths open while inflating their throats with air and arching their backs. At times like these, their skin color may darken as well. A Sauran displaying any of these behaviors is attempting to dominate those who have angered or threatened it, and the wise traveler would do well to act swiftly by either retreating or appeasing the beast.

Saurans have their own methods of appeasing one another. Subordinate reptilians attempt to calm a dominant Sauran by encircling him or her and performing ritualistic walking, strutting, and tongue licking. To outsiders, this may seem to be a form of primitive dance. Typically, there are two results: either the appeasement works and the enraged or threatened Sauran joins the dance and tongue caressing, or it fails and the Sauran vents its anger upon one of the subordinates, which can quickly lead to bloodshed or even death.

Other creatures native to the region that hold interest to courageous hunters include land dragons, draconids, earth demons, opteryx, pyro-demons, and vaspas. Tarkus and striders of particularly large size and

ferocity are hunted in the Volcanic Hills by Kang warriors seeking beasts to train as well as a measure of khir.

JOURNEYING TO THE VOLCANIC HILLS

Considering that the region is completely landlocked, travelers have three choices when deciding how to reach the Volcanic Hills – by land, by Underground Highway, or by air.

BY LAND

Those travelers originating in the Western Lands, Seven Kingdoms, Desert Kingdoms and regions thereabout, are well-advised to journey along the Wilderlands Road all the way to the Citadel of Hadran, the largest military installation in the Kang Empire. From there, one can travel the Emperor's Road, a network of roadways winding through the Empire. The Emperor's Road is heavily patrolled and relatively secured by Kang warriors, and it is well-maintained by crews of Vajra engineers. However, one should expect to pay considerable fees for travel permits and tolls.

The Emperor's Road winds north and south through the Greylands and relatively close to the Eastern border of the Volcanic Hills. The Sauran cities of Sathra and Sathir are within reach, and are recommended starting points for venturing into the hills.



BY UNDERGROUND HIGHWAY

A labyrinth of caves, caverns, subterranean rivers and lakes, and carved tunnels snakes its way below the surface of Talislanta, and is known as the Underground Highway. The Gnomekin of Durne have surveyed it from the Seven Kingdoms to the western border of the Volcanic Hills.

Traveling the Underground Highway is not something to pursue without considerable deliberation. Satada prowl the black passageways, eager to use their capture-bows and make slaves of explorers. Other, even more foul beasts, sit gibbering in the darkness. Natural hazards include flash floods, cave-ins, and aberrant or flammable pockets of gases.

BY AIR

Those journeying via windship could conceivably enter the Volcanic Hills from any direction. Assuming, however, the vessel is not assaulted en route – aerial predators infest the skies surrounding the region in unusual numbers, possibly due to the strong, hot winds. Batranc are notorious for attacks on windships here, and more than one sky captain has fled with tattered sails and terrified crew. Perhaps even more frightening are the opteryx roosting near the tops of active volcanoes. These creatures consider windships to be akin to floating eggs – tasty morsels with fragile shells and soft, juicy centers.

Predators are not the only threat a windship must face. Aberrant winds from the Shadow Realm and frozen blasts from L'Haan often mingle with hot air masses swirling about the Volcanic Hills, causing storms of tremendous fury. Winds from the Volcanic Hills may even carry flaming cinders and debris.

The shrewd captain plots a course for a civilized settlement or city, and encourages passengers to complete the journey

overland. Assuming one can acquire the necessary permits to fly a windship within the Kang Empire, suitable cities there include Hadran, Kang-Tu, and Karang.

An especially daring or well-paid captain might consider flying over the Kang Empire, across the Greylands, and then to the Sauran settlements of Sathra or Sathir. Be forewarned, however, for the local inhabitants may react in a less-than-enthusiastic manner to both windships and foreigners.

ARRIVAL

Assuming one is not traveling the Underground Highway, the destination becomes apparent from a considerable distance. Like pustules bursting from the pockmarked skin of the world, rows of angry red volcanoes loom on the horizon. From their fiery throats, long tendrils of night-black smoke lick the sky like slow, sensuous tongues. Heavy, grey-green clouds hang low in that sky, their bellies glowing crimson from the fires below. The shadows they throw down blot out much of the light of the twin suns, causing an eerie, perpetual twilight.

As one draws nearer, the Volcanic Hills affect more than one's sense of sight. Soon, the traveler hears low grumbings of thunder and the almost mechanical screeching of shifting earth, the result of small earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. The hot wind brings the foul breath of volcanoes to the traveler's nose – a smell of acid and sulfur and ash.

Once within the region, one not only sees and hears and smells the Volcanic Hills, the wayfarer *feels* the place in one's skin. A profound sense of foreboding may overcome the traveler. It is as if all things in this land live a slow, languid existence, and yet are frantic to remain calm as something powerful slumbers – something that at any moment might awaken to shake the world.

TRAVELING WITHIN THE VOLCANIC HILLS

Much like the magma flowing beneath it, the terrain shifts and changes dramatically and often. Volcanoes both small and large erupt suddenly, triggering lava flows, earthquakes, and avalanches, all of which alter the face of the land. Towers of jagged rock might push up from below like stone fingers, chasms may open wide and deep, and rivers of fiery lava may change course seemingly at a whim.

ROADS

To say there are roads in the Volcanic Hills is misleading. What one finds are more akin to wilderness trails than roadways. These trails result from the movements of Saurans, either on foot or mounted upon land dragons, traveling between settlements. One finds particularly well-beaten trails near Sathra and Sathir, the two Sauran cities.

Like other features of the land, roadways change often. A trail may simply end at a chasm or against the newly-risen rock wall of a cliff.

MODES OF CONVEYANCE

A well-trained mount, such as an equus, aht-ra, or strider, is undoubtedly the best mode of travel for a single rider within the Volcanic Hills. Saurans prefer to ride land dragons fitted with iron-plated battle towers. These lumbering behemoths serve an obvious offensive function in warfare, but also act as moving shelters against aberrant weather and predators when traveling.

Encounters in the Volcanic Hills

Use this table for encounter ideas or roll 4d20 to select a random encounter. Subtract 10 for northern encounters. Add 10 for southern encounters.

<u>Roll</u>	<u>Encounter</u>
4	Aggressive vorl
5	Aamanian pilgrims
6	Rolling fog bank
7	Lone Aamanian warrior-priest
8	Dried husk of a corpse
9	Ambitious pyromancer
10	Lake of volcanic glass
11	Swirling storm of flaming cinders
12	Mated pair of land dragons
13	Sauran obsidian artisans
14	Rune-inscribed obelisk
15-16	Sudden volcanic eruption
17-18	Ambushing Raknid warriors
19	Landslide of hot ash
20-21	Slow-moving lava flow
22	Hidden cave opening
23	Erupting tower of rock
24	Field of sedge
25	Chasm appears suddenly
26-27	Raknid workers
28-29	Visible side trail branches off
30	Clumps of wireweed
31	Steaming well or hot springs
32	Raknid hive
33	Xambrian wizard hunter
34	Nesting drac
35	Field of obsidian shards
36	Hungry draconid
37-38	Geyser of hot fumes and steam
39	Unleashed earth demon
40	Kang mining party

(continued)

HIRING A GUIDE

Considering the inherent dangers of the place, a stranger to the Volcanic Hills would do well to hire a trustworthy guide. At the Sauran settlements of Sathra and Sathir, one has favorable chances of locating such a person. Djaffir and Orgovian merchants frequent these cities, and their caravans travel into the interior of the region to ply their wares among the Sauran clans. Even Saurans themselves have been known to act as guides.

NATURAL HAZARDS

In addition to major events, such as large volcanic eruptions and earthquakes, travelers should beware localized natural hazards. These include events on a lesser scale and in a smaller area. Most of these hazards are preceded by rumbling and shaking or the screeching of scraping stones or sudden bursts of steam, and the wary individual should seek shelter quickly.

Geysers of steam or smoke and hot ash or lava spray can erupt from the smallest fissure and are common examples of localized natural hazards. Landslides of ash and pumice-stone are another. Depressions in the earth filled with heavy, noxious gases, which may upon occasion be colorless and odorless, pose a threat as well.

WEATHER

Above the Volcanic Hills, the suns of Talislanta seldom shine with their full brilliance. Even at midday, the light can shift from normal daylight to the darkness of midnight in a blink as clouds and winds of smoke and ash swirl above. Such winds become dangers themselves when moving swiftly and bearing hot debris.

Storms here typically carry acid rain accompanied by flashes of mundane lightning and magical black lightning. The dreaded Black Wind may also blow through the valleys and crags of the Volcanic Hills,

Encounters in the Volcanic Hills

(continued)

<u>Roll</u>	<u>Encounter</u>
41	Discarded ancient silver disc
42	Relentless ravenger
43	Fragment of huge broken glyphstone
44	Solitary vasp
45	Scattering of firegems
46	Cavorting pyrodemon
47	Fortified Kang outpost
48-49	Deep rumbling noises
50	Glimpse of floating manse
51-52	Minor earthquake
53	Hunting opteryx
54	Invisible cloud of noxious gas
55-56	Kang raiding party
57	Lurking vasp
58	Lone tarkus
59	Trail ends in a rock cliff
60-61	Sauran war party
62	Small herd of striders
63	Acid rain and black lightning
64	Satada hunting party
65	Stand of flickerpine trees
66	Flock of batranc
67	Sauran youth with dragon icon
68	Unattended land lizard steed
69	Roving duadir
70	Discarded obsidian weapon
71	Caravan bugs
72	Crude red iron shield
73	Patch of bramblecup lichen
74	Band of Rajan cultists
75	Saurans herding land lizards
76	Orgovian traders
77	Sauran settlement
78	Djaffir merchants
79	Roaming herd of durge
80	Devious black magician

and some accredit its arcane forces of transformation to the creation of the Sauran species ages past.

SEEKING SHELTER

The wise traveler keeps one eye toward spying shelter while traveling through the region. Predators, natural hazards, and aberrant weather strike suddenly, and are all good reasons to have a sanctuary within swift approach.

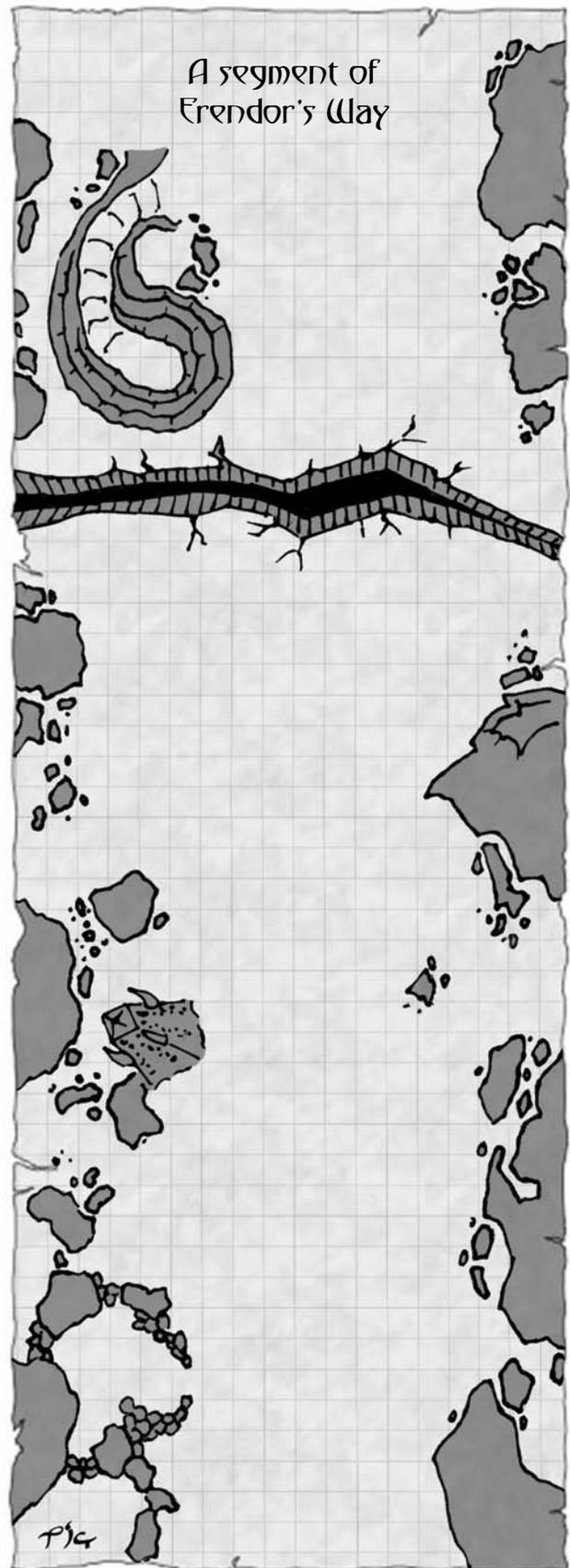
One might seek shelter in caves or lava tubes and beneath overhangs of stone or pumice. Shallow fissures, chasms, and sinkholes should be used only as a last resort due to the dangers of poisonous gases and shifting earth.

Erendor's Way

A wide, rugged trail snakes its way through much of the Volcanic Hills, particularly to the north. This ancient roadway proceeds with fits and starts and dead ends, and is completely wiped away in many sections due to lava flows and landslides. What set this trail apart are its road markers – obelisks of grey stone inlaid with glowing green runes.

It is commonly believed that the legendary Erendor of Elande placed the pillars and inscribed the runes, which are purportedly written in a secret cipher that only the ancient magician can decode. It is thought that the obelisks mark the path and the runes reveal how to avoid the snares protecting his hidden sanctum – the fabled Caves of Erendor.

To this day, no one has been able to read the runes or successfully follow the obelisks. The maze of caverns and its supposed cache of Archaen artifacts remain lost.



CHAPTER THREE

Places of Interest

VOLCANIC FEATURES

DRAGONROCK

A predominate feature of the Volcanic Hills, the gigantic volcano called Dragonrock opens its fiery throat tall and wide toward the sky. The immense mountain predates even the Great Disaster. Geographically, it stands in the northwestern corner of the Volcanic Hills, south of the mountains surrounding the Sinking Land.

The slopes of the volcano are more colorful than one might expect. Shimmering, black wireweed and patches of grey-green sedge grow up the lowest elevations like a stubbly salt-and-pepper beard. Further up, layer upon layer of black, magenta, and red ash paints the slopes. Smoke, steam, and other gases ranging in color from white to grey to black, and even a sickly green, issue from fissures, which themselves range in size from the smallest cracks to yawning chasms.

Flaming fountains of lava erupt from the eastern face of Dragonrock's mouth. Flowing down its slopes like red-hot drool, the streams of lava come together in a wide river, churning and burning toward the north in a torrent.

As one draws near Dragonrock, the intermittent noises of the place become apparent: rumblings of shifting earth and stone, hissing of hot gases, and other similar sounds. However, one soon realizes that beneath these bursts of noise a steady, harmonic resonance drones. Listening carefully, one may get the uncomfortable feeling that the volcano itself breathes and groans as if in torment.

It is told in legend that the entrance to the lost Temple of Satha may be found among the caves and lava tubes of the upper slopes of Dragonrock. If this is true, it would seem that the Saurans would know of it, as they frequently visit the volcano in large numbers and consider it a sacred place. In fact, they believe the goddess still resides deep within Dragonrock, and claim that the deep moans and groans heard in the area are the Dragon-Mother in labor. Consequently, strangers to the area should proceed cautiously for fear of angering the reptilians.

DRAGON'S GRAVE

Among the desert folk, particularly Rajans and Dracartans, tales are told of a dead volcano called Dragon's Grave. Most of these stories agree that the volcano is short and squat, its mouth wide and jagged, forming what has been described as a crest or crown around the top of the mountain. In addition to its "toothy" mouth, the slopes are said to distinguish it among other volcanoes

due to the thick layers of bone-grey ash deposited there by wind throughout the ages.

In the caldera of the long-dead volcano, one finds the remains of untold thousands of land dragons. It is believed that the beasts come to this place to die, drawn here by some unknown force.

As more of the history of the Volcanic Hills in relation to the Drakken comes to light, scholars and storytellers weave this knowledge into legends of the Dragon's Grave. Modern stories now describe the place as also being the graveyard of the ancient Drakken, who are said to have interred their dead in caves and lava tubes upon giant discs of beaten silver.

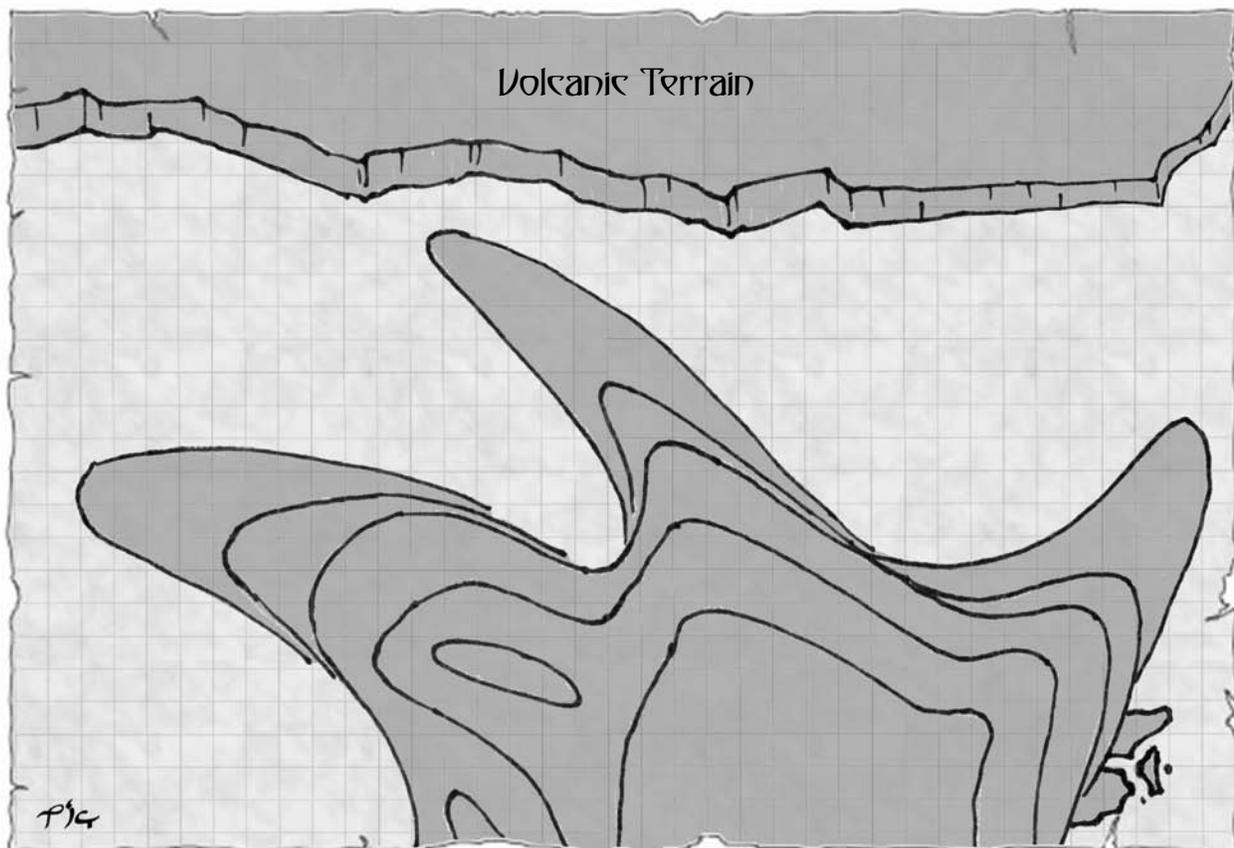
Dragon's Grave is said to stand at the heart of the Volcanic Hills. Unfortunately, however, no explorers have ever returned to report its true location, assuming it exists at all.

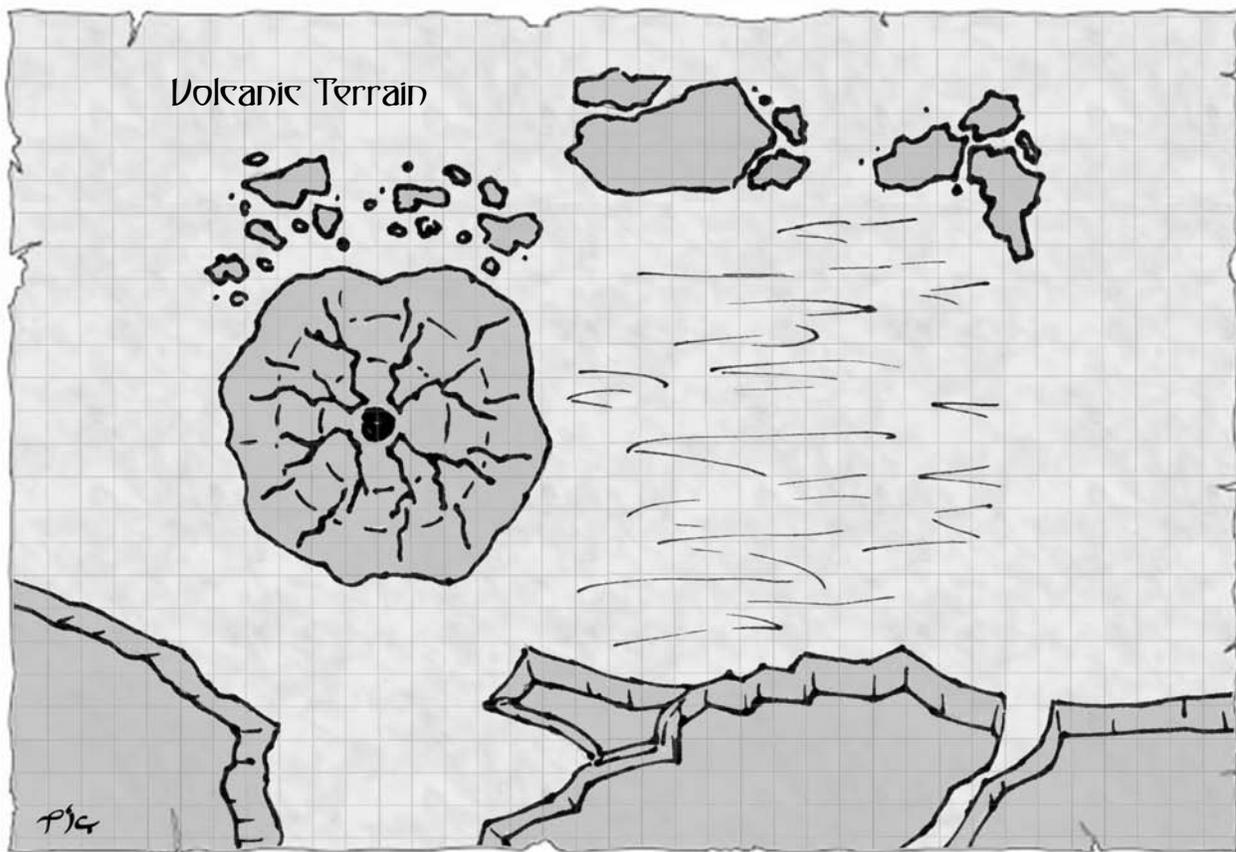
FIRE-PITS OF MALNANGAR

Along the western border of the Volcanic Hills, about midway north and south on that border, lies a region of short, wide volcanoes and volcanic mounds and domes of pumice stone. It was here in ages past that the Torquarans constructed the Fire-Pits of Malnangar.

In those remote days, the Torquaran Empire controlled much of the continent and was led by a cabal of black magicians. Driven by genocidal hatred, the Torquarans ritually sacrificed thousands upon thousands of people from other cultures, particularly the Xambrians, by casting them into the Fire-Pits of Malnangar.

Hot magma still boils at the bottom of many of the pits, which may reach a depth of hundreds of feet. Ancient stonework engraved with forgotten Torquaran script encircles each pit, forming ledges, balconies and platforms. Many of these structures





have crumbled over time and the area is now essentially a very old ruin, a testament to times and deeds best forgotten.

Saurans and Raknids seldom venture here. Xambrian Wizard Hunters may be drawn here when hearing the Calling. Bands of Rajan Warriors and Necromancer-Priests come here at times, also. Mysterious errands of the Khadun or the Nihilist Cult and the search for ancient Torquaran lore bring the Rajans.

[Editor's note: For an alternate interpretation of the Fire-Pits of Malnangar, see The Underground Highway, Book Two of the Lost Books of Talislanta.]

RIVER OF FIRE AND THE FIREFALLS

Continuous streams of burning lava roll and churn down the slopes of Dragonrock, coming together at its base to form the River of Fire. The molten torrent flows for miles

toward the north, and its width, depth, and path all change considerably on the journey. Its temperature and consistency remain the same, however – a searing lava flow.

Upon occasion, the shifting earth causes tributaries to form, which are cutoff from the main flow and very slowly cool over time. In most cases, the molten rock simply cools to form pumice and ash and stone, hardly noticeable from the surrounding terrain. However, under the right circumstances, which the thaumaturges of Dracarta claim to be acidic rains, these places cool and transform into elbow-shaped lakes of volcanic glass.

The typical glass lake is quite small and covered by a crust of red or black or green obsidian. The volcanic glass may vary from an inch to a foot in thickness. In some cases, the crust conceals a core of still-cooling lava.

The Saurans have developed skills in extracting obsidian from the glass lakes. This is not the most effective means for working with the substance, however. Recently, Saurans have learned to scoop molten lava from the River of Fire with red iron tools and apply a primitive alchemical process to it, causing obsidian to form in desired shapes and colors. It is not uncommon to find groups of Sauran artisans toiling along the banks of the boiling river.

The River of Fire pours back into the heart of the world at the Firefalls. Here, the flow drops from a great height into a vast chasm. Some say this gorge is bottomless. Others claim it ends in an underground sea of magma, which itself flows back beneath the Volcanic Hills, feeding the volcanoes there and completing a cycle.

Regardless of the origin or depth of the abyss, the falling sheets of flaming lava offer a wondrous sight, particularly at night. The cavorting of pyro-demons within the Firefalls enhances both the spectacle and the danger.

SATHRA

The capitol of the Sauran world, the city of Sathra sprawls upon a scene of red sand, white ash, and black rock mounds and crags along the southeastern border of the Volcanic Hills. Large tracts of sedge grass and wireweed attract roaming herds of durge, land lizards, lopers, and megalodonts.

Nearby food sources and a strategic location with easy access to the Greylands and the Kang Empire made the region around Sathra a natural choice for its construction. Volcanic eruptions and seismic activity are lessened here as well, enabling structures and roads to persist longer

than those toward the interior of the Volcanic Hills.

VIEW FROM A DISTANCE

Upon first sighting it, Sathra lies over the land like the decaying corpse of some ages-old metropolis, a place of abandoned structures fashioned in confusing angles and odd shapes. Considering it is haphazardly constructed of scavenged materials – such as boulders, long chunks of volcanic rock, and weathered columns and blocks dragged from sites in the Wilderlands – its appearance as something ancient and forgotten is no surprise. However, black and grey smoke from the cook fires and forges of the Saurans quickly give it away as being populated, and not quite as decayed nor dead as it seems.

A series of thirteen battle towers form the main defensive barrier about the city. These towers vary in height from 30 to 60 feet, and no two appear exactly the same. A tower may be constructed of a single, massive pillar of stone or many fitted blocks. Forgotten runes and pictographs from ancient cultures – especially the Drakken – decorate some of the materials, all meaningless to the Saurans, who simply took what they needed when building the city.

Regardless of building materials, all of the towers are solid constructions with no interior rooms or windows. Access to the top is gained via a series of ladders and landings or spiraling stone stairs. At the top, a wide platform holds at least one stone-thrower and a tall pile of ammunition.

Rubble, boulders, and chunks of hewn stone form walls between the battle towers. The walls vary considerably in thickness and quality, and stand from 10 to 30 feet high. Work crews of Sauran laborers toil constantly to rebuild collapsed sections.

The city has outgrown its barrier. Scores of Sauran dwellings stand clustered outside the walls, many of which form a twisting road leading away from the main gate.

AT THE GATES

Along the eastern barrier wall of the city stands the tallest and most formidable of the battle towers. It is called "Satha sa Sheer" in the Sauran tongue, meaning the Horn of Satha. From the platform atop it, lookouts peer for miles into the Greylands and the Kang Empire.

To either side of the Horn rises a tower nearly equal to it in size and strength. Two utterly massive gates hang suspended between the three towers, one on each side of the Horn. Each gate is made of a seamless grey stone block quarried from the hills and covered with beaten red iron plates. Each is a dozen feet thick and nearly 25 feet tall.

The crimson gates are held high by giant red iron chains, which are locked into position by winch mechanisms fixed to the ground upon platforms of stone. Pulling pins from the mechanisms releases the chains, causing the gates to crash to the ground. Teams of land dragons must pull and strain for an entire day to lift them fully into position once more. As one might expect, the gates remain open unless the city is threatened.

ON THE STREETS

Dusty, beaten paths twist crazily among the primitive structures of the city. Most buildings are fashioned of stacked rubble and may be open to the sky or covered by a roof of cured land dragon hide. Stone slabs supported by pillars form walkways among some structures, but the majority are single-story buildings.

Partial statues and engraved stone or metal discs and columns brought from Drakken ruins stand about, apparently attempts at decoration. The choice and

Sauran Aggression

The wise traveler is not lured into a sense of complacency when confronted by the languid movements and dull-witted nature of Saurans. The reptilians can move with frightening speed for short bursts and fight with tremendous ferocity.

Saurans think nothing of taking slaves or murdering strangers outright. Even so, their aggression is seldom wanton or without reason, though their motives may make such actions seem random to outsiders.

On the simplest level, Saurans view strangers as well-spoken food. One would do well to remember this fact when attempting to parlay with the reptilians.

placement of these pieces may be confusing to strangers and only of aesthetic value to the reptilian eye.

Flickerpine trees grow from bowl-shaped chunks of volcanic rock, which may hold a splash of sulfurous-smelling water. Saurans lounge in the shade of these trees, or bask in the suns upon short blocks of carven stone. Land lizards and land dragons thunder and roar through the streets, driven to and from the city gates by Sauran animal handlers. Everywhere can be heard the clangs of hammers and hisses of steam as Sauran artificers work in their forges.

THE MARKET

A wide, open area of red sand near the city gate serves as a market place. Upon this common ground, Saurans from different clans gather to barter their goods. The Saurans of Sathra have a trade relationship with an Orgovian clan, and it is not

uncommon to find the wandering merchants here.

SAURAN DWELLINGS

Rough-hewn stone blocks and boulders comprise the walls of Sauran homes. Almost all of them are built around shallow, circular depressions dug into the ground. For a roof, Saurans stretch land dragon hide across a red iron grate, which is then secured atop the walls with thick, leather straps and wireweed cords.

Doors are fashioned of similar materials – land dragon hide strapped to a red iron frame. On the inside of the door, buttons carved from land dragon scales or Raknid husks are sewn to it. These can be fitted through leather thongs attached to the frame to keep the door closed.

Upon entering, one usually descends a few feet into the main room of the home, which may give the visitor the sense of entering a nest. Rough leather pillows filled with crushed sedge leaves and branches lie along the walls. While the sedge provides a pleasant odor, it can be quite uncomfortable as a cushion for those unaccustomed to Sauran furnishings.

In the center of the room one usually finds a simple fire pit. Dung mixed with sedge is used for fuel, as wood is scarce. Red iron chests secured with crude locks not only hold the occupants' valuables, but may be used as tables or seats as well.

Because Saurans eat and perform bodily functions in communal halls scattered around their settlements, they seldom construct rooms for these purposes within their homes. If there is more than one room, it is usually separated by a low arch where a leather hide may be hung as a curtain.

Communal Living

Sauran society is comprised of family clans who band together to form tribes. The Sauran tribes are not united and are often hostile toward one another. For this reason, each settlement or city holds only one tribe.

Even within the same tribe, Sauran clans are aggressively territorial. Within their settlements and cities, such as Sathra, dwellings are clustered together according to clan. Each clan has its own dining halls, bathing pavilions, and corrals for herds of land lizards and land dragons.

Within a clan, food and resources are shared, and all members are expected to contribute to the survival of the family. Within a tribe, sharing among clans may occur, but usually only in times of dire need. Typically, clans within a tribe barter or use firegems as currency to exchange goods.

BATHING PAVILIONS AND HOT SPRINGS

Geysers, fumaroles, and hot springs abound in the region around Sathra, and can be found to a lesser extent throughout the Volcanic Hills. Saurans have taken advantage of these natural formations by constructing pavilions around them. They come here to soak in heated pools or bask in the suns upon hot rocks.

The waters vary widely in quality, acidity, and temperature. Saurans find even the most acidic waters tolerable, but strangers should be wary for bathing could result in injury or even death. Acid pools are

denoted by especially colorful rocks around them, the result of chemical reactions.

CLAN DINING HALLS

Saurans gather in large pavilions for meals. Stone tables, chairs carved from land dragon horns, and hide curtains serve as furnishings. Food is prepared in open-air kitchens where ovens made of red iron or clay broil meats of suspect origins. Raw meat, whole carcasses, and Raknid eggs are stored in adjoining larders, which are dug into the ground to provide relatively cool storerooms.

SHRINES AND TEMPLES: THE CLUTCHES OF SATHA

Scattered among the clans within the city, one finds shrines built in honor of Satha, the fertility goddess of the Saurans. Such shrines take the form of cairns of colorful rocks. Many of the individual stones comprising a cairn are carved into decorative shapes and hollow. Inside, firegems of particularly brilliant quality sit catching and reflecting the golden sunlight as crimson beams.

Customarily, a shrine holds the clan's wealth of uncut firegems within it, and the clan priestesses bear the honor of managing the treasures. As one can imagine, being caught stealing from a shrine carries the harshest of penalties – death in an excruciatingly slow fashion.

Although small shrines to the Dragon-Mother have been erected among the clans, there is only one temple in Sathra. It is immediately recognizable among the other buildings for its uniqueness and beauty – its central dome rests like a shimmering pearl atop a garbage pile at the heart of the city. How the dome came to be here is lost to time, but its origin is likely found among the clouds and sky-cities of the Archaens in ages past.

The High Priestess of the tribe holds court in the temple. She is served by lesser priestesses, who are selected from females among the various clans. It is the priestesses of the temple who hold the bickering clans together as a tribe.

Also residing in the temple is the Dragon Master, a male warrior of the tribe elected by the priestesses to serve the High Priestess as a military commander. The Dragon Master's elite warriors can be found here as well, serving as protectors and consorts of the priestesses.

SATHIR

Situated along the eastern border of the Volcanic Hills, the Sauran city of Sathir is virtually the twin of neighboring Sathra, which lies about 35 miles to the south. However, Sathir is about half the size of Sathra and the tribe living there is more tolerant of strangers. Both Djaffir and Orgovian clans have trade agreements with the Saurans of Sathir.

VALLEY OF MISTS

Not far from the magnificence of the Firefalls, the white slopes of the Opal Mountains stand vigilant upon the border between the Volcanic Hills and the snow-covered land of Xanadas. Here, on this border, a land of fire meets one of ice, and tumultuous weather and great, heavy clouds are the result.

A wide, steep valley winds from the Volcanic Hills, through the mountains, and into Xanadas. Perpetually filled with fog, the natural pathway has been named the Valley of Mist. Aggressive creatures called vorls, which seem to be comprised of animate fog or vapor, make the valley their domain, preying upon any who dare to enter.

Due to the dangers of vorls and the cold, Saurans seldom venture into the Valley of Mist, preferring the comfort of their warm homeland. Even so, the region is a favorite setting for Sauran legends. One such tale involves a mysterious, floating manse of twisting towers and hanging gardens that hovers hidden in the fog of the valley, only rarely becoming visible when reflecting the red glow of the Firefalls.

WELL OF SAINTS

Deep within the Valley of Mist, a body of water glitters in the fog. The Orthodoxists of Aaman proclaimed it to be a holy site and named it the Well of Saints. According to their doctrine, waters from the pool will cure any disease and bestow divine favor upon the imbiber. Making a pilgrimage here is a source of aalms among their people.

While the waters may very well bring life to the dying, the pilgrimage to the Well of Saints is even more likely to steal life away. Even if one should survive the journey to the Valley of Mist, vorls await there. Groaning eerily and driven by an insatiable hunger, the entities move through the fog like ghosts, leaving the dried, mummified corpses of their victims in their wake.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Saurans

APPEARANCE

Being a species of humanoid reptilians, Saurans look like a cross between a man-like race, a serpent, and a dragon. The shape and color of their horns and scaly hides distinguishes individuals and sexes. Their horns form a crest running from the forehead, down the spine, and finally ending in a tail-spike. Females have less prominent horns, but more brightly colored scales. Neither sex has breasts.

The Sauran physique can be quite imposing – horns and thick scaly skin covering rippling muscles, all on a frame standing up to seven feet in height. Their large snake eyes sit sunken and surrounded by ridged brows like brooding spiders at the center of webs spun not of silk, but of bone and gristle and scales.

The reptilians' three long fingers end in powerful claws, as do their opposable thumbs. Likewise, their four toes bristle with sharp claws, and the soles of their feet bear thick, scaly pads which provide protection and traction in the hot sands and rocky terrain of the Volcanic Hills.

The Sauran mouth resembles that of a snake, being very wide and surrounded by "lips" of scaly ridges. Inside, rows of sharp teeth form ranks and are meant for slicing as

opposed to biting. When eating large hunks of flesh from a carcass, Saurans thrash their heads, allowing their teeth to cut out chunks, which are then swallowed and not chewed. The lower jaw can unhinge when devouring especially large pieces, or when swallowing small prey whole.

Sauran Horns and Hides

To outsiders, Saurans look very much alike – a living, breathing bad attitude wearing a reddish-brown hide, a crest of horns, black claws, and general reptilian features. Among their own kind, however, differences in their appearance set them apart and can even reveal their ancestry.

It is common for members of the same clan to bear similar markings or features. For example, Saurans born of the same clutch may all have red-tipped ears or green scales rather than the typical rust colored hide. The scales of some may even form multi-hewed patterns. The size and shape of horns and tail-spikes also distinguish Sauran clans.

(continued)

Saurans prefer to drink from large bowls of red iron or clay. When doing so, the reptilians immerse their snout up to the eyes, suck up the liquid, tilt back their heads, and allow the fluid to drain down their throat. Saurans have been known to survive for up to three weeks without water.

While most humanoid creatures have broad flat tongues used for food handling, Saurans have forked snake-like tongues which lack taste buds and are retracted into sheaths. When searching for prey or exploring, Saurans slash the air with their tongues in quick arcs, carrying odors back into their mouths and nasal organs.

Rippling with muscles and bearing barbed horns, Sauran tails are formidable weapons used to bash and trip opponents. However, they serve other purposes as well. Saurans use their tails as rudders when running, leaping, and swimming, or when trying to balance themselves. They can even grasp and carry objects with them.

HISTORY

Within their nest-like dwellings, Saurans sit around fires of smoldering dung and sedge grass. Here, the clan priestesses relate their history through epic tales. Though the specifics vary from home to home, the consensus remains the same: the Sauran race was born through the labors of Satha, the Dragon Goddess, who lies to this day within the heart of the great volcano, Dragonrock.

According to Sauran tradition, Satha created them to serve herself and her first-born, a race of giant reptilians known as the Drakken. Many tales relate the Drakken as having been cruel taskmasters who forced the Saurans to labor in mines and quarries, and to die upon fields of battle against hordes of the Wild Folk.

Sauran Horns and Hides (continued)

Some clans harbor the knowledge of how to change the color of their hides to blend into their surroundings. Whether this camouflage ability is a result of breeding or a matter of secret lore remains unknown to modern Talisnantans. Even so, it is a fact that only certain Sauran clans have the ability, and only they know its source. Presumably, if indeed it is learned through study alone, Saurans who know the secret could teach it to other Saurans.

It is in tales of war against the Wild Folk and the magic-wielding Archaens that Saurans begin to describe themselves as not merely servants, but as loyal warriors fighting and dying to protect the Dragon-Mother. Stories reveal the cowardice of the Drakken, who failed Satha and fled the Volcanic Hills, leaving the goddess to be defended by her much maligned and overlooked stepchildren – the Saurans.

As the Drakken fled before the Archaen host, the Saurans remained grim in their determination to protect the goddess. Many died bravely, giving Satha time to flee and avoid the cataclysmic explosion of Dragonrock as her temple was destroyed by Archaen magic.

Over the course of many years and many struggles, the Saurans managed to survive in the desolation of the Volcanic Hills. The worship of the Dragon-Mother was not forgotten, though her greatest secrets remain hidden among the ruins of her temple upon Dragonrock.

ALTERNATE ORIGINS

While the Saurans fervently believe they are the offspring of a goddess, most Talislantan scholars do not. Although lacking physical evidence, many historians believe the Saurans are a degenerate offshoot of the original Drakken species. This theory proposes that not all of the Drakken fled the continent after being defeated by the Archaens, and the remaining Drakken evolved among the rigors of the Volcanic Hills into the smaller-sized Saurans of today.

Other scholars imagine that the aberrant energies unleashed by the Great Disaster created the Saurans. This theory supposes that the Saurans were in fact members of a race of neomorphs created in the alchemical vats of the Archaens. When the Great Disaster occurred and the sky-cities fell, many neomorphic species were freed and further transformed.

A third explanation proposes that the ancient Drakken stole the knowledge of magic and alchemical hybridization from their Archaen enemies. They used this lore to create the Saurans in an effort to breed warriors capable of defeating the Archaen host. When the Drakken Empire fell, the smaller reptilians were freed to fend for themselves.

Like a brilliant firegem buried under mounds of ash and pumice, the truth no doubt lies somewhere among the ruins of the Temple of Satha.

SOCIETY

The Sauran tradition of government is a form of matriarchy in which community power lies with the mothers of the community. Hatchlings are identified according to their mother rather than their

father. Family clans and tribal alliances form along female bloodlines.

Family clans cluster their dwellings and communal buildings together forming settlements, which are typically built atop volcanic mounds used as natural forges. Being extremely territorial and aggressive, clashes between Sauran clans are common. Clans on good terms with one another tend to form tribes and construct their distinct family settlements behind communal defenses, as is the case in the Sauran cities of Sathra and Sathir.

All Saurans within a clan carry the name of the eldest female, who is also the High Priestess of the clan. Examples of Sauran clan names are Serpent Mother, Red Horn Mother, Shining Eyes Mother, and so on. The names – along with the clan's buildings, land, herds, and other wealth – are exclusively inherited through the female line.

TWO SEATS OF POWER: THE MATRIARCH AND THE HIGH PRIESTESS

The High Priestess and her retinue of priestesses are the grandmothers of the clan. Through stories told from generation to generation, it is their duty to teach the hatchlings and remind the adults of the lore of the Saurans. Following ancient rituals, they honor and appease the spirits of the dead, seek the blessing and guidance of Satha, and oversee the initiation and funeral ceremonies of Saurans. Members of the clan, both male and female, look to the wisdom of the priestesses when making decisions, and bring their grievances before the High Priestess for justice.

The Matriarch is both an administrator and a merchant. She and her matrons organize the clan's labor force and distribute its wealth and resources. All things of value are brought before the Matriarch: gathered

food, hunted beasts, firegems, and goods acquired from other clans or foreign traders.

It is common for the Matriarch to beseech the High Priestess for wisdom when making decisions of great import. Among the clans, the typical path of the Matriarch is to later become the High Priestess herself.

A MALE IN A FEMALE'S WORLD

The life of a male Sauran comes with much less ritual, free-thinking, and community power than that of a female. Unlike females, prior to reaching age six, the average Sauran male will have already begun work as a laborer.

Most accept their path and seek to honor the females of the clan and their ancestors. They live as guests in their mother's dwelling, and have no possessions except those given to them by their mother or the clan Matriarch.

There are those, however, who leave the clan and venture beyond the Volcanic Hills for various reasons. Some may be outcasts due to crimes against the clan, while others may be the only surviving members of a clan. Few choose to leave the family of their own free will. Those who leave often find employment as mercenary warriors among the peoples of the Western Lands.

Among the males of a clan, one is elected by the priestesses to hold the title of Dragon Master. It is his duty to organize and train the male and female Dragon Riders, defend the settlement and herds, and plan war parties and raids.

Sauran Courtship and Mating Customs

For one week of the year during the month of Ardan, when the purple moon is full, Sauran maids from all of the clans make a pilgrimage to the sacred volcano, Dragonrock. Accompanying them are their brothers and uncles, who themselves have interest in the journey, for the Saurans making this pilgrimage seek to find a mate. Priestesses join the retinue, as well, not only to oversee the rituals honoring the Dragon-Mother, but also to select new lovers among the young males.

Upon the slopes of the great mountain, outlined by the crimson glow of the Firefalls, Saurans worship their goddess with sacrifices of food and venomwine and herd beasts, and court one another in ritual dances. Some say these ceremonies continue within the volcano's lave tubes, perhaps even among the ruins of the lost Temple of Satha (see Chapter Three).

It is the females who choose lovers among the males. Once selected as a mate, the male has the right to visit the female at night in her clan dwelling. However, before the light of dawn, he must leave because he has no right to live among the clan, and may not even eat there. According to Sauran custom, everyone eats and lives where he or she works, which is with the family clan.

(continued)

RELIGION AND MAGIC

The worship of Satha, the giant dragon-goddess, dates back to the Time Before Time and the First Folk, also known as the Drakken. Satha is a fertility goddess attributed with laying the first clutch of eggs for every reptilian species.

Saurans believe the Dragon-Mother lives beneath the Volcanic Hills and that all eruptions and lava flows are the result of her will. They claim that firegems are gifts from her to them, and that it is possible to communicate with her through these rubies. Priestesses perform elaborate rituals using firegems, peering into them in search of visions or curious light patterns with hidden meanings.

Priestesses seem to have no true magical abilities, however. In fact, all Saurans appear to lack any affinity for the use of magic. While priestesses do perform ritual blessings of the dragon icons created by Sauran artisans, and these talismans do affect their success in training land dragons, whether this result is magic or faith is debatable.

Saurans cremate their dead by casting them into active volcanoes or lava flows, considering this to be a way to reunite the deceased with the Dragon-Mother. The body is wrapped in dragon hide, and the bundle may include offerings of food and drink.

The worship of Satha has spread little beyond the Volcanic Hills. Outsiders typically refer to it as the "Dragon Cult," and know only tidbits of its true practices or history. It has gained some fashion in Zandu, where it has been twisted into a curiosity involving serpents and exotic legends of the Volcanic Hills, rather than a true religion.

Sauran Courtship and Mating Customs (continued)

When the twin suns set each evening, brothers and uncles leave the clan settlement and males from other clans enter to be with their mates. Each morning, the lovers leave and the brothers and uncles return. A Sauran male's duties and rights are with the house of his mother, and not in the house of his mate, where he is merely a guest.

Hatchlings born of these unions belong to the mother and her clan. The uncles of the hatchlings care for them as fathers.

LIFECYCLE

EGG

The shell of a Sauran egg is thick and leathery. Most are a solid, sandy-brown color. However, upon rare occasions, an egg may be marked with speckles or stripes or odd patterns, and such events are thought to be messages from Satha indicating the rebirth of a renowned ancestor.

The typical clutch contains from one to a dozen eggs. Saurans protect their eggs inside spherical containers filled with sedge leaves. Appearing much like over-sized eggs themselves, these hinged chests can be closed and locked to ward against predators and fungus and mold. Often primitively adorned with carvings or inlaid firegems, the red iron clutch chests can be moved to areas of sun or shade as deemed appropriate by the mother.

HATCHLING

From birth to age six, Sauran children are called hatchlings. During their first year of life, hatchlings move about as quadrupeds. They are thought of as ancestors returning to their family. Priestesses relate tales of how all Saurans originated from the first clutch of eggs laid by the goddess, Satha. Hatchlings come from the realm of dead ancestors – not from the males of other clans – and are therefore sacred.

As a hatchling matures, priestesses watch the child closely and peer deeply into firegems to consult the goddess, all in efforts to recognize similarities between the hatchling and a deceased ancestor. During the hatchling's initiation ritual, the name of the ancestor is given to the child, who becomes a full member of the clan. This ceremony is especially elaborate for females, who are given the costume and trappings of the ancestor, and are then considered to be the ancestor reborn.

ADULT: THE DRAGON RIDER

At about age six, all Saurans receive an initiation into adulthood. The festival is much more elaborate for females, involving a clan feast and entertaining tales of the deeds of ancestors lasting long into the night.

On the first day of the celebration, the clan's High Priestess bestows a dragon icon upon the youth, who must venture into the wilds of the Volcanic Hills alone and return riding upon the back of a land lizard or land dragon. A Sauran who manages to track, capture, and return riding a dragon, as opposed to a lizard, can expect special privileges and recognition from the clan.

At the culmination of the ritual, the High Priestess proclaims him or her to be a Dragon Rider – a full member of the clan. The High Priestess also declares the path to be followed by the fledgling Dragon Rider:

Hot and Cold

Due to their reptilian nature, Saurans must manage their body temperatures through specific behaviors. To warm themselves, they seek out fires or bask in the twin suns upon hot rocks. Sitting in the shade or bathing are two ways that Saurans cool themselves.

Within the Volcanic Hills, the air temperature remains consistently warm to very hot, and Saurans have little trouble regulating themselves. Outside their homeland, they may need to bask and seek shade more often.

As their bodies grow warmer, Saurans become more energetic in body and mind. The reptilians typically bask soon after awaking in order to ready themselves for the day's activities. A cold Sauran is a sluggish and dull-witted creature.

armorer, artificer, artisan, laborer, or weaponer.

In addition to the title of Dragon Rider, a female can expect to be addressed as Maid and have a dwelling constructed for her. The young maids toil alongside the males: herding and protecting land lizards and land dragons; gathering red iron ore and firegems; constructing homes and fortifications; working the forges; and joining hunting and war parties. However, they also concern themselves with attracting males from other clans, mating, pregnancy, and motherhood.

MIDDLE-AGED

Considered middle-aged, females between twenty-five and thirty-nine are honored with the title of Matron. One female among this group of sisters is elected by the

priestesses to be the clan Matriarch. While the venerable priestesses tend the spiritual needs of the settlement, the Matriarch and matrons care for the daily economic, social, and survival affairs of the clan.

VENERABLE

Females over forty years of age hold positions as priestesses, and the eldest of these venerable females is the High Priestess. The elderly females devote themselves to the worship of Satha, the Dragon-Mother, and to the worship of the clan's ancestors, particularly the foremothers in the female line. The priestesses create vivid relationships with the goddess and the dead, speaking to them as if they are present and making daily sacrifices of food, scented tapers, and venomwine. In return, Satha and the Sauran ancestors give their blessing to the living members of the clan.

During the funeral ritual of a venerable female, the initiation gown of a hatchling is wrapped with the corpse, as well as food, drink, and firegems. As the bundle is cast into the lava flow of an active volcano, the priestesses comfort themselves and their clan with words such as, "She will serve the Dragon-Mother, and then come back to us as a hatchling."

COSTUMES AND ATTIRE

Hatchlings wear little clothing, chiefly a loincloth of lizard or dragon hide. During their first year of life, while they are still moving about on all-fours, the skin tone of hatchlings is typically a rich crimson, which darkens as they mature.

Adult males wear the standard loincloth, but also adorn themselves with bracers and

anklets of beaten red iron, as well as a heavy necklace bearing a dragon icon. Males are prone to fitting the tips of their horns and tail spikes with red iron caps bearing shards of razor-sharp obsidian.

Maids wear the most colorful attire of any Sauran age group. Commonly, this includes a kilt-like garment of supple dragon hide which has been dyed in brilliant colors to bring out the natural patterns of its scales. This garment may be further embellished with thin strips of red iron and firegems. A growing – and undoubtedly painful – custom among the latest generation of Sauran maids is to have a living horn or claw engraved and the pattern then filled with molten red iron or obsidian.

Matrons garb themselves in the same kilt as maids, but without the bright colors and patterns. To do so would be beneath their dignity.

The daily dress of priestesses consists of a heavy red iron collar from which dangle long, wide straps of dragon hide. Such collars may be quite ornate, bearing exceptional firegems and pieces of obsidian. Sauran priestesses wear varied and cumbersome costumes during specific rituals and ceremonies. Such attire may include gowns and headdresses of hide, horn, bone, fur, and feathers; all accentuated with glowing strands of Laeolis moss.

LANGUAGE

The Sauran language is likely derived from ancient Drakken. It is a sibilant tongue of strong hissing sounds like "s", "sh", "z", and "zh". Female names commonly begin with "Sa" like Satashee, Sazeeya, Satta, Sathya, and Sathas. Examples of male names include Shimeezar, Zosiar, Zheemaat, Sosar, Sar, Sotha, Sethar, and Sirras.

Saurans have no written language. They do, however, paint intricate pictographs upon various objects: the large egg shells of land dragons, blocks of stone, and cured dragon hides used for room partitions and banners. Such images typically relate events of note in the lives of favored Sauran ancestors.

SETTLEMENT CONSTRUCTION

The typical Sauran settlement houses a single family clan. When space and temperaments allow, clans may band together, forming tribes. This is the case in the cities of Sathra and Sathir.

Volcanic mounds filled with hot magma are favored building spots, but Saurans will construct their dwellings around any vent or rift providing access to lava. The fiery “blood of the sacred mountain” keeps the reptilians warm in the cooler evening hours and fires the forges and furnaces for their smelting and metal-working.

Pillars of smoke from the natural vents and forges dance and embrace into heavy clouds of soot above the settlements, which will likely be the first thing the traveler spots when approaching from a distance. Stone walls and squat watchtowers next come into view atop the volcanic mound, and one also notices a ramp of stones, pumice, and impacted ash twisting up and around the black hill to the settlement’s red iron gate.

WALLS

Saurans utilize a variety of building materials, taking advantage of whatever the Volcanic Hills provide. Some walls have been built using the remnants of stone blocks and columns taken from ruins in the Wilderlands of Zaran. Other clans quarry the

grey stone of the mountains, driving and prodding land dragons to drag the rock to their settlements. Some even know the lore of how to mold lava into blocks by ladling it into pits lined with a mixture of ash, ground bone, and highly acidic water. It was these imaginative clans who later learned the secret of mixing lava with acid to create obsidian.

The walls of the typical settlement are made from one of these sources – either stones from ruins, grey stone quarried and cut into slabs, or volcanic rock molded into blocks. They vary in height from 10 – 20 feet. Due to seismic activity, Sauran constructions shift, settle, and even collapse regularly.

WATCHTOWERS

Constructed of the same materials as the walls, watchtowers look like short, flat-topped pyramids. Usually they are solid to the core, and rise 10 to 20 feet above the walls around them. Stone stairs or ramps provide access to the top, where one finds a heavy catapult and ammunition. To sound the alarm, a Sauran blows a long blast on a tremendous dragon horn.

GATE

As wood is a scarce commodity, the gates are made of sheets of beaten red iron. Dragon icons may be affixed to the gates, or they may be painted with crude pictographs relating memorable events in the lives of the clan’s ancestors.

CLAN HALL

Saurans gather in communal buildings to eat, worship, and socialize. The clan hall is the largest structure in the settlement, and typically the last line of defense should the community be overrun by invaders. Because of the instability of the terrain, even the clan hall is seldom built with more than a single, wide floor – building up is generally a bad idea in the Volcanic Hills.

DWELLINGS

Each home is the abode of a female, who allows her brothers, young sisters, and children to live with her. For a description of how these dwellings are built, see the entry for the city of Sathra in Chapter Three.

FORGES

Sauran laborers, armorers, and weaponers work long hours at the smelting furnaces and forges, which are built near the settlement's lava flow. The source of the lava may be clefts or vents on the surface of the volcanic mound, or deep inside it and accessed by ramps and tunnels.

Sauran metallurgy is a primitive skill, requiring the reptilians to rework metals many times in attempts to purge impurities from the raw red iron ore. Despite their tiresome labors, alloys produced by the Saurans pale in comparison to the quality of red iron created by Dracartan thaumaturges.

SHRINE

All Sauran clans revere Satha, and every settlement is adorned with a shrine constructed in her honor according to ancient tradition. At the core of the typical shrine stands a column of pumice stone or dragon bone, carved and engraved with pictographs and niches and cubbyholes designed to hold colorful rocks, egg shells, and firegems. As more and more objects are piled on, the shrine's central pillar may be completely hidden, making the shrine seem more like a cairn of haphazardly stacked rocks.

Many of the pieces of the cairn seem ordinary or plain, and could have been easily found lying about. Others show craftsmanship, being engraved and polished and holding glittering firegems. No matter the appearance, all are of great importance to each priestess who placed them there. Every item of the cairn holds a story, part of the long chain of tales of the clan's history as told by the priestesses of Satha.

CORRALS

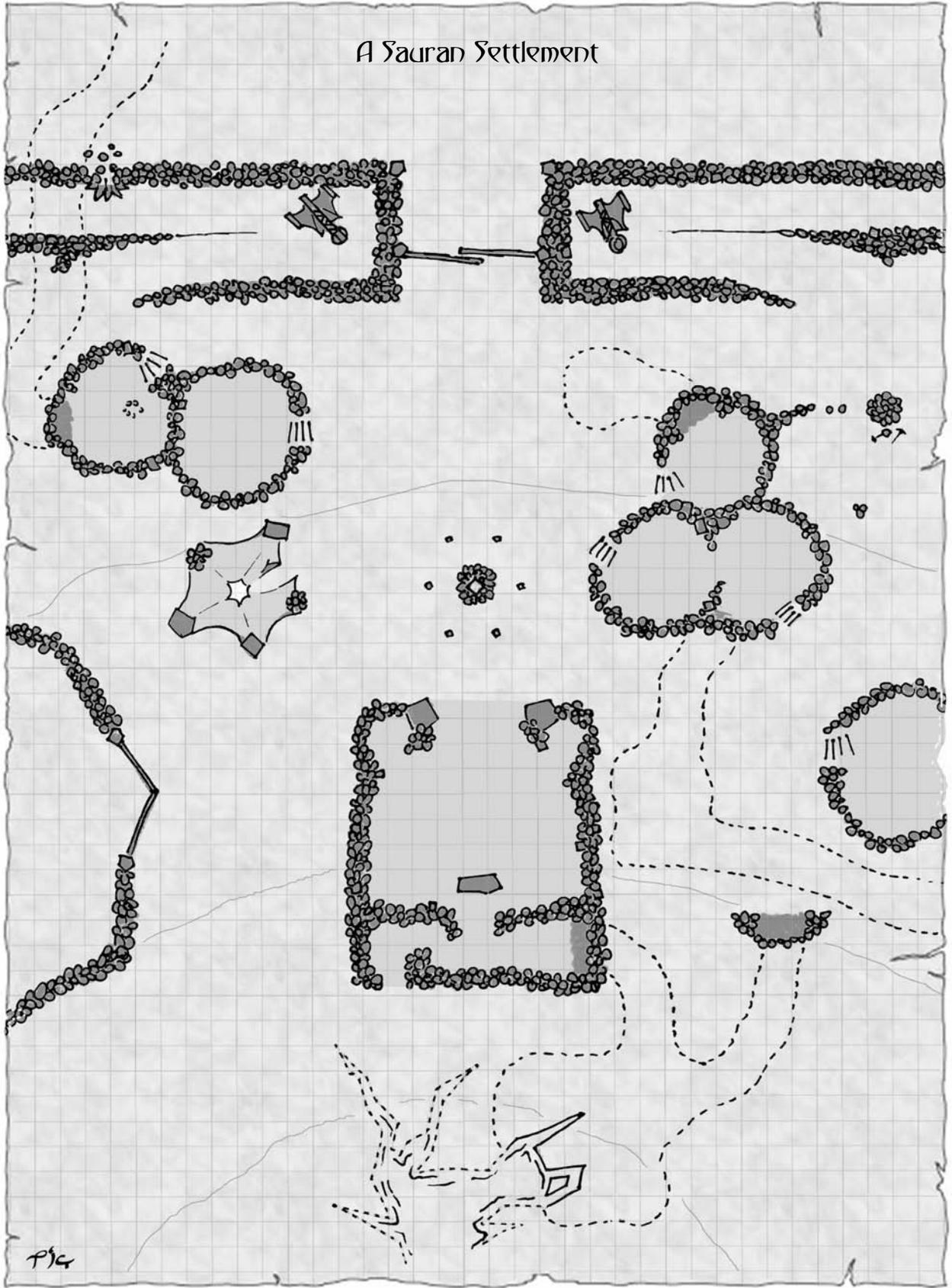
High rock walls and red iron bars form pens to contain the clan's herds of land dragons and land lizards. The two types of beasts are corralled well apart, for land dragons will bite at lizards (and virtually anything else, including Saurans) if given a chance. Keeping the dragons under control is a constant struggle, made somewhat easier with the use of Sauran dragon icons. During much of the daylight hours, Saurans drive the herd of land lizards to find forage, which usually consists of sedge, lichen, and other hardy plants.

TUNNELS

Whether natural or mined, passageways and caverns honeycomb the typical Sauran mound. Some of these places are used as relatively cool larders to store food. Others may be pens for beasts or even prisoners or slaves. Grates of iron bars secured with chains and crude locks protect the contents.

Tunnels from the settlement often branch outward, extending a considerable distance under the surrounding terrain and exiting upon the surface at concealed locations. These passages provide a means of escape should the clan become besieged. However, being seldom maintained or used, the tunnels are prone to cave-ins and to becoming the lairs of predators, such as wasps.

A Sauran Settlement



P'4

CHAPTER FIVE

The Raknids

APPEARANCE

Created via experimentations in sorcerous hybridization, the Raknid species is thought to be a cross between demon and scorpion. The four very distinct types of Raknids share little in common regarding their appearance.

QUEENS

At the heart of the colony rests the corpulent, bloated form of the queen. Coiling for nearly forty feet along the hive floor – and filled with maturing eggs – the purple and black bulbous segments of her body quiver under the oily sheen of a greenish substance resembling mucus. White as bone and banded with thin black stripes, her segmented antennae curve up and back forming long arcs to either side of her over-sized head. The antennae never rest, constantly vibrating with such rapidity as to produce a low hum heard throughout the hive. Sliding and shifting beneath furrowed brows of hard chitin, the great milky orbs of her eyes seem unfocused, yet never at ease.

DRONES

Resembling giant, insectoid crabs up to ten feet in length, drones are blind creatures that find their way by feeling with long, feathery antennae and smelling with orange

comb-like organs near the tips of their many legs. The soft, pinkish tissues of a drone's body are protected by a spiked shell, into which it can pull its extremities much like a turtle. The shell consists of hard, black plates from which the spikes of yellow boney material protrude. Pink, fleshy tissue rings the base of each spike, and may be some manner of sensory organ.

WORKERS

Protected by a heavy exoskeleton of interlocking black plates, workers are truly massive creatures with specimens reaching twenty feet in length and weighing two tons. They lumber about on eight long legs, which are also armored with chitinous plates. The solid white orbs of a worker's eyes reveal no semblance of intelligence or free will. Clicking and clattering incessantly, the mandibles and palpi in their wide, drooling mouths can be quite unnerving to those unfortunate enough to meet these beings.

WARRIORS

The smallest of the Raknid forms, warriors are humanoid and stand less than seven feet in height. Their soft inner tissues are pinkish in color and protected by a heavy, armored carapace. The segments of this exoskeleton are black as midnight but covered with an oily substance giving them a multi-colored sheen. Their powerful arms end in hooked talons forming deadly pincers. A long tail of segmented plates

arches over their backs, and bears a stinger dripping sickly yellow-green venom. Orange comb-like organs along the sides of their feet allow warriors to track prey by smell. A warrior's eyes are multi-faceted orbs of either a green or red metallic hue.

LIFECYCLE

All Raknids undergo four stages of development: egg, larvae, pupae and adult.

EGG

A Raknid egg typically measures up to a foot in length and is cylindrical in shape. The outer-most layer of the egg consists of a leathery, translucent sac containing a thick, syrupy substance. This fluid contains the excretions of millions of tiny organisms and emits a dim greenish-white glow. Suspended in the fluid is the true egg – an ovoid object made of a hard, pearly-white shell containing the matter that will develop into the larva. The glowing mucous substance not only protects the egg but is also devoured by the ravenous larva upon its hatching.

Workers keep the eggs in clusters, and constantly clean and rotate them to avoid mold, which can grow on the translucent sac, ultimately eating into the sac and allowing the mucus inside to escape and the egg to die. As a means of accelerating the hatching period – which can take up to one week – eggs are moved to chambers of differing temperatures.

LARVAE

Looking like yellow-white grubs armed with glittering mandibles, the larvae hatch and immediately eat everything they find. If the workers have not adequately supplied the larvae with food stuffs, the voracious creatures will even devour the eggs of their unborn brethren.

This feeding frenzy is the result of the instinctual desire of the larvae to grow and to prepare for the next stage of their development. Within a week of eating and growing, the larvae begin spinning a cocoon of white silk around their bodies.

PUPAE

Completely enshrouded in their white cocoons, the pupae are carried by workers to warm chambers in the hive. Here, they will rest in torpor while their bodies transform into one of the four adult forms.

Probing the minds of the pupae, the queen of the hive can determine into which form they will metamorphose. Those who would become queens are typically ripped to pieces by workers under the influence of the reigning monarch.

However, in some cases, a monarch may have the cocoon of a developing queen taken by workers and warriors to a location near a rival queen's hive. Upon tearing from her cocoon, the newborn queen will immediately attempt to usurp control of any Raknids her mind finds, and may cause considerable disruptions in the rival colony.

Using their enhanced senses of touch, hearing and smell, drones may also determine the resultant form of a developing pupa. Drones plotting against their queen might use this information to escape the hive with the cocoon of a developing queen in the hopes of starting a new colony.

ADULT

Its claws ripping and its mandibles tearing, the adult frees itself from its cocoon. Whether worker, warrior, or drone, the adult is brought before the queen. While petting and probing the young adult's mind, the queen allows her newborn subject the opportunity to caress her form, to smell her unique scent, and to become one with her colony.

HISTORY

Popular theory supposes that the Raknids were created by Archaen magicians prior to the Great Disaster. Experimenting within the laboratories of their fabulous sky-cities, Archaens of that age would later become renowned for bringing into existence many of the strange species found upon Talislanta today.

Assuming Raknids are the result of ancient Archaen experiments in sorcerous hybridization, exactly what species were used to fashion them is open to further speculation. Common belief is that the essences of giant scorpions and demons were used in the process.

Lack of evidence as to the origin of Raknids has fueled the wild fires of debate among modern scholars. Some believe the Raknids were not created by Archaen magicians, but came to Talislanta via gates or rifts torn in the dimensional fabric of the world as a result of the Great Disaster. Another theory claims that the insectoid beings have always thrived on Talislanta – but on the other side of the world – and burrowed to the “surface” ages past.

In any case, evidence revealing the true source of Raknids might be found among the ruins of the fallen Archaen sky-cities. The ancient sorcerers catalogued and sampled many of the life forms indigenous to the world at that time, and may certainly have recorded information regarding Raknids.

Wars Among the Hives

Raknid queens communicate among themselves telepathically at seemingly endless distances. In this “psychic court” the queens plot and scheme and threaten one another. Although alliances among the queens do take place, it appears that the Raknid species as a whole is not united and the majority of colonies and their queens are openly aggressive toward one another.

While it has not been proven, scholars feel it may be possible for one queen to battle another psychically, with the loser either slain or telepathically controlled. Regardless, it is a fact that young – and more mobile – queens have been known to invade a colony, usurping psychic control of warriors and workers in an effort to kill or drive off the reigning queen.

SOCIETY

Within every Raknid hive lives a single queen and her colony of drones, workers, and warriors. Their hive-like mentality pursues one objective with deadly determination: to protect and serve the queen in order to propagate the species. Intruders to the hive and its surrounding territories are considered enemies to be swarmed, slain, and ultimately devoured.

Each of the Raknid forms adheres to specific roles within the hive.

THE QUEEN

Virtually immobile due to her great bulk, the queen never leaves the egg-laying chamber at the center of the hive. Only the queen can lay eggs. Workers see to her needs and carry off their precious cargo of newly laid eggs, while conniving drones beseech the queen incessantly for mating rights.

Equipped with a vast intelligence and incredible psychic abilities, the queen is virtually omniscient and omnipresent within the confines of her hive. She can perceive what any of her workers or warriors perceives, and completely dominate their will. However, the minds of the drones can be closed to her.

Her telepathic abilities are not limited to Raknids. The queen can assault the mind of any being within reach, causing intense pain or even unconsciousness.

DRONES

Drones are the only males in the colony. Able to shield their minds from the controlling influence of the queen, they are capable of independent thought and actions. However, strong instincts still drive them, chief among these being the desire to win the queen's favor in order to mate with her. Ways to entice the queen include: bringing gifts of unusual or favorite foods; supplying knowledge about other hives or the world at-large (drones have been known to torture captives for useful information); caressing and cajoling the queen in ways she finds especially pleasurable; and revealing the inadequacies or failures of rivals.

Drones who fall out of favor may find themselves suddenly ripped to pieces by workers and fed to newly hatched larvae. In some cases, the instinct to survive overpowers the desire to please the queen, and those drones realizing they have lost the queen's favor may flee the hive or even plot

with a queen from another colony against their own monarch.

WORKERS

Making up the majority of Raknids in the colony, workers are infertile females. Effectively mindless, they perform their prescribed duties in the hive by instinct. Even so, they are capable of emitting weak telepathic "alarm signals" to summon warriors, and will fight to protect the colony themselves.

By extruding a white, pulpy substance from their palpi, workers construct and repair the walls and tunnels of the hive. Upon drying, the material turns a yellow-white color, becomes tough and fibrous, and smells faintly of wet parchment. Workers can use the pulp as a weapon to entangle intruders.

Tasks carried out by workers include: gathering, processing, and storing food; cleaning and caring for the eggs; cleaning and feeding the larvae and the queen; defending the colony; and making new corridors and chambers.

WARRIORS

The soldiers of the colony, Raknid warriors are neither male nor female. Although closely monitored and controlled by the psychic queen, warriors have much more free will than workers and must often rely upon their own instincts and intelligence when outside the hive.

The very survival of the colony depends upon the warriors. Their responsibilities include protecting the colony from intruders; tracking down and slaughtering members of the colony targeted for disposal by the queen; hunting for food; and forming war-parties to invade rival hives, typically with the objective of capturing other Raknids and returning them to be assimilated into the colony by the queen. In some cases, Saurans

and other sentient beings have been captured and made slaves.

LANGUAGE

Raknids communicate among themselves in a language of clicks and clacks produced by the clattering of their mandibles. Queens are also able to communicate telepathically in the language of the receiving entity, whether Raknid or not.

Although garbled and difficult to comprehend, Raknids are capable of normal speech. The queens of many colonies have gained the knowledge of the language of the Saurans and common Talislan, and passed this knowledge to their subjects.

HIVE CONSTRUCTION

Raknid hives cover a wide range of sizes and shapes; each designed by the driving instincts of the workers and the particular tastes of the queen. Typically, what can be seen on the surface resembles a stepped pyramid made of tubes and globes of a yellowish material like fibrous parchment. A neglected or abandoned hive may be mottled with patches of bloodspot mold.

The observer's eye spies no windows or doorways. If an opening is needed, such as when a hunting party of warriors is leaving or returning, Raknid workers chew a doorway into a wall, then reseal it by spraying pulp from organs in their mouths.

A Surprise in the Sand

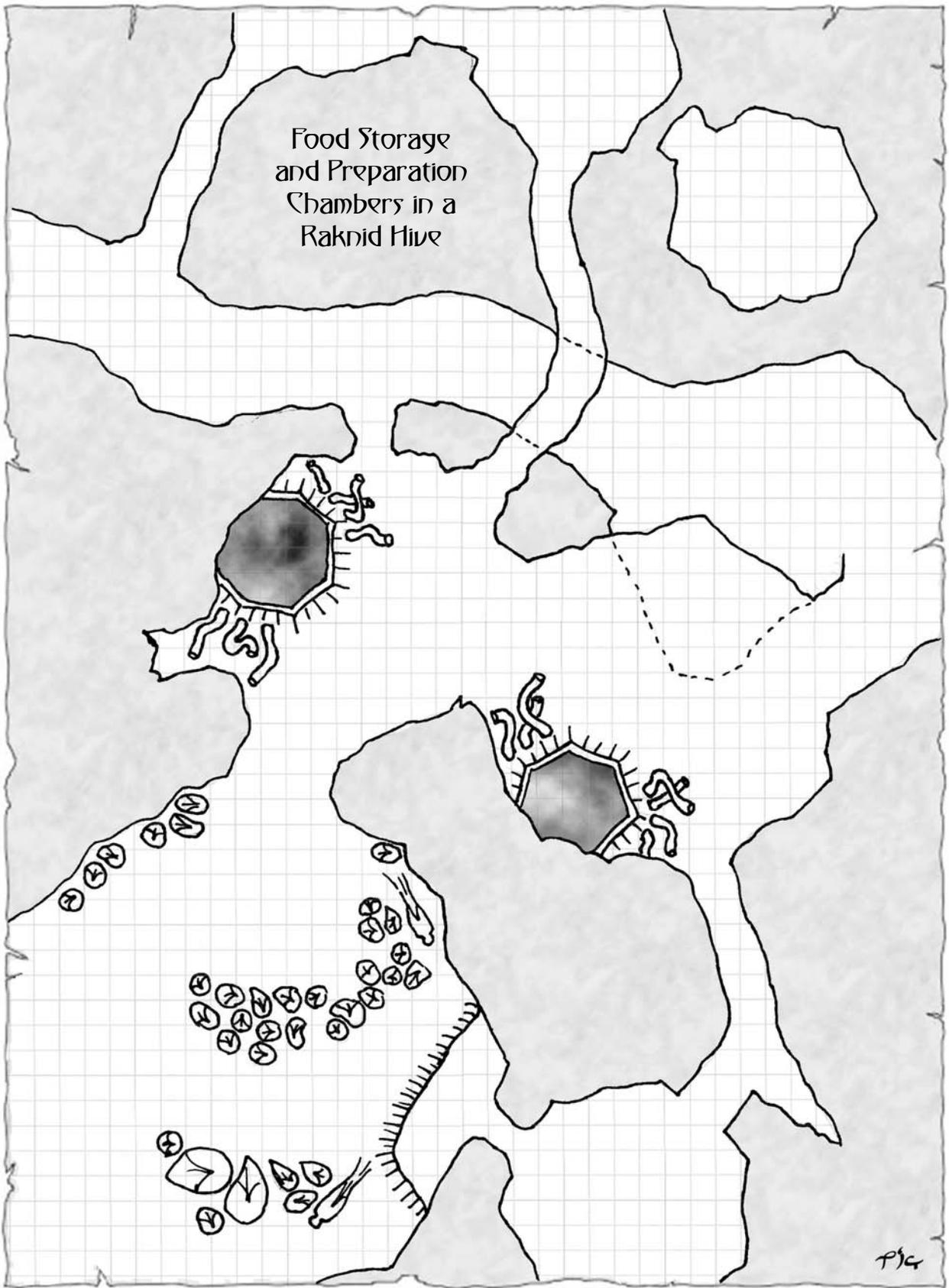
Raknid warriors stalk their prey at night. They burrow under the sand and ash, just below the surface, allowing sensitive hairs on their bodies to detect airborne and ground vibrations. Quick as a wink, they spring up, grasping at their prey with their pincers. Once caught, the victim can expect to be stung repeatedly by the Raknid's tail until overcome by the creature's paralytic venom.

The dried pulp of the tunnels and rooms of a hive is susceptible to flame. Saurans know this. Upon finding a colony, the reptilians form large war-parties specifically to put the structure to the torch. Natural hazards are another source of fiery danger. Volcanoes erupt continuously in both small and large events, blasting burning ash and cinders into the sky to be carried on hot winds.

Being wet and goopy, freshly sprayed pulp is not flammable, and Raknid workers use it as a fire extinguisher. They expend great effort – virtually on a daily basis – to keep the hive from burning. In fact, due to the prevalence of fire, it is not uncommon to find a hive by first spotting twisting pillars of grey smoke reaching into the sky.

Whether being ridden by Saurans or roaming in the wild, land dragons also pose a direct threat to the survival of the hive. The giant creatures relish Raknid eggs and fat, grub-like larvae, and will literally charge into the construction, ripping apart tunnels and chambers to get to their quarry. Quite often, only the psychic powers of the queen are capable of stopping a land dragon from devastating a colony.

Food Storage
and Preparation
Chambers in a
Raknid Hive



TUNNELS

Inside, the dim blue glow of Laeolis moss lights the hive. Cylindrical tunnels measuring up to 40 feet in diameter connect its chambers. The great size of the passages is necessary to accommodate the giant, scurrying forms of Raknid workers. The layout of the colony continuously changes as new doorways are opened and new tunnels and chambers are built, while old ones are closed off or destroyed due to fire or mold.

CHAMBERS

Chambers can be quite vast – upwards of 200 feet high and several hundred feet across. Tunnels open onto ledges and platforms along the chambers at various heights and angles.

Food Storage

Constructed in the deepest, coolest locations, these chambers hold creatures captured by Raknid warriors. Wrapped in cocoons of fibrous pulp and suspended from the ceiling like treats in a spider's web, these unfortunates may still live – paralyzed by a warrior's venom but aware of their fate.

Food Preparation

Each large food storage chamber has several smaller food preparation rooms around it. In these foul chambers, workers strip cocoon and hide and fur (and clothing or armor in the case of sentient beings) from meat brought from the food storage chamber. Using their mandibles and forelimbs, workers tear the carcasses into chunks and cast them into vats containing a horrid brownish-red, meaty concoction covered by a thick "skin" of glowing Laeolis moss.

The moss interacts with the meat, breaking it down to form a syrupy substance. Fibrous pulp shaped into funnel tubes extend from the bottom of the vats, and wind and twist their way *upward* into the hive. Exactly how the food is pumped is

One Raknid's Garbage...

Raknids waste nothing. Any materials remaining after the food preparation process are mixed with fibrous pulp in the construction of the hive – such items become part of the very walls, floors, and ceilings. It is quite possible to discover lost relics, glittering firegems, assorted coins, weapons, armor, and other valuables protruding from the hive, along with less desirable items like bones, skulls, scaly hides, horns, hooves, and teeth.

unknown, but the funnel tubes visibly constrict and expand as if alive.

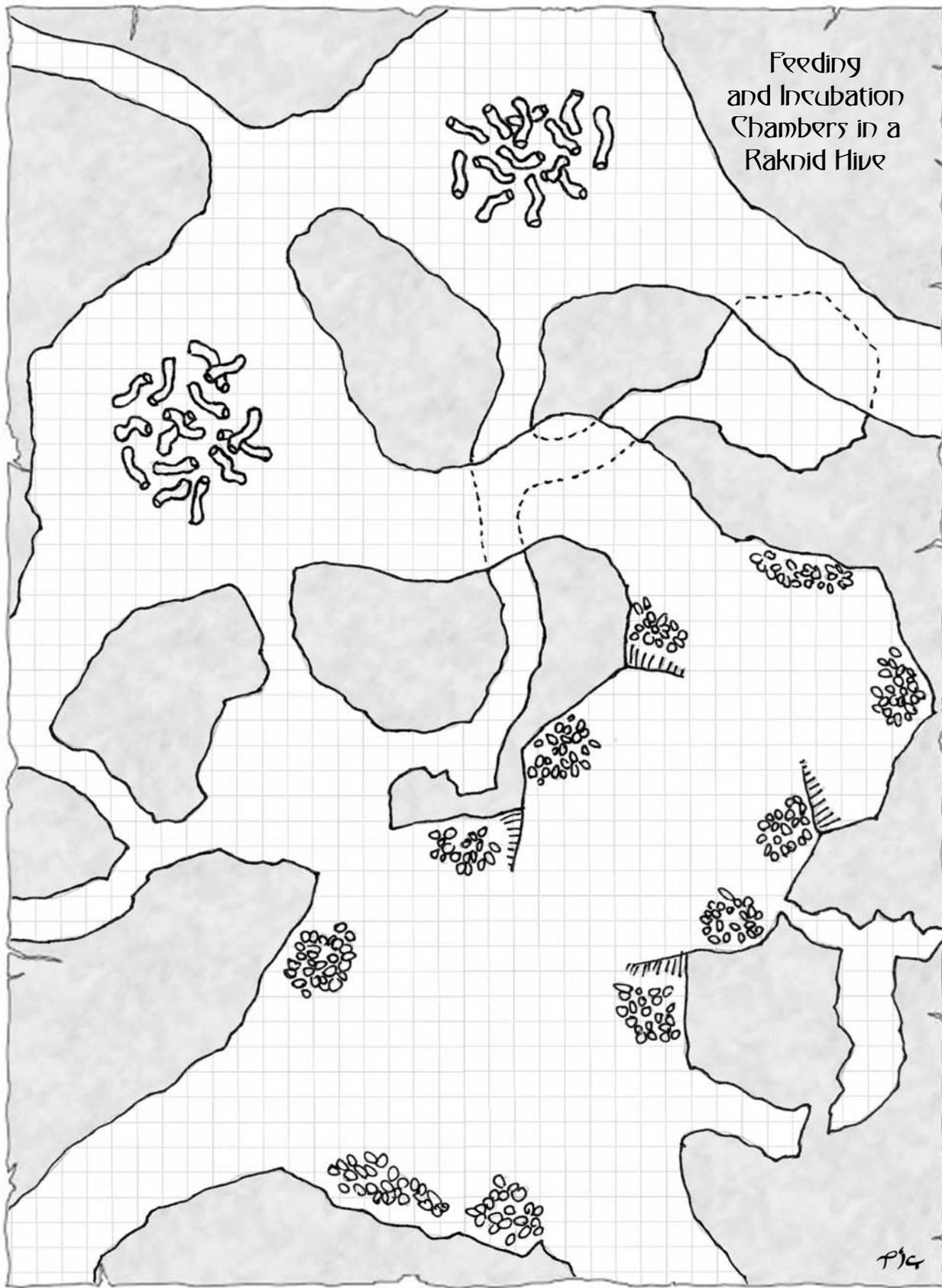
Feeding

Funnel tubes protrude from the ceiling in these rooms, hanging nearly to the floor. A great, gooey droplet of meaty syrup hangs from the mouth of each quivering tube. Looking like fat, greedy grubs, Raknid larvae suckle and chew at the bloody dew.

Incubation

Constructed among the middle levels of the hive to receive warmth, incubation chambers are long, wide, and low rooms. Workers diligently and gingerly tend to the developing eggs, turning them and cleaning them to prevent mold. When a worker detects that an egg is about to hatch, the worker quickly carries the egg to a feeding chamber. The emerging larva will be ravenous, and will even devour eggs in the incubation chamber if not stopped.

Feeding
and Incubation
Chambers in a
Raknid Hive



P14

Transformation

After a week of gorging itself in the feeding chamber, the larva spins a cocoon about itself. A worker carries the cocoon to the highest – and warmest – chambers of the colony. Spitting pulp, the worker attaches the cocoon to a vacant niche, where the larva will remain in a stupor and eventually develop into one of the four Raknid adult forms. Niches line the entire surface of the walls of the dome-shaped transformation chambers.

The Queen's Court

At the core of the colony, the breeding and egg-laying chamber is constructed partially on the surface and partially below the ground. Blotches of Laeolis moss glow on the walls, cropped and tended by workers to grow in patterns dreamed by the queen. What meaning they have or story they tell can only be understood by her alien mind.

Weeping great tears of bloody syrup, feeding tubes dangle from the ceiling. Always breeding, always birthing, the queen's hunger knows no end. Drones crawl over her massive form, caressing her with their feathery antennae and pleading with her for the privilege to mate. Workers struggle to move segments of her body in order to clean her and eat molds which might threaten her health. Still other workers aid her in the continuous outpouring of eggs.

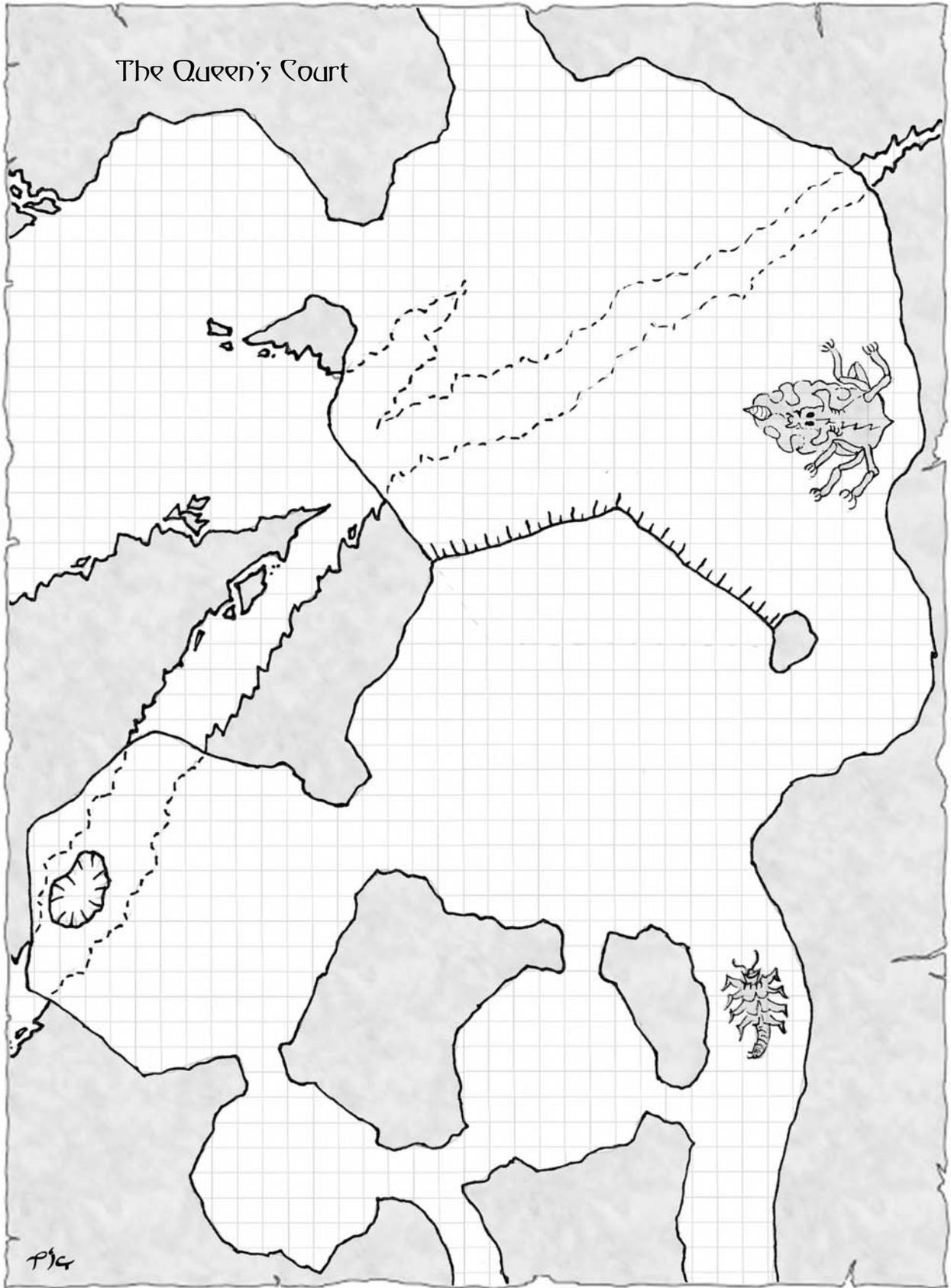
Amidst this flurry of gruesome activities, the queen's form lies in repose and quivers in pain and pleasure. Though she is physically present, the hum of her vibrating antennae and the unfocused gaze of her full-moon eyes bear witness that her mind is not only here but everywhere within the hive.

THE HIVE BENEATH THE HIVE

Invariably, the pyramidal structure of the hive on the surface rests atop at least one chasm or crevice providing access to subterranean caverns. These naturally formed passages of rock and pumice are the final defense of the queen and her brood, who can continue to survive here should the surface hive be destroyed.

Most of these subterranean passageways are interconnected beneath the Volcanic Hills, forming a portion of the Underground Highway – a vast network of caverns, tunnels, rivers, and lakes twisting beneath much of the continent. Due to increased movements among the Sauran clans and growing numbers of roving Kang war bands on the surface, Raknid warriors use the subterranean passages more-and-more when foraging for food.

The Queen's Court



CHAPTER SIX

Character Archetypes

SAURANS AS PLAYER CHARACTERS

The *Talisanta 4th Edition Handbook* presents the Sauran Dragon Rider archetype as a non-player character (page 386). That

book also provides the Sauran Gladiator as a player character (page 403). A new archetype – the Sauran Priestess – is outlined below. At the Gamemaster's discretion, all three archetypes could be utilized as player character archetypes.

SAURAN PRIESTESS		<table border="1"> <tr> <td>+4</td> <td>-3</td> <td>+1</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>STR</td> <td>DEX</td> <td>PER</td> <td>CHA</td> </tr> <tr> <td>+4</td> <td>-3</td> <td>+3</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>CON</td> <td>SPD</td> <td>WIL</td> <td>INT</td> </tr> </table>				+4	-3	+1	0	STR	DEX	PER	CHA	+4	-3	+3	0	CON	SPD	WIL	INT	Special Abilities:
+4	-3	+1	0																			
STR	DEX	PER	CHA																			
+4	-3	+3	0																			
CON	SPD	WIL	INT																			
<p><i>The ground rumbles and shakes with tremors. "Sssteady your legsss and mindsss, travelerssss. Sssatha remindsss uss of her pain, and demandsss appeasement. Let usss all recite the ancient chant of calming . . ."</i></p> <p>It is your duty to pass on the lore of the Saurans, and especially to let none forget the trials and tribulations of the Goddess, Satha. Within the womb of the sacred mountain, she labors to protect all of your clan from those who would invade the Volcanic Hills. She talks to you through her gifts of solid flame – glittering firegems. Aided by Satha's blessing and your dead ancestors – whose spirits surround you and send you omens – you protect and guide your clan.</p>		<table border="1"> <tr> <td>+3</td> <td>30</td> <td>-2</td> </tr> <tr> <td>CR</td> <td>HP</td> <td>MR</td> </tr> </table>				+3	30	-2	CR	HP	MR	<p>Special Abilities: Hide (PR 1); immunity to poison; can use tail as Brawling attack (DR 6 + STR); rendered sluggish by cold (-2 to Action Table rolls); unaffected by heat (half damage from fire); ten percent chance of having chameleon-like ability to change coloring at will (roll during character creation).</p>										
+3	30	-2																				
CR	HP	MR																				
<p>Appearance: 6'6"-7', 350-450 lbs. Venerable female of the species (age 40+); scaly rust-brown hide; reptilian features; clawed hands and feet; powerful jaws lined with rows of sharp teeth; heavy tail.</p>		<p>Skills: Brawling +4 Dagger +3 War Axe +4 War Whip +4 Mounted Combat +4 Animal Handler +4 Healer +4 Survival +5 Ride +6</p>		<p>Equipment: Ornate red iron collar and bone headdress forming a gown of long straps of dyed dragon hide, obsidian jewelry and dragon icon, Sauran war axe or Sauran war whip or obsidian dagger, shoulder pouch, 100 gold lumens in uncut firegems and assorted currencies.</p>																		
		<p>Languages: Sauran, native Low Talislan, basic</p>																				

RAKNIDS AS PLAYER CHARACTERS

Convincingly role-playing a Raknid can be a fun challenge for players, and the GM is encouraged to work with any player interested in doing so. The most suitable type of Raknid is the warrior, and an archetype for the Raknid Warrior has been supplied.

Suggested Backgrounds and Motivations

Developing a background for a Raknid player character might take a bit more effort on the part of the GM and the player. Consider the following questions, and try to develop your own questions and answers.

Does the character serve a Raknid Queen? If so, how does the character feel toward the queen: loyal, subservient, fearful, obligated by duty, resentful? If not serving a queen, how did this come about? Perhaps the PC somehow moved beyond the range of

the queen's psychic abilities, or one of the character's antennae was damaged during a struggle, breaking the queen's control. It may even be that the warrior emerged from its cocoon in a strange environment, and not the hive of its birth, such as in a magician's laboratory, amidst the oddities of a traveling carnival, or simply alone in the wilderness. In this case, what would happen if the solitary warrior were to encounter others of its kind or . . . a psychic queen?

What motivates the Raknid character? Answers to the first question will likely influence answers as to the character's motivations. Is the PC still under the influence of a queen, one who has secret goals and aspirations? What does she want her subject to do for her? Does she trust the PC to venture beyond the range of her control? Assuming a solitary Raknid devoid of queen and colony, what become its primary goals, other than survival? Its instincts are to protect and to provide for the hive. Would serving new-found friends in this manner satisfy its instinctual drives?

RAKNID WARRIOR		Special Abilities:																	
<p><i>Rounding a corner on the high ledge, the creature was suddenly before me – a Raknid. The light of the moons glowed like ghostly auras on its oily carapace. Its mandibles clicking and clattering, it managed to speak, "Click! Snap! You block the path, strange meat. Out of the way, for She is not patient and this one's task is undone. Snick!" Its long antennae twitched toward the ground far below, and a greater intelligence seemed to flash across the many facets of its red eyes. Sudden inspiration struck, and I lashed out with my dueling sword, slicing the antennae from its horrid head! The Raknid dropped to the ground like an empty suit of armor, and I carefully stepped past it. Before I rounded the bend, I looked over my shoulder to see it still sitting on that high ledge of the volcano, seemingly lost in its thoughts.</i></p> <p>In the hive, the queen rules all – even the thoughts and dreams of her spawn – and all are one. Whether by design or by fate, you are no longer of the one. You walk the world alone; your mind free.</p>	<table border="1"> <tr> <td>+4</td> <td>+2</td> <td>+2</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>STR</td> <td>DEX</td> <td>PER</td> <td>CHA</td> </tr> <tr> <td>+6</td> <td>-2</td> <td>+5</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>CON</td> <td>SPD</td> <td>WIL</td> <td>INT</td> </tr> </table>	+4	+2	+2	0	STR	DEX	PER	CHA	+6	-2	+5	0	CON	SPD	WIL	INT	<p>Exoskeleton (PR 3); claws (DR 8); tail stinger (DR 10 + paralytic poison: CON roll to resist, duration 20 rounds); leap up to 20 feet.</p>	
	+4	+2	+2	0															
	STR	DEX	PER	CHA															
+6	-2	+5	0																
CON	SPD	WIL	INT																
<p>Appearance: 6'-6'8", 200-300 lbs. Segmented black exoskeleton covered with oily substance giving it a multi-colored sheen; powerful arms ending in hooked talons; long tail with stinger; orange comb-like organs along the sides of feet used to smell; eyes are green or red multi-faceted orbs.</p>	<table border="1"> <tr> <td>+5</td> <td>30</td> <td>-5</td> </tr> <tr> <td>CR</td> <td>HP</td> <td>MR</td> </tr> </table>	+5	30	-5	CR	HP	MR	<p>Equipment: None.</p>											
+5	30	-5																	
CR	HP	MR																	
<p>Skills: Brawling +4 Climbing +2 Scout +2 Stealth +4 Survival +4 Tracking +3</p>		<p>Languages: Raknid, native Sauran, basic Low Talislan, basic</p>																	

CHAPTER SEVEN

Equipment

WEAPONS

Obsidian Dagger

Although used by both male and female Saurans, these daggers have become symbols of rank and privilege among Sauran matrons and priestesses. The handle is typically fashioned of curved dragon horn and may be intricately scrimshawed. Typically long and straight, the blade is a solid piece of obsidian of black, green, or red coloration. The sharpness of these blades is without equal. (Consider non-metallic armor – hide, scales, leather, etc. – at one-half its normal protection rating.)

DR: 4
WT: 2
STR: -2
Cost: 12 g.l.
Range: --

Obsidian Spear

Wireweed or dragon hide strips are wrapped around the long, red iron haft of this spear to form a grip for throwing. Chipped and shaped into various forms and lengths, the head of the spear is made of obsidian. The edge of the spearhead is sharper than a razor, though somewhat fragile. (Consider non-metallic armor – hide, scales, leather, etc. – at one-half its normal protection rating.)

Saurans use obsidian spears not only for throwing, but also for thrusting and slashing. When riding within battle towers mounted on land dragons, Saurans commonly equip themselves with obsidian spears of varying lengths – some short for hurling and others much longer for stabbing at opponents on the ground.

DR: 10
WT: 20
STR: +2
Cost: 10 g.l.
Range: thrown

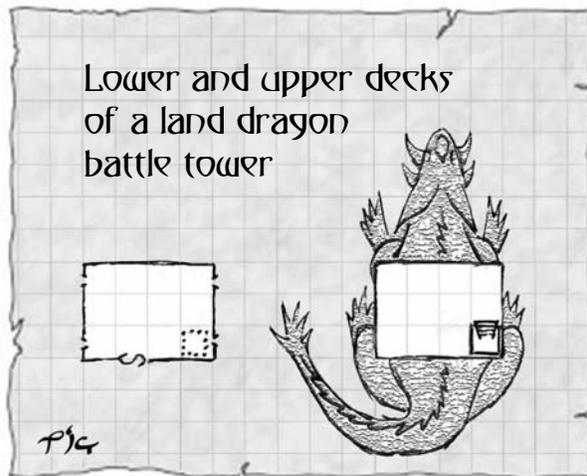
Red Iron and the Saurans

While it is true that red iron is a superior metal to black iron, being half as heavy and doubly as strong as the latter, this is not true of the red iron produced by the Saurans. Only the thaumaturges of Carantheum know the secrets of creating pure red iron. The red iron poured from the smelting furnaces of the reptilians is a crude alloy heavy with impurities. As a result, items born of Sauran forges should be considered to have a weight and strength equal to that of similar items made of black iron.

CONVEYANCES FOOD & DRINK

LAND DRAGON BATTLE TOWER

Saurans outfit their land dragon mounts with platforms made of red iron and leather. A portion of the construction is an actual enclosed tower, used as a sanctuary to avoid aberrant weather or the artillery and missile weapons of enemies in battle. The typical crew when armed for battle includes two handlers to prod and steer the beast and four Saurans equipped with spears.



VENOMWINE

Most definitely an acquired taste, venomwine is a concoction brewed by Saurans and consists of fermented bramblecup lichen nectar and Raknid venom. The reptilians are immune to the poison, but do experience a euphoric feeling when over-indulging in venomwine. Members of other races may also enjoy the intoxicating effects of the drink, along with an unexpected and undesirable one – paralysis due to poisoning lasting up to an hour. If the effect is successfully resisted with a CON roll, the imbiber is rendered somewhat sluggish (-3 on all actions) for ten rounds.

Dose: one ounce

Level: 2

Ingredients: fermented bramblecup lichen nectar and Raknid venom

Time required: one day

Cost of materials: 120 g.l.

Minimum value: 128 g.l.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Mysteries, Myths, and Secrets

The information in this chapter is meant for the Gamemaster (GM) only. Players should avoid reading it so as not to spoil the fun of exploring the Volcanic Hills.

LEGENDARY PERSONAGES

When studying the Volcanic Hills, the names of three legendary individuals appear many times in musty tomes penned by forgotten historians: Erendor of Elande, Sassan of Phaedra, and Satha the Dragon-Goddess. Each of them is described in greater detail in this chapter.

ERENDOR

Erendor's Cave has never been uncovered, and still remains a mystery of the Volcanic Hills. One reason for this is that the cave is buried under tons of rock. Another is that Erendor's markers have never been deciphered, as no one has thought to view the glowing runes from the air.

Erendor himself went to great lengths to conceal his sanctuary. He constructed several false markers leading to caves containing nothing at all. Some even contain minor treasures and traps in an effort to make those finding them believe they have the true cache.

Certainly, a veritable museum of exotic treasures awaits those smart enough and brave enough to uncover the real cave. It may even be possible to free Erendor and his wife Marisha from stasis.

The Fate of Erendor and Marisha

Moments before the Great Disaster, Sky-City of Elande, Tower of Marisha, Wife of Erendor and Voice of the One Hundred.

Marisha moved like a stalking exomorph among the boxes and crates stacked in the entry of her tower; the home she shared with her husband, the magician Erendor. Spying a vacant chair, she pounced into it. Holding her chin in her hands, she glared vacantly at the piles of packages before her.

She had told him she hated him, she thought. *Hated* him. How could he expect her to move her belongings into those abominable caverns and leave their home? All because of a vision. A *vision*.

She had done the right thing, she reassured herself. As the Voice of the One Hundred, it was her duty to question those who would speak before the gathering of magicians. She had to put the tough questions to him. She had to make Erendor see how his apocalyptic vision had blinded him to all else.

Now, humiliated before his wife and his peers, Erendor had left his home. She knew where he was. The same place he always went . . .

Moments before the Great Disaster, Volcanic Hills, the Caves of Erendor

Deep within his hidden sanctum, Erendor busied himself with his work; securing artifacts and storing supplies. He tried to forget the fight with Marisha. Such angry words. How is it that he could be so cordial to colleagues and strangers, but say such horrible things to the one person he loved more than life itself?

Laying down a heavy iron box filled with ancient texts, the magician stretched his sore back. The tone of a tiny gong drew his attention to a mechanism affixed to a wall of the cave. The machine contained many moving parts attached to a brass frame, all of which surrounded a glass jar filled with thousands of living eyes – eyes taken from draconids, creatures capable of seeing magical emanations. A zodiac disk on the device rotated, and hands of the clockwork device ticked forward.

“One month remaining,” Erendor said to his ears alone. “I gave the fools plenty of time to prepare for the end. But they mocked me. Even *she* laughed.”

Suddenly, the ground shook . . . and didn't stop. This was no tremor common to the Volcanic Hills. The floor seemed to ripple and spread out like water. For an instant, Erendor would swear that he had seen through - or between - the very substance of the world and looked into the void beyond. Then everything snapped back and the cave was shaking all about him and dust and rocks were falling on him and he had to get to Marisha!

He ran. He nearly made it to the entrance of the caves when a stone bounced off his skull, driving him to his knees and filling his eyes with blood and tears. Confused, he continued down a passage, and suddenly realizing his mistake spun about to retreat. But it was too late. He had sprung one of his own traps. Amber light enveloped Erendor.

(continued)

The Fate of Erendor and Marisha

(continued)

The Great Disaster, Sky-City of Elande, Tower of Marisha, Wife of Erendor and Voice of the One Hundred.

When the sky-city of Elande tilted upon its axis and began spinning lazily toward the ground far below, the magician Marisha did not know whether to rejoice because her husband was not insane or weep for she would never see him again. Stunned, sitting in the entrance of her tower, she finally realized that amidst the droning of the city's warning klaxon she was hearing banging at her door.

Upon opening it, she found a wild-eyed servitor dancing from foot-to-foot in front of her. "Lady Marisha, we must go to the windships! Everyone is flying south for the coast! We'll be safe there! Come!"

She allowed the servitor to lead her through the panicked throng to the sky docks. Instead of boarding one of the great windships, she clambered into her sky chariot and sped downward toward the Volcanic Hills.

Her journey was one of crazy speeds through a world gone mad. Dismayed, she watched the huge crimson sun slowly divide into two brilliant yellow orbs. Holes ripped through the fabric of the sky, and new moons appeared.

She skimmed the ground, flying past Erendor's markers. Following the patterns of the glowing runes on the obelisks, much like windship captains followed landing lights on the sky-city, she knew in which cave to find her husband. The entrance was covered by a flow of sliding debris like a waterfall, and she crashed her sky chariot through in a terrible impact.

As the world literally fell on top of her, the magician Marisha, Voice of the One Hundred, saw her husband standing within an amber light, his arms outstretched to her. Crying his name, she ran to him, but never felt his embrace.

To this day, the lovers stand mere inches apart, held in the stasis trap.

SASSAN

In the early part of the New Age, shortly before the Cult Wars tore the city-state of Phaedra asunder, a magician named Sassan gained quite the reputation. At times he was considered a scoundrel and others a hero of virtue. Regardless of whether they hated or admired him, all knew him to be an eccentric who would easily take offense at the slightest perceived insult and challenge his detractors to duels.

Having a knack for magic – especially spells involving fire – Sassan used enchantments of his own design to aid in vanquishing foes. Even without his

arcane talents, Sassan was feared as a master swordsman.

Some say he became bored of Phaedra, and others claim he was banished, in any event, Sassan undertook an expedition to the Volcanic Hills. As he was never heard from again, it was assumed that the daring magician met his match among the Saurans. The Wizard King Damon declared Sassan a public menace in absentia, and banned his works. The spellbooks of Sassan became black market wares.

In truth, the wily magician yet dwells within the Volcanic Hills, living well beyond his natural years. Not long after arriving in the

region, Sassan discovered what the Aamanians were still trying to find: the Well of Saints (see Chapter 3). Imbibing of its waters, Sassan soon realized he was no longer aging and was virtually impervious to wounds and illnesses.

Unfortunately, he also discovered that the water lost its efficacy if placed in containers, and his age rapidly changed if he did not regularly drink from the fluid's source. Undaunted, the magician explored the surrounding environs, and eventually discovered the vast library within the Temple of the Seven Moons in Xanadas. Determined to learn all that the Savants of the temple could teach him, Sassan made regular trips between the library and the Well of Saints.

Upon one of his explorations in the Opal Mountains, Sassan uncovered the crash site of an ancient Elandar cloud palace. Using tomes in the library, artifacts and books found within the ruins of the palace itself, and his own arcane talents, Sassan repaired the domicile and made it his own. Now, he could float upon the clouds, traveling between the Temple of the Seven Moons and the Well of Saints in safety and comfort.

When the Aamanians eventually did discover the well, Sassan knew he must take action to protect its waters. Among the relics of the cloud palace, he had found creatures of cloud-stuff held in stasis – the dreaded vorls. Sassan learned the means to control the insatiable creatures, and unleashed them upon the Aamanian pilgrims. To this day, the magician employs the vorls to drive away trespassers who come to near to “his” well.

Upon the rare occasion that he becomes homesick, Sassan captures Aamanians or other travelers in the valley and brings them into his manse. News of the continuing conflicts between Aaman and Zandu merely disgust him, and visitors who bring ill tidings of the world and his beloved Phaedra seldom survive Sassan's fickle wrath.

In the present day, the flying manse of Sassan yet hovers in the obscuring clouds of the Valley of Mists. Saurans have spied it upon occasion, and have told tales of the mysterious flying tower.

Sassan and the Wizard King

Year 89 of the New Age, City of Phaedra, Royal Bedchamber of Wizard King Damon.

After fumbling with the ornate lock, Damon strode heavily into the bedchamber. “You would dare to bar me from our chambers, woman?” Not waiting for an answer, the wizard king cast a tube fashioned of yellow clay to the tiled floor, where it shattered, and continued on his march to a long desk.

Yawning and rubbing her painted eyes, Natoshia sat up in the royal bed. Afternoon light of the twin suns shone through tall arches opening onto the balcony, and glowed and glittered on the golden layer of sweat coating her naked form.

“I would not have my nap disturbed by clumsy servants, my king,” she said languidly. “What is it that truly disturbs you?” She looked to the broken shards of clay, and her eye caught a glitter of gold among a pile of dust. Sliding off the bed, she pulled a coverlet behind her and wrapped herself in it. She glided to the mess on the floor.

Knocking about delicate crystal decanters, Damon pulled the stopper from a tall flask and – not bothering to find a goblet – drank deeply. “The same as always – trying to keep these zealot cultists from killing one another and ripping the country to pieces!”

(continued)

Sassan and the Wizard King (continued)

Taking the flask with him, Damon moved onto the balcony. He looked over his shoulder at Natoshia and saw her sifting through the ashes and bits of clay. "That's Argontor, the Aamanian cult's latest high priest."

"His ring, you mean?" asked Natoshia, holding up a gold ring amid bits of white ash.

"No, you fool. That is Argontor."

Natoshia dropped the ornament and instinctively rubbed the ashes on her bare thigh. Even more repulsed, she visibly shuddered and wiped her hands frantically on the bedding worn as a gown.

"That damned fool, Sassan, incinerated him. Challenges everyone and his brother to duels! Over the slightest offense. Yesterday, he dueled a Pardoxist, accusing the hapless man of having insulted the style of his hat. Today he has slain Argontor. That magician has overstepped his bounds. The Aamanians call for his fool head, and I will give it to them before the suns set!"

Quickly and calmly composing herself, Natoshia moved to her husband's side upon the balcony. She caressed his shoulders and neck in the way he liked, and looked past him to the city below. Her eyes darted about, seeking something . . . anything.

"Now, now, my king," she soothed. "Sassan's fiery duels have made him popular with the people. And, besides, if you were to give his . . . head . . . to the Aamanians, the Pardoxists would accuse you of choosing sides."

Damon's muscles relaxed and he said, "Now I know why I put up with your dalliances, my dear. Tell me then, what would you have me do with this magician?"

Waving banners and a flash of reflected sunlight caught Natoshia's eye, drawing her gaze to the sandy floor of an arena far below. A Sauran wage-fighter dodged the clumsy stroke of a Phaedran swordsman, and countered with a sweep of its tail. The swordsman flew into the air and landed on his back. Natoshia pointed in time for both her and the king to watch as the Sauran drove a pronged spear deep into the Phaedran's chest. As one, the crowd inhaled a terrified, yet excited, breath.

"The Saurans are as brutal as their homeland, are they not?" she asked. "The Aamanians claim to receive visions from their god telling them to seek the source of immortality within the Volcanic Hills. Whether there is truth to this or not, many of their cult have made pilgrimage there, never to return. Perhaps someone with Sassan's talents should be sent to investigate."

Damon turned on his heel and made for the door. Speaking over his shoulder, he said, "Back to bed and rest, my dear, for when I return I shall reward you with great vigor. I go now to summon Sassan to my council hall."

As soon as the door clicked shut, Sassan slid from beneath the great bed and stood up in one fluid motion. Wearing only his dueling belt and sword, he held his hat – made of the scaly hide of some brilliantly colored beast and adorned with the garish plumes of an exotic bird – in one hand and presented Natoshia with a sweeping, graceful bow.

"Of all the places in all the world, she picks the Volcanic Hills. Why could you not choose the pleasure pavilions of Eros Isle, my love? Oh well . . . say, how do you like my hat?"

SATHA AND THE LOST TEMPLE

High on the slopes of Dragonrock, some of the columns and blocks of the Temple of Satha still stand, partly covered by ash and pumice and wreathed in clouds of toxic fumes. Prior to the Archaen-Drakken wars and the Great Disaster, the temple walls and complex extended for miles around the mouth of the great volcano. Via lava tubes and crevices, the temple continued underground and opened upon the interior of the mountain, providing stunning views of the boiling lava lake below.

In those long gone days, the Drakken revered Satha as a fertility goddess and source of all fire, thinking of her almost as an elemental force or spirit of birth and flame. According to their tradition, the High Priestess of the Dragon Cult always reigned beside the King of the Drakken as his Queen. Every succeeding queen was said to be the living embodiment of the goddess, and all bore the name of Satha and held privileges as the High Priestess.

Whether Satha was truly a powerful spirit entity or merely a legend or myth worshipped by the Drakken is open to debate. Pictographs and Drakken symbology engraved into the remaining walls and pillars of the ruins of the temple relate the tales of how Satha was a spirit possessing the bodies of succeeding generations of Drakken queens.

From the Sauran point of view, they believe that Satha takes the form of a gigantic crested dragon and still lives beneath the Volcanic Hills. They attribute volcanic eruptions and tremors to her, claiming these things occur due to her discontent or labor pains as she continues to birth new generations of reptilians of all species.

The Archaen Orb

During the Forgotten Age, when a primitive tribe calling themselves the Archaens discovered the wreckage of an alien craft, they found a strange sphere inside. The Archaen Orb, as it would become known, taught the Archaens the secrets of magic. Over the centuries, the relic became lost to history.

At the culmination of the first Archaen-Drakken war, the reptilians defeated the Archaens and razed their city of Arcanopolis. Some historians believe the Archaen Orb was in the city during the Drakken siege, and claimed as a prize by the victorious giants.

If this is the case, the Drakken would likely have taken the fabled orb to one of their strongholds. Perhaps it lies in a hidden gallery within the Temple of Satha in the Volcanic Hills . . .

Saurans cannot decipher the Drakken script and pictographs. When they see images of a titanic spirit-dragon painted upon the crumbling walls of the bygone temple, they believe it is the true form of Satha, which may ultimately be correct should the being truly exist.

Whether a powerful entity known as Satha exists or not, the fact remains that a vast temple complex waits to be explored. Saurans have uncovered only a fraction of the many passageways, galleries, and chambers of the temple. Undoubtedly, many strange Drakken relics still lie in their final resting places.

THE RAKNID PLOT

The Raknid queens are concerned with more than just survival; they want to propagate their species throughout Talislanta and beyond. Besides bickering and fighting among themselves, the primary obstacle in their path is the fact that their eggs require hot climates in order to mature and hatch.

In order to find suitable locations in addition to the Volcanic Hills, some queens have begun sending warriors on special tasks. Usually they travel the Underground Highway, but may be encountered on the surface. The small groups of warriors carry the eggs of workers, drones, and queens with them in the hopes of finding a region where a new colony can be started. Small hives may soon sprout up in arid or desert lands such as Kasmir, Sindar, Djaffa, Faradun, Rajanistan, Carantheum, and the Wilderlands of Zaran.

Some queens have spun devious plots designed to lure accomplished alchemists and sorcerers to their domains with the intention of capturing them. These queens wish to learn the ways of alchemical hybridization and investigate the possibility of altering eggs or larvae such that they might survive in cooler climes.

SAURAN CAMOUFLAGE ABILITY

Some Saurans have the ability to control the color of their scales, effectively hiding themselves against their surroundings. As the Gamemaster, you have a couple of options as to how this comes about and how it works.

ORIGIN

You can assume it is simply random, and roll a d20 with a result of 19 or 20 indicating success. In the case of player character Saurans, consider allowing the player to roll during character creation.

Alternatively, the camouflage ability could be a latent talent of *all* Saurans. However, only certain clans know the lore, and keep the secret among their brethren. Priestesses of the clan train young Saurans to use their talent as part of their initiation ritual into adulthood. This provides motivation for Sauran player characters who do not know the lore to seek out Saurans who do, and gives you the opportunity to develop interesting adventures for the character.

EFFECTS

Camouflaged Saurans gain a bonus of +8 to Stealth in the natural surroundings of the Volcanic Hills. You may wish to apply negative modifiers to this when the character is in unfamiliar territory or indoors.

Depending upon the situation, you may grant the camouflaged Sauran a bonus of up to +4 to combat rating. However, you should nullify this effect if the opponent possesses magical sight or has no need to see, for example.

ABERRANT WEATHER

When determining weather conditions in the Volcanic Hills, refer to the aberrant weather chart and information in the *Talisanta 4th Edition Handbook* (pages 442-444). When rolling on the aberrant weather chart, consider the Volcanic Hills to be an arid region and replace any result of icicle rain with obsidian rain.

OBSIDIAN RAIN

Imagine the sky being made of colored glass, then shattering and falling to the ground in a hail of razor-sharp shards. Obsidian rain can occur shortly after volcanic eruptions. Globes and sheets of lava passing through acid

clouds and winds form obsidian shards, becoming deadly projectiles ranging greatly in size and shape – from less than an inch in diameter to several feet across.

Cutting and puncturing those it strikes, an obsidian rain deals 2 points of damage per round to anyone unfortunate enough to be caught in it. Because the shards and globules are quite fragile and typically shatter on impact, structures and conveyances made of heavy materials suffer little damage. This is not the case for the sails of windships, which can be utterly devastated by obsidian rain. The typical obsidian rain lasts no longer than 10 rounds.

A growing crescendo of the tinkling of millions of shards of glass often precedes an obsidian rain. Those accustomed to the warning sound can usually find shelter before the rain strikes.

CHAPTER NINE

Bestiary

This chapter presents information on flora and fauna of the Volcanic Hills region.

BLOODSPOT MOLD

This thick, spongy mold is denoted by its shape and color – a brownish blotch speckled with red spots. It is found growing on decaying matter or living plants. In particular, bloodspot mold thrives on the pulpy substance excreted by Raknids when constructing their hives and it is known to grow on Raknid eggs. Workers of the insectoid species must labor continuously to protect the brood and colony, using their many palpi to pluck the mold and devour it.

Saurans make use of the mold by extracting various shades of brown and red dyes from it. Their priestesses consider it a remedy for curing illnesses of the stomach – particularly indigestion – and include it as an ingredient in a heavy, pungent tea.

In many ways, bloodspot mold is similar to moss mold in regard to its effect upon humanoids, plants, and Green Men (see the *Talislanta 4th Edition Handbook*, page 444).

BRAMBLECUP LICHEN

Colored black and white and resembling a salt-and-pepper beard, bramblecup lichen grows on volcanic rocks and pumice. The main body of the plant actually grows *inside* the stone, and will eventually cause rocks to crumble and erode over time.

The blooms of this plant are what give it its name. Looking like tiny green goblets, the blossoms pop up over the lichen's surface. Wreathes of thorny vines protect the cups, which hold small amounts of sweet nectar and morning dew.

Saurans go to great lengths to find and harvest the nectar. When allowed to ferment with a mixture of Raknid poison, the result is a concoction which the reptilians find intoxicating: venomwine.

DRAC

Though smaller and wingless, dracs may be distant cousins of dractyls (see the *Talislanta 4th Edition Handbook*, page 185). The creatures thrive in the Volcanic Hills, preying upon small creatures and insects. Saurans know the lore of how to breed and raise dracs from the egg to adulthood, and train them as guard-beasts and trackers. Some clans sell trained dracs to Orgovian and Djaffir traders, who have found a market for the beasts in civilized lands, where the wealthy enjoy dracs as exotic pets.

Size: 2-8' in length, 20-160 lbs.

Attributes:

INT -8 PER +4
WIL +2 CHA -9
STR +1 DEX +2
CON +2 SPD +2

Ability Level: 1-4

Attacks/Damage: Bite: DR 4; Claws: DR 2

Special Abilities: Track by scent

Armor: Thick scales and hide, PR 2

Hit Points: 20

DRACONID

Also called fire lizards, draconids are handsome creatures bearing scaly hides and leathery wings in various shades of brilliant red, yellow, and orange hues. Fully grown adults measure under a foot in length.

Due to their rarity and elusive nature, draconids are highly coveted by collectors of animals and those seeking exotic pets. Practitioners of the arcane arts also desire draconids because of their ability to detect magical emanations.

Though inflicting little physical damage, the poisonous bite of a draconid induces searing, burning pain, and may be one reason they bear the name "fire lizard." This venom brings a high price among torturers.

Size: 8-12 inches, 1-3 lbs.

Attributes:

INT -3 PER +5
WIL +2 CHA -9
STR -8 DEX +6
CON -3 SPD +3

Ability Level: 1-2

Attacks/Damage: Bite: DR 1 + poison (WIL roll to resist or incapacitated by pain for 5 rounds: -10 on all actions)

Special Abilities: Flight, detect magical emanations (range: 20')

Armor: Scales, PR 2

Hit Points: 8

Volcanic Hills Fauna and Flora Found in Other Sources

Below are references to additional creatures found in the Volcanic Hills, along with the page number in the source.

Araq (NG 6, Tal4 348, TM4 11)
Azoryl (NG 11, TM4 16, TM5 11)
Barb-Berry, Common (Tal3 281, TM5 187)
Batranc (Tal3 260, Tal4 336, TM4 20, TM5 14)
Behemoth (Tal3 260, Tal4 340, TM4 22, TM5 14)
Caravan Bugs (Tal3 276, Tal4 163, TM4 26, TM5 169)
Cave Bat (NG 16, Tal3 261, Tal4 290, TM4 28, TM5 17)
Chasm Viper (Tal3 289, Tal4 133, TM4 29, TM5 18)
Crag Spider (NG 17, Tal3 261, Tal4 185, TM4 31, TM5 171)
Demon, Earth (NG 21, Tal4 359, TC 130, TM4 41, TM5 111)
Demon, Lava (TM4 42, TM5 112)
Demon, Pyro- (NG 24, Tal4 213, TC 135, TM4 46, TM5 116)
Demon, Rock (TM4 46, TM5 116)
Demon, Smoke (TM5 118)
Drac (Tal3 290, TM4 60, TM5 20)
Draconid (NG 29, TC 14, TM4 62, TM5 20)
Dragon, Crested (NG 32, TM4 63, TM5 22)
Dragon, Land (NG 34, Tal3 264, Tal4 351, TC 17, TM4 64, TM5 24)
Duadir (NG 36, Tal3 253, Tal4 351, TC 19, TM4 67, TM5 25)
Durge (Tal3 253, Tal4 147, TM4 67, TM5 26)
Elemental, Minor (Tal3 275, Tal4 311, TC 95, TM4 72, TM5 137)
Fire Lily (Tal3 282, TM5 191)
Geophage (TC 28, TM4 83, TM5 32)
Kang (Tal4 194, TM4 101)
Kra, Land (Tal4 129, TC 37, TM4 105, TM5 44)

FLICKERPINE

Gnarled and twisting, the roots of flickerpine trees cling to boulders, hunks of pumice, and the slopes of rocky crags. The trees bear long, dark-green needles that excrete a thick resin which smells of burned pitch. This resin protects the trunk and roots from heat and flame, allowing the tree to survive the flash fires commonly sweeping through the Volcanic Hills. After such an event, a flickerpine tree smokes and smoulders for days or weeks, but lives on.

In addition to needles, flickerpines grow tasty nuts encased in barbed, rock-hard shells. When caught in a blaze or extreme heat, the tree's nuts explode in a shower of bright sparks, spreading seeds.

Saurans carve large bowls out of pumice stone to be used as pots for growing flickerpines. The trees provide shade and edible nuts.

LAEOLIS MOSS

Named for one of Talislanta's moons, Laeolis moss emits a dim, blue glow. The plant itself ranges in color from deep blue-purple to light white-blue, and is of a spongy, hairy consistency.

Raknids grow patches of Laeolis moss in cropped patterns within their hives, using it as a light source and possibly as some form of "written" language. They also include it in the process of preparing meat for consumption by their kind – chemicals in the moss breakdown flesh and organs, resulting in a grotesque, bloody syrup.

Sauran priestesses favor strands of the glowing moss as decorations on the dragon hide gowns and masks worn during night-time rituals. They also dry it and crush it into a powder used to devour the necrotic tissue of infected wounds – an excruciatingly painful remedy.

Land Lizard (NG 52, Tal3 255, Tal4 337, TM4 108, TM5 46)
Loper (Tal3 255, Tal4 338, TC 40, TM4 108, TM5 47)
Magmite (TM5 144)
Malathrope (Tal4 359, TM4 110, TM5 48)
Manra (Tal4 188, TM4 113)
Manrak (TC 46, TM4 114, TM5 175)
Megalodont (NG 55, Tal3 264, Tal4 346, TC 47, TM4 116, TM5 51)
Morde (Tal3 291, TM4 123, TM5 53)
Optyryx (Tal4 352, TC 55, TM4 136, TM5 62)
Raknid (NG 70, Tal3 266, Tal4 214, TC 58, TM4 148, TM5 177)
Ravenger (Tal3 266, Tal4 281, TM4 150, TM5 66)
Rock Urchin (Tal3 293, Tal4 359, TM4 154, TM5 179)
Satada (Tal3 267, Tal4 132, TC 65, TM4 157, TM5 71)
Sauran (NG 73, Tal4 211, TM4 158)
Saurud (NG 74, TM4 159, TM5 72)
Strider (NG 84, Tal3 257, Tal4 196, TC 74, TM4 176, TM5 83)
Tarkus (NG 86, Tal3 257, Tal4 197, TM4 180, TM5 86)
Terradractyl (TC 80, TM4 182, TM5 87)
Vasp (Tal4 215, TC 83, TM4 190, TM5 184)
Vorl (NG 91, Tal3 269, Tal4 216, TM4 195, TM5 93)
Withergall (Tal3 288, TM5 207)

Key to abbreviations:

NG - *A Naturalist's Guide to Talislanta* (1st edition)
Tal3 - *Talislanta Guidebook* (3rd edition)
Tal4 - *Talislanta Fantasy Roleplaying* (4th Edition)
TC - *Thystram's Collectanea* (3rd edition)
TM4 - *Talislanta Menagerie* (4th edition / d20)
TM5 - *Talislanta Menagerie* (5th edition)

SEDFE

A small, spreading, aromatic shrub, sedge seldom grows taller than a single foot in height. The leaves are colored pale grey-green to dark green, and its trunk and twigs are a dark reddish-brown to black. In the summer months, flowering brown stems ascend above the herbage, and bear bright green and red blooms.

Sedge provides excellent forage for herbivores, including durge, land lizards, and megalodonts. Saurans use the scented herb as stuffing in leather bedding, and mix it with dragon dung to be burned as fuel. Their priestesses brew a decoction of boiled stems, leaves, and twigs to be consumed as a remedy for respiratory ailments. The leaves may also be crushed and the vapors inhaled to relieve nasal congestion.

WIREFEED

This grassy plant grows in clumps, and its blades can reach a height of ten feet. A light, dusty green in hue, the tall blades may also be striated with red and black veins – the plants absorb particles of red or black iron ore from the soil. Though not realizing exactly why, Saurans know that red or black patches of wireweed are choice locations for gathering hunks of ore.

The plant's fibers are incredibly strong, and Saurans dry and weave its blades into sturdy mats, saddles, clothing, and other items. They also utilize strands of the grass as a wire-like material when constructing roofs and doors for dwellings or as a wrapping around the handles of weapons and tools.

Most herbivores find wireweed too tough to consume, and those that choke it down may find themselves dying soon after of colic-like symptoms. Only the shoots of young wireweed plants are suitable as forage.