



**EN5sider Presents:**

# **Island at the Axis of the World**

## **Part Two**

**A 5E-Compatible Adventure for 3rd-Level Characters**



# Act Two: Three Towers

**I**N THIS ACT, THE PARTY HELPS OPEN THE WAY FOR Risur's navy to take down the treasonous duchess.

## Three Towers

### Puzzle/Social. Real-Time.

*The wits of the PCs are tested by the cunning Lya Jierre.*

Assistant Inspector Delft is not alone in his office. He tells the PCs to sit, then introduces them to the “Minister of Outsiders” from Danor, Lya Jierre. She’s dressed in a rich formal coat of red and purple, which is tailored to give her a lot of freedom of movement – fancy looking yet suited for a sword fight.

And indeed she has a sword at her hip; it looks like a rapier, but has some tiny mechanical device attached at the guard. The sheath is thicker than one would expect for a rapier. In the unlikely event the PCs get a glimpse, the blade’s edge consists of a thin sharpened wire which works something like a razor chainsaw when the sword’s mechanism is activated. The weapon is magical, a rarity and mark of great prestige among Danorans.

Without explaining why she’s here, she directs the PCs’ attention to a strange collection of items on Delft’s desk.

First are three ivory “towers,” each three inches tall with a steel plate on its base. Next are three stone rings—one red, one green, and one blue—each just slightly larger in diameter than the towers. Each ring has three strands of thread clipped to it, and each of the nine strands ends in a small silvery magnet, which can stick to the bases of the towers.

Lya Jierre says, “The three towers are about to be attacked. They must be reinforced by magic that flows like water from three portals – fire mana is red, earth is green, water is blue. The wires are canals through which the mana flows. But if the mana streams cross, they’ll destroy their respective portals. How do you arrange the portals, towers, and streams of mana so that each tower gets all three types of magic, without any of the streams crossing?”

Inspector Delft looks impatiently amused by all this, but he looks at you expectantly, as if saying to give the lady an answer so you can move on to the mission briefing.

**The Solution.** The puzzle is a trick, a test by Lya to see how smart the PCs are and how fast they figure out that there is *no* way to connect the three portals to the three towers without the wires crossing. More accurately, it is impossible to solve the puzzle unless the PCs bend the rules slightly and move into three dimensions.

If a PC presents a solution that tries to “jump” one wire over another, hold one tower in the air, or otherwise solves the puzzle,

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Lya huffs a laugh and commends them on being smart enough to change the rules of the test.

If the PCs announce the puzzle is unsolvable, Lya nods and thanks them. If they keep trying for more than a minute or two, Lya sighs, explains that the puzzle has no solution, and asks Delft if he's sure these are the ones he wants to send on this mission.

### The Mission Briefing.

After the puzzle, Delft explains what's going on. The expected civil war doesn't seem to be materializing. Instead, the duchess and some of her allies have seized a single island in the Yerasol Archipelago, known as Axis Island because compasses spin on their axis there. The Danorans conquered the island seven years ago in the last war.

Lya Jierre says that there's a Danoran mining project on this island, as well as advanced steelworks, a shipyard, and a coastal military fort. If all of this seems surprisingly forthcoming, it's because the PCs are going to be finding it all out anyway.

According to Lya, this island is a key Danoran military holding, and the duchess's attack might be seen as an act of war by the Danoran Congress. Lya wants the duchess and her people off the island soon, because she agrees with King Aodhan's desire for peace, and she doesn't want to risk giving her congress enough time to start another war. But she is not authorized to command Danoran forces, and even if she did, a Danoran counter-attack might result in the accidental death of the king's sister.

So Lya is bending the rules a little bit. She wants Risuri forces to remove the duchess, and to hand control back over within the next three days, and King Aodhan has graciously agreed.

Delft says that a fleet of Risuri ships with marines on board are preparing to assault the island in a few days. The PCs are to set out this evening, taking the Constabulary's fastest ship, the *RNS Impossible*, to meet up with the fleet. Other investigators will take point, and the military will handle the heavy lifting, but the PCs will be there because they were the last ones to interact with the duchess's forces. They might spot something others would miss.

Simply landing at some secluded beach is infeasible, because spells at the Axis Fort will alert the duchess if anyone sets foot on the shore. But Lya has a work-around. The *Impossible* will rendezvous with the naval armada, where it will pick up a group of infiltration specialists – four highly decorated Homeland constables from the Slate office. While the navy waits out of sight, the *Impossible* will enter a cove under the cover of darkness. A sea cave in that cove leads to the bottom of a mine; Lya Jierre knows its location, but not the layout of the mine. With the aid of potions of *water breathing*, the infiltrators will go in first to secure the cave, and then the PCs will be given the signal to follow.

The island's fortress has a sea wall around a harbor, which protects against storms and assault, but provides access for shipments in and out. The infiltrators are tasked with opening the fortress's sea gate so the armada can storm the fortress more easily. The military will capture the duchess, who will likely be holed up in a keep in the center of the fortress. Once the dust settles, the PCs will be on the scene to look for clues and interrogate the duchess and her associates.

### Presenting the Puzzle.

If you want to assemble the test for your players, some rooks from chess with metal washers glued to the bottom work for the towers. A shower ring or cheap plastic bracelet can work for the portals, and you can use different colored threads with tiny magnets glued to their ends for the mana streams.

Alternately, some scrap paper and pens should work to let players scribble potential solutions.

**Minister of Outsiders Lya Jierre.** An ambitious tiefling in her late 20s, Lya's father is brother of Han Jierre, the Sovereign of Danor. She graduated top of her class from the prestigious academy of war, the *Jierre Sciens d'Arms*, and many students of other war colleges have read her thesis, *Field Study of Melee Effectiveness and Foe Debilitation through Focused Limb Severance Techniques Contrasted with Mainstream Opportunistic Techniques*, which she wrote near the end of the last Yerasol War.

Despite her youth, she was awarded the position of Minister of Outsiders, giving her great leeway to travel and make alliances. For the past three years she has worked with King Aodhan to keep the peace between their two nations, and as they began making plans for a formal alliance, she accepted the king's offer of marriage as a symbolic union.

Secretly, she is also a tier-four member of the Obscurati's Golden Cell, tasked with recruiting archaeologists and miners around Lanjyr to seek out ancient seals like the one on Axis Island. She merely thinks this is part of a scientific endeavor to better understand the nature of the planes. During the course of this adventure, however, the leadership of Golden Cell are all slain when Duchess Ethelyn of Shale attacks the island.

When the adventure begins, Lya is not aware of how important the operations on the island are. Only after this adventure is she contacted by the ultimate head of the conspiracy and promoted to leader of Golden Cell. Lya Jierre should be portrayed as a complex character with competing motivations. Though she gets involved with Risur out of a desire to gain great political power, she does so with no malice. After she is promoted within the Obscurati, she sees a chance for a more meaningful and lasting peace, but to reach that goal she must tell ever more elaborate lies.



At least, that's the plan. If anything goes awry, the PCs are the infiltrators' back-up. They'll be supplied with mission critical resources, but once they're on the island there won't be any help until they open the sea gate for the navy. If they get into a fight, either with the island's original Danoran defenders, or any of the duchess's allies, the PCs have approval to defend themselves, but take prisoners if feasible.





### About Axis Island.

Thousands of years ago, primitive peoples performed a ritual on Axis Island to seal off this world and a few affiliated planes from the rest of the multiverse. While planar travel is difficult elsewhere in the world, after such a long time, energy from these other worlds bleeds through near the Axis Seal. What some interpret as the island being alive is just random fluctuations of reality caused as slivers of foreign planes briefly overwrite parts of the island.

These fluxes happen most often in the presence of stray conscious thoughts, where idle imaginings make it easier for a foreign reality to become real. Large quantities of people tend to stabilize an area, since the mass of thoughts crowd out other planes. Likewise, the nature of the seal ritual makes iron act as a ward. The seal-builders placed key components of their ritual in veins of iron-rich rock, and the Danorans working on the island install small iron spikes at regular intervals in walls or floors, which help lock normal reality in place.

The island's fortress is commanded by General Alsanor, who is also head of the Obscurati's Golden Cell. He dies before the PCs ever make it to the island, though the PCs might ask about him.

### Expanded Adventure.

If you want to expand the scope of the adventure and have the party explore the island, perhaps have Lya Jierre give Risur four days instead of three, and assign the party the task of locating an engineer who designed the Axis Fortress, without whom the party won't know where to use their *spell scroll of passwall*.

Other island locations appear under Optional Encounters (page 9).

### The Complication.

While the RHC's main priority is obviously the capture of the duchess, Lya has two additional demands. First, to avoid a war, she says that by sunset three days from now (roughly 12 hours after retaking the island, if all goes according to schedule), Risur must hand control of the island back over to Danor.

Second, as a personal request, Lya wants the PCs to ensure the safety of one person in particular. Her cousin, Nathan Jierre, was on the island when it was attacked, and she's worried the duchess might have harmed him just because he's a tiefling. Nathan was just a teenager during the last war, so Lya says he deserves no punishment for whatever grudges the duchess holds. If her cousin is still alive, Lya asks them to keep him safe until her people can pick him up and bring him home.

She says she also knows other people who were working on the island, but they knew the risk of working in contested territory. Her cousin, though, is innocent, and she asks the PCs to do whatever they can to protect him.

### More Details.

Lya is willing to answer a few questions, but she's a busy woman and will soon leave the PCs to work out details with Delft. She'll readily admit that Danor has factories on the island, and that yes, strange magical things happen there, but she only ever spent a few days in the fortress, not exploring the island. She knows that there is an archaeological investigation of an ancient culture living on the island, and so she asks them to try not to damage anything of historical

value. As stated above, Lya is not yet familiar with the plans of the Obscurati, so she doesn't feel any need to keep these things secret.

Once Lya Jierre leaves, Assistant Chief Inspector Delft tells the PCs that he's got a hunch there's more going on here than what the Danorans are saying. It might just be that the island was one of the nearest Danoran military installations in the archipelago, but Delft wants the PCs to try to keep an eye open for anything unusual.

If a PC is a spirit medium, Delft gets a grisly grin as he explains that, if the duchess doesn't surrender, it'll be up to the ghost-talker to seek answers as to whether the duchess has any other secret accomplices, or if there was some ulterior motive for her attacking this particular island.

If any PCs have the Yerasol Veteran theme feat, they may have fought a battle on Axis Island nine years ago. It was a pretty place, with steep jungles and beautiful beaches, at the edge of the wild magic zone that surrounds Danor's dead magic zone.

There weren't too many casualties because the place wasn't inhabited to begin with, and their commanders weren't willing to settle in for a slog. A lot of weird stuff happened there, though – terrain seeming to shift, spells backfiring, rockslides and treefalls happening too often to be coincidence – almost like the island was fighting both sides who were trying to claim it. Even the Danorans seemed spooked, but they're not a superstitious type, so they held out while the Risuri commander ordered a withdrawal.

### Mission Critical Supplies.

The PCs will each be given one *potion of water breathing*, and two *potions of greater healing*. As a group they'll receive a *gem of brightness* and a selection of specially-prepared scrolls crafted by Principle Minister Harkover Lee and his aides, which can be activated by any character, even non-spellcasters. These include a total of four scrolls of *faerie fire*, two of *silence*, and two of *passwall*. The RHC, of course, expects any unused material to be returned.

The PCs each receive a stipend now: 1,000 gp, as detailed in Rewards section in Act 1. They can use it to requisition equipment. Non-RHC characters are paid 500 gp, but get to keep items they loot from the island. Assistant Chief Inspector Delft encourages them to get some sort of healing magic item.

## The R.N.S. Impossible

### Social. Montage.

*The party sets sail for Axis Island and links up with their fellow constable infiltrators.*

That evening, the *Impossible* – a 220-ft. long clipper – leaves Flint's harbor and turns west. The captain, Rutger Smith, recalls the PCs from the events aboard the *Coaltongue*, though his opinion of them depends on how well that great ship fared.

During the brief but intense voyage, the PCs get to experience his unorthodox tradition of discussing philosophy with his crew during meals. If you want to give the PCs a chance to ponder the pros and cons of the duchess's actions, now is a good opportunity. Of course, while the crew is willing to discuss the topic, all of them insist they're firmly loyal to the king.

Aided by a skyseer to keep the course at night and a druid to guide the wind, the *Impossible* sails the five hundred miles to Axis Island in just under two days, arriving before sunset the day of the first-quarter moon.

### Infiltrators.

The four other constables arrived earlier in the day from Slate. They take a rowboat from their ship to the *Impossible*, and make quick introductions before getting down to planning. These infiltrators will likely die before they see combat.

- **Tanya.** Half-elf druid with a hound companion. Leader of the group, confident but cautious. Double-checks everyone's armor and gear before setting out.
- **Letmas.** Human mage who is excellent at faking accents. Slips off to make tea during the mission briefing while an illusion of himself stays behind.
- **Seven-Foot Dan.** Towering human gladiator with a spiked chain. A veteran of the Fourth Yerasol War. Offers to give lessons in "breaking stuff," and carries a bag full of bricks and wooden boards for that purpose.
- **Burton.** Goblin spy who carries a fancy surgical kit containing many varieties of daggers, knives, saws, and scalpels. According to Letmas, Burton once camped out in a Danoran latrine for three hours to get a shot at the commander of an enemy company. Ever since then, he's worn an amulet that constantly cleans him as the spell *prestidigitation*.

The plan is that evening the ship will hoist black sails and reach the cove around 9 PM, at low tide. Once they arrive at the sea cave entrance, Letmas casts *water breathing* so that the infiltrators and PCs can breathe underwater for an hour or so. The infiltrators will then take a 500-foot length of rope, dive underwater, and swim to the sea cave. There's supposedly a 200-foot stretch of submerged cave before an opening with fresh air at the bottom of a mine.

Once there, they'll secure the location, and signal back – by *animal messenger*, or sending Burton back, or just tugging really hard. The PCs will then follow the rope to link up with them. Sunrods will let everyone see underwater.

Together, the two groups will make their way to the mine's exit (marked as Mine C on the island map), which should be on a low mountain facing an island valley. They'll then cross over the mountains to the north shore of the island and descend to the back of the fortress. They'll use *passwall* to breach the fortress, and then the infiltrators will try to open the sea gate. Once it's open, they'll shoot a crossbow bolt affected by *faerie fire* into the sky as a signal flare to alert the navy.

Meanwhile the PCs hole up and wait for the military to arrive. Once the fleet is signaled, it will take about ten minutes for them to strike. They'll be able to sail directly into the interior harbor of the fortress, and they outnumber the duchess's forces about 5 to 1, so victory should be a foregone conclusion.

Once the dust settles, the infiltrators plan to bring the PCs in so they can handle Nathan Jierre and pore over whatever evidence the duchess and her allies may have left behind. If needed, however, the infiltrators or military may ask the PCs to step in early and help things along.





## Sea Tunnel

### Exploration. Real-Time.

*Tragedy forces the PCs to decide whether to undertake their mission without aid.*

The first-quarter moon shines down as the infiltrators dive overboard and swim for the sea cave, trailing rope behind them. It should take them less than five minutes to get through, but two minutes in a strange vibration wave ripples the water around them, and the rope goes slack. A few minutes later, the rope starts to jerk fitfully.

What happened is that while the infiltrators swam through the tunnel, a random planar fluctuation dislodged part of the stone above them, and they were crushed. Unless you'd like to keep some of them alive, Tanya, Letmas, and Seven-Foot Dan have been killed, and Burton's leg is caught under a boulder; he's now bleeding from a compound fracture and is just conscious enough to tug on the rope for help.

When the PCs come upon the scene, the *water breathing* ritual lets them speak with Burton, who says he felt like he was someplace else for a moment – a swamp with yellow frogs and a purple sky – and then the ceiling cracked. He's a little delirious, and after explaining what happens he grabs anyone beside him. He demands they cut off his leg and get him out of here before sharks eat him.

If the party can manage to shift 1,000 pounds, such as with a successful DC 20 Strength (Athletics) check or by using some improvised fulcrums and levers, they can unpin Burton. His leg can be tended so he won't bleed to death, but he's useless for the mission until he can see a healer back with the navy. That's time the party can't really spare, so when he calms down a bit Burton will suggest leaving him in the mine, then coming back for him when the mission's over. A better plan might be to take him to the *Impossible* now.

The party has a little while to discuss their options, but the *water breathing* only lasts about an hour more. If they press on, the sea cave goes about two hundred feet before opening into a large vertical chamber.

## Genius Loci

### Action/Exploration/Social. Real-Time.

*A paranoid mine foreman tries to kill the PCs as they examine an airy artifact.*

- Nicolas Dupiers, mine foreman
- Axis Air Elemental
- Axis Earth Elemental
- Axis Shadow Stalker

The 80-foot diameter, 60-foot high cave at the end of the tunnel has no light sources, but the air is pleasantly warm despite being underground. At low tide, when the PCs likely arrive, the water at the bottom of the cave ranges from 10 feet deep to just a few inches. Wooden platforms anchored to the walls form a makeshift dock and stairs, which lead up to a 30-foot wide tunnel that intersects horizontally with this chamber 35 feet above the water line. Iron spikes, each 6 inches long, are driven into the walls every 30 feet as a defense against planar fluctuations.

## Quitting Early?

The most likely course of action after the infiltrators are put out of commission is for the party to enter the sea cave, head to the surface, then sneak into the fortress and finish the infiltrators' mission. But the PCs might decide otherwise.

If they avoid getting onto the island altogether, the *Impossible* sails back to the fleet, which uses its back-up plan of landing on the shore near the fortress and marching their forces in for a traditional attack. The fort's defenses are already weakened from one successful assault, so the forces loyal to the king will succeed, though they'll take worse casualties. They can still call in the PCs for all events of Act Three.

If the PCs get onto the island but avoid the fortress or don't try to open the gate, they might witness some strange phenomena as they try to survive the island. A few hours later they'll hear sounds of cannons and battle, and later in the day troops loyal to the king will track them down and bring them back to the fortress, just in time for them to deal with Act Three.

## Taking Prisoners.

As mentioned earlier, we suggest you let remind the PCs that they can knock out enemies when they're reduced to 0 hit points, instead of killing them. Similarly, the duchess's forces here want to take the PCs prisoner. You can use the following rules for situations where enemies might prefer to take the PCs alive rather than slaughter them.

If the whole party is defeated while on Axis Island, they wake up in the fortress prison. They can interact with the other prisoners, detailed in Act Three, and will eventually be rescued when loyalist forces manage to finally breach the fortress's defenses, shortly before Asrabey Varal storms the inner wall.

A 20-foot diameter pillar of dull gray stone rises from the water line to the ceiling. A dramatic splinter of white marble extrudes from the gray stone, 5 feet wide and rising 17 feet above the water. Ages of surf have eroded its surface, but in places one can still find hints of ancient pictogram carvings. It looks like once the splinter was part of a longer column, but something snapped free its top. The missing section of pillar is nowhere to be found.

In a tiny nook carved into the tip of the marble splinter sits an oversized gold coin. About three inches across, it has primitive designs of birds, clouds, and dots that might represent stars. A PC with the Skyseer theme feat, or any other character who succeeds a DC 17 Intelligence (Nature) check, recognizes the constellation of The Eagle, which is said to hold great influence over the planet Avilona, which affects weather and air magic.

One of the mining platforms sits just beneath the nook. Anyone standing right beside the marble splinter hears what sounds like voices muffled by a thin wall. The coin can easily be removed.

## Being Watched.

When the PCs arrive, characters with a passive Perception of 15 or higher spots a lurking shadowy figure that quickly flees up the stairs to the tunnel 35 feet up. The shadow is bound to Nicolas Dupiers, the mine's foreman who has hidden here since the duchess's attack. His makeshift lair is nearby in the bottom of the mine, and he wears a necklace with two golden icons similar to the one in the

## New Magic Items.

### Golden Icon of Avilona

*Wondrous item, rare (requires attunement)*

Once per day, before the end of your next turn you can make one 60 feet fly move as a move action.

While on Axis Island, if you hold the icon or wear as a necklace, you can cast the *jump* spell from it as a bonus action at will, but can only target yourself when you do so. Additionally, you unconsciously influence air magic, drawing air elementals to you. They defend you and obey your orders.

Note that the powers available to the bearer of any of the golden icons while on Axis Island also function if the Axis Seal is opened... but don't let the players know that!

### Golden Icon of Nem

*Wondrous item, rare (requires attunement)*

Once per day, you may become incorporeal until the end of your next turn. This effect ends if you attack.

While on Axis Island, if you hold the icon or wear it as a necklace, you gain darkvision out to 60 ft. Additionally, you unconsciously influence shadow magic, drawing shadow creatures to you. They defend you and obey your orders.

### Golden Icon of Urim

*Wondrous item, rare (requires attunement)*

Once per day, you may cast a variant of *wall of stone* that creates up to three 5-foot square cubes of stone.

While on Axis Island, if you hold the icon or wear it as a necklace, your Armor Class increases by 1. Additionally, you unconsciously influence earth magic, drawing earth elementals to you. They defend you and obey your orders.

marble splinter – one tied to shadow magic of the planet Nem, and one to earth magic of the planet Urim. These are the only icons of this type the Danorans have excavated so far, and when the attack came, Dupiers tried to hide them.

Dupiers has set a loyal shadow creature here to watch the lower entrance to the mine, and has an earth elemental watching another approach to his lair. If the shadow alerts him, he sneaks up to the top of this chamber. He's very paranoid and twitchy, so unless the PCs come in talking about how great Danor is, Dupiers hears their accents and assumes they've come to kill him. He tries to strike with the element of surprise.

In combat, Dupiers is a **thug** with the following changes:

- He has 40 hit points.
- His Dexterity score is 13 (+1).
- He wields a pistol instead of a heavy crossbow (one handed, +3 to hit, 1d10 piercing damage).
- He wears and is attuned to both the *golden icon of Nem* and the *golden icon of Urim*.

### Lesser Air Elemental

Small elemental, neutral

**Armor Class** 15 (natural armor)

**Hit Points** 34 (10d6)

**Speed** 0 ft., fly 30 ft. (hover)

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
8 (-1)	16 (+3)	10 (+0)	5 (-3)	10 (+0)	6 (-2)

**Skills** Stealth +2

**Damage Immunities** poison

**Condition Immunities** poisoned

**Senses** darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 10

**Languages** Auran

**Challenge** 1 (200 XP)

**Air Form.** The elemental can enter a hostile creature's space and stop there. It can move through a space as narrow as 1 inch wide without squeezing.

#### ACTIONS

**Slam.** *Melee Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., one creature.

*Hit:* 10 (2d6 + 3) bludgeoning damage.

**Whirlwind (Recharge 4–6).** Each creature in the elemental's space must make a DC 13 Strength saving throw. On a failure, a target takes 12 (3d6 + 2) bludgeoning damage and is flung up 10 feet away from the elemental in a random direction and is knocked prone. If a thrown target strikes an object, such as a wall or floor, the target takes 3 (1d6) bludgeoning damage for every 10 feet it was thrown. If the target is thrown at another creature, that creature must succeed on a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw or takes the same damage and be knocked prone. If the saving throw is successful, the target takes half the bludgeoning damage and isn't flung away or knocked prone.

### Lesser Earth Elemental

Small elemental, neutral

**Armor Class** 12 (natural armor)

**Hit Points** 65 (10d6 + 30)

**Speed** 20 ft., burrow 20 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
16 (+3)	6 (-2)	16 (+3)	5 (-3)	10 (+0)	5 (-3)

**Damage Vulnerabilities** thunder

**Damage Immunities** poison

**Condition Immunities** poisoned

**Senses** darkvision 60 ft., tremorsense 30 ft., passive Perception 10

**Languages** Terran

**Challenge** 1 (200 XP)

**Earth Glide.** The elemental can burrow through nonmagical, unworked earth and stone. While doing so, the elemental doesn't disturb the material it moves through.

**Siege Monster.** The elemental deals double damage to objects and structures.

#### ACTIONS

**Multiattack.** The elemental makes two slam attacks.

**Slam.** *Melee Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., one creature. *Hit:* 10 (2d6 + 3) bludgeoning damage.



**Mine Foreman Nicolas Dupiers.** A white-haired Danoran in his 50s, Dupiers meets the PCs several days after the duchess attacks Axis

Island. He ran the iron mines, and is completely unaware of the Obscurati. However, he knew that archaeologists working for the island's military commander, General Alsanor, had found golden icons that resemble coins three sites deep underground. When the fighting began, Dupiers panicked, stole two of these icons, and fled to the mine that contained the third icon, thinking their magic might help him. When he realized they let him see in the dark, he hid in the mine, fearing discovery by Risuri forces.



### Tactics.

Dupiers' forces include himself, a **shadow**, and a **lesser earth elemental** (see above). The shadow stalker gets as close as possible, and Dupiers shoots as soon as it attacks. The earth elemental throws a barrel of oil, then intercepts anyone trying to climb up its master. Thereafter Dupiers hides behind barrels for cover, and struggles to reload his gun fast enough to keep PCs at bay.

A **lesser air elemental** (see above) lurks near the ceiling, almost invisible. It doesn't join the battle unless someone has the air icon, at which point it acts as that creature's ally.

**Negotiating.** As soon as the fight begins, Dupiers yells to the PCs, "You killed all my men, you dirt worshippers! That wasn't enough? Now you want me dead as well?"

The PCs might be able to talk him down, at which point he'll call off his monsters. If he's under half health, though, Dupiers starts screaming that he's going to die. He tries to get the air icon, either from the pillar or by knocking out whoever has it. He thinks it will keep him safe.

**Terrain.** Ladders stretched horizontally between platforms can be crawled across safely, or walked across with a successful DC 12 Dexterity (Acrobatics). A character who fails makes no progress; one who fails by 5 or more falls off.

Normal vertical ladders lead between levels of the scaffolding. A rope dangles from a wooden crane at the tunnel at the top of this chamber. The rope can be climbed with a successful DC 12 Strength (Athletics) check, or a creature at the crane can raise or lower the rope 20 feet as a move action.

A pair of ropes stretch between two sides of the scaffolding. Normally the miners hung lanterns from here for light, but a daring character could try to walk across by making a successful DC 17 Dexterity (Acrobatics) check, or climbing across with a successful 15 Strength (Athletics) check.

The barrels in the high tunnel are filled with lantern oil, and Dupiers has rigged them with charges of firedust. A creature can throw or drop a barrel, making a ranged attack roll as though the barrel were an improvised weapon, dealing 1d8 damage plus its Strength modifier on a hit. If a barrel strikes a creature or solid

### What Is This Place?

The ancient heroes who created the Axis Seal carved runes and symbols into trees as part of the ritual. These carvings, along with specially crafted golden icons, drew a small group of planes to this world. The ancients used magic to turn the trees to stone and lower them into the earth, ensuring a strong connection between the worlds.

They then crafted smaller stone pillars, and placed them in a pit beneath the massive golden Axis Seal in the center of the island. This locked the connections in place.

The Danorans dug mines on Axis Island to retrieve iron ore, but Obscurati members guided their excavations toward the locations of the ancient petrified trees. For their ultimate plan, the Obscurati will need to replace the icons each tree is tied to, which is why Nicolas Dupiers has two of them already.

The ancients did not know about the sea cave when they lowered this pillar into the earth. The force of tides and erosion broke the pillar, which weakened the world's connection to Avilona, the plane of air. Recall that in ZEITGEIST, flight magic is limited.

surface, it shatters, dealing 1d6 fire damage to each creature within within 5 ft. of the impact.

**Aftermath.** If taken alive, Dupiers recounts how, when the island was attacked, he stole the golden icons from a safe, then fled to the mine. He thinks most of his miners fled into the jungle. If the PCs explain the situation and calm him down, he can guide them safely to the fortress.

Exiting the mine is relatively easy; the industrious Danorans hung signs with handy directions. At the mine's forested exit, however, the party finds a recent mass grave. The PCs find signs that the Danorans tried shooting and hacking at trees, like the forest itself attacked them. A few hours after Dupiers got into the mine, many other Danorans tried to flee there, but dryad allies of the duchess ambushed the men and slew dozens of miners.

## Island Mysteries

### Exploration. Montage.

*Oddities abound on Axis Island, making the path to the fortress dangerous.*

The PCs have a few brief encounters on their trip to the fortress. Also, if they are enticed to wander and explore, or if they finish their mission and want to take a look around before leaving, we also provide suggestions for other possible encounters.

### Road Trek.

If the PCs follow the trails and roads from the mine to the central valley, then around the coast to the fortress, they have the following encounters.

**Duchess Patrol.** Occasionally the duchess's forces send out patrols to hunt for Danorans or search Danoran facilities. A typical patrol consists of 1 **rebel investigator** and 4 **rebel patrolmen**. Stats for these enemies are presented in the Sea Gate encounter, below.

At least once while traversing the main road, the PCs get dangerously close to one of these patrols. Have each PC make a DC



12 Wisdom (Perception) or Dexterity (Stealth) check, or let them devise their own method for avoiding confrontation. If at least half the party succeeds, they can get away without being spotted.

**Reality Fluctuation.** The PCs are all gripped by vertigo. Their surroundings briefly flicker, revealing a wooded marsh filled with croaking yellow frogs, where a blue sun sets in a purple sky. Then the world snaps back to its normal form. A few PCs' shoes or cloaks are still damp from having fallen into the marsh.

If the PCs wait long enough, a similar event occurs every few hours, each time with a different odd landscape, some of which may not be so benign. But all have the same blue sun. That element shows up later at the fortress's observatory, providing a clue to the island's purpose, so make sure to mention it.

**Trap.** The PCs come across an overturned wagon. Swords and firearms have spilled out onto the road, but this is a lure to get people to come close. A suspicious PC using *detect magic* can make a DC 12 Intelligence (Arcana) check to detect a magical aura infused with wintry cold. Alternately, a successful DC 16 Wisdom (Perception) check reveals that the weapons couldn't have fallen where they are; they must have been placed there.

The duchess's forces inscribed runes of warding on the wagon and its spilled contents. If any of the inscribed items are disturbed, all the runes trigger at once. If a PC picks up any of the weapons or examines the wagon, the magical ward activates.

#### Freezing Ward

Magical trap

##### Challenge 2 (450 XP)

**Effect** When activated (see above), the trap makes a melee spell attack (+5 to hit) against the creature that activated it. On a hit, the creature takes 1d8 cold damage and is restrained as chains of ice manifest around its arms and legs. The chains are as impressively strong and require a DC 18 Dexterity (Acrobatics) check to slip out of. They can also be shattered (AC 10, 50 hp).

Disabling the trap will let the party loot the wagon for supplies safely. A failed check triggers the trap. Cautious or clever players, of course, could set off the trap from afar.

Truly clever players might try to retrieve the items without triggering the trap, requiring a successful DC 18 Intelligence (Arcana) or Dexterity (Sleight of Hand) check. Each item has only one ward, which has a lesser effect.

#### Frost Shackle Rune

Wondrous item, uncommon

**Property** As an action, you can inscribe any weapon with this rune. The first time any weapon inscribed with a frost shackle rune hits a target, the rune is expended from all weapons that were inscribed as part of the same trap. The target hit takes an extra 1d6 cold damage and must make a DC 13 Wisdom save or be affected by the *slow* spell.

**Wandering Monster.** The PCs hear metallic grinding and the thump of heavy footsteps coming from the woods, headed vaguely in their direction. Any character with the Spirit Medium theme feat also hears echoes of voices, too many to make out.

If the PCs wait or investigate, they find a huge **iron golem** lumbering through the forest, missing its head from what looks like

a combination of magical rust and an explosion. It leaks black oil that seems to have motes of white light floating inside it. This substance – gloom oil – will make an appearance in Adventure Two: The Dying Skyseer, where the PCs will discover that it absorbs the souls of those who die nearby, and that when the oil is burnt these souls provide great magical power.

If any PC gets within 10 feet of the golem, it blindly swipes at him. There's no reason for the PCs to fight this incredibly powerful monster, but if they try, they're unlikely to be successful.

## Wilderness Trek.

If the PCs avoid the roads and just climb over the mountain to reach the fortress, they have the following encounters.

**Fire in the Woods.** At one point a fierce gout of flame bursts up from the trees a hundred feet away, rising fifty feet into the air. It's a solitary event, and while a few trees get slightly scorched, there's absolutely no sign of the fire's source.

**Perilous Terrain.** Descending the mountain is hazardous. Have each PC make a DC 12 Strength (Athletics) or Wisdom (Survival) check. If at least half the party succeeds, the whole party avoids injury. Otherwise, each PC takes 1d6 damage from slips and falls.

**Reality Fluctuation.** This encounter happens regardless of which path the PCs take.

**Wandering Monster.** This encounter happens regardless of which path the PCs take.

## Optional Encounters.

If the PCs go exploring, they might come across these encounters, and you can also re-use encounters from the above treks.

**Abandoned Facility.** There are more than a dozen different villages, mines, light houses, and dig sites on the island. All such places show signs of fighting in the past week, and in many places the bodies of dead Danorans lie in the mud. Each village usually has a small factory, using local magical energies instead of traditional mill or steam power. One factory refines iron and rare gems into the metal adamantine, while others craft huge but perfectly-balanced gears and cogs, or ropey exhaust piping with dozens of small exhaust valves, or other bizarre and advanced arcano-technology.

If the PCs poke around too long, a Duchess Patrol might arrive, intent on searching the facility for incriminating evidence.

**Axis Ruins.** Occasionally the PCs might spot a few ancient bricks from crumbled buildings, or find a rock wall carved with primitive designs that resemble men and beasts. On the south of the island, though, a temple survives fairly intact, preserved by layers and layers of ritual magic. The huge compound, an eerily empty marvel of Stone Age architecture, must remain for now an enigma. The designs on the walls come from before the invention of written language, so while clearly this place was very important at one time, its purpose and creators are inscrutable.

**Danorans in Hiding.** About a hundred Danorans hide in scattered pockets in the jungle. The PCs might spot a campfire, or stumble across a search party out to hunt or scavenge supplies from an abandoned facility. The Danorans are easily spooked, and would rather run than fight, but they might be convinced to provide a distraction against the duchess's forces for the PCs.



## Axis Fortress

### Exploration. Montage.

*The PCs sneak inside a Danoran stronghold controlled by the duchess.*

In order for the Risuri navy to attack, the PCs must breach the fortress's outer wall, reach the harbor, activate the sea gate control mechanism in the lighthouse, then signal the fleet and make sure the duchess's forces cannot close the sea gate for ten minutes.

The PCs might just follow the infiltrators' plan (see page 5). But if they aren't particularly stealthy, or if they lost the ritual scrolls, they'll need a new plan. Also, they might decide to roam, so make sure you're familiar with the fortress's general layout.

### Fortress Layout.

Axis Fortress has a 60-foot high **central keep**, topped by an astronomical observatory. A **hedge labyrinth** surrounds that, recently grown by a male dryad-like fey named Gillie Dhu. Barracks and critical supply warehouses are built into the 40-ft. high inner wall.

The outer fortress has dozens of buildings, and is effectively a small town. Many of these buildings were damaged or destroyed in the duchess's assault, and only a few important ones are occupied.

Namely, a nondescript warehouse houses the fortress's **teleportation circle**. Unlike a normal *teleportation circle* spell, this etched circle on the floor acts as a beacon. Such magic is rare and expensive, but invaluable when transporting large amounts of materiel. Normal teleportation magic is risky on Axis Island and other areas in the Malice Lands, so this beacon serves two functions.

- Any spellcaster who teleports more than a mile at a time and targets a destination within twenty miles of the circle has their spell redirected here. This helps protect the fortress from long-range assaults, whereas the wards in the walls inhibit shorter-range jaunts by enemies already on the island.
- A spellcaster who knows the proper arcane password key can use lower level teleportation spells to create a brief one-way portal that leads safely to the circle.
- Similarly, a spellcaster standing beside the circle who knows the password key can create a portal and safely teleport off the island. Without the proper key, or especially powerful magic, it is impossible to flee the island by teleportation.

When the duchess attacked, she used a circle key provided by Nathan Jierre to march hundreds of soldiers directly into the fortress. After securing the fortress, she suppressed the teleportation circle with a spell of her own, and placed eighty-nine gold-inlaid blades in and around the circle so that anyone who managed to teleport anyway would be sliced to pieces. As an additional layer of security, she has a dozen guards stationed here, ready to sound an alarm if anything stirs in the circle.

Also, a stable was converted into a **makeshift brig** to house about fifty prisoners who surrendered or were captured for ransom. The prisoners are crammed in tight quarters, and guarded by ten men.

Finally, the sheltered bay is surrounded by a 40-foot high sea wall. A **sea gate** opens to the north, its control mechanism in the basement of a nearby lighthouse. Currently only a handful of ships sit in the harbor. Several sank in the duchess's assault.

The locations of the outer and inner fort are detailed in Act Three.

## Fantasy Defenses.

Beyond the normal thick walls – sloped and angled to reduce damage from cannons, star-patterned to give defenders wider firing arcs with muskets – Axis Fortress integrates magical defenses to thwart common fantasy siege tactics. Since Danor does not use magic much itself, most of these defenses were crafted by Drakran dwarves.

Walls of iron bars etched with ritual inscriptions are set within the walls, which generate a slight outward force that weakens the impact of cannons and has the fringe benefit of making it exceedingly difficult to climb. Rings of gold thread weave together deep inside the walls, forming a barrier against teleportation and similar magic. Finally, intermittent pockets of the rare stone opaline acts as a magic sink, absorbing spell energy.

On a more mundane note, the walkways along the tops of the walls and roads near them on the inside are all covered in a patina of light gravel, which crackles underfoot, making it more difficult for people to move about invisibly. The fortress also had many watchdogs trained to attack creatures they could smell and hear but not see, but most of those are dead or in a kennel now.

Lya Jierre provided the RHC with details of a known weak spot in the walls, which is the best spot to use the *passwall* scrolls. In any other location, a *passwall* spell would stop only a few feet into the stone, blocked by a gold ward. This location is marked on the Axis Fort map. Recall that the specially-prepared scrolls do not require a caster level check to use.

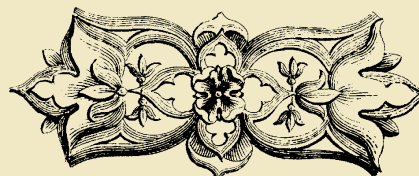
The inner walls have no such vulnerable points, and indeed are more resistant to magic. The Risuri military plans to try magic to bypass it when they arrive, but those spells will have no effect.

## What's She Up To?

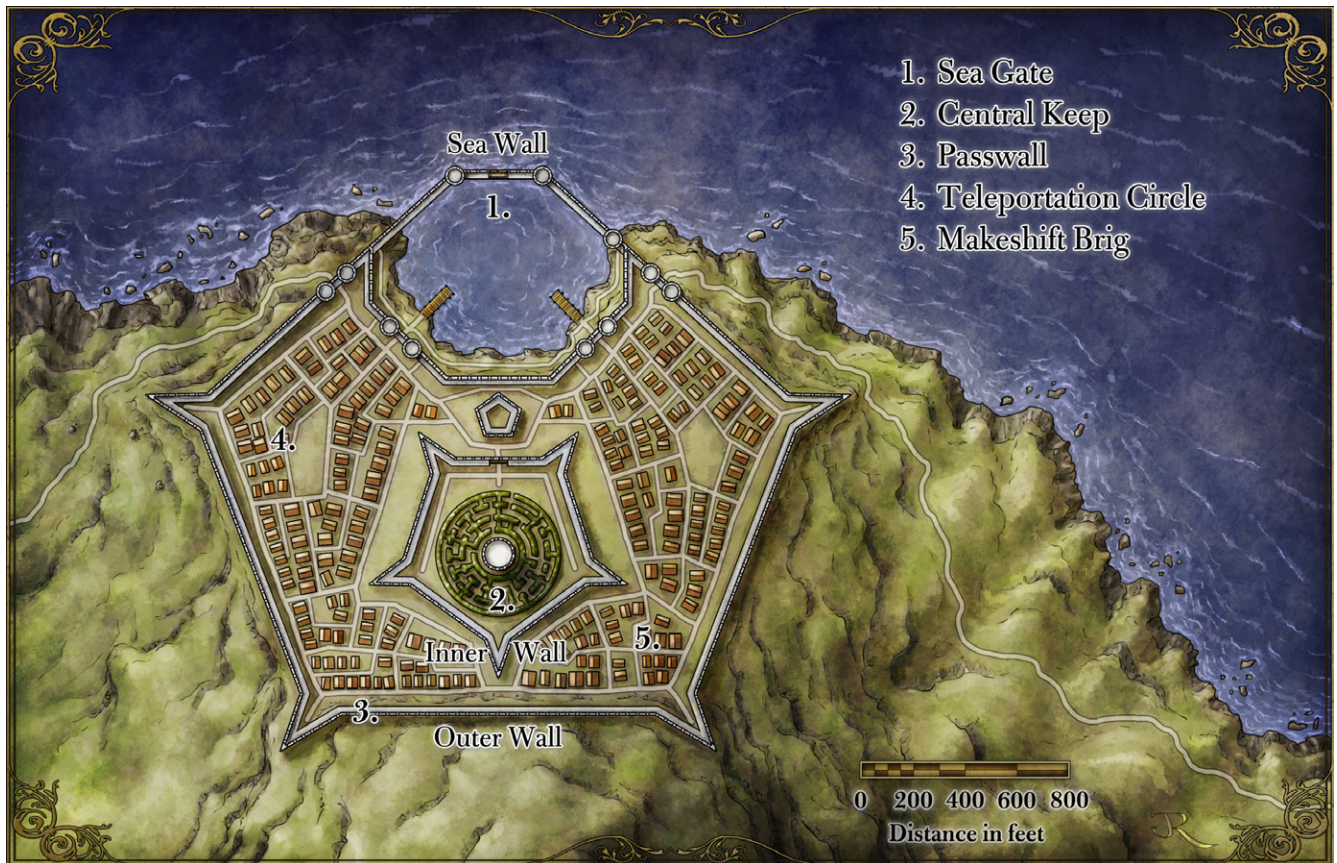
Now that she has Axis Island, the duchess plans to hold it until her own naval reinforcements arrive. Her patrols scour the island, documenting what the Danorans were up to here. Though her assassination attempt failed, she still believes she has solid proof that Danor is a threat, at least enough to get the nobles of Risur to reject her brother's peace plans.

However, ships loyal to the king have been busy keeping the duchess's allies from reaching the island. A whole separate level of unseen conflict is occurring between King Aodhan and the duchess's fey allies; in particular, the king has used subtle magic to hide the approach of his fleet from the aquatic fey the duchess is counting on to warn her of an attack.

Right now the duchess is considering abandoning her position and teleporting back to her stronghold in Shale, but she is not ready yet to abandon land that she claimed for Risur. Indeed, she hopes Danor does try to take back the island, because if she dies it will spur more Risuri to view them as enemies.







## Moving About the Fortress.

Once the PCs reach the fortress, they can use a *passwall* scroll to get inside the Outer Fort. The duchess doesn't have enough forces to keep a full look-out, and if the PCs are all natives of Risur they might have the benefit of being able to pass as members of the duchess's forces. She only brought a few hundred people, though, so people will be wary of unfamiliar faces.

Not much can be gained by looking around right now, but the party might try to release prisoners as allies, rig up some sort of distraction, or even go confront the duchess and try to talk her down.

As the PCs go through the fortress, they must make skill checks. Keep track of the number of Stealth checks they fail. While the defenders won't chase after every person they might happen to spot in the distance, the more small disturbances occur, the faster the duchess's forces will respond to the PCs revealing themselves.

**Explore Outer Fort.** Each PC must make a DC 8 Dexterity (Stealth) check to avoid being noticed. The PCs become familiar with the layout of the streets and buildings, and learn the two facilities being guarded – the brig and the teleportation circle. They can move to the sea wall without requiring an additional check.

**Get into a Secure Location.** A PC can attempt a DC 12 Charisma (Deception) to get the party access to the brig or the teleportation circle. Failing this check means the PCs have revealed themselves, and response teams will come after them.

Instead, a PC could try to break in. That character must make a successful DC 18 Dexterity (thieves' tools) to open a path for the rest of the party, and must also make a successful DC 8 Dexterity

## Fortress Security.

Moving between areas requires the PCs to make Dexterity (Stealth) checks. Failed Stealth checks increase the alert level, and the higher the alert level, the faster forces will respond when the PCs finally reveal themselves. Most likely the PCs will only reveal themselves once they're at the lighthouse sea gate, but if they make a mess of things early, use the response groups from the Hold the Lighthouse encounter, below.

### Alert Level

- **Secure.** (0 failed Stealth checks) Everyone goes about their business as normal.
- **Mild Alert.** (1 to 3 failed Stealth checks) People are slightly nervous, but suspect any trouble is a false alarm.
- **Elevated Alert.** (4 to 5 failed Stealth checks) People are suspicious of strangers and have weapons at close reach. Increase the DC of Charisma (Deception) checks by 2.
- **High Alert.** (6 or more failed Stealth checks) People are prepared for immediate battle. Increase the DC of Charisma (Deception) checks by 5.

(Stealth) check with each attempt to avoid attracting attention. Once the way is open, the rest of the party must make Stealth checks of their own to get in.

**Enter Inner Fort.** Each PC must make a DC 12 Dexterity (Stealth) check. From here, the PCs might survey the hedge labyrinth so they know its layout in advance.





Enter the Central Keep. It's very difficult to get to the central keep without Gillie Dhu spotting and confronting them. Each PC must make a DC 17 Dexterity (Stealth) check. A truly brazen PC might try to deceive Gillie Dhu and the guards into letting the party through with a successful DC 17 Charisma (Deception) check, but if anything goes wrong the PCs will be in no position to flee.

## The Sea Gate.

### Action. Tactical.

The PCs must get past enemy look-outs and get inside a lighthouse to open the sea gate.

- Rebel Wizard
- Pseudodragon
- Rebel Investigator
- 5 Rebel Patrolmen
- Rebel Soldier

Once the PCs get to the harbor, they can easily get onto the sea wall. From there, it's a 300-foot shot to the lighthouse. However, a wizard in the lighthouse will make their approach difficult if he spots them, and a handful of workers and look-outs are active on the sea wall, searching a docked ship.

If combat breaks out, the lighthouse wizard will ring a bell to alert the main fortress, which counts as a failed Stealth check for determining the Alert Level. If the PCs are very sneaky, they might manage to take the lighthouse without an alarm going up, giving them a chance to rest for a few minutes before they reveal themselves by opening the sea gate and using *faerie fire*-enchanted arrow or bolt to signal the fleet.

### Methods of Approach.

The cleverest method might be to use a spare *water breathing* potion, swim up to the lighthouse, sneak in, and assassinate the wizard and his guards.

The PCs could try to sneak along the sea wall, requiring a DC 14 Dexterity (Stealth) check. The defenders are unlikely to pay attention to anyone more than 100 feet away (i.e., off the battle map). Gaslight lamps every 60 feet each illuminate 25 feet in every direction, leaving small pockets of shadow between them. The defenders might not notice if a couple lamps flicker out – snuffed by cantrips or precise bowshots. Alternately, the PCs could try to con their way in with a DC 16 Charisma (Deception) check.

If the PCs get to the lighthouse without starting a fight, the moment they open the sea gate or fire off a signal, the local defenders will try to stop them. More likely, though, the PCs will tip their hand and combat will begin.

Rebel wizards use **acolyte** statistics, with the following changes:

- Their Intelligence score is 14 (+2) and Wisdom score 10 (+0).  
Their spellcasting ability is Intelligence (spell save DC 12, +4 to hit with spell attacks).
- Their cantrips are *light*, *ray of frost*, and *shocking grasp*.
- Their 1st-level spells are *feather fall* and *magic missile*.

## For Wargamers.

If you think your players would get a kick out of a “defend the base” combat, you can use stats from the Sea Gate encounter to create waves of enemies for a “combat version” of the Hold the Lighthouse encounter (next page). The PCs have a few rounds to set up barricades and possibly even traps. Use the skill challenge timeline and alert level to determine how much lead time the party has.

- **Wave A.** 8 rebel patrolmen and 2 rebel soldiers.
- **Wave B.** 1 rebel investigators, 2 rebel soldiers, and 12 rebel patrolmen.
- **Wave C.** 2 pseudodragons, 1 rebel wizard, 3 rebel soldiers, and 12 rebel patrolmen.

Putting several combats in a row could be a bit of a grind, though, and the enemies are all fairly faceless, so if you plan to run this scene as traditional combat, you can give it more emotional impact by making NPCs whom the players will want to thwart. Perhaps as they sneak through the fort they spot a smarmy military officer making a pair of Danoran scullery maids fight each other with knives for the amusement of him and his men. The PCs would be in no position to attack a large force out in the open, but now that they have walls to protect them, it could be satisfying to get some revenge.

Rebel investigators use **druid** statistics, with these changes:

- They have 12 hit points each.
- They are 1st-level spellcasters and cannot cast 2nd level spells.
- They have two 1st-level spell slots, and they do not know the *longstrider* or *entangle* spells.
- Their challenge rating is ½ (100 XP).

Rebel patrolmen use **guard** statistics.

Rebel soldiers use **thug** statistics, with the following changes:

- They wield glaives instead of maces (+4 to hit, 1d10 + 2 slash damage).

### Set-Up.

One **rebel patrolman** stands guard inside the ground level of the lighthouse, while the **rebel wizard** watches from the window one floor up. His pet **pseudodragon** naps beside him. A **patrolman** stands watch near each of the three lamp posts on the map. The remaining **patrolman** is on the ship and gangplank down the ramp to the left. The **rebel investigator** is directing a search of the ship, while the rebel soldier is smoking a pipe at the bend in the ramp switchback.

### Tactics.

The patrolmen hang back, trying to shoot from cover as much as possible – behind lamp posts, doors, or barrels. The investigator links up with the soldier and they advance as quickly as possible. Meanwhile, the lighthouse wizard blasts from relative safety. When the wizard is reduced below half hit points, or if the PCs breach the tower, he and his pseudodragon move downstairs to back up the patrolman.

Bear in mind the elevation differences; a shooter at sea level might not be able to target someone on the outer side of the sea wall.

**Terrain.** A lamp post, door, and windows provide cover. The sloped ramp down to the inner harbor provides a good venue for



rolling barrels down at foes (+4 ranged attack; 1d6 + 1 damage and knocked prone). If the fight happens to reach the top floor of the lighthouse, anyone in the path of the light is blinded, and the beacon turns 90 degrees at the start of each turn.

The highest ledges of the sea wall have chest-high stone railings, so forced movement can't slide PCs into the ocean, at least not easily.

If the PCs investigate the pallets on the docked ship, they find crates full of firedust, just waiting to be detonated with a little fire damage. The explosion hits everyone within 5 feet, does 1d6 points of fire damage, and the ship's deck catches fire. Any creature that starts its turn on the deck or enters it for the first time on its turn takes 1d6 fire damage.

The bottom floor of the lighthouse contains the sea gate mechanism and a small hearth for warmth. A closet leads to a cluttered storage basement, too tight for much combat, but with plenty of odd things PCs might use as barricades or traps in the next encounter.

**Sea Gate Mechanism.** Operating the sea gate mechanism is quite easy. As an action, a PC can turn some valves, open a safety latch, and pull a lever, which starts the sea gate moving with a loud mechanical clanking sure to alert anyone nearby. It takes 1 minute for the gate to open enough to let a ship through.

**Resting.** The next encounter starts as soon as the PCs open the gate or signal their allies. A very stealthy party might manage to secure the lighthouse without an alarm being raised, and could take a short rest. Otherwise, enemies are on the way, leaving no time to rest.

## Hold the Lighthouse.

### Action. Real-Time.

The PCs must defend the lighthouse as the fortress's defenders try to close the sea gate.

When the PCs launch a *faerie fire*-enchanted bolt to alert the navy, an alarm goes up, and fortress defenders move toward the mainland end of the sea wall in preparation of an attack on the lighthouse. The PCs have limited time to prepare. They have to defend their position for ten minutes, long enough for reinforcements to arrive.

We present this scene as a quick, tense skill challenge, which should go by much faster than if you choose to run this encounter as a traditional combat.

## Holding the Lighthouse.

### Level 1 Skill Challenge.

You can see enemy forces gathering in the distance. You have limited time to prepare yourself, but a little ingenuity might negate the need for a fight.

**Key Skills:** Athletics, Arcana, artisans' tools, Constitution (no skill), Deception, Intimidation, Persuasion, Sleight of Hand, Stealth, thieves' tools

**Difficulty:** Unless otherwise noted, all skill checks are DC 15.

In this encounter, the PCs want to ensure the sea gate remains open so their allies can storm the fort. They are contested by enemy forces trying to reach the controls for the sea gate and close it. The enemy forces come in waves, and the PCs have time before each wave to prepare defenses.

The PCs can lay traps, set up barricades, actively attack, or otherwise fend off the enemies' advance. If the enemies defeat the PCs, they can close the sea gate and make it much harder for the party's allies to attack.

**Victory:** The PCs win if the sea gate is open at the end of Round Ten or any round thereafter. Their allies sail through and provide enough reinforcements that the duchess's forces cannot manage to retake the lighthouse.

**Failure:** The PCs lose if they are all knocked unconscious, surrender, or flee, and the sea gate is closed.

## Passage of Time.

Every minute of the encounter is one "round," and each PC can take one action per round. PCs can also cast spells or use potions/scrolls to heal or prevent damage, in addition to their primary action; the amount of time required is inconsequential in the span of a one minute 'round.' However, for each spell cast (or other thing that takes a single action), the PC takes a -1 penalty to their check on that round.

## Locations.

There are three locations in this skill challenge: the sea wall, outside the lighthouse, and inside the lighthouse. Keep track of where each enemy group is.



When PCs take their actions they can move to any location, but they remain in that location until the start of their next turn. If a PC wants to set up a trap on the sea wall, for instance, that character risks being caught in the open by approaching enemies.

If getting to a location would require moving through a location currently occupied by enemies, the PC must make a DC 8 Dexterity (Stealth) check. This does not count as an action for the round, but on a failure, that character gets stuck in the enemies' location. If that happens, they can choose a different action, to try to make the best of a bad situation.

### Sea Wall.

This location is too large to barricade effectively.

### Outside the Lighthouse.

This location can have no more than 20 points of barricade at a time.

### Inside the Lighthouse.

This location can have no more than 10 points of barricade at a time. If the lighthouse has more than 5 points of barricade, PCs cannot easily move into or out of the lighthouse. If an ally can throw a rope down from a window, the PC can get inside, but both PCs involved take a -5 penalty to their actions for the round.

## Enemy Forces.

Three waves of enemy forces are on their way. Mechanically, each wave consists of a number of enemies. When PCs take actions to kill enemies, you can use the suggested compositions in the "For Wargamers" sidebar (page 12) to help flavor your descriptions.

- **Wave A.** 5 enemies. Arrives on the sea wall at the start of round 1.
- **Wave B.** 10 enemies. Arrives on the sea wall at the start of round 4.
- **Wave C.** 16 enemies. Arrives on the sea wall at the start of round 7.

If the PCs manage to defeat a given wave they might have some time to prepare for the next one. If a latter wave reaches the location of an earlier wave, combine them into one group.

**Timeline.** The alert level when the PCs reached the lighthouse adjusts the arrival times of the waves. If Secure (0 failed Stealth checks), delay each wave's arrival by 3 rounds. If Mild (1-3 failed checks), delay the wave by 2 rounds. If Elevated (4-5), delay by 1 round. If High alert, use the base time.

**Enemy Actions.** After the PCs take their actions, the enemies act. Various PC actions can destroy enemy units, but to reflect the simultaneity of the scene, an enemy that is destroyed still gets to act on the turn. It is then removed at the end of the turn.

When enemies act, they move as far as they can, but they cannot enter a location with a barricade, and they stop if they reach a location with a PC, trap, or ward.

## Smaller or Larger Parties

Reduce the waves by 1, 2, and 4 enemies for each PC fewer than five, and increase likewise for larger parties. A party of seven PCs, for instance, would face 7, 14, and 24 enemies.

If they stop next to a barricade, they first work to remove the barricade. Each enemy reduces a given barricade by 1 point. When the barricade is reduced to 0, it is destroyed.

Then, if they are in a location that contains a PC, for each enemy that didn't use its turn to remove barricades, one PC in the location takes 2 damage. If there are multiple PCs in the area, the PCs divide the enemies' attacks as they choose among themselves.

Finally, for every enemy who still hasn't acted, one PC in an adjacent location takes 1 damage from enemy ranged attacks. The enemies can only affect PCs inside the lighthouse if those PCs spent their action to attack this turn. (Otherwise the PC is considered safe behind walls.)

PCs reduced to 0 hit points this way do not make death saving throws, and automatically stabilize.

## Sample Character Actions.

You may want to remind your players that they can always aid their allies if their own skill modifiers are too low to have much chance of succeeding alone.

**Assemble Barricade.** (Athletics or artisans' tools) A PC hurriedly piles whatever's at hand to halt the enemies' advance. The PC creates 3 points worth of barricade inside the lighthouse, or 2 points of barricade outside the lighthouse. A failed check places 1 point of barricade.

A PC cannot assemble a barricade in a location already occupied by enemies, and there is not enough material to effectively barricade the sea wall.

**Battle.** (Special) The PC does not have to make a check to perform this action. Instead, the character must have a combat action (melee, ranged, or spell – even a cantrip) that can affect an enemy in range. Melee attacks work if the PC ends his turn in the same location as the enemies.

The PC kills 1 enemy. If he describes a particularly effective strategy or gambit, they might kill 2 enemies at your discretion.

A PC in the lighthouse can make a DC 17 Dexterity (Stealth) check to snipe and move to cover when attacking enemies outside the lighthouse or on the sea wall. If successful, that character takes no damage from any ranged counterattacks.

**Boiling Oil.** (Special) This action can only be done once, and only has an effect if enemies are right outside the lighthouse. No check is required, but three PCs must be in the lighthouse and must all use this action in the same round to have any effect. The PCs use the lighthouse beacon's brazier and supplies of fuel to create a pan of boiling oil, which they pour out the window, searing anyone in front of the entrance. This kills 5 enemies.

As with Battle, a PC can attempt a Dexterity (Stealth) check to reduce damage from counterattacks.

**Brace.** (Athletics or Constitution DC 10) The PC must be inside the lighthouse to use this action. By using force to hold barricades in place, the character makes it harder for enemies to get through. The first 2 enemies who try to remove barricades this round have no effect.

**Sabotage the Gate.** (Special) A PC with the Technologist theme feat does not have to make a check to perform this action. Other PCs must make a successful DC 15 Intelligence check. If successful,





the PC damages the controls of the sea gate mechanism. Even if the PCs are defeated by the enemy forces, it takes 2 rounds for the enemies to repair the damage and close the sea gate, giving reinforcements more time to get in.

**Set Trap.** (Sleight of Hand or thieves' tools) A PC uses available materials (weapons, ropes, loose stones, supplies from storage) to assemble a crude trap that lasts until the end of the encounter or until expended. A PC cannot assemble a trap in a location already occupied by enemies. When the enemies reach that location, the trap is expended and kills 1 enemy.

**Set Ward.** (Arcana) As Set Trap, except a PC scratches some sigils into a surface and uses a spell to prepare a temporary trap that lasts until the end of the encounter or until expended. To use this action, the PC must have a spell available that deals damage. Even a cantrip works.

**Stall.** (Intimidation or Persuasion) The PC shouts to the approaching enemies, perhaps to try to convince them to surrender, to negotiate a feigned surrender of the PCs, to cow them into holding off for reinforcements, or to create a hostage situation. If the check succeeds, no enemies advance this round.

Increase the DC by 2 for each previous round the enemies were stalled. If the PC is using Persuasion, increase the DC by 2 if the party attacks at all this turn. If the PC is using Intimidation, increase the DC by 2 if the party *doesn't* attack at all this turn.

If the PCs have hostages, they get a +5 bonus to checks to Stall. If the stalling PC lies (such as to feign surrender, or to fake having hostages), that character must also make a DC 12 Deception check or the Stall attempt fails.

Multiple PCs can try to Stall. Only one needs to succeed to stop the enemy advance.

## Complications and Lucky Breaks.

If things are going too easily for the PCs and you want to ratchet up the tension, or if you want to cut them some slack, consider these options.

**Extra Enemies.** The simplest option is to add an extra wave of enemies equal to the number of PCs in the party. This might be necessary if it hits round 7 and the party has 30 points of barricade up.

**Invisible Ambush.** If no PC spots them with a successful DC 17 Wisdom (Perception) check, a pair of pseudodragons fly up the side of the tower, break through the windows, and get inside the lighthouse. Place 2 enemies in the lighthouse. This might provide enough of a disruption for the next wave to get close and assault the lighthouse doors.

**Surrender or He Dies!** If a PC is knocked out in an area occupied by enemies, the enemy leader might put a sword to the PC's throat and threaten to kill him unless the rest of the party surrenders. Be careful if you think your players might resent being sentenced to death by their 'friends.'

**Unnatural Wave.** At the start of the round, the PCs spot a sudden disturbance on the coastline, as the local planar fluctuations cause a hundred foot high shaft of amber to erupt out of the sea floor, then disappear just as suddenly. A massive wave rushes toward the sea wall, and at the end of the round it hits. The wave deals 2d6 bludgeoning damage to each PC on the sea wall, and it kills half of the enemy forces on the sea wall.

## Aftermath.

If the PCs win this challenge, allied ships sail into the harbor, and archers and mages on-deck attack any remaining enemy forces. Within a few minutes, soldiers reach the lighthouse to reinforce it, and military doctors and druidic healers start to tend to the PCs' wounds. Each PC is healed back to full hit points, but then they only get a brief respite before the beginning of Act Three.

If the PCs fail, the sea gate slams shut, and the PCs are carted off in shackles to the makeshift prison in the outer fort. It takes several hours for the navy to maneuver to shore and prepare a ground assault. It's nearly sunrise by the time the PCs are rescued, and their allies have already suffered hundreds of casualties. When they're rescued, doctors and healers tend to them, as above.

