

Chapter 1 — The Solution to Yesterday’s Problem Becomes Today’s Problem

The slum town of Ningho lay on the outskirts of Nanchan, one of the three capital cities of the swamp planet of Jing. Baron Chen Meerong had retired, ceding his throne and Circle of Ascension to his eldest son, Baron Gang, who was now twenty-five. For his younger sons, Baron Jie, twenty-three, and Baron Li, twenty-one, he had had two more Circles of Ascension built at the other two larger cities of Chaohu and Zhouhan, but these cities lay some five hundred miles distant from Ningho and in opposite directions, more or less. Why? Solid ground was hard to find on this swamp planet, especially ground which would support larger cities and the needed stone fortresses to both support and defend these great Circles of Ascension that gave the barons and baronesses their powers.

Although Ningho was only some twenty miles from the castle of Baron Gang in Nanchan, ten of these were merely foggy swampland. The poorest of folks eked out marginal lives in and around Ningho. Yet here too was the home base of the Swamp Raiders, five like-minded folks who had banded together to tackle the ever-growing problem of the greens, that is the Green Dragons.

Chan Meerong, twenty-four, was their leader, while her younger sister, Wen, twenty-two, was her second in command. Three men in their late twenties had joined up with them, Kang Zu, Tao Wu, and Peng Long. The three men were skilled fighters, who once had been in Baron Chen’s army. Baronesses Chan and Wen now lived in exile from the royal courts. Both had defied their father’s arranged marriages to off-world men, each of whom had sought to solidify their political alliances against the “Zoran Crowd” — a derogatory term for Baron Zoran and his allied planets. Worse, both young ex-baronesses thought that their father’s secret deals to bring hundreds of Green Dragons to Jing, giving them sanctuary here in return for their protection and allegiance, had been an awful, terrible blunder. Baron Chen had made that decision some nineteen years ago and now Jing was infested with these infernal beasts, as the two women called them, only when they were being polite about the dragons.

The five sat around a beat up table in Wu’s Bar. The hour was late. Urine, stale swamp fog, and tobacco smoke fought for dominance in the dimly lit room. Kang knocked down another shot of low grade swamp whiskey, “God-damn greens! May they rot in the bayous!” They’d just heard another report of locals being attacked by the Green Dragons. A family of three were found dead, their flesh eaten away, leaving behind bleached bones. Green Dragon slime was exceedingly toxic to human flesh. This was the sole topic of many who had frequented Wu’s this evening.

“Aye. Wish they were not so damnably hard to kill,” Tao interjected angrily.

“Top of the food chain — isn’t that what old Zoran used to say a score of years back?” Wen asked, searching her childhood memory. She was barely four when dragons suddenly came into existence, arriving on Jing.

“Damn dad to hell,” Chan answered hostilely, banging her mug on the marred tabletop. “He should have known better than to bring those foul, wicked demons to Jing. It’s all his god-damn fault. Now he’s retired, sitting comfy in his fortress home, and what do our idiot brothers do? Nothing! Not a god-damn thing! Damn right, Wen, dragons *are* at the top of the food chain and our people *are* their food!”

“Actually, Chan, our people are not food for the greens. They don’t eat us — just kill us. Greens hate humans and kill us for sport,” Peng politely corrected his leader.

“Okay, okay, so they don’t eat us,” Chan amended herself, hiccuped, and countered. “No, they just dissolve our bodies and kill us. That’s bad enough. Well, that’s not entirely true, Peng. We now know that the greens only attack out here in the slums of Jing. They never attack the wealthier cities. I swear that they have a bargain of some kind with the barons. But, yes, it was a whole family this time. We’re just going to have to go after that green and kill it before it has a chance to do that to another family!”

“Agreed. Tomorrow we go dragon hunting again,” Kang added. “Say, how many have we killed so far? My mind is a little fuzzy tonight.” He hiccupped.

Tao laughed, “Too much cheap whiskey, Kang. Muddled your brains. Good thing a green isn’t here now, you’d be slimed in no time!” All laughed, but Kang knew that what Tao said was true. They’d returned three days ago from their last mission, successfully slaying another green who was on their “most wanted” list.

“Eighteen,” Chan answered. “We’ve been at this five years now, gang, and we have a paltry eighteen to show for our hard work.” She sounded disgusted.

“Yes, but that’s eighteen more than any other hunters on Jing,” Peng countered.

“But there aren’t any other hunters on Jing,” Wen protested. “We’re it! We are the only ones fighting the accursed dragons.”

“Hey, that we know of — we haven’t been all over Jing, just in this area. Yes, the barons are turning a blind eye to the dragons as long as they don’t attack them and their precious cities. Out here in the sticks, we folks are left on our own,” Chan added. “They’ve only got us to protect them. Eighteen, damn, that’s hardly a tree in the swamp around here. Pathetic gang, pathetic.”

“Yes, but they are so damnably hard to kill, Chan. Keep that in mind, will ya?” Tao justified. “Seventy feet of pure fighting machine, scales so thick a sword can’t cut through them,

claws like razors.”

“Don’t forget they can pick up a dozen of us and fly off with us,” Kang added, greatly exaggerating how much a dragon could carry and still fly.

“That’s ignoring their slime spittle breath, to say nothing of their magic spells,” Chan growled. Magic spells and slime breath — if the truth be told, those were what made these powerful creatures so hard to slay. Worse, from Green Dragon to Green Dragon, there was no predicting what spells any given beast would have. The last one they’d killed very nearly did them in when it shot a Ball of Flames at them as they charged it. All five had miraculously avoided the searing flames by diving into the swam waters. The women’s Duska senses had again saved the five from certain death. Indeed, Chan and Wen were convinced that only a Duska had any chance at all of killing a dragon and that was only a slim chance at best. She didn’t ask her group how many dragons had successfully eluded them. It was far more than eighteen. The dragons could also Shadow Walk, though theirs was somehow different that the Duska’s Shadow Walk — at least that’s what many had said that old Zoran had said so many years ago. “Damn Zoran for bring the dragons into the federation!” she cursed her off-world, enemy baron.

When Chan and Wen turned fourteen and come of age, each had been given their birthright Ceremony of Ascension. Chan recalled her ceremony, during which her special gland at the base of her body’s brain activated. Through the guidance of the Priestess, she’d been initiated into the Shadow Walk, which allowed one to walk through space to any of the sixteen planets within the Federation. Her first trip was nauseating, but by the last walk, she had mastered her fears and was now a true Duska, a Shadow Walker, which was her given birthright. All those who ruled throughout the Federation were Duska, both barons and baronesses.

Duska were special, multi-talented, different human beings, gifted by birth with an oversized gland, which, upon puberty, set them apart with special powers and abilities. Perhaps the greatest of these was their ability to Shadow Walk, in which they could transport themselves and others, if they chose, from one planet to another within the Federation of Planets. Also, their reaction times were phenomenal, and males usually made use of this by becoming master swordsmen, though often women were so trained as well. Certainly, all male Duskas were given standard fighter training from about the age of six onwards.

Magic was also prevalent throughout the Federation, though it took many shapes and forms. Although no one ever made an accurate assessment, popular opinion held that one in ten of every inhabitant had some latent magical skill, though often this amounted to little more than having a spoon stir a cooking pot or starting a fire in the fireplace — little, useful sort of things. From among those with magical skills, a relatively few had gotten some magical training and were able to cast limited formal, useful spells, these were called the Adepts. Often, they made their living by trading their spells for room and board or gold coins. Clean, Mend, and Polish were some of their main spells.

Even fewer still had the funds or backers to make a full time study of magic. These were called Mages. Armed with an array of spells, often power spells such as Ball of Fire, Lightning Bolt, and Killing Vapors, these men and women frequently found lucrative employment within the ruling baron's army of enforcers or even their armies proper. Those who did not, were often employed by the many warlords who controlled lands currently beyond the dominion of the barons and baronesses.

Exceedingly rare were those in the third category, that of the Archmage. These individuals had gone far beyond the mundane use of magical powers and spells, extending their knowledge of arcana to unknown limits. Wherever possible, every baron had one Archmage in their employ, who, among other duties, taught magic to those gifted few. Baron Gang Meerong, the women's older brother, still had the use and support of their father's Archmage Liang Don, who was now sixty-five. True, all three barons had several mages in their employ, but only the one, aging Archmage, a distinct disadvantage. Many other planets had several Archmages backing the barons there, none more so than on Adapazan and Baron Archmage Zoran Vladislov.

For over twenty years now, this had become a very sore point among the other many barons. Baron Archmage Zoran's wife, Baroness Archmage Zdenka, continued to turn out new Archmages at an unheard of and alarming rate. Hardly a year passed without her announcing that yet another of her mage students had achieved this exalted status. True, some fifteen years ago, many of the barons had challenged her products, claiming these supposed new Archmages were not in fact true Archmages. The High Council backed the challengers and conducted an extensive series of tests of these new Archmages and their spell casting abilities. To the dismay of the many challengers and barons, all of her new Archmages fully passed their rigorous tests. They were in fact Archmages, capable of casting the most powerful of all spells.

After that, many of these new Archmages sought employment on the Zoran-aligned planets. A few ended up working for the Neutral barons, but none for the Have Not's, such as Jing. Long ago, Chan realized why her father had made the awful decision to bring the detested Green Dragons to Jing. Self-preservation. With their enemy barons loaded with Archmages and Golden Dragons, the very independence and survival of Jing was in question! The presence of the greens was supposed to act as a deterrent to their enemies. Perhaps it had, Chan sighed. Jing had not yet been attacked or invaded by armies, dragons, or magic users.

Assassinations, well that was an entirely different story! These came with the position of baron or baroness. Indeed, their mother had fallen victim to an assassin's poisoned blade, though their father, then Baron Chen, somehow escaped. It was not long after that that he had passed on his throne to his eldest son, Gang, and gone into retirement. In fact, Chan had not seen her father for many years, not since he had exiled Chan and Wen. She smiled, recalling the last bounty poster that Baron Gang had posted around Ningho. Each year, the bounty had risen. Now her head was worth fifty thousand gold and Wen's, forty thousand.

Here in Ningho, they need not worry. Eighteen kills had endeared them to the locals, who

looked to them for their protection, not the baron who never came here or sent any aid, just the loathsome tax collectors. Most all of their kills had been viewed as revenge by many in Ningho, since the dead dragons had killed one or more of those who lived in and around this area of the swamps. No, they were relatively safe here in Ningho. Still, sooner or later Chan knew that Baron Gang would tire of the game and send out assassins to cut them down or sick Archmage Liang on them. The aged Archmage had trained them and he knew their strengths and weaknesses as well as their personalities. He would be a most worthy opponent, one that they might barely have a chance of eliminating, but only because they were Duskas. On that, the two rested all of their hopes.

Early on, they discovered that the greens loved gold and gems. Each green that they had slain had a den somewhere in the vast swamps. However, they had been successful in locating only ten of the eighteen, recovering quite a stash of gold and gems. Most of the gold they donated to the seneschal of Ningho, who doled it out to the residents, covering their yearly taxes for the most part. Again, this helped ensure that none in Ningho would betray them to the barons.

Wen spoke up, “Well, if we are going to go after number nineteen tomorrow, we had all best get some sleep.” Chan agreed and had the others hold hands with hers, while she teleported them all to their secret base of operations in an isolated area of swampland.

They did not see a dark cloaked man rise, grin, and leave the inn after they left. He had been watching them all evening and once outside the inn, he too teleported away. He arrived within the walls of the Royal Palace in Nanchan.

Neither saw another dark cloaked man rise, grin, and leave the inn after both had left. Once outside and after a careful glance around him, the man simply vanished. No spell was cast.

None of these three saw yet another dark cloaked man rise, grin, and leave the inn after the others had left. He climbed into his boat and began poling his way through the shallow swamp waters, heading towards the city of Nanchan.

Finally, as the inn closed for the night, the barmaid Yan cast one of her few spells. A Message was sent.

“Ah back at last, Mage Hui,” the twenty-five year old Baron Gang acknowledged the arrival of one of his mages. “Come share some wine with me.” He poured out the red liquid into crystal goblets imported from one of the desert planets. The men were in his private study deep within the fortress and Circle, far from prying eyes.

“Anti-scrying?” asked the thirty-five year old Mage Hui Shihuan.

Baron Gang quickly cast a few protection spells and handed the expensive goblet to his mage, who had quickly vanished his grubby clothes, replacing them with his fine suit — a few

quick spells cast.

He took the offering and sat down in the overstuffed, leather chair opposite the young baron. “It is as you suspected. The Swamp Raiders — your sisters — showed up at Wu’s Bar, talking about their recent slaughters of the Green Dragons. Eighteen they claim that they have murdered, sir.”

“Incredible! So many? I had no idea that they were killing so many. I guess that I should have upped the bounty on their heads long ago. This is getting way out of hand, Mage Hui. I simply cannot overlook their rebel behavior any longer.”

“They did take the offered bait, Baron. I heard that they are planning to go after the green tomorrow sometime,” Mage Hui continued, satisfied that it was safe for him to relay this bit of news. “Perhaps this will be the end of this annoying problem for you.”

Baron Gang grinned, “Aye, perhaps it may well be. Still, they are Duska trained. Eighteen? Incredible. Well, let’s hope that their murdering spree comes to an end soon, Mage Hui.” For the tiniest moment, Gang felt a twinge of regret for what was about to befall his two sisters. That feeling didn’t last long, though. Ever since his father had banished the two, they had been nothing but constant trouble, both for his father and now for himself. “Lord knows that it is hard enough making ends meet for Jing without those two constantly messing everything up. With luck, tomorrow may bring us a new day, eh Hui?” He grinned at his mage.

“Aye, sir, that it may. On the off-chance that it fails, do you want me to get the Archmage involved in the search for their hideout?” Mage Hui asked. For weeks, the two had worked on an alternative scheme, one that depended upon knowing where the Swamp Raiders made their home. Once that was known, it would be a simple matter to send in shock troops and mages to capture them and put them out of business. The flaw in that plan, as Baron Gang often pointed out, was that the women were Duskas and would likely be able to escape by Shadow Walking.

“Let’s see how this one works out first. I hate to get the Archmage involved if we don’t have to — he’s under orders to make as many mages as he can turn out.” The two chatted a bit longer, and it was clear to Mage Hui that it was time for him to leave. He bowed and cast a Mystical Door to his own quarters, where his disguise clothes were now heaped on the floor, deposited there by his previous spell. He kicked them into a corner and plopped down on his bed. He had much to ponder. Tomorrow promised to be eventful.

Alone at last, Baron Gang made his Mink Link to his brothers. *Li, Jie! They took the bait. Tomorrow they will be going after the green. Are you prepared?*

Jie replied, *We certainly are. Our sisters are such an embarrassment to us all. They have to be stopped. Count on us, big brother. We will be totally focused on Shadow Walks tomorrow. You know that we can sense when anyone Shadow Walks now. It is a marvelous side-effect of our*

new Circles. Rather amazing. Gang grimaced, he hated the fact that his two younger brothers now actually had more physical powers than he, whom his father had chosen to be his heir! Still, he knew that he could do nothing about that, only continue to keep them aligned with himself.

Li added, *Gang, if our sisters attempt any Shadow Walking tomorrow, we will know about it and attempt to follow them or at least know where they went, if it is off-planet. One way or another, this constant interference of our sisters must be ended. Most likely, they will head back to their safe house, wherever that is. If they do, rest assured big brother, we will know their precise location. If so, are we still planning to raid them and capture them?*

Gang replied, *Yes, it would be ideal to make them pay for their crimes against Jing. Such would do wonders for our authority. They've been flaunting dad's and our rule around here for far too many years. It has to stop now.*

I still think that we ought to give them a choice between execution and marrying one of Baron Clav's men on Rehor, Jie added. Getting them off-world permanently is better than execution. They are still Duska after all.

Gang laughed, envisioning his sisters bedding one of the ugly Clav men on Rehor. *Well, first we have to capture them. Then we'll see. Time for bed. Tomorrow promises to be most interesting, brothers.*

Once that connection ended, Baron Gang made one more Mind Link. *Ah, Noble Ashford, Baron Gang here. The Swamp Raiders have taken the bait. They will be looking for the green tomorrow. I wish you the very best of luck with your trap. Keep me informed of the outcome, please.*

The Green Dragon smiled, his own spy had already reported in on the Swamp Raider's conversations around their table at Wu's Inn. He certainly didn't need this puny human's message. Still, the human was most useful for the time being. *Of course, Baron Gang. I will notify you of the outcome at soon as I hear it.* However, he didn't add that he would do so only when it suited him.

“Come Leeds, let's prepare this trap. I aim to personally devour these infernal death stalkers myself! Eighteen! Damn them to hell. No one kills eighteen of us without paying the ultimate penalty!” Ashford growled. He was the oldest of the greens here on Jing and their leader. Leeds was his second, though he longed to take Ashford's place. He thought that Ashford was being way, way too kind to these infernal humans on Jing. One sweep and the combined greens could put an end to this human infestation on their new beautiful homeland. Ashford continually refused to do any such thing. Quite why, Leeds had no idea. Ashford seldom relayed such information to the other Green Dragons, only his orders which they had to follow.

Of course, with Green Dragons, following orders was antipathetic to their very natures.

Each thought of himself or herself as all important and capable of making their own orders. However, due to the near starvation of their species back on Voss, those that had come here via Ashford owed him a great debt. With a Green Dragon, a debt was taken almost as seriously as gems and magic. Hence, most all of the greens on Jing pretended at least to follow Ashford's orders, at least until the gems stopped coming from the barons.

Morning came to a remote portion of the swamp, some twenty miles from Ningho. Here on a small clump of ground above the water was the Swamp Raider's base camp. Long ago, they had discovered an abandoned bear cave here. With a bit of enlarging into the bedrock via magic spells, Chan had turned it into a small home. Actually, most of their cave was below the water level, but the solid bedrock kept the swamp waters out. The main chamber served as their all-purpose livingroom. Two small side chambers had been fixed up as bedrooms — one for the women, one for the three men. Outside, two small boats were hidden in the brush.

This area of the swamp was heavily infested with both gators and vipers, which acted as a natural protection force while they were away. When they were here, the women erected a Force Screen to prevent unwanted creatures from entering, though they added more spells to completely block and hide the entrance whenever they left their safe house.

Wen went about the task of fixing them breakfast, while Chan sharpened their many blades, along with the three men. "Well, Yan sent me a message last night after we all left Wu's. She said that three different suspicious men left after we did. She doesn't think that any of the three were aware of each other, but only us."

"Sounds like someone is on to us," Peng pointed out.

"Could be a trap that we are heading into today," Kang said, highly suspicious of this interesting tidbit of news. "Three of them? Do you suppose each of the Barons sent out spies looking for us?"

"That's what has been bothering me all night, guys. Gang has always run rough-shod over Li and Jie, who have always done pretty much whatever Gang says. I can't imagine all three of them sending out spies and not having their spies aware of each other and working together. It is not Gang's way. No, Gang is devious. I wouldn't put it past him to send out a spy to spy on the spy, but not three of them. His big thing is redundancy. If one thing doesn't work, always have a secondary backup plan. I would bet that one of the spies was spying on one of his spies, but the third? Honestly, that has me baffled. Who else wants our hides?"

Wen called out as the tea water boiled over, "The greens!"

"She's got a point, Chan," Peng put in. "Dragons can take human forms. Perhaps one of the spies was a dragon looking for us. If so, maybe this whole thing is a setup — a trap to ensnare us all."

“I agree with Peng,” Tao added, nursing a slight hangover. “Maybe we should let this one slide.”

“Ordinarily, I’d agree,” Chan said, diving into the breakfast that Wen dished out, “but that was a family of three, helpless, defenseless, innocent people who were murdered by the green. We saw their bodies, we know it was a green’s doing. I just cannot let that go, fellows. That family needs justice served.”

“If we know or suspect that it is a trap, we can be extra cautious and not take any chances,” Wen suggested.

“Fellows, this one might be way too dangerous for you to come on, so if you want to stay here and guard the fort, we will understand. We cannot keep on asking you to risk your lives fighting these vile greens,” Chan explained, giving them a way to back out honorably.

“Nah, what else is there to do now on Jing except go after the vermin?” Peng replied. “I’m with you. If I have to die, let it be for something of value.” The other two agreed with him.

Kang added, “Look, Chan, if we don’t survive this one, at least we five can say that we alone took eighteen of them down with us! No one else on Jing has even gotten one of them, so I say we are heroes. Let’s die like heroes. At least the folks in Ningho know that we are heroes.” They all grinned at that.

After arming themselves with all of their weapons, the five left their safe house. Chan sealed it up and was the last to climb aboard their poled boat. The three men were in one, while the two women took the other boat. With Wen poling and Chan far forward as lookout, they led the way through the fog-filled swamp morning. Chan too held a pole which she used to encourage vipers hanging from branches to move out of their way. A dozen gators slipped into the waters from the nearby patches of semisolid ground. Great trees grew overhead, their roots often looked like giant tendrils dropping down into the water, as if even the trees hated to be in these semi-stagnant waters and were trying to pull themselves upwards.

The going was slow in the fog, but they all knew that it would soon burn off. Then, they could double their pace. Bird calls echoed through the trees, flies and mosquitoes abounded. Occasionally, a deer darted off following the patches of semi-solid ground. Wildlife teamed in these swamps, just not humans. Oh, there were hardy pioneers who lived out here in the swamps, catching wildlife and trading furs and such for other necessities of life in Ningho or other towns and cities, but they were in the minority. They were also the ones that the Green Dragons were preying upon the most — isolated swamp families. Well, eighteen of them would not be doing that any longer, Chan mused, as she deftly encouraged another viper to slither out of their way from an overhanging branch.

Around ten, the fog lifted and their pace doubled, though it was still slow by poled boat.

In these bayous, about the only real means of transportation was by poled boat. These were very shallow bottomed boats, capable of floating in mere inches of water, which often occurred as one traveled around the swamps of Jing. Occasionally, beams of sunlight slanted down through gaps in the dense foliage above their heads.

They drifted along at lunchtime, snacking on the scraps that Wen had packed. Finished, they resumed their poling. One o'clock found the two boats near the deceased family's home. "Here's where we start out search," Chan announced. "Start looking for dragon signs."

The one thing that these dragon hunters had going for them is that Green Dragons seldom flew. They preferred to slither along the water like the snakes that they were. Oh, they were fast swimmers! The gators were one of their favorite delicacies here on Jing, though they also often ate the deer as well. Before long, Chan picked up the trail left by the vile creature who a few days before had slaughtered the family of three. No mistaking the path: crushed plants and grasses, even small saplings bore witness to the seventy foot long passage of these enormous beasts. The question was: was this the trail the green left leaving the murdered family or was it the path that it took when it came here? Chan could not be sure which it was just yet.

"Okay, circle around the area. Let's see if we can find a second trail," she ordered. The two boats split up and began making a huge sweep around the small hillock on which the wooden cabin stood. Before long, Peng called out that they found another path and Wen poled their boat over to the men's location.

After a bit of study, Chan announced, "Ah, this is the exit trail. See how the grasses are pushed that way, away from the cabin and hillock? Follow me. Stay sharp, this well could be a trap!" On they poled for another hour.

At last, Chan hastily flashed hand signals to the men behind her. Both her and Wen's inner Duska senses began warning them of danger. The swamp was deadly quiet as their two boats drifted along among the trees. They made little noise with their passage. Still to their ears, it sounded as though they were shouting their way along the waters. The five felt confident, primarily because Chan had already cast her most powerful protection spell upon them all, Skin of Stone. This had frequently save their lives when attacked, as no weapon could pierce their skin until the spell wore off. Perhaps that was their downfall, depending too heavily upon this single protection spell. Chan later believed that this was so.

In the lead boat, Chan drew her weapons making as little noise as possible. Wen already had hers out and laying at her feet where she could grab them when she dropped her pole. Slowly, ever so slowly, the two boats slipped along the shallow waters. Still no birds, no gators, no deer could be seen or heard. Utter quiet, deathly quiet. Chan knew that they must be close now. Somewhere just ahead of them must lay the vile Green Dragon who wantonly murdered the helpless pioneer family. She was determined to get revenge for them. Wen gave their boat another silent push and they continued their gentle, forward glide. Chan's eyes were pealed,

looking for any sign of the green. It would be hard to miss, it would likely be seventy feet long and ten feet in diameter along its mid-section. But where the devil was it?

Curled around tree, Ashford watched the wary humans in their two puny boats slowly drifting towards him. Just a bit closer, he thought to himself. Five other greens were wrapped around neighboring trees, all Invisible. He'd cast that spell on the other five, who did not know the spell. If they followed his orders, the lives of these infernal Swamp Raiders would be over in just another minute. Get a bit closer, he thought.

The problem with Green Dragons is simple, they hate to have to work together. One of the five began his spell cast chanting before Ashford gave the signal. Ashford saw this and hastened his signal to the others, who began their chanting as well. That was all that Chan and Wen needed. Their Druska senses triggered, warning them of an imminent attack!

“Trap! We’re being attacked!” Chan screamed her warning to the others. Spells detonated. Wen and Chan both felt their Skin of Stone spells being nullified and knew that some of their attackers had cast Dispel Magic spells on them. Further, the six Green Dragons became visible at the very moment their spells fired. Chan saw them curled around the thick trees just ahead of them. She realized that it would have been far worse had the dragons waited a bit longer until they had moved further along. Then they would have been entirely surrounded! A volley of Magical Missiles struck Peng. A Lightning Bolt arced towards Wen, but with her lightning fast reaction times, it missed her entirely, striking the pole that she had been holding. Five seconds had thus far elapsed, the Swamp Raiders had yet to counterattack.

Ashford saw his spell missing Wen and chose to resort to his tried and true methods of dealing with these humans. Forgetting even his own orders to his companions, he belched forth a flood of slime from his mouth, aiming it towards the first boat. These pesky humans would now have no chance at all, he thought.

In a nearby tree, Leeds, who, following Ashford’s orders, had shot a Dispel Magic, now regretted having done so, for he could see no reason to have used that spell at all. Thus, he also belched forth his flood of slime onto the second boat. Enough of this playing around with these humans, he thought, besides he had no intention of eating their bodies. They tasted awful. After all, they had killed eighteen fellow dragons and harmed another ten. In his mind, they should pay with their fragile lives. He ignored Ashford’s orders not to dissolve their bodies, though he knew that the puny Baron Gang had wanted visible proof that these Swamp Raiders were dead and that Chan and Wen were among them. Well, he could give them their bones at least.

Still in the middle of her flying dive out of the way of the lightening bolt, Wen saw Ashford’s mouth opening and knew he was about to unleash his awful slime breath weapon on her boat. She saw the vile looking, greenish slime exploding out of his mouth in an expanding cone of devastation coming her way. Her hands reached the side of the boat and she used her falling motion to flip her body over the side into the foul-smelling swamp waters beneath the

boat, hoping that the waters were deep enough to cover her body and protecting her from the highly corrosive slime. Wen felt the warm waters flowing over her face and she headed downwards, striking hard into the soft, muddy bottom some three feet below the surface. Instinctively, she knew that it was just enough to cover her from the slime. However, she had a brief glimpse of the others as she was falling into the waters. Her sister was facing the wrong direction! Had she even seen it coming? Worse, the three men had not reacted as fast as she. Damn, they were not Duska. By the time that she hit the waters, Wen knew that the three men would take a direct hit from the slime.

As she sank below the waters, she heard the pitiful, horror-pain filled screams from the three men and knew that she'd lost them forever. Damn! Chan and she ought never have allowed these men to join them, she thought as she landed face down in the mucky bottom, three feet from the surface. Wen's thoughts now went to her sister, had she gotten out of the way?

Chan was facing sideways and from her left she saw Ashford's mouth opening and knew slime was sure to follow. Worse, from her right, she saw another green's mouth opening and knew that the three men were in a direct line of sight of this one. She delayed her own reaction long enough to scream to the three, "Dive! Dive! Dive!" Almost in slow motion, she saw how futile her warning was. The three men barely had time to look up at the dragon before the cone of foul, caustic, green slime shot out of its mouth directly towards them in an ever expanding cone! She was utterly helpless to prevent them from taking a direct hit and a horrible, painful, but quick death! Her delay in reacting to the slime coming her way in this last ditch attempt to save her three companions almost cost Chan her life. At the very last instant, she dove into the water, having seen that Wen was a spit second ahead of her.

Pain! Sharp, excruciating pain shot along her lower left arm and hand. Such pain she had never felt before and she knew that she'd been hit with slime herself. Sliding under the water, Chan felt the intense pain of having led her three companions to their death with her insane desires to get revenge for the slain family. Now she knew that she was dying as well. You bastard, she thought. *If I am going to die, then so are you!* With her right hand, she drew her magical dagger and focused her will power, attempting to drown out the searing pain in her left lower arm and hand. She did a short Shadow Walk and landed precisely on Ashford's enormous head! With her legs wrapped around his long neck, she stabbed her dagger into his right eye!

Chan felt the dragon's body wildly lurching, waves of involuntary muscle reactions surging through its seventy foot long, snake-like body, but she willed her legs to hold on, gripping hard as if they were around a horse. She pulled the dagger out and fought to hang on as Ashford's body writhed in agony and began falling from the trunk of the tree. Again she stabbed her dagger down, this time into its left eye, thrusting it in with all of the force she could muster. Ashford's body jerked hard to the right and her dagger snapped with a loud cracking sound. She was falling, so was the dragon. Cold water hit her followed by a massive weight landing on her body. Chan knew that this was the end, the force of the dragon's weight shot the remaining air out of her lungs like a bursting balloon. Death would come quickly now.

Wen used her Duska skills to Mind Link to Chan and was momentarily overwhelmed with the searing pain coming from Chan's body. She was able to see the dagger snapping like a twig and the two falling down into the waters not far from her own. She felt the massive exhale of air from Chan's body, just as Chan did. Wen acted. She Shadow Walked a few feet, grabbed a hold of her sister's right hand and Shadow Walked them both back inside their safe haven cavern. She cast her Light spell and looked at herself and sister. They were drenched in swamp muck. Foul smelling waters dripped off of them onto the stone floor. Leeches wiggled over her exposed flesh and she knew more were probably beneath their clothes. However, what commanded her instant attention was Chan's left lower arm and hand. The flesh was slowly dissolving right before her eyes! An awful rotting, foul-smelling vapor rose from the decaying flesh! She gagged. What could she do to stop it?

Chan's body lurched and her lungs and chest gave a huge gasp for air, startling Wen for a moment. Then, she saw her unconscious sister's body breathing again and she began wracking her mind for what she could do for the rotting arm.

Barons Jie and Li were with Baron Gang and his two Mages Hui and Ji, along with the assassin Li Shan. Both younger barons were using their special abilities that their new Circles of Ascension had given them. True, their eyes had also changed color to match the uniquely colored threads of their Circles, a swampy green and a pinkish green, respectively, much to their eternal annoyance. Yes, they'd cursed Brother Jiri for not having told them that their eyes would take on the color of their Circle's threads, but it was too late for that. Still, their new Circles gave them an ability that their older brother Gang didn't have. While Gang had inherited their father's original Circle here on Jing, he did not inherit the many special abilities that an original owner of a new Circle had. Among these was one that the priestesses had: the ability to follow and monitor Shadow Walks.

"Hey, I got them!" Baron Jie called out.

"Right, me too. Now we got you, pesky sisters!" Baron Li added, not wanting to be left out in the eyes of his older brother, Gang.

"Brilliant, brothers. Let's go capture them. Looks like Ashford failed in his ambush attempt. Well, never trust a dragon, I always say. Come on, Jie. Take us to them. Chan and Wen, your rebel days are finally over!" Baron Gang exclaimed excitedly, punching his fist high into the air. He was about to do something that even his father had been unable to do for nearly a dozen years now, capture his renegade daughters, ending their constant meddling in planet affairs. He felt certain of victory now. Always make contingency, backup plans was his motto. Today, it worked to perfection. He wagered that Ashford would botch his carefully laid trap for the Swamp Raiders, but his backup plan was working to perfection!

The six men double checked their many weapons and then they held hands with Barons Jie and Li. Jie then stepped them all into the Shadows, a swirling mass of blackness, but with

their own planet still visible beneath their feet. A moment later, Baron Jie stepped them out onto the foul smelling swamp land just in front of the mouth of the cavern and safe haven of the Swamp Raiders. Baron Gang attempted to move into the entrance, but ran smack into their Force Screen. “Damn, Force Wall.”

Baron Li cast his Dispel Magic but it failed to bring the two walls down. Baron Jie attempted it a second time and also failed. “Let a man do it,” Baron Gang teased his brothers, knowing that had nothing to do with it. This particular spell just merely had a chance to bring it down. However, his was successful and he gave a smirking look to his younger brothers. “Li Shan, guard the entrance. Mages prepare defensive spells. Let we Duska enter. Remember, we want them alive if possible,” Gang ordered. Then, he yelled loudly, “Okay, Chan, Wen, the game is up. Surrender peacefully and we won’t harm you.” He was a bit hesitant about just walking into this unknown cavern, after all, they had killed eighteen dragons.

Inside, Wen had begun to examine the rapidly dissolving lower arm of Chan, frantically trying to think of anything that she could do to arrest the corrosive action of the green slime that still covered the arm from just below the elbow on down. She tried to use a Create Water spell to wash it off, but that had no effect, the slime was somehow sticky. Just then, her Duska senses kicked in, warning her of an imminent attack! She cursed, “Damn! How did they find this place?” Suddenly, she realized that this whole thing had been a cleverly designed trap! Only another Duska could have possibly followed her Shadow Walk back here. That meant her brothers were coming after them and were likely right outside. Their protective Force Walls would delay them, but only briefly. She could not fight her brothers, they were far too strong for her. Besides, all of her weapons were back on the boat, she’d abandoned them while diving overboard.

Wen thought fast. If she Shadow Walked from here bringing the still unconscious Chan with her, her brothers would surely be able to follow her no matter where she went on Jing. Worse, she really didn’t know where she could possibly go on Jing where she and Chan would be safe! Wen thought fast, she had to do something to save her sister and herself. They had to get away from her brothers, but Chan desperately needed medical attention. She fought down the idea that perhaps it was already too late for Chan. The sneering voice of Gang entered her ears, ordering her to surrender. In desperation, she did the only thing that she could think of doing to get them to safety. She took her sister’s good arm in hers and again dragged Chan into another Shadow Walk. This time it was a long walk!

“Hey, they are Shadow Walking again!” Baron Jie yelled to Gang, as the older brother stepped cautiously into the dark cavern.

“Damn! Can you follow them or see where they are going this time?” Baron Gang yelled back, quickly rushing back outside to the others.

“Shit, they are going off-planet, deep into the Shadows!” Baron Li pronounced, growling

more excited by the minute.

“Crap! We almost had them,” Baron Gang admitted. “Well, see if you can follow them. Where the devil are they going now?”

Both brothers didn’t answer, they were both off into the Shadows themselves, at least partially so, monitoring the route taken by their sisters. They followed a good deal behind the two fleeing sisters and before long saw that they were heading for Adapazan! *Damn*, Jie thought, *they are fleeing to our archenemies!* Both watched a little longer until their sisters finally left the Shadows, then they returned to Jing.

“Well, they are on Adapazan now,” Baron Jie proclaimed as he and his younger brother stepped back onto the swamp land.

“Well, good riddance. While it would have been best to have tried them for their crimes here, I guess this result is almost as good. At least they won’t be meddling in Jing affairs any longer. You two, keep a sharp eye on any possible return to Jing that they might make in the future. I expect to be informed the moment that they return here. Come on, let’s get out of this smelly swampland!” The six men quickly reappeared back in Gang’s private study.