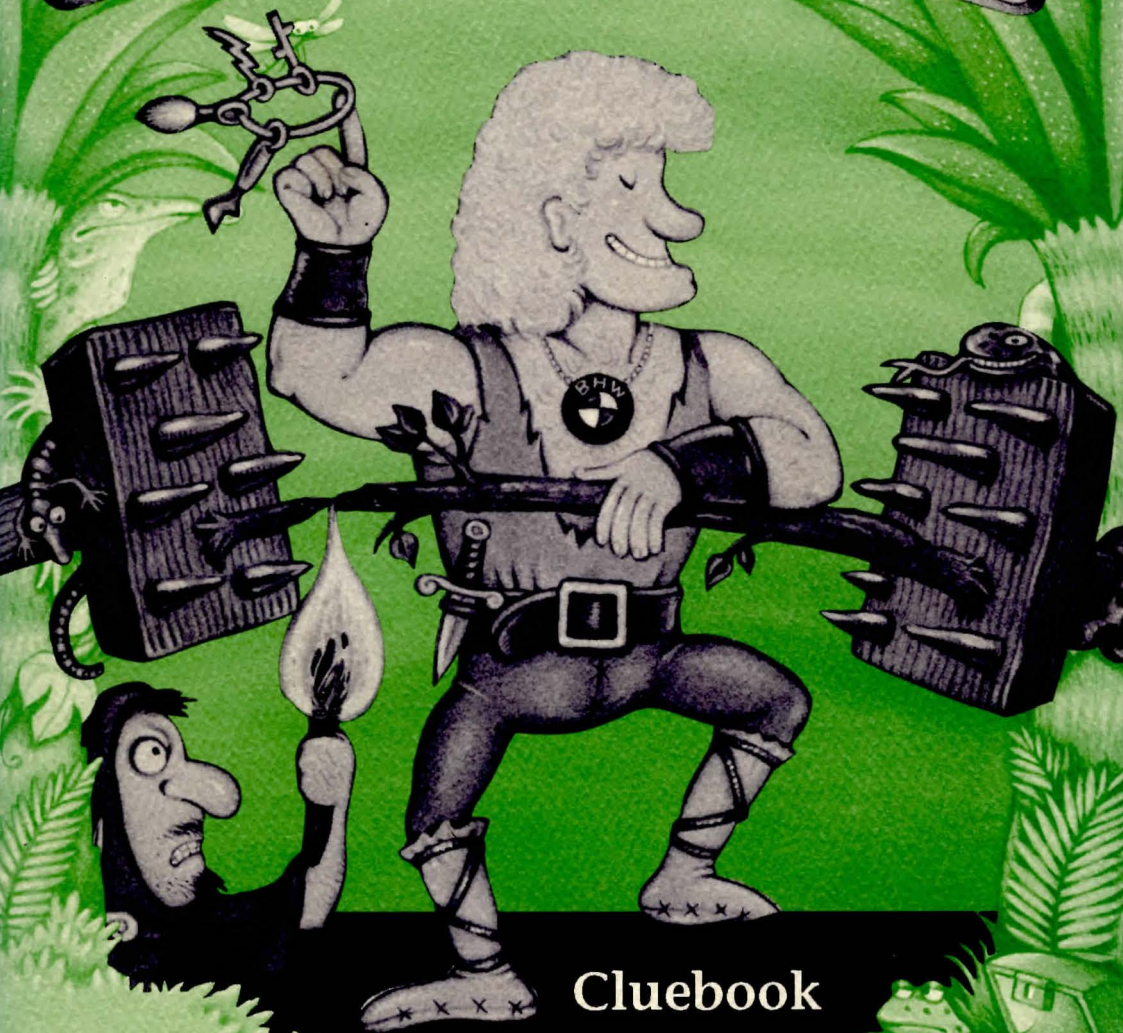


KEEP the THIEF



Cluebook



KEEF the THIEF

“I was a Teenage God-King”

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KEEP THE THIEF!

It was a long time ago...

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THE JUNGLE OF THE TRI-CITY AREA

I'm sitting alone in this jungle, watching dozens of tiny notes drift away in the sluggish breeze. I just got kicked out of my home town so this is my first time out. I guess I gave the Eldest One too much lip, so he gave me a one-way pass to the best attitude adjustment center he could think of: The Real World.

There're all sorts of sounds in the jungle alien to my ears: leaves rustling against each other; the wind sighing in the highest branches of the trees; heavy breathing in the dense vegetation. My heart's pounding out my chest because I'm not sure what I should be doing or how hard it's going to be to do it. I remember the Eldest One's advice: *You might want to find a stout tree limb to defend yourself with*, so I search until I find a tree limb the size of my arm. I yank as hard as I can, but the limb moves me more than I do it. I let it whip me around for a while before moving to a smaller one. It snaps off without a hassle.

I tell my heart to shut up and sit down. Between my unfocused fear and the aerobic routine with the tree, it's beating like a hummingbird motor. I sit down for a while, checking out the scenery, when I spot a break in the trees to the south. I can barely see a city off in the distance. It must be Same Mercon: Jeweled City, Center of Shameless Wealth, Land of Immoral Decadence. In other words, my kind of town. I take a deep breath, thrust my branch into my belt, and strut out of the jungle and into a thief's paradise.

WELCOME TO SUNNY SAME MERCON

Spread out before me, perched on the rim of the Great Southern Bay and sparkling in the sunshine, stands Same Mercon. At first glance I see a city alive with activity. Now I see a hundred sea gulls fighting over tons of raw sewage flowing out of the city and into the bay. I know a city that can produce that much waste is a city of vast wealth and resources indeed.

At the bridge stands a guard. He'll probably demand to see citizenship documents, or trading papers, or at least a visa to cross the bridge and enter the city. There's no possible way to sneak past him, so I just walk steadily by, hoping he doesn't jerk my collar or put a blade to my spine.

The guard makes no challenge. It was so easy — am I mistaken? I call back to the guard, "This is Same Mercon, isn't it?"

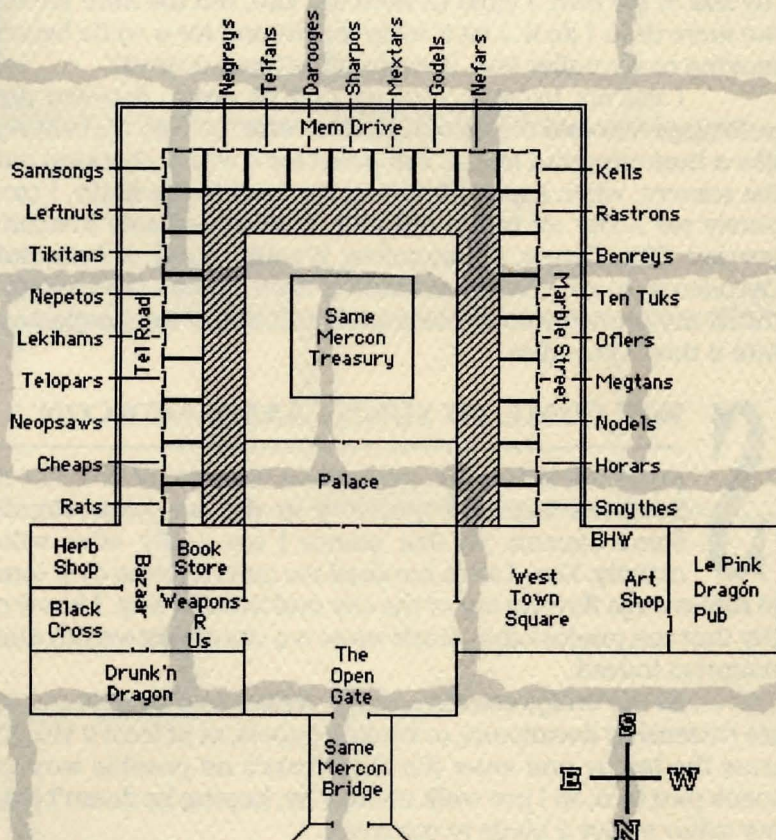
"That is the Open Gate of Same Mercon. Anyone may


pass." He looks me over. "And I mean, *anyone*." He turns again to stare out into the jungle just in time to miss the gesture I flip in his direction.

As I cross the bridge, I see a couple of men in the traditional black robes of the Church of Mem. I have a lot of bad memories of my childhood in the Church, so I give them a wide berth.

The city's filled with busy people; I seem to be the only one standing aimlessly in the main courtyard. To the left's the Bazaar and to the right's the Town Square. I'm not wasting my time with petty theft, so I walk straight ahead into the Palace.

Same Mercon





Flanked by two guards is the Merchant King of Same Mercon and his daughter. The Merchant King looks at me through one eye and says, "New in town, Eh? Well, let me tell you the way things are around here..." He starts bragging about his town and wealth, but I hear almost none of it. Standing before me is a woman unlike any I had ever seen in my backward, small town existence. Her lips are as red as rose petals, her eyes shine with the intense blue of sapphires, her hair is as dark as a moonless night, and her backless gown makes me wish she had accidentally put it on backwards this morning.

"And in case you were thinking about stealing anything..." The Merchant King warns me away from any ideas of theft, but my mind is on other crimes. The princess sizes me up, and then she gives me a seductive smile. She murmurs something about her preference towards big men with no intelligence, so I grab my tree limb to bash my IQ into submission. In my smoothest voice, I ask the princess about her men.

She whispers that the answer could be mine for a mere sixty gold pieces. Sixty gold pieces! That's more than half of everything I own! My mind scoffs and prepares to leave, but my glands take control, forcing me to hold out my gold pieces. She plucks some gold from my hand and slips the loot into a place I would have killed half the world to go. She leans tantalizingly close to my ear and whispers that a unique and very expensive gift would earn her affection.

I hardly hear the Merchant King offer to tell me, for a mere thirty gold pieces, what he does to thieves. I don't know and I don't want to know. How did he know I was a thief, anyway? I turn and stumble out of the palace, kicking myself until I trip and fall onto the dusty ground. I should have known that giving the princess an expensive gift was the way to her affections, but my hormones had to blow half my stash to be sure.

Feeling like an idiot, I wander over to the Bazaar and bump into a nervous character hanging out in front of a tavern called the Drunk'n Dragon. He has this hunted look in his eyes, like a three-legged raccoon whose days are numbered. "I can tell you might need some of this stuff," he says in a low voice as he opens his vest. Inside's a complete assortment of thieving tools.

Are the words *I AM A THIEF* tattooed on my forehead? I ask him for a price list, and of course I can't afford any of the good stuff. To get money to buy thief tools, I have to steal. To steal, I have to have thief tools. I'm screwed. The guy's feeling sorry for me because he offers to tell me where and how I can lift some items. He wants forty gold pieces for the information. I had about a hundred when I came to town, and the princess took sixty, so

I can give him the remaining forty. I'll come out ahead once I steal some of the items he describes.

I count the coins in my hand and come up short. I look through my sack three times before I realize that the sweet and sexy princess had sticky fingers. She must've taken about five extra gold pieces from my sweaty palm while my eyes were mapping every square inch of the front of her dress. The thief's waiting, so I mumble some excuse about "going it on my own" and head over to the door of the Drunk'n Dragon.

I take a quick peek through the barred window and spot a guard. It's not hard to do — they always look so...overdressed. Wrestling with a guard is more than I want to deal with, so I wander over to the Town Square. There's a pub called the Pink Dragon. There're no guards here, so I walk in and take a table.

The waitress strolls over to me, smiling. I remember my last encounter with a female in this town — the bitch princess, so it's hard for me to return the smile. The waitress is fair-skinned, with dirty blond hair (and by that I mean she hasn't washed it lately), but somehow she wears the dirt well. Her eyes look me over much the same as the Princess's did, sending my guard up. She winks and offers me a screwdriver for only fifteen gold. I grumble about the high-priced drinks and buy the screwdriver.

Scanning the bar, I see a man at the next table who looks like a shady merchant. He probably knows where some good pickings are, so I take my drink and go over to his table. As it turns out, he's a merchant dealing in rare and interesting items. What luck! He'd know where there was an interesting item or two. I ask him what he deals in, and he says it'll cost me twenty gold to find out.


I can't believe it. I can't get directions to the *toilet* without paying for it. But still, this might be my lucky break, so I give him my last twenty gold pieces. I am now completely broke.

He pockets the money, leans over to me, and whispers, "I deal in rare and unusual pets."

Pets?! I jump up from the table in disgust and send my chair crashing to the floor. This moron likes his treasures with fleas! Everybody in the pub is watching me so I give the animal lover a sneer and stomp out of the pub instead of throttling him like I should. I stomp past the Open Gate, past the Drunk'n Dragon, and south to a book store where I peer in. What need do I have for books? Gold is what I need: G-O-L-D. I resume my furious stomping.

To the south are the slums of Same Mercon. On the north end of Tel Road is a stretch of low-rent housing units set into a single brick wall. Half of the doors are so decrepit they no longer





close. They probably don't hold much in the way of loot, but I have to start somewhere.

I hear the footsteps of a guard walking a beat along the road. Looking as inconspicuous as possible while loitering in the middle of the street, I wait until the guard passes me. Then I dash into the first house, one with a small wooden plaque with *The Neopsaws* etched in it.

There's a dog inside, but it doesn't attack. I think it enjoys the diversion of seeing a new face in its master's house. After a quick look, I can see that there's nothing of value in the place, so I turn to leave. Then I remember, *I deal in rare and unusual pets.*

The dog looks ordinary enough to me, even a bit mangy, but what do I know? I reach down and grab the dog, who immediately sinks its canine teeth into my hand. I yelp and drop the malicious pooch on its head. Determined to get the dog and escape before the guard returns, I try again with the same result. By the third try I manage to pick up the dog while holding its mouth shut. I back out of the house and run back the way I came, looking as guilty as a cat with a mouthful of feathers.

I return to the Pink Dragon with my furry bounty. As I walk in, I accidently stumble into this drunk and his two vicious dogs. The man assumes I'm picking a fight and unleashes his dogs on me. I pull the branch out of my pants and start swinging.

One solid blow to the head and one dog drops dead at my feet. The man lunges at me next, but he's so drunk that three hits to his head and chest put him on the ground. Before I can check and see if he's dead or unconscious, the second mad dog jumps me. As it rips into my arm, I bash its skull with my branch and put it down next to its master.

By the time I stand back up and check myself for injuries, everyone in the pub has gone back to their business. I pat the guy down and pocket the fifteen gold pieces I find — it might come in handy next time I need directions to the bathroom.

I sit down across from the merchant and pop the small dog on the table in front of him. "Whaddya think of this?"

His eyes open wide as he shifts his gaze between me and the dog. He reaches into his vest and plays with some gold pieces before tossing me a sack and moving for the dog. I smash a fist on the table in front of him. He looks up at me as I warily pick up the sack and quickly count the gold. I figure that any merchant who charges twenty gold pieces to tell you what he sold was shifty as sand.

"Seven hundred!" I blurt. I can't fathom how this ugly dog could be worth even one hundred gold. "Seven hundred for that dog?"

The merchant draws himself up and says, "I won't go higher — take it or leave it."

He won't go higher, I think to myself. I suppress laughter and give him a hard stare. "All right, seven hundred it is." He tucks the dog away in his jerkin as I leave the bar.

I immediately run back to the slums and enter the Cheaps' ramshackle abode. I ransack the whole place and don't find a thing. The Rats live next door (though I don't see any) and their house is empty of booty too. Unlike the other houses, the Lekihams have a door that closes — lucky for me it was stupidly left unlocked.

As I step into the house, the bright glare from a golden goblet grabs my eye. I stuff it into my shirt, make a quick rummage of the place, and run back out of the house just as another guard turns the corner and heads towards me. "How do you do, gentle sir?" I ask him with a humble nod. He looks at the strange lump straining against my jerkin, but says nothing.

When the guard completes his pass, I dash into the Nepetos where I find an exquisite plate on the mantle. I stuff it into my jerkin along with the goblet and head for the next house, where all I find is a toothbrush. My teeth are feeling pretty hairy, so I slip it into a pocket.


The Leftnuts' house is empty, as is the Negreys'. The Samsongs have a very nice painting on the wall which I carefully remove from its hook and tuck into my shirt.

I'm pleased with my loot until I find the Telfans' house. Up till now, I found *stuff*. Now I find *a true prize*. There, on the wall, high above the fireplace, is something that makes my heart leap, my breath stop, and my pants tighten.

It's a bastard sword, half as tall as myself. I hoist the sword off its hooks and I proudly look it over like a father studying the face of his newborn. I can't toss the tree branch, for sentimental reasons, so I slide it over to make room for the sword.

All of the houses down to the corner are empty, for which I am grateful. I try to rub this knot out of my neck, wishing for a soft bed, but there is no way I can return to my home town. Another night in the jungle with fern leaves for blankets and compost for a pillow? Wait. I remember — the Drunk'n Dragon has an inn. I take a slow walk back to the Drunk'n Dragon, avoiding all confrontation.

Two steps inside and I'm attacked by three greasy, green goblins. Two are brandishing spears, while the third's trying to shoot arrows in the tiny space of the tavern. I quickly draw my bastard sword and put them away, bloodying my sword for the first time. The other people in the bar don't applaud, but I can



sense their relief when the last goblin drops. The slimy little corpses only have twenty-seven gold pieces between them, but the largest goblin's wearing some decent light mail. Since he isn't as greasy as the others and is roughly my size, I roll him out of his armor and slip it on.

Weak from hunger and hard work, I buy a good meal before paying for a room. Too tired to haggle, I pay full price and hit the straw.

Early next morning I'm back in the suburbs, taking on the Kells' residence. In the middle of the room on a trunk is a pile of gems. Looking carefully, I can see a trap connected between the gems and the fireplace. There's a variety of things I can do to disarm the trap, but I decide to go straight to the source: the fireplace. I can either stoke up the fire or brush back the embers into the fireplace. Since some paranoid elder taught me not to play with fire, I gently brush back the embers. Once the embers are gone, the mechanism's exposed and the trap is disarmed. I snatch up the gems without a hitch and run out of the house.

In the Benreys' house I find a heavy glove that I instantly know is some kind of weapon or armor. It's easy to see the trip wire trap leading from the glove to the candles. I can extinguish the candles, or maybe move them, but I have to decide quickly before the guard returns.

I reach up and remove the candle from the wall. Nothing happens. I grab the glove hastily, pinching my finger in the metal mesh of the glove. As I run for the door, I leave a snaking trail of blood on the Benreys' nice shag carpeting. I shift the glove to my uninjured hand and dash out of the house just before the guard rounds the corner.

I casually hide the bloody finger in my mouth as the guard passes. When his shadow disappears behind a distant building, I hit the Megtans, where I steal a gaudy but expensive-looking necklace without any trouble.

The Nodels have a tempting teapot on full display. Since it's not nailed down like most everything else, I accept this as my open invitation to steal it. The only catch to my free quarry is the trap. I consider kicking the teapot across the room and then hitting the floor to avoid the fire and brimstone. Then I wonder if the tea inside has something to do with the trap. I lift it carefully without spilling any tea, and I see that once I have the teapot off the hearth, the trap's no longer connected. I run back outside with my prize.

The Horars have nothing worth the effort, but the Smythes' have a necklace of gaudiness and worth similar to the Megtans' loot. I grab it and escape just as the guard returns.

After my afternoon's worth of work, I return to the Pink Dragon. I don't think the merchant would be interested in anything I have, since none of it's alive and shedding. There's a woman sitting at the bar by herself. Although she looks too refined for this bar, she has the air of a scavenger. I sit down next to her and ask about her occupation.

"I collect antiques." She eyes me carefully, and then she adds, "I wrote a book about some of the antiques many Same Mercon residents own, if you want to know what kind of things I like."

I'm suspicious about showing stolen goods to this woman, not knowing who she is, so I give her some gold and ask her to be more specific.

She fumbles for words, mumbling something about how her book lists antiques in this town that she wants. I can take a hint as well as the next thief; I don't need a castle dropped on my head. I get the idea that she'd pay handsomely for anything I might have stolen from the houses of Same Mercon. I peer down my collar into my shirt and rummage around for a bit, trying to determine what this woman might like.


Her eyes flicker with interest as I give her a glimpse of the goblet. Glancing discretely over both shoulders, she presses three hundred gold pieces into my palm in exchange for the glorified cup. I show her the plate and get a hundred gold for that. I'm on a roll, so I show her the two necklaces; she gives me eleven hundred gold for both.

With the addition of fifteen hundred gold to my pocket, I feel pretty happy. In good humor, I show her the toothbrush that I was going to polish up my smile with, when she grabs it and gives me four hundred gold. At this point, I want to give her everything, but all I have left of any real value is a painting and the teapot. I think the painter outside might give me more for the painting, and I have special plans for the teapot.

I walk outside and show the painting to the artist. The painting's nothing more than an oil-coated rag with color, but fortunately the artist has the insight to see that it's true art. He gives me five hundred gold, and I strut away holding the teapot like a shield. I feel like a million gold pieces. I head straight for the palace, where I again find the Merchant King and his stunningly-beautiful daughter.

Confident as a peacock, I walk up to her with the teapot behind my back. With a flourish, I bring it out. "For you, Princess. For your beauty, for your charm, and for your lovely pair of —"





Bolts of lightning shoot up from my groin, rifle through my brain, and blast out my ears. I fall to one side, holding, yet trying not to hold, my most delicate limb. The guards rib each other and laugh and I hear the Princess hiss, "How dare you think I would approve of such a gift? Next time, I'll be wearing my spiked heels!"

Somehow I manage to crawl out of the palace and waddle back to the Pink Dragon. Damn that teapot. Just as I raise it up to smash it into a million pieces, the waitress comes to get my order. I offer the teapot to her, just to get rid of it. She gives me a smile and two hundred gold for it — four times what I think it's worth! I wonder if she's married.

I'm tired, hurt, hungry, depressed, and I have to go to the bathroom. I slowly make my way back to the Drunk'n Dragon, buy a meal, and rent a room for the night. Curled up in a ball on the coarse straw, I sleep and fitfully dream of being chased down and cut to cubes with a bread knife. What's the point of sleeping if I can't dream of poppies and beautiful women in backless gowns?

The only places in Same Mercon I haven't been to are the book store and reagent shop. I have no need for books. I have even less need for reagents since I have no spell book. No spell book. Ah...spell *BOOK*. I hurry over to the book store.

The proprietor of the bookstore is a disgusting little man called Nick the Nose. He wears fetid rags and has a hook nose that hangs down over his mouth — I bet he really hates sneezing. With a curious wink, he comments on my strength and size, which means little from this gnome. He follows me around the store, repeatedly advising me to read books because smart and strong is better than dumb and strong. He and the princess could have some great arguments.

As I casually look over the selection of books, I spot a scroll that I really want to buy. I don't know what's in it — I just feel like taking my first step towards being a literate person with it. The scroll's only one hundred gold, so I flip the pieces over to Nick the Nose and leave. Outside the store, I unfurl the scroll. Bandus Aidus? Flickus Bickus? Emmus Exesus? I bought a spell scroll!

I need reagents for my spells so I head on over to the reagent shop. I'm not sure exactly what I need, so I buy a few of everything except roses, daffodils, and the Flower of Mem, which are too expensive and aren't good spell components anyway.

I want to mix my spells now, so I spread out my bearskin mixing cloth, form the Circle of Perfect Unity, and light my magic flame. The first spell's a healing spell called Bandus Aidus. It

speaks of a self-obsessed Greek, which is obviously Narcissus, and a spice for cooking, which could only be Peppermint. I mix Narcissus Root and Peppermint Sprigs in the flame, and I feel the power to heal surge in my palms.

The second spell's a light spell called Flickus Bickus. It speaks of plants that pierce the darkness, which is clearly Glow Grass, and of beasts of fire and flame, which could be nothing but Dragon's Drool. I mix the two and feel the power of illumination swell in my eyes.

The third spell's a weapon called Emmus Exesus, and it speaks of a deadly desert beast, which has to be Scorpion Tail. I mix it in the fire and feel the power of long range pain tingle in my fingertips.

The scroll hints that there are other spells, but it gives no clues as to their components. I mix up a couple more of each spell for the road.


Before I leave town, I go back to the book store and ask Nick for some information. He suggests I get a map before venturing out into the jungle. I agree to that, so I point out the window and say, "Nick, isn't that lovely creature looking at you?" As he's craning his head towards the window, I slip the map into my pants. Nick says he can't see anything, and I tell him I'm sure the horse will pass by again.

Nick mentions something about rare reagents, so I tip him for more information. He tells me of an old man that sold him some magical bird eggs. The old man claimed he was from Land's End. Land's End sounds like a good place to go since I've picked Same Mercon clean of goodies. First I need some protection, so I go to the weapons shop.

The smith is busy strapping his apprentice for one reason or another, but he seems glad for the interruption when I show up. He mentions Tel Hande, the police state to the north, so I ask him about it. He warns me away from it, but since I have a terrible habit of going out of my way to get into trouble, I press him on the point. He suggests I buy a crossbow to kill the Tel Hande guards from afar so I take his advice and make the purchase. I also want some armor for the journey so I point up at the sky and say, "Look at that!" As he searches the sky, I steal a serpent skin, some gauntlets, and an ogre skull. He looks at me blankly and I apologize that the beautiful bird I saw was gone. The smith doesn't seem to notice that I'm suddenly in possession of a lot of new armor.

Needing some good hardware, I go back to the retired thief and buy one of everything. Just for good measure, I buy an extra set of lockpicks.





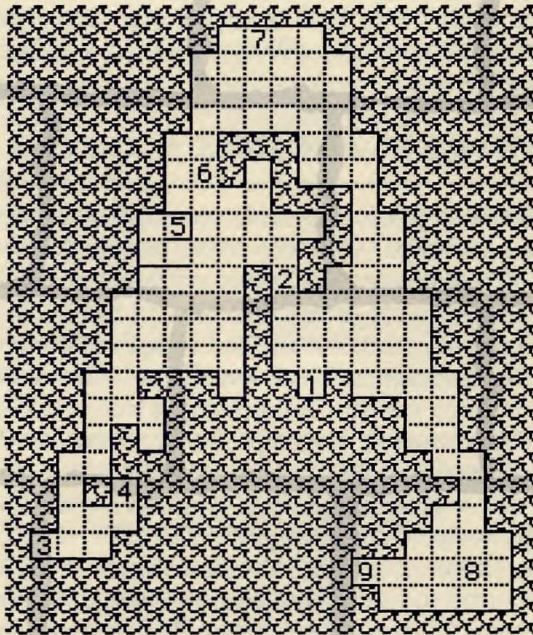
I walk out of Same Mercon one day after I got there, carrying tools, armor, gold, and a spellbook. I started with nothing, and in less than two days I've accumulated more possessions than I ever had in my home town. Although I'm feeling righteously smug, I still avoid the gaze of the guard as I leave Same Mercon.

N WHERE IN THE HELL IS LAND'S END?

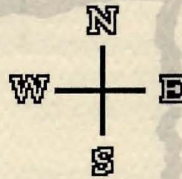
Nick's description of the old man makes me stop and think. He's an old guy who lives in the jungle. A hermit. He sells spell reagents to Nick, so he must be a magician of sorts. It sounds a lot to me like the old man's Al Handratta himself. I remember that the old God-King Telloc sent troops after Al Handratta long ago, so I sit down and pull my history notes out of my shorts. They say that Telloc sent his troops to the southwest corner of the continent. That's probably where Land's End is.

Once in the jungle, I check the map I stole from Nick the Nose. It's not a great map since it doesn't show much of the jungle. What a rip off! I almost go back to get a refund, but reason intervenes. The map does tell me that the river Tel Roca stands between me and the southwest corner of the continent. I'll have to go northwest following the river until I find a way to get across.

Jungle Map




1. Same Mercon
2. Tel Roca Bridge
3. Land's End
4. Hermit's Hut
5. Mem Santi
6. Waterfall
7. Tel Hande
8. Fiend Hole
9. Tel Empor



After hiking for a while, I come to a bridge. On it is a guard standing next to some stuffed sea birds — trophies from his crossbow kills? A little too bored for his own good? The Same Mercon guard didn't seem very picky about people coming and going, so I step onto the bridge.

Thhwap! The crossbow bolt rakes my face and lodges itself into a tree behind me. I fall to my knees, shocked and in intense pain. "Wha..." I say. "Buh...buh...buh," I add. Then I find my voice and shout, "You could have *said* something!"

He just smiles, standing there with his birds, and it occurs to me that his uniform's different from that of the Same Mercon guard. This one must be from Tel Hande — the smith warned me



about these guys. I pretend to fall into the bushes in agony, loading my crossbow while I'm down. Time for something more than a conversation, less than a fight. It's one of those things one has to do sometimes that simply falls under the category of *OTHER*.

The guard drops dead at the first shot. I search his body quickly and find a small scroll — a Tel Hande Passport. I slip this little treasure into my pocket and give the guard a slap of gratitude on his bloody cheek. Looks like the birds are going to get the chance to stuff themselves on this Tel Hande entrée.

I check the map again, but can't quite figure it out. There's something weird about it, things shifting this way and that. Oh...it's a minor magic item! It always shows the area around me, with me always being in the middle. I'll have to go west a bit before I can go south.

With the occasional help of the map, I walk southwest until I reach the extreme southwest corner of the continent. Looking around at the starlit daytime sky, I know this is Land's End. Before me is a mighty tree, but not so mighty that it can't be climbed. Up I go, hoping it's got the same eggs the old man had brought to Same Mercon. Sure enough, sitting out on a little limb is a large phoenix egg.

Getting the egg's another story. It's precariously set on the limb, almost like a trap. I tie myself to the tree with a rope and carefully lean out towards the egg. With as gentle a touch possible, I gently take the egg, and then I steal it.

Climbing up and down the tree wasn't exactly like taking a Sunday walk. The tree scratched and bruised me badly, so I cast Bandus Aidus to repair myself. I feel a hundred percent better, which is fortunate, since several cretins ambush me as I'm picking leaves out of my hair. I try to take the pacifist's way out and run, but they insist on pursuing me. In a minimum of chops and stabs, I teach my aggressors the error of turning the hunted into the hunter.

Consulting the map, I find a small peninsula a short distance to the northeast. I wonder if the old man lives there. Making my way to the tip of the islet, I come upon a hut.

HOME OF THE HERMIT

In front of the hut's an old man who has his face turned upward as if he's trying to get a suntan on it. When he hears my footsteps, he lowers his head and loudly asks why I came all this way to bother an old man. It's the immortal Al Handratta. This is the perfect opportunity to get

some good information, but he won't open his mouth until I give him two hundred and fifty gold pieces.

I don't have to listen more than two seconds to figure out that old Al has a couple of cracked eggs in his basket. He rambles on for a while before he presses his thin, cracked lips together and waits expectantly for five hundred and fifty more gold pieces. I grudgingly hand him the gold. After a minute of fumbling, he finds a key in his filthy robe and says that the key leads to his treasures. Then he mumbled, "Horse. Hairy palms. Mine. For me." I don't need it spelled out for me that if I got him one of these horses, he'd give me the key.

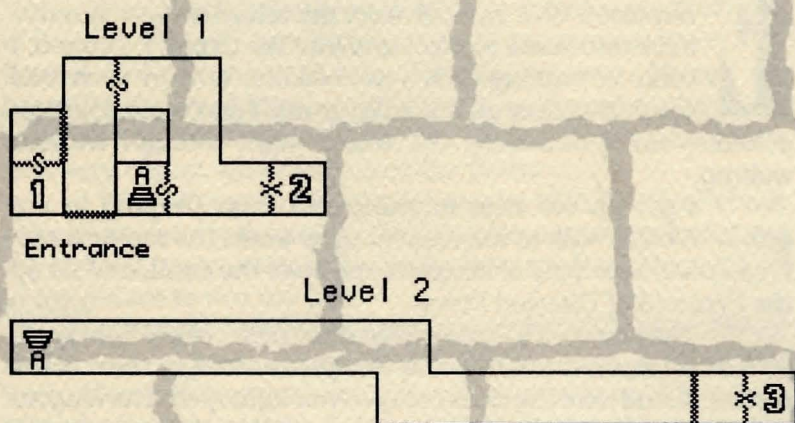
The old man hints, "There's something you should know — and fear — about my treasure. Uh-hum. Uh-hum. Hack hack!" Al tells me between coughs, "You know, dear boy, four hundred gold would make excellent lubrication for a dry throat." As I hand over the rest of my loot, I realize that Al's not as crazy as he seems. After all, in less than ten minutes he's convinced me to give him all my gold. With a small twist of a smile, he tells me that his treasure's guarded by a three-headed hydra.

Swell. I decide to check out Al's hut without the key, just to see what the place is like. I don't know whether to believe in Al's hydra or not, but I proceed carefully just in case the beast is more than a vision in his deranged mind. Al shakes his head as I walk past him and into his hut. Just as I pass through the door, a corpse, a crazy woman, and some gross goo attack. I triumph against this strange trio, but not without a couple wounds.

The hut's dark inside. To save my strength, I light the wall torches with my flint instead of casting a light spell. The place is immense. From the outside, it looks like a small, simple hut, but on the inside it looks like a sprawling dungeon.

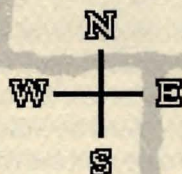


Hermit's Hut



LEGEND

- ⋯ Door
- ⋯-S Secret Door
- ⋯-X Special Door
- ⌆ Ladder/Stairs Up
- ⌆ Ladder/Stairs Down



1. Al Handratta's Library
2. Hall of Wisdom
3. Telloc's Library

I walk forward and take the first left. Inside the room is a corpse which I kill again with two swipes. The room's suspiciously empty, so my first thought is *secret door*. I search until I find a secret door on the south wall. The door's locked, so I get out my lock picks. I feel a quiver of excitement as I slip my tool into the hole.

I ruin five lockpicks before I tumble the lock.

Inside is a neglected room filled with dust and books — Al's library. As I sift through his books, I find another spell scroll. By the looks of it, it's better than the one I already have. This scroll's enough to make the trip worthwhile, so I leave Al's hut and make my way back to Same Mercon.

E WELCOME BACK TO SAME MERCON

xhausted and starved from my return trek, I stumble back into Same Mercon and into the Drunk'n Dragon. I come in walking such a crooked line and in such bad shape that they all think I'm drunk. I don't care. I just eat a hearty meal and sleep the whole night through without waking.

I get up the next morning stiff from sleeping in my armor. A brisk walk to the reagent shop works the soreness out. I replenish my supply of reagents, roll open the scroll, and set up the Pyramid of Directed Power.

The first spell's a more powerful version of my light spell, called Genusus Elektus. It speaks of Light and Fire, so I look in the first scroll and read the clues to my minor light spell. The reagent of Light is Glow Grass and the reagent of Fire is Dragon's Drool. The spell also makes reference to the bird that sees best at night, which has to be Eye of Owl. I mix the three reagents in the flame and feel a more powerful source of illumination swell in my eyes.

The second spell's a magical search spell called Huvius Vacuumus. It refers to something that's especially dark and dense, which must be Black Pearl. I mix it but nothing happens. I reread the clue and see that Focused *Sight* is needed; Sight is Eye of Owl. I mix Black Pearl with Eye of Owl and feel the power of focused sight tingle in my eyes. At this point my eyes are getting pretty full.


The third is a weapon called Cynus Arcenus, and it speaks of the powers of Hatred and Focusing. I mix Scorpion Tail and Black Pearl in the fire and feel the power of long range pain and suffering tingle in my fingertips.

The fourth spell is an even more powerful weapon called Agenus Oranus, which needs Hatred and Magnification. Hatred is Scorpion Tail, but I don't know Magnification. It's something that grows underground. Kiki Root's the only reagent from underground, so I mix it with Scorpion Tail. The power of longer range pain and suffering throbs in my fingers to the point of bursting.

The fifth spell's a magical protection spell called Riteus Gardus. It speaks of Self and Protection, which is Narcissus Root and something else. The book speaks of an animal that all other animals run from, though not from fear of their lives. That's a skunk if I ever heard it. I mix Skunk Juice with Narcissus Root and a strange greasy feeling invades my armpits.

The scroll hints that there're other spells, something about turning energy into matter, but it gives no clues as to their





components. I mix up a couple more of each spell and then pack up my stuff.

Standing here in the reagent shop, it strikes me that three of the plants for sale aren't spell reagents, but flowers. *Women like flowers.* Perhaps that will win the princess over. There's the beautiful Flower of Mem, unique in the land, and fantastically expensive at seven hundred gold pieces. I smile at my discovery, look very casual, and deftly steal the flower.

While I'm primed to steal, I stop by Nick the Nose's book store on my way to the palace. Strolling innocently up and down the aisles of books, I steal all I can for later reading. Then, it's off to the palace to win my love.

I drop to one knee and offer the beautiful Flower of Mem to the equally beautiful princess, checking her feet for spiked heels. "For you. Precious beauty for precious beauty." She gently takes the flower and sighs. Taking my arm in hers, she presses her full lips to my ear and whispers, "The palace doors are open to you. And I mean *all* the doors."

With a feigned smile of swooning anticipation, I slip past her and into the palace. My smile melts once I'm inside. After what she did to me last time, I have no intention of letting her near me again. As I grumble my way down the corridor, a group of mercenaries attack me. I grab my crossbow and shoot them from far away so they can't land a sword on me. After all four are dead, I search their bodies and gather only eleven gold pieces. If I'm going to make a decent living out of killing things at random, I'll have to step up production.

I know the palace treasury's around somewhere — I can practically *smell* it. If the merchant king has a portion of a brain, he would have put it behind a secret door. I search every inch of the corridor as I circle around. As soon as I get to the far end of the building, four palace guards circle me like starving vultures as I feebly swing my sword.

My vision begins to cloud over and my body begins to fail when I suddenly remember my spells. I cast Riteus Gardus for protection, blast the guards with a couple Agenus Oranus spells, and then follow up with a few Emmus Exesus. Finally, I cast a few heals on myself until I'm too exhausted to cast any more. There are two guards left standing. I down one from long range, but the last one is a spearsman. To kill him I have to run up close, fire my crossbow, and then run away to reload. After a bit of this comic shuffling, the spearsman hits the stone floor.

I frisk them all for gold. The commander's wearing dragon hide for armor, and I relieve him of it. It looks like quality stuff, so I shed my serpent skin and put on the better dragon hide.

Resuming my search, I find a secret door on the northern wall. I slip a pick in the lock and the door swings open with a touch.

The first thing I see is a horde of fantastic wealth. The second thing I see is a horrendous tangle of traps. The terrible battle I just fought leaves me wounded near death, so I go back to the Drunk'n Dragon to recoup before I take on the traps.

I return to the Same Mercon treasury and everything's just as I left it. There are traps on the floor, on the ceiling, on the walls, in the gold... I take a deep breath to check if the air's trapped too — it isn't. I start with the walls.

It looks as if big nasty spikes could shoot out of the right wall and give me a lobotomy, a appendectomy, a castration, and an amputation all at once. I've always disarmed traps the most direct way possible, so I wasn't going to change my strategy now. I wave my sword in front of the trap.

Sprong! Four spikes fly out from the right wall and embed themselves in the stone of the left wall. One of them grazed my arm on its way by, but that was a small price to pay.

I turn to the ceiling trap. It looks like maybe the entire roof might cave in. Or a duct will open and fill the room with sewage. Or maybe a dozen poisonous stonefish will drop from the ceiling. I rub my chin for a while before I realize that this trap has a trap. Whoever designed this room knew someone would try to disarm all the traps, so they put in a trap that would work only if someone tried to disarm it. In this case, two wrongs did make a right. The best thing I can do is ignore it.


Next is the floor. There's a shiny square in the center of the floor that smells an awful lot like a pit. I tap the floor carefully with my sword.

Whoosh! The floor opens up, exposing a huge pit. There's nothing inside, but that wouldn't have made the fall any more pleasant. Next is the gold pile. This is a tricky one, too. I can't determine if the trap would launch flaming spears from the right, or release a hungry wild pig from the left. After a moment I conclude that this is another trap within a trap, so I move on to the back wall.

I look throughout the room and notice that there are many things worth stealing — the sword in the gold pile near the back wall isn't one of them. It looks like a lever to disarm the trap, but should I twist it or remove it? I toss a mental coin and come up with *twist it!*

Bzzzt! I expose a mechanism that looks like it would have sent a bolt of lightning across the room to the back wall. I'm five for five.





That leaves the pedestal. On the right side's a suspicious-looking hole; must be for projectiles or poisonous gas. I ram my knife into the hole. Crunch! I think I crimped a nozzle with my knife. Poison gas, all right.

The last trap is at the front of the pedestal. It might be a trigger for something, maybe an ax or a guillotine. I carefully, painstakingly, desperately push on the front panel. One... more... trap. Click! My head's still attached to my body, a good sign. I survey the room, marvelling at my skill at disarming traps.

I quickly grab the scroll, which turns out to be a spell book even more awesome than my previous two. I grab the white sword, which isn't as good as my bastard sword, but I can't seem to turn down an opportunity to take what isn't mine. I tuck it next to my bastard sword. Next I take the crystal shard. It's not like any gem I've ever seen, but it's pretty and I can make it into a nice table lamp. I scoop up the five hundred gold pieces.

The last item is the jeweled arm on the pedestal. This has to be the arm that the fisherman dredged up from the sea after the fall of the great God-King Telloc. I remember how Same Mercon considered it an icon that bestowed supernatural luck of amazing proportion on whomever possessed it. I heft it down from the pedestal, completely misjudging its weight. The two of us went crashing to the floor. I bruise a couple ribs, but the arm isn't damaged by the fall. I'm getting luckier already! I came within a hair's breadth from falling into the pit. Before I had the Arm of Wealth, I would've fallen into the pit *and* landed on my sword.

I walk out of the palace, looking pregnant with all the loot under my shirt. It must remind the merchant king of the grandchildren he's been hoping for, as he smiles wanly and glances at his daughter. She doesn't notice; she's busy watching me while smoothing out the wrinkles on her lips with her tongue.

In desperate need of a respite, I return to the Drunk'n Dragon, where they seem to be expecting me. Not only do they have a room prepared, but they have bandages next to the bed. I eat a hearty meal and then tuck myself in for a few hours.

When I awake, I excitedly head straight for the reagent shop with my new and improved scroll. I pick up more reagents, open the spell book, and sit down to set up the Cube of Irresistible Force.

First on the list is Takus Tylenus, a powerful healing spell of Health, Healing, and Power. Self is Narcissus Root and Healing is Peppermint Sprigs, but Power is a new one. The clues refer in some convoluted way to a body infection, which I presume to be warts, so I add Wart Weed. I burn the three reagents and a powerful warmth fills my hands.

The second spell is a magical opening spell called Dranus Liquus. It needs Focus, which is Black Pearl, and Opening, which is a mystery. The clue alludes to a massive animal — a rhino, perhaps? I mix Rhino's Horn and Black Pearl and apply flame liberally. A twisting sensation tickles my forehead where the third eye is rumored to be.

The third spell's a nasty weapon called Qnus Arudes, and it tells of the powers of Focusing, Power, and Hatred. I mix Black Pearl, Wart Weed, and Scorpion Tail, and I feel the power of long range mega-pain and mega-suffering charge my fingernails.

The fourth spell is a more powerful version of Agenus Oranus called Napus Almus. It needs Hatred and Magnification, and the added ingredient of Power, so I mix Scorpion Tail, Kiki Root, and Wart Weed. The surge of even longer range mega-pain and mega-suffering makes my fingers throb almost beyond their capacity.

Mutus Omahaus is the fifth spell. It's a magical protection spell even greater than Riteus Gardus. It speaks of Self and Protection with the addition of Power, so I mix Narcissus Root, Skunk Juice, and Wart Weed, and feel the eerie sensation of complete protection from any disaster — accidentally or naturally caused.

The scroll hints that there are other spells, like a powerful light spell and a healing spell that can completely restore one's health, but there are no clues as to their components. I mix up a few more each of my old and new spells.

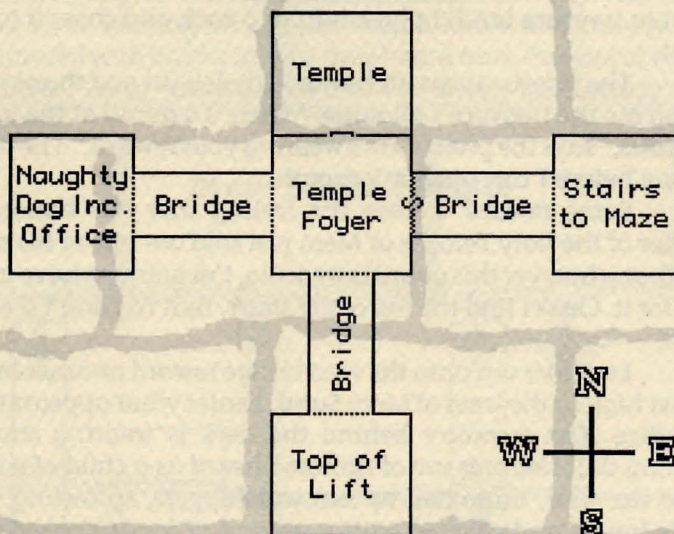
A BRIEF TOUR OF MEM SANTI

Same Mercon's okay for a home base, but you get restless if you hang around here too long. I've got the itch to travel to faraway places, meet new and interesting people, and then kill them. I haven't forgotten about Al Handratta and his unhealthy desire for a horse with hairy palms, but that can wait. I think I'll do some more exploring on the other side of the bridge first.

Once I cross the bridge, I travel due west until I reach the sea; then I wander north and east again. I stumble upon what looks like a platform that will take me up into the trees. I enter it cautiously, and the platform starts rising to the tree tops with the loud creaking of straining vines and metal. The ride's slow and boring, so I take the time to polish my sword. When I reach the top, I recall my history and recognize that this city in the trees is Mem Santi, or God's Roost.

The city's a series of buildings set in the massive branches of trees born at the beginning of time. They're all connected by a network of swaying suspension bridges. I walk across the first one, being careful not to look down, and enter what appears to be a temple.

Mem Santi



In front of me is a pious man wearing a bathrobe. He introduces himself as the Temple Curator, and then he asks if I really feel worthy in the eyes of Mem. I start telling him that I was once an apprentice to a Priest of Mem, but he raises an eyebrow in disbelief and I stop.

"Can I offer you some information on Mem's Gift?" the priest asks earnestly. "For only three hundred gold pieces, you can share in my knowledge." I respond with a gagging sound, like a huge furball's caught in my throat. Then I remember that the Temple is probably a non-profit organization, and needs to collect money any way it can. This Artifact of Mem sounds like something worth stealing, so I give him the gold.

He points to an object in the center of the foyer, and claims that the spirit of Mem resides within the object. I examine it closely. It looks like two legs from the bottom half of a statue. Where's the torso? Doesn't it have a head? Arms? Bust? It doesn't look very valuable in itself.

The curator interrupts my thoughts by offering to tell me about some other valuable object. I pay the price, and he explains that the artifact was once held on a sacred crystal table, but the table was broken and only one piece remains. The shard was lost to Same Mercon on a poorly placed wager. He points out that I'll be rewarded if I recover it and return it to the temple.

Reward? My hands dance around in my pockets with excitement. I have the sacred Shard of Mem somewhere here. What I thought was a useless hunk of quartz turns out to be my ticket to treasure land. I pluck it from a sack and show it to the priest.

The priest clasps his hands with delight and thanks me, telling me the treasure's all mine. "There's a guard at the top of the stairs," says the priest. "He's wearing your reward." The priest is gone before I can open my mouth.

Some reward. I have the feeling that this honorable curator of the holy Temple of Mem just sold out one of his men, and that whatever this guard is wearing, I'm going to have to kill him for it. Once I find the top of the stairs, that is. I don't see any stairs.

I wander out onto the west bridge toward another building set high in the trees of Mem Santi. I enter what appears to be an office. The secretary behind the desk is wearing strange clothing that reminds me of rumors I heard as a child of a land far to the west, inhabited by sun worshippers, sprawling with fertile lands, and covered with a myriad of roads choked with traffic. *City of Angels* comes to mind, but if she's an angel, I'm master of the universe.

"Can I help you?" she says plainly, without even looking at me. She's busy putting some colored paint on her fingernails, alternately painting and admiring them. Feeling a bit like an anachronism, I shut the door and leave.

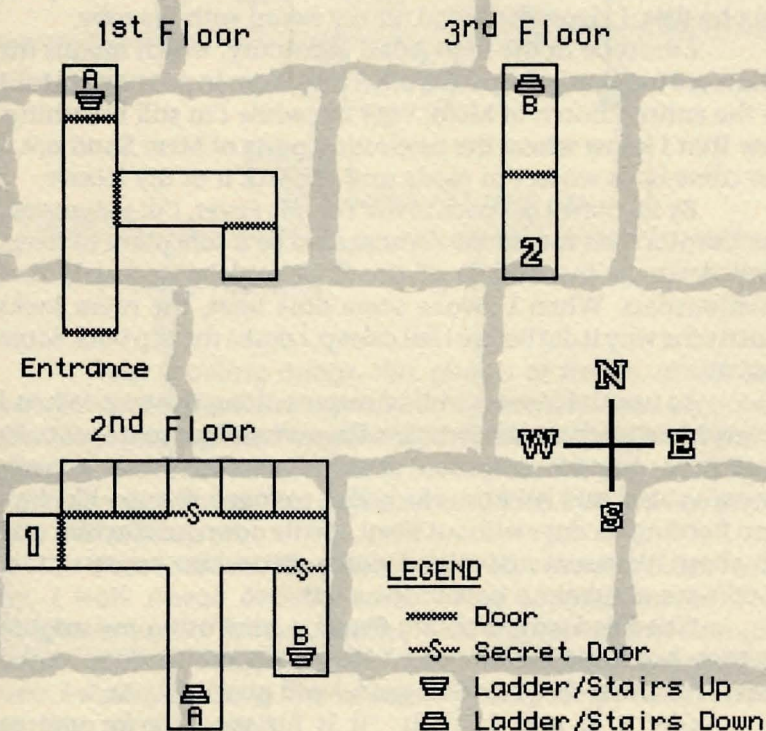
Back in the Temple Foyer, thinking about where the stairs might be, I see the errant legs of the Artifact of Mem. If they could walk, they'd look for a body. The Arm of Wealth I stole from Same Mercon has been a source of tremendous luck for me, so I assume these legs are a magic item, too. Perhaps there are many statue pieces scattered throughout the land, each with its own special magic power. Lips here, belly button there, left buttock way over there. And maybe, if I get all the pieces and put them together...

That's stupid. But I want those legs anyway. If they aren't magic, they'd at least make a funky coffee table. I move closer to the legs and see that there's no way to get to them. Completely surrounding the platform is a distinct lack of floor. I can't even

tell what's holding it up. I don't want to hurdle my way over to the platform, risking a one-way trip to the jungle graveyard. But I'm sure there has to be some way. As I'm thinking of ways to get myself extra legs, the rumors I had heard in my home town about the splendid treasury of Mem Santi seep into my mind. Since these legs aren't going anywhere, now's a good time to start looking.

I go out through the north door into the back halls, defending myself from the miscreants and undead who always seem to be looking for a fight. I don't know why they're all so enamored with battle; maybe they heard from their local butcher that thief meat was the sweetest. I'm sweet, but nobody's hors d'oeuvre.

Mem Santi Temple



1. Mem's Second and Sword Yin
2. Treasure Room

After searching the entire floor without success, I find a door at the north end of the north-south corridor. The door isn't locked so I let myself in. Inside, I climb up a ladder leading to the second floor. I light torches with my flint and steel and move down the corridor, turning right when I reach the end. After a few paces is a door to my left, so I go through it.

A man in robes attacks me. My stint in the Church of Mem taught me enough to recognize his uniform; he's the fifth ranking high priest. I flash back on the gruel I ate for years in the church, the hours of cleaning I performed, and the torture of singing in the choir, so I take special satisfaction in running my sword through him. I lose some blood in the process, but it's worth it. In typical religious fanatic style, he only has one gold piece on him. I take it.

I walk farther east down the corridor and enter another door to the left. Inside I'm jumped by another priest, Mem's Sixth. He's easier to kill than Mem's Fifth, but I'm bleeding badly by the time he dies. I clean the blood off my sword with his robe.

I must be in the high priest dormitory, which means the priests are tougher going in the other direction. In no shape to take on the entire Church of Mem, I get out while I'm still breathing. Now that I know where the interesting parts of Mem Santi are, I can come back when I'm ready and ransack it at my leisure.

By the time I get back to the Temple Foyer, I'm exhausted. The Curator likes me, so the foyer should be a safe place to sleep. I lay down in the middle of the floor and immediately lose consciousness. When I awake some time later, the room looks exactly the way it did before I fell asleep. I make the trip back Same Mercon.

As usual, I leave a trail of corpses along the way. When I arrive, I go straight to the Drunk'n Dragon and get some grub. As I'm eating, I notice a warrior slouched over his bowl, eagerly spooning stew into his face. His body's ravaged; it looks like he's been fighting for days without sleep. I settle down next to him and ask about his recent activities. Equally starved for conversation, he tells me all about a hole in the southeast.

"It's filled with drooling fiends. I tried using my mighty weapon, but it did me no good." He put his magic sling on the table. "For thirty-five hundred gold, I will give it to you."

Give it to me? I laugh. "It is far too nice for one as inexperienced as I, sir." The warrior doesn't pick up on my strained humility. Sitting so close to him, he looks like a weak old man. I decide that I could handle whatever it was that drove him away. A group of fiends *that* determined must be hiding something good. I set out right away.



I remember that I had stolen a Book of Swords from Nick the Nose, so I slip my new sword into my belt with the others and sit down to read. Leafing through the book, I find that the bastard sword I stole from the house in Same Mercon is Charles the Disemboweler. I smirk as I recall the encounters where the sword lived up to its name. The sword I had just found is Nischtarr.

On the same page is a passage about a sword abandoned in Tel Empor; a sword called St. George, slayer of the three-headed beast. Bells ring in my head. Al Handratta said his treasure was guarded by a three-headed hydra. I dig through my history notes and find that Tel Empor is also in the southeast corner of the continent. I'll get St. George, and afterward, I'll go take Al for all he's worth.

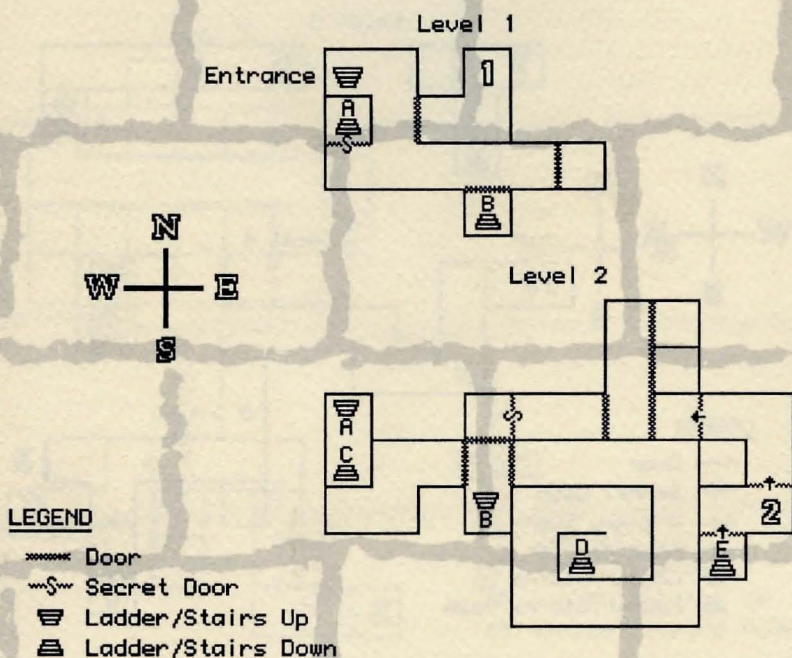
I tuck the book away and climb out of the fiend hole, heading west. After a short walk I reach the bay and the ruins of Tel Empor. There's no doubt that they're ruins—everything looks like hell, overgrown with weeds and vines. The neighbors must be crazy, letting Tel Empor lower property values for the whole neighborhood with its trash motif.

Y THE FASHIONABLE RUINS OF TEL EMPOR

et in the middle of the ruins is a dark, dank hole. I know a front door when I see one, so I climb down into the black mouth. Once inside, I light a torch. I pull out a pad and start mapping the contents: a secret door, two ladders leading down, a couple evil creatures hell-bent on killing me. I kill the creatures before making my way down the southernmost ladder.



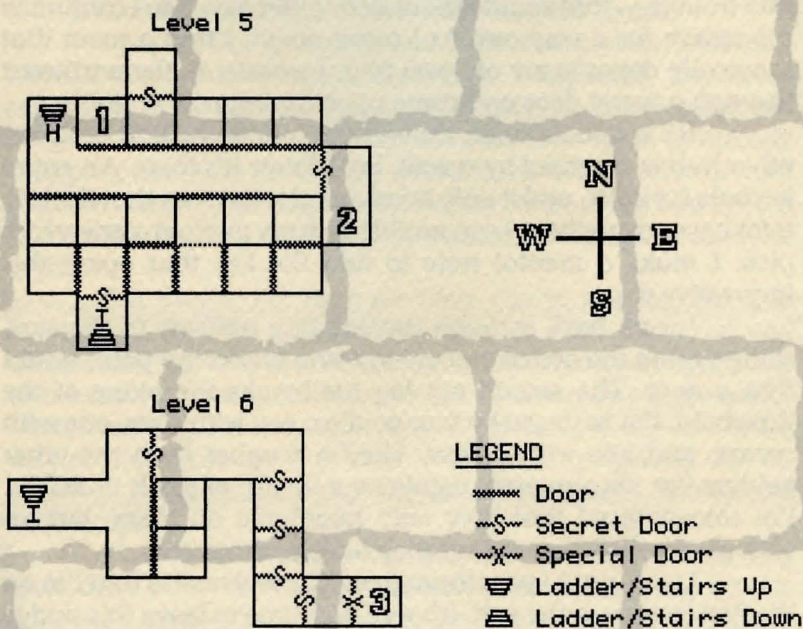
Tel Empor (Levels 1 and 2)



1. Teleport from Level 4
2. Abyss

Walking north, I make the first possible turn to my right. I keep making right turns, traveling in a spiral until I find another ladder that leads down to the third level. I step a few paces east and find another ladder descending to a fourth level. Carefully lowering myself down the wet, moss-covered ladder, I step into an empty pit. Sticking to my rule that there's no such thing as a dead end, I search and find a secret door on the south wall.

Tel Empor (Levels 5 and 6)



1. Teleport to Level 4
2. Sword St. George
3. Hall of Strength

I take the offensive edge and launch into battle. Alternating healing and attack spells, I squash the scum beasts with marginal effort. Sifting through their loot, I gather a little over a hundred gold pieces. How can these four hulking creatures have been satisfied with such a skimpy booty? I know they must've been hiding something more valuable this deep in the ruins, so I carefully search the room.

The place is littered with candy wrappers, paper cups, crushed boxes — basic ogre residue. I sift through the mess, making my way to a tangle of dirty underwear. There! I carefully lift the heavy find. It's obvious after a swing or two that it's a slow weapon, but the edge is second to none. I could cut my hair with it, but not in such an inhospitable setting. I slice the air a few more times and then slide St. George into my belt.

I plan on searching for other goods on my way out, but there's no door leading out. I return to the spot I had entered and see only a blank wall. Searching carefully, I finally find the secret door. I pick the lock and escape without breaking into a sweat.

I found another ladder leading down to what must have been the sixth level. I balked at the thought of traveling deeper into trouble — that could wait until another day — so I continued the search for a way out. As I move about, I find a room that magically deposits me on level four. I wander to the northwest through a secret door and come upon an impressive sight.

It's a double door, though I can only see half of it; the other half is obscured by a wall, but I know it's there. An entire keyhole is visible, and it only takes one glance to see that the lock is far beyond anything I can tumble with my peasant-variety lock pick. I make a mental note to find the key that opens this impressive door.

I walk back through the winding hallway to the east, slaughtering the occasional enemy who blocks my path, until I find a door. The second my big toe breaks the plane of the threshold, I'm besieged by four goblins, two with axes, one with spears, and one with a bow. They're tougher than the other goblins I've encountered, requiring a bagful of spells to defeat. I'm unconvinced that they only have gold on them, but an extensive search proves that they have nothing else.

I walk until I pass through a door and realize that I'm on the first level near the exit. It's well past time to leave this sludge hole, so I make my way back to Same Mercon. At the only home I know, the Drunk'n Dragon, I get something to eat and a good night's sleep.


The next day I buy more reagents and mix up some more Takus Tylenus, Mutus Omahaus, and Napus Almus. Then I head over to the barbarian at the BHW to get Al's horse. He informs me that the Clydesdale will cost me nine-thousand, nine-hundred and ninety-nine gold pieces. That's one shy of ten thousand! I laugh in his face. Then I try to haggle, but after laughing in his face, he isn't having any. So I pretend I'm no longer interested and start to walk away. As soon as the barbarian turns his back, I mount the horse and disappear into the jungle.

W THE LEGACY OF AL HANDRATTA

hen I ride up to Al at his hut, he eyes me with excitement. I dismount and show him the horse. He's ecstatic. He jumps for joy. He laughs, he cries, he sings, he sighs. Then he falls to the ground, exhausted, and hands me a key in return. I smile and step over him to enter the hut.

I'm jumped immediately upon entering. As I kill the rabble, I wonder why Al lets all this scum run around in his house.





At the end of the hall, I locate a secret door to the right, and the lock falls before my pick. I follow the corridor until I find myself face to face to face with a three-headed hydra.

I grip St. George tightly and draw it with all my strength. Instead of the heavy, unwieldy weight I expected, the sword practically flies out of my belt. Suddenly, in the face of this dragon, St. George is light as a feather. One head is already snapping at me, so I swing my sword faster than I ever thought possible. I know that this dragon has three times the bad breath of the other leading dragons, but with St. George, my hopes are high.

But they're not high for long. I'm in trouble. The first head drops, but the others don't seem to care. The next one attacks and I have to cast Takus Tylenus to ward away death. My own head's spinning, and I know I can't cast many more spells. Then I realize that they're getting three shots to my one since they're circled around me. I run until I'm only fighting one on one, with the other head and body unable to attack. The second head drops.

The last head nearly kills me, but I cast another healing spell, duck a few blows, and ultimately drive the blade into its skull. As I approach the headless body, the hydra's necks suddenly wriggle alive like fire hoses spouting blood, whipping at my legs and spraying me with blood. I drive St. George into the writhing, headless mass and put it to total rest.

The instant the hydra dies, St. George suddenly becomes heavy and falls from my hand, clanging solidly to the floor. I pick it up again and slide it into my belt. Since Al said the hydra guarded the treasure room, I assume the door ahead of me is it, but the key he handed me doesn't match the lock. I dig a lock pick from one of my countless pockets and attempt to pick the lock.

The tumblers roll over and play dead. The door practically opens itself. I feel a momentary vibration in the pocket where I keep Al's key, and I probably wouldn't have been able to pick the lock if I wasn't carrying it. Through the door is the Hall of Wisdom. Sitting on a book called *Cooking for Bachelors* is a huge green gem larger than a melon. I snatch it.

I pick up a glove that's sitting on the bookcase. It's similar to the glove I picked up in Same Mercon, and I remember that the book of swords mentions two gauntlets of power, the Tortoise and the Hare. I pull them on over my ordinary gauntlets.

As I walk out of the room admiring my gauntlets, three witches shriek and move to attack. I thrust the Hare toward one of them, and a screaming bolt of blue light blasts across the room and scorches her face. I could've done more damage with my

sword Nischtarr, but the range and speed are fantastic. I kill the other two cackling bitches with a flick of my pinky.

Just outside of the Hall of Wisdom, I locate a secret door. A ladder leads down into a tunnel that must lead under the bay; I can see the salt water trickle down the walls. I'm sure there isn't any land in the direction the tunnel goes. I walk for quite a ways before the tunnel jogs a bit south and stretches off west again.

A skeleton, a ghoul, a walking corpse, and a ghost surprise me. I can't understand how these guys magically materialize since I can see for many paces in all directions, but mine is not to question the unnatural goings-on of the undead. I kill the lovely foursome and press on.

I walk what seems to be the entire stretch of the bay. Near the end, I find a locked door that I try to pick, but as I work the tumblers, my hand slips and the pick bends severely. Here I am, deep in a secret tunnel under the Great Southern Bay, at the door to some great adventure, and I ruin my last lock pick. In desperation, I keep at the lock with my ruined pick. After more than a dozen tries, the tumbler falls to my superior skills. I enter the room.

I find the other half of the double door that matches the one at the bottom of Tel Empor. Another whole keyhole is visible. Just for the hell of it, I try Al Handratta's key in the lock, but it doesn't work. I shrug and take my leave. I figure that the door leads to Tel Empor — where I've already been — and if I open it I'll only have another way to get into the ruins. That doesn't sound very important.

Wait. Both doors face the same direction. There must be a room behind the double doors, and to get inside, I have to unlock one door and then travel all around the continent to unlock the other side. I walk back through the tunnel to Al's hut, wondering where the key might be.

I run back to Same Mercon with the green Gem gripped tightly under my right arm. Usually after casting spells, my spiritual strength gradually returns afterward. Now, with the Gem in hand, I could feel my spiritual strength growing, even exceeding my normal capabilities. The Gem must be increasing my spiritual power, or wisdom, as the magic users call it. It's doing for my wisdom what the Arm does for my luck.



BACK IN SAME MERCON AGAIN

Back in Same Mercon, I visit the cute waitress at the Pink Dragon. She gives me the eye again, so I ask her a silly question about love at first sight. She offers to tell me about the old God-King Telloc's love, so I voluntarily slip her some gold pieces.

The waitress goes on to say that Telloc had a lover who cried so much when he died that it formed a river. It's really a sad story, but she tells it with such a cold demeanor that I realize being sentimental and romantic isn't going to get me anywhere with her. I pay her for the drink and she wanders off.

Looking for conversation, I approach a huge green warrior named Gruk. He laughs at me and asks if I'm going to go to the contest in Tel Hande for the great sword Bruce. I don't like the gleam in his eye as he asks me, nor the laughter spraying from his jagged mouth.

He offers to tell me about Bruce for two hundred gold, but I decline his offer with a shake of my head. I already know from my Book of Swords that Bruce is the best sword in the land, hands down. Gruk laughs and offers to recite a poem to me for three thousand gold pieces. I smile, stand up, and walk away to the tune of his bellowing laughter.

An old man in the corner is the only one in the tavern I haven't talked to yet. Old people always seem to have interesting stories to tell, so I sit down next to him. After exchanging pleasantries, he tells me that he's a historian and has written a Book of Lore exploring the reasons for Telloc's fall. I remember that I stole that from Nick the Nose, but I had yet to open it.

He says he's working on a new book on a similar subject, but he's reluctant to tell me about it before it's published. Two hundred and fifty gold pieces change his mind. He says he believes Telloc had a powerful magic item that he used to rule the world with, and that a rival killed him for it.

I go back to my own table and open the historian's Book of Lore. Most of it is history that I'm familiar with, but on the last page is something I didn't know. Apparently, Tel Hande is ruled by an evil Magician King who is trying to find magic to become God-King of the whole continent, like Telloc had been.

Things are starting to make sense, in a confusing sort of way. At least connections are leaping to mind. There's something unbelievably powerful somewhere in the Tri-City Area. It explains Telloc's unlikely rise to ultimate power, and now the evil Magician King is looking for it. The Tel Profi, the long and confusing prophesy Al Handratta gave to Telloc before his fall,

might offer a clue. I pull my copy out and begin reading.

The first three stanzas are obviously history; following that are a couple of stanzas far less clear. I read them over and over, and finally, like a dim bulb flickering to full light, I realize it's about the construction of Tel Hande and the subsequent food riots that led to Telloc's death. A particular line catches my eye: "The power is scattered far and wide, finding many a place to hide." *The power*. This had to be the superior magic item that Telloc used to gain absolute power. Somehow, it was broken up into little pieces and scattered throughout the whole Tri-City Area. I read on.

"To ocean depths sinks Lady Luck, very deep in endless muck; but as is its nature Fortune is found, and placed within the Mercon pound." This told the story of the fisherman who found the Arm of Wealth and put it in the Same Mercon treasury. No one knows it, but that artifact is now happily resting in one of my larger pockets. I glance around the room and see that no one is paying any attention to me, despite the fact that I'm radiating with smug self-satisfaction. I already have one of the pieces of this great idol. I read on.

"Intelligence and Wisdom fly south, to the west of the harbor's mouth; it rests within a secret fold, a place larger than its walls can hold." *Wisdom*, I think to myself as I feel the Gem. Tucked far down into my sock, it bulges oddly like a geometric tumor. Southwest is where Land's End and Al Handratta's hut are. A place larger than its walls can hold must be Al's hut, whose size is deceptive inside and out. A chill rakes my entire backside — I have *two* pieces of the idol, each one in itself a source of amazing power. I read further, wondering if I happen to have all the pieces.

"Hiding behind a transparent wall, rests the loveliest of all; Health and Love forever bind, with buxom breast and scaly behind." That's a piece I don't have, but with words like "Love" and "buxom" and "behind," it's a piece I desperately want. Tending to some minor business first, I purchase some reagents and mix more Takus Tylenus spells. Then I pop into the Drunk'n Dragon for a quick bite and a bit of sleep. Feeling a hundred percent, I walk out of town.

"Hiding behind a transparent wall," is the clue. It sounds like a window or maybe a mirror, but neither item has caught my attention. I walk north as I think about the clue, eventually coming upon the Tel Roca river. Tel Roca. Tel Roca! The waitress at the Pink Dragon said something about Telloc's lover crying a river after Telloc died. I turn east to follow the river to its source.

T WHERE THE WATER FALLS

The river loops around until I'm walking west again. I leave the usual carnage as I go, with my deadly gloves of power leading the way. Soon I pass the headwaters of the Tel Roca river, turning south again. I hear muted rumbles coming from ahead. As I get closer, I feel the spray of the waterfall in the air.

Laying by the falls is a lovely and naked mermaid with entirely too much hair. She tries to speak to me, but the roar of the waterfall drowns her voice. I have to get conveniently close to hear her. Buxom was a good word for this creature. And now I fully understand what a "scaly behind" means.

For hours she pours forth a sob story about her lover, long since dead. She complains about the fact that she had two things to remember him by, and they're both lost to her. I ask her about these things, and she sheepishly asks ten gold for the information. I'm touched by her asking price, so I pay the small fee. She says her lover had given her a ring and his love, both of which are behind the falls.

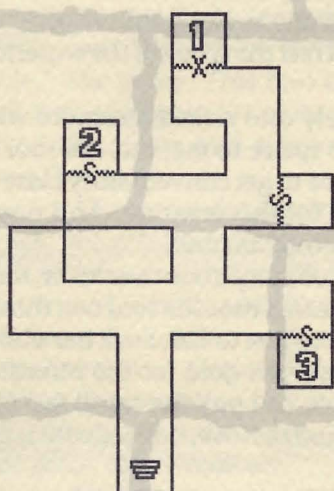
She promises that if I retrieve the ring, then I can have the other thing, whatever that is. I have a hunch I want the other thing, so I give her another ten gold and ask about her lover. Wiping one of the countless tears from her eyes, she admits that it was Telloc the God-King. The teary mermaid starts into a personal account about how he wasn't really *that* bad, and about how she thought she could have changed him. While she speaks, my mind drifts and recalls something I read in the Book of Swords. It said that Neptune's Trident was given to Telloc's lover, so I glance around to find it.

The trident is nowhere in sight. Perhaps someone else had already sweet-talked this lovely fish into giving it up. Just in case it's well hidden, I cast Huvius Vacuumus, and much to my surprise, the trident gleams in the beautiful sunlight reflecting off the waterfall. The mermaid smiles demurely as I pick it up. A few thrusts tell me that it's better than anything I currently possess. I look up again and the mermaid's staring expectantly at me.

I thought of the Tel Profi. "Hiding behind a transparent wall," it said. *A transparent wall.* With one confident leap, I plunge through the transparent wall of the falls. I fall through a hole and enter a cave behind the waterfall where a couple of bored goblins delight over my entry. Returning the enthusiasm, I mince them into tiny goblinettes and move on. At the first intersection, I turn right and follow the cave to a dead end — which of course I don't believe in. A search reveals a secret door to the south. I pound on

the lock with my broken pick until it succumbs to my superior will.

Waterfall



Entrance

LEGEND


- ~\$~ Secret Door
- ~X~ Special Door
- ≡ Ladder/Stairs Up

1. Arm of Love
2. Mermaid's Ring
3. Helm Moe

A witch and three sorceresses descend upon me like rabid bats. Though they're nowhere near me, I'm instantly pummeled with blows. I throw *Napus Almus* spells until I only have the strength to cast a *Cynus Arcenus*. Two of the sorceresses are still standing so I slip on the *Tortoise* and the *Hare* and attack them from long range. We three dance around each other until I'm the only one left dancing.

The cave is empty. These four she-devils didn't hand over their lives to me to hide nothing so I search carefully. Sifting through a pile of chicken bones, I uncover a sturdy helm. I study its shapes and markings and then leaf through the *Book of Swords* for its heritage. It turns out to be the mighty helm Moe. I tug off my ogre skull and slip my latest acquisition on.

I'm too tired and wounded from my romp to continue, so I brush clear a spot on the ground and lay down for a nap. After waking I'm refreshed, but still wounded and weak. I keep on the gauntlets of power so I can kill my aggressors from afar as I steadily regain my strength.



I wander west until I locate another secret door. Inside, I startle a witch and three more sorceresses. I learned my lesson from the last encounter and stay farther away from these heartless ladies, maneuvering to fight each one at a time. This time I kill them all with hardly a scratch. I scavenge around the witches' little home and find the mermaid's ring.

I return to the mermaid to find her sunning herself on a flat rock. She props herself up by an elbow and watches me expectantly as I rummage through my pockets. I pull out the ring from deep in my pants and set it before her. Thanking me for the ring, she goes on to say that love is one-sixth of Telloc's power and that she wishes people would stop maligning him for being an evil king. Then she says something about finding the lost door, so I take the hint and go back through the waterfall, to the dead end at the far north of the passageways.

As sure as the mermaid has too much hair, the door is there. I pound on it with my bent lock pick and it slowly swings open. There, standing on a pedestal, is the Arm of Love. It's similar to the Arm of Wealth I already have, except it's a left arm instead of a right arm.

There're two traps guarding it. There's a trip set on the right hand torch designed to flare up if I touch the Arm. To disarm it, I can pull the torch forward or take it off the wall. I gingerly pull the torch forward, which works fine until my sweaty fingers somehow slip and jerk the torch. Falling flat to the floor, I manage to escape the gout of flame with just the smell of hot hair and a slightly-toasted arm.

The other trap's a pit trap under the pedestal. To disarm the trap, I can tip the pedestal over quickly and retrieve the arm, or I can slip my knife under the pedestal and wedge it there. I remain calm and do the latter, deftly disarming the trap. The arm begs me to pluck it off the pedestal, so I happily take it into my hands.

Just as I had misjudged the weight of the Arm of Wealth in the Same Mercon treasury, I misjudge the weight of this stone arm. I tumble over backwards, and the heavy stone smashes into my chest, cracking just about every rib I have to offer. If it had hit me a little more squarely in the sternum, I'd have died then and there, in the Chamber of Love.

I push the arm off my chest, drop it into a sack, and dust off my aching body. On my way out, I spot a group of goblins looking bored and aimless, loitering about like they always seem to do. I duck my head low and hobble away to avoid their usual petty challenges. As I climb out of the waterfall, I expect a helping hand and perhaps a little sympathy from the mermaid, but she

simply starts into her worn out story of lost love. I pass her by and stumble back to Same Mercon to recuperate.

R CAN'T GET ENOUGH OF SAME MERCON


Right now, nothing is more beautiful than the Open Gate of Same Mercon. I'm exhausted, hungry, and a pinky's push from being dead. After a good night's sleep I feast on a king's meal. As the bar maid leans over me to take my empty plate, I feel a stirring deep within me. Just to try my luck, I slip her twenty-five gold to tell me what she thinks about love. She tells me, "Go for it on the straight and narrow, but without leaving the straight and narrow. You know?" Then she spills ale in my lap and goes back to take someone's order at the bar. What she said was an old cliché, but I now know what it means. It's a warning about the cave behind the waterfall, about the witches' dens to the sides of the path to the Chamber of Love. *Thanks a lot.* I order another beer. This time I buy it from the bartender.

The barkeep's a loudmouth who wants to tell me things I already know. I'm still in the mood for conversation, so I try to talk to others in the bar. The guard's only interested in telling me stories about what they do to thieves. Some guy named Vijay the Blue wants to talk about something complicated, but I don't have the patience for him. Finally, I end up with an old man in the corner.

The old guy seems a tad senile, talking about having dinner with Telloc long ago. He offers to tell me something about Telloc's death, so I guide a few gold pieces into his hand. The old man explains how Telloc's head had been taken on a pole to the north, which I guess means Tel Hande or thereabouts. He clings to my shirt sleeve and whispers, "Telloc was betrayed by a friend, *not* by the people."

I had always thought that Telloc killed himself accidentally during the Food Riots of 666. This old man was suggesting that Telloc was betrayed by one of his own. Foul play. That's something to think about.

I thank the old man and move to another table by myself. Now that the Arm of Love is in my possession, I dig out my copy of the Tel Profi and read the next stanza. "Speed and confidence run into a hall, behind the floor that is a wall; Deep in Santi and through the worst, guarded just below the First." The next piece is in Mem Santi, a place whose time was ripe for a good sacking.



I stop at the reagent shop and pick up more ingredients for Napus Almus. Then I turn to the bookstore. I've already seen all the books except for some bad poetry and things called credits. I lift them and cram them into a pocket for later study.

As I set out from Same Mercon, lazily shuffling one foot past the next, I remember how nice it was to ride the Clydesdale over to Al Handratta. I arrived there a lot less hungry and tired than if I had trudged there on foot. I go back to the barbarian's stalls and slink through the hay bales, looking for a filly to call my own. In a far stall I spot a Homin Horse that looks like it's meant to be mine so I crawl over to it and grab it by the mane. The belligerent mare kicks me violently in an attempt to shake me loose, but I hang on, swing a leg over to mount it, and ride away with massive internal bleeding.

Gingerly straddled on the trotting horse, I prepare to cast Takus Tylenus when I recall a spell in the Scroll of Irresistible Force that could completely cure a man in one shot — Goodas Newsus. With my spleen, liver and kidney smashed into a bloody pulp, I think it's time to research this spell.

I know that the simplest spell for healing is Bandus Aidus, which requires Narcissus Root and Peppermint Sprigs. The more powerful version, Takus Tylenus, requires those two reagents plus Wart Weed for Power. I look through my list of reagents over and over. Only Kiki Root for Magnification makes any sense. I try it instead of Wart Weed, but it sputters and fizzles in protest.

I roll up my reagents and start packing them away when the Phoenix Egg rolls out from a small sack I had set on the ground. Expecting nothing more than scrambled egg, I add the Phoenix Egg in place of the Wart Weed, and suddenly my veins surge as if I've been infused with hot blood. Without hesitation, I cast the spell and feel an enormous rush of power. I'm not really stronger, but I feel as though I could endure any punishment; punishment much greater than before I found the Arm of Love.

The power I feel in my head to cast spells is still growing; it'll take a while before I reach my full potential. Outside of the Drunk'n Dragon, I see the Black Cross offer to restore magic power to full for five hundred gold. That's too much for a health organization like theirs to be charging, so I try to convince them that charity to an ailing brother is the humane thing to do. The Black Cross finds my haggling amusing and raises the price. "Especially for you," says the Black Cross representative with a generous smile. I really want to get back to normal, so I bite my tongue and pay the fee.

The Black Cross rep tosses some powders in my face, utters a few words, and fling his arms around in the finest

dramatic fashion. In seconds, it feels as if my hair is on fire, each follicle burning hotter than the next. My mind explodes in a flurry of energy centered on my forehead and the Gem of Wisdom in my sock. When the shock of heat passes, I feel superhuman. I mount my horse and set out for Mem Santi.

My encounters along the way are laughingly tame. With the Hare and the Tortoise comfortably on both hands, I can flick my fingers and dismiss my enemies. By the time I arrive at the tree lift, I'm completely untouched. I climb into the lift, horse and all.

B THE MYSTERIES OF MEM SANTI

Back in the Temple Foyer, I see the legs, which have to be the next piece of the idol. I reread the *Tel Profi stanza*, and deduce that it's guarded below Mem's First. That means there's a way up so I can grab the artifact from above. Yet when I was in the Priest dormitory earlier, there were only enough rooms to accommodate up to Mem's Second; Mem's First, the supreme priest, must have a special place elsewhere.

The key seems to be that it's hidden behind the "floor that is a wall." I look around the room, but nothing comes to mind. I recite the line over and over again, hoping that my mind will cling to a reasonable idea. I trim my toenails, sort my reagents, and clean my blades, waiting for that thought to come. I lean against the tapestry on the east wall to think some more — and I feel a doorknob in the small of my back.

I search around and tear down the tapestry in one jerk. I go through the door I find behind it. An unstable bridge leads to a building. I slowly make my way across the unsteady, shifting bridge, staring at my destination so I wouldn't see miles of empty space between me and the ground far below.

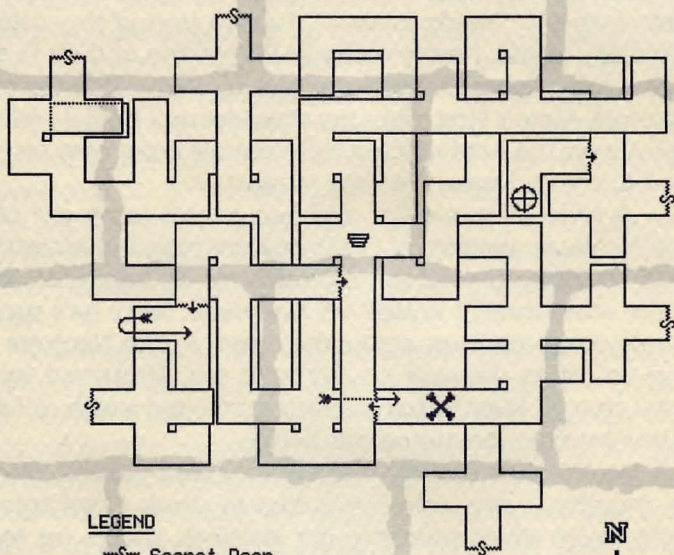
Inside the building is the top of a flight of stairs. This is where the Temple Curator said my reward could be found. The Mem Commander and three guards are standing by the stairs, keeping an eye out for ruffians like myself. I keep my distance and call out a hello before waving at them with my gauntlets and striking them dead one by one. One lucky shot glances me, but otherwise I'm untouched. I search the Mem Commander's body since he was the hardest to kill. Surprisingly, he's only wearing a slight robe, which must be powerful armor to protect him as well as it did against my bolts of lightning death. I take my reward and put it on in place of my dragon's hide. The armor makes my skin tingle, and it's clear that the Tortoise is no longer adding to that protection — in fact it seems to hinder it — so I take it off. The normal gauntlets now seem cumbersome too, so I take them off.

The Book of Swords describes the robe as Achilles, a magical garment that will protect every part of me — but with one weakness. That’s probably my head, but with the helm Moe clinging tightly to my skull, I feel invincible. I go forward, wearing the Hare on my right hand and ready to grab Neptune if I need to fight in close quarters.






After I descend into darkness, I cast *Generus Elektus*. The enormous tree trunks I’m buried within light up in the glow of my spell. Looking up and down all the corridors, I know this isn’t going to be easy. I’m in a maze, and I’ll have to solve it before I get anywhere. I pull out some paper for mapping.

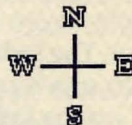
The maze is baffling. It’s clear that the floor isn’t always level; I can take three turns to the right and never cross the corridor I was in at the start. After lots of stumbling around, I locate a secret door. I pick it and enter, only to find myself in a short passage with no door behind me. I remember the rumors I heard in my home town tavern, about picking the wrong door, and I realize I’ve been teleported somewhere else in the maze. I continue mapping on a separate sheet of paper, planning to join the maps later if possible.

Mem Santi Maze



LEGEND

-  Secret Door
-  One-way Door
-  Ladder/Stairs Up
-  Going through the wrong secret door teleports you here.
-  Approaching this room from the west takes you above the maze entrance.



Eventually I find another door. I pick the lock and enter, only to find myself in the same short passage I was teleported to the last time. If I want to get this fun house mapped, I have to quit opening any more doors I find. Over time, I discover that the maze isn't difficult to map as long as I avoid the teleportation of opening doors. There are several one-way passages that can drive a seasoned traveler crazy, but they're easy enough to map once I realize what they are.

Days pass before my map begins to take shape. My task would be much easier if all the creatures I killed stayed where they fell, but they're scavenged immediately so I can't use them as signposts. Finally, all the pieces fit together and I have a complete map of the maze, including all six doors, and the point I'd get teleported to if I went through the wrong one. Now it's just a matter of systematically checking all the doors.


The third door I enter leads to the room of Mem's First. He doesn't seem upset at my presence. In fact, he starts pushing some literature on me, trying for an easy convert. I'm not interested. I ask him about Mem's Gift, but he wants two hundred and fifty for the information. It's a sad day when the church demands money for counsel. I grumble and hand it over.

Mem's First tells me a windy, useless tale about how the Artifact of Mem fell from the sky the day Telloc died, which only confirms what I already knew — that it's part of the artifact I seek. After a while, I grow weary of his talking and try to walk past him to go down the ladder, which leads down to the top of the artifact. Mem's First grabs my shoulder and politely tells me I can only see the Artifact from this vantage point over his dead body. I agree and raise the Hare to blast him.

A Mem Commander and two guards jump out of the wings. I unleash the fury of the Hare from afar, but Mem's First joins in on the battle and starts beating me up from afar. When I kill the other three, I myself am half dead. Since he's successfully attacking me from across the room, I grab Neptune and charge to inflict damage on his holy self. Unnerved by my suicidal charge, Mem's First can only stand and watch as I drive Neptune into his sanctimonious belly.

By the time he falls, I'm battered and bruised, but still fairly healthy. I step onto the ladder to climb down into the Temple Foyer when suddenly my stomach shoots up to my throat. The ladder automatically dropped down so I'm hanging within arm's reach of the Artifact of Mem. I grab it and climb back up the ladder. When my weight's no longer on the ladder, it retracts to its normal position. I sift through my clothes, looking for a place to hide this pair of stone legs, but all my larger





pockets are filled with odds and ends and treasures. I hang the artifact on my back and start to make my way out to the Temple Foyer with the map.

The Artifact of Mem acts like an incredible homing beacon for all the nutty disciples of Mem. They see their treasured item dangling sacrilegiously on my back and feel compelled to challenge me to a fight. I show them who the new owner is and blast them all with the Hare. Just to rub it in their faces, I go into the back halls to ransack the priest dormitory. I've already searched the first floor, so I go straight to the second floor.

I return to the room in which I had killed Mem's Sixth and find no body. I go through a secret door and find a ladder. I climb up the ladder and walk straight into a group of guards who choose to kill first and ask questions later. How unoriginal. I cast a Takus Tylenus to fortify myself, aim the Hare, and start blasting hot fire and raw energy.

Those poor bastards don't know what hit them. In no time there are three corpses on the ground, looking like leftovers from last night's barbecue. I waste no time, gathering the hundred gold from my victims and then picking the lock of the door in front of me.

A thief's dream! The Mem Santi treasury. But to balance out the dream, there's a nightmare of traps. I can see the spikes set in the floor ready to leap up and ruin my day. I deduce two options: I can jam the spikes with my knife or I can pour oil on them. I decide to jam the spikes securely with the knife. It works.

The right wall of the treasury has a panel with a trip mechanism on the floor. The panel looks it's been waiting years to fly open and fire projectiles. I could either jam the panel closed with the knife or pry it open with my fingers. I try to jam the panel closed, but it belligerently springs open and fires arrows across the room. I duck in expectation, so only one grazes me across the shoulder.

The trap on the left wall's a trapped trap, designed only to injure if I try to disarm it, so I leave it alone and move on to the ceiling. There are cracks in the ceiling from which a variety of evil goodies can escape: a crushing flood of water, a cloud of toxic gas, or maybe poisonous creatures like scorpions or spiders. I don't think my knife can combat the crack, so I pull out my oil can and start feeding the cracks. The oil effectively gums them up and stops anything from escaping.

I move forward into the room past the first set of traps. A beautiful gem to the side entices me, but I study it closely and can tell it has no value. It must be a trigger, maybe to the floor. I can either lift the gem very carefully or hack at it with my knife.

Subtlety is always best, so I gently remove the gem from the its stand. Nothing happens.

On the right side of the bench are little holes too small for creatures or water, so it must be an outlet for poisonous gas. I can plug the holes with oil or ram my knife into them. Since I've already tested the oil method with success, I start pumping it into these holes. The gas burbles and dies, smothered under the thick oil.

The floor's trapped, but it looks suspiciously like a trapped trap. I ignore it.


The last deadly trap is the sceptre. The head of the sceptre looks suspiciously rigged, either with poison gas or some kind of explosive — maybe both if I'm lucky. I can grab the sceptre, but that'll set it off for sure. My instincts tell me that the sceptre top is some kind of explosive, and if I break the top quickly, the container will be breached and no explosion will occur. I take a deep breath, think some lucky thoughts, and crush the top of the sceptre with the flat of my knife. The sceptre yields without protest.

I grab five hundred gold pieces and a pile of used scrolls, cramming them into one of my last empty pockets. I pick up a beautiful scimitar that looks like it could run through three goblins in one thrust. This must be Bahb el Buhd, the scimitar mentioned in the Book of Swords. It looks as good as Neptune, but easier to use. Bahb el Buhd will have as glorious a destiny as St. George did against the hydra.

As I leap around the room swinging the scimitar in mock battle, a glint on the wall catches my eye. A key. I reach up and pull it off its hook. My instincts start up again. I think it's the key to the double doors under the Great Southern Bay. I tuck it away. I'll go there, but only after I paid back the Church of Mem for all the brainwashing they subjected me to as a child.

I've already seen all of the third floor and all of the first. I head to the second floor — where I'll partake in my priest feast — and begin a thorough visit. The room belonging to Mem's Fourth is my first stop. A priest is escorting him, so he isn't quite as easy to kill as Mem's Fifth and Sixth. I get almost fifty gold, but the pleasure of the kill is worth more.

Mem's Third also has a priest with him, but they go down with hardly a scream. I get a little more gold and a lot more pleasure. Next is Mem's Second. Although he's flanked by two strong priests, I'm most excited about this fight. We nod a civilized salutation to each other before ripping into combat. That is, *he* rips into combat. As the priest stands in the distance gesturing in my direction, I'm being pummeled with blows from



his magical attack. Unless I bridge the distance between us, he will continue to batter me mercilessly from afar.

Focusing my mind away from his salvo, I summon my strength and jump in his face, swinging the scimitar in full fury. He pummels, I swing. He pummels, I swing. Again and again we repeat this hostile ritual, waiting to see who will collapse first. Finally, I swing, he drops. I give the other two hapless priests a solid swing and they follow their friend into hell. For my efforts, I receive fifty-six gold and all the satisfaction I could possibly stand.

Satisfaction aside, I expect more booty from one so important. Mem's First had nothing less than the Artifact of Mem itself. I think Mem's Second should have something more becoming a priest of his stature. I start from one end of the room and systematically search the area as if I'm looking for a single grain. I work my way through almost the entire room when I find, in a corner laying neglected, a sword. I pick it up and see that it isn't a very good one. It looks exactly like the sword I stole from the Same Mercon treasury, except for two features: it's black instead of white, and it's a mirror image of the other. I tuck it in my belt with the rest of the sword collection, and dig out the Book of Swords.

Yin and Yang! I always wondered why the white sword was in the Same Mercon treasury at all; it was the counterpart to this sword. Divided weak, *united strong*. A paring knife was more effective than either sword alone, but together they create one magnificent weapon.

I reach down to pull out the black sword, but somehow it's caught in my belt. I try pulling out the white one, but it, too, won't come out. All my other swords are willing to come out, why not Yin and Yang? In a fit of desperation, I wrap my hands around both and draw them together. They glide out of my belt freely. The swords must have fused together when I put them close to each other! I hold the single, double-edged sword, one side black and the other side white, up to the light. The blade is much sharper and swifter than anything I possess.

Exhausted from ravaging the Temple of Mem, killing all its high priests, looting its treasury, and wiping my feet on its rugs, I bravely lie on the floor in the Temple Foyer and fall asleep. When I awake, I pack up and head straight for Al Handratta's hut.

On my way to Al's, I study the key I found in the treasury. I know it's large and elaborate enough to be the key I sought. I open the used scrolls and read through them, looking for any useful information. The scrolls confirm that the key in my hand

will open Telloc's library under the Bay. The scrolls also tell of Al's library, which I've already seen, and of the Magician King's library, which plants insane ideas in my head.

A QUICK TRIP BACK TO AL'S

Al Handratta and his horse Boo Boo are out in front of the hut drinking beer as I ride up. Al smiles wanly as I pass him and enter his hut without a word. I walk to the end of the long tunnel under the Bay, with Yin and Yang cutting the way clear. When I reach the double door, I use the key to unlock the door. I try to open it, but the door will only rattle and give a fraction of an inch. I will have to go around to the other side, in the dungeon of Tel Empor, to open the other door.


As I leave the hut, Al raises his bottle to me and winks. I ignore him as I brush by with my mind focused on the next task of getting more Phoenix Eggs. I climb up the tree, retrieve an egg, and climb back down. To get more than one egg, I have to repeat this process. The Phoenix must prefer having her eggs stolen one by one, rather than all at once.

I stop off in Same Mercon to tend to my neglected personal hygiene and then set out for Tel Empor. Pulling out the Tel Profi to see where the next piece of the idol is, I review the next stanza. "To fallen Empor flies the Strength, to the farthest of its length; far below lies the power, in the bottom of an inverted tower." The next piece happens to be in Tel Empor, my current destination. It sounds like the piece is buried at the bottom of the dungeon. The last time I was in the dungeon, I stopped at the fifth level — I have no idea how much deeper I'll now have to go or what prices I'll have to pay.

BACK AGAIN TO TEL EMPOR

I make my way to the double door on level four as directly as the vermin let me, greasing the floor with the blood of those who try to intervene. I slip the key in, turn, and push. After centuries of being closed to the world, the door grudgingly swings open with the creaking voice of age.

A swirl of dust and cobwebs blow past me as I enter. I look around the room dumbfounded. Books line shelves from floor to ceiling. Telloc's library. The room is almost indistinguishable from Al's library, except for the aura of ancient brooding evil. I search through the stacks of pressed paper pulp and leather, but find nothing.



Casting Huvius Vacuumus to give the room a more thorough search, I reveal a scroll sitting on a shelf by a stack of books. I pick it up and peel it open, hoping I had found Telloc's spell scroll, which catalogues the most powerful spells imaginable.

It's not. It's Telloc's logbook, which tells, in rather dry text, how he forged the idol in his lab. He said the entrance to his lab was in front of his house and the magic word needed to enter the lab is *Tuna*. I know that Telloc's home was Tel Empor, so I head straight for the surface.

Tel Empor looks normal from the outside. I'm not sure what to do. Instead of just standing there, I again do something *OTHER* than sit and twiddle my thumbs; I glance about to make sure nobody's watching, and then I call out "Tuna!" A stairway of floating stones leading up to Telloc's lab appears in front of me. I ascend the stones into Telloc's nondescript lab and assemble what pieces of the idol I have, but it's incomplete. According to the Tel Profi, there are two pieces remaining: Strength and Charisma. Strength is below me in the bottom of Tel Empor, so I climb back down into the dank depths of the ruins.

On the sixth level is a strange corridor where I have to find a secret door in every room to get to the next. I finally arrive in a room full of strong-smelling scum, which means a fight is only as far away as my nose. I grab Yin Yang and start swinging at the my foes. The minotaur Titan, the King of Scum, the Sorcerer's Eye, the Astral Wraith — none can oppose the united power of Yin Yang. With my enemies at eternal rest, I walk ahead to the door.

The lock does not yield to my pick. After a journey's worth of making locks bow to my excellent touch, I can't believe I'm rebutted by this very average lock. I grow angry and cast Dranus Lique. The door pops open. I go into the room and am attacked, but Yin Yang hands the opposition their heads. I pass through the next door and enter the treasure room.

Except it isn't the treasure room. It's an ambush. I'm jumped by a Sorceress, which might have been nice in different circumstances, but now I have to kill her. The Goblin Headsman and Sniper are next, and I carve up their faces. The last foe is a disgusting mess that looks like a fouled chem lab, and I almost don't want to stick my Yin Yang in it, but it's a life or death situation. I destroy it and gum up my sword. I find a secret door to the east and open it.

I enter the Hall of Strength. In the center of a circular room, where everything is oddly symmetrical, there's a pedestal. On the pedestal is a formidable chest plate — the idol's element

of Power. The chest plate is undoubtedly rigged with its weight in traps.

A leaking brick on the right wall looks suspicious. I can either jam in the brick or slide a knife under it. Jamming the brick might open the hole, so I wedge the knife under the brick with success. There's a trap on the left wall, but I see no mechanism. I ignore this trapped trap and move on to the ceiling. The ceiling's on the verge of collapse and ready to fall naturally on its own, but they trapped it anyway. I secure the rock with my rope, preventing myself from being brained by the roof.

The torches on the walls are like those in Mem Santi. I examine the torches for a mechanism, and sure enough, these unoriginal morons trapped the torches like the other morons. I pull the torch holders forward. A soft click signals the disarming.


The floor had a trap like nothing I'd seen before, so I knew it was a trapped trap. These monsters can handle simple traps, but anything unusual is out of the question.

The pedestal's my last challenge. There are signs of a pit near it, and the trigger's probably somewhere on the pedestal. There are three panels on the front, like buttons, which appear to be the disarming mechanism. I have one chance to press the right combination of buttons. I wish I were home playing Three Card Santi instead.

Looking around the room, I notice the designer's compulsive need for symmetry. I look at the two outer buttons — one and three — and study their relative symmetry on the pedestal. Nothing else seems logical, not that *any* of this has been logical. I take a deep breath to prepare myself for faulty logic, place a hand on both panels, and push. I hear a click and then I suddenly I feel myself freefalling. I fall for an eternity, screaming and clawing as my body turns circles through the air. The eternity ends when I open my eyes. I didn't actually fall. I just prepared myself so well for the fall that I *thought* I did. I look sheepishly around before grabbing the plate and fleeing the room.

I run all the way up to Telloc's lab just to see the pieces of the icon in their proper places. All that's missing is the head, so I turn to the Tel Profi: "Beauty and Charisma weep in a cage, captured by the Evil Mage; imprisoned in the Hande peak, by flames of blue to kill the weak."

The Magician King has the last piece in Tel Hande. I've been putting off going to Tel Hande, because it always received low hospitality ratings in all the travel guides. But now, experience was my cloak, greed was my motivation, and I didn't care what type of service I got.



I feel a renewed strength in my muscles now that I hold the Plate of Strength. With five of the six pieces, I'm formidable in every aspect except one: I'm ugly. I try to keep up good hygiene, speak clearly, and walk straight, but it's not enough. I need the Artifact of Charisma, not just for absolute power, but to help me get dates, too.

I consider my problem as I ride back to Same Mercon.

SAME MERCON, DIFFERENT DAY

After eating, sleeping, and healing myself, I go to the reagent shop to figure out the missing spells that are in the scrolls without clues. In the Circle of Perfect Unity, there are references to other spells, but no hints as to what they are. I skip it and set up the Pyramid of Directed Power, but I run into similar ambiguity. I know figuring out these spells won't be easy, but I don't want to sit here all day mixing reagents at random. Between twelve reagents and three spell scrolls, I'll die of old age before I reveal anything.

I start thinking back to the gossip I've heard and leaf through the papers and books I have. I look over everything again and again, even resorting to the sheets of bad poetry. The Fool's Cant is just as described — bad poetry. But as I read it, something jumps out at me. Many of the words are capitalized, and they sound suspiciously like spell reagents. The second stanza refers to the pyramid, Heal, Self, and Weed. So in the Pyramid of Directed Power, I mix Peppermint Sprigs, Narcissus Root, and Wart Weed. I burn them in the fire and make Makus Foodus, which would create a cubic foot of pink tofu to eat.

The next stanza mentions the cube and refers to Warty Sight and Glowing light. In the Cube of Irresistible Force, I mix Wart Weed, Eye of Owl, and Glow Grass. Bigus Lightus comes from the combination, and my eyes glow with powerful florescence.

I look at the next stanza, and after a moment figure out that this one's Goodas Newsus, the heal spell I already discovered on my own. The next two stanzas speak of a pentagram, which I don't have. It sounds powerful, a welcome addition to any fighter's repertoire. There must be one more spell scroll in The Land. I had fully expected to find it in Telloc's Library, but it wasn't there. The old scrolls spoke of three libraries. I found Al's. I found Telloc's.

Damn.

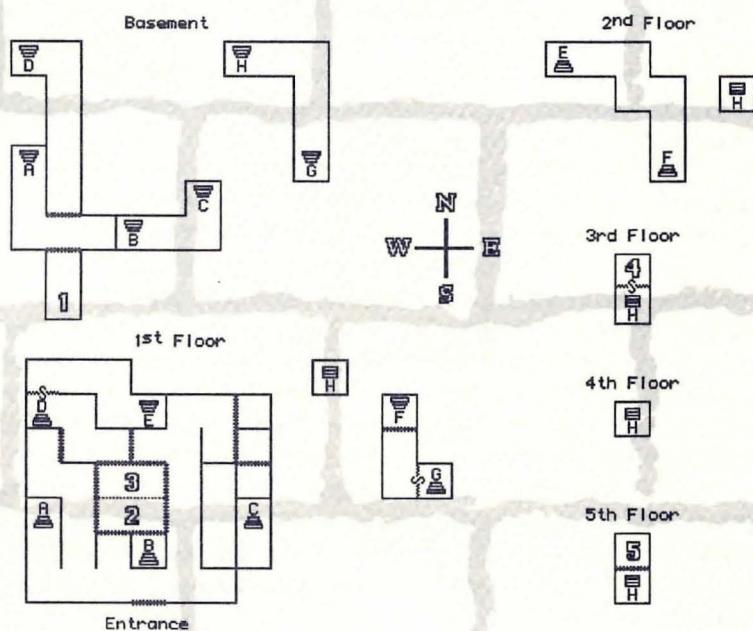
I have to find the Magician King's library in Tel Hande.

THE RANSACKING OF TEL HANDE

I set out for Tel Hande, feeling like the second most powerful creature alive. My enthusiasm's only dampened by the fact that I'm going to meet *the* most powerful creature. Tel Hande is to the north, so I cross the bridge, pass the waterfall, and wander north using my map.

Tel Hande. The stone walls stretch so far up to the sky, they're covered with ice. Crossed halberds stand before the gate, and flags ripple to the dirge of the moaning breeze. With the Tel Hande passport I had taken from the dead guard on the bridge, I pass through the gates with no trouble.


Tel Hande



LEGEND

- Door
- \$— Secret Door
- Ladder/Stairs Up
- Ladder/Stairs Down

1. Telloc's Skull
2. Contest Waiting Room
3. Contest
4. Magician-King's Library
5. Magician-King



Once inside, I cast Bigus Lightus. The light's so bright, I think I lit up the whole continent. I blunder into a room filled with warriors of all sorts, including Gruk from the Pink Dragon, and the thief's twin brother Blue Goon. Between my sword, my awesome abilities, my magic, and my ego, I'm convinced I can take them all on. But that's not my purpose here. I bow out of line gracefully.

To the northwest is a ladder leading down. I descend into a basement and open an assortment of doors until I find one corridor leading south. The corridor leads to a dead end, where I find a skull that doesn't look anything like the other flat-headed, small skulls belonging to ignorant servant beasts. The regal cheekbones, sophisticated temples, and bone-white eye sockets belonged to only one person — the old God-King Telloc.

I leave the basement, mapping the various floors I see and coming across nothing but Tel Hande guards and mercenaries who want to kill me. After some time of fighting, searching, and mapping, I discover a tower. Up on the third floor of the tower, I locate a secret door on the north wall. It's unlocked, which I kindly take as an invitation to let myself inside.

It's the third library, the library of the Magician King. Rather than doing the usual search, I immediately cast Huvius Vacuumus. The spell exposes a glowing object — the scroll of the Pentagram of Infinite Conveyance. In my hand is magic as powerful as any in the whole Tri-City Area. With it, I'm empowered to take on the Magician King himself!

Although my major task of finding the scroll is over, I continue my search and wander up the ladder, keeping a special lookout for secret doors. At the top of the tower I find a locked door on the north wall. I easily pick the lock and slip in.

Spread out before me is an enormous balcony, and beyond that stretches the endless reaches of the firmament. Standing on the far corner, bathed in swirls of light and glitter, is an old man in a blue evening gown. He reeks of age and evil. The two monstrously huge blue dragons on his flanks look no more friendly than the wizened man.

I wave timidly, and he booms in a powerful voice that comes from every direction at once. "I believe you have certain properties that belong to me. Return these items and I shall permit your heart to continue its feeble beating." He goes on to tell me if I don't comply, he'll give me a one-way ride through dragon entrails.

I brush the sweat from my temple and in my weakest voice ask, "O Great and Fantastic Magician King of the Highest Order and Magnitude, before I take the great honor of handing

over all my possessions, can you tell me anything about Telloc's power?"

"First, two-hundred and fifty gold pieces," demands the angry magician. I barely manage to toss him the coins as my arm quivers uncontrollably. "Give me the pieces of the idol, you toad. I killed Telloc to get them, and I want back what is rightfully mine by murder." He starts to throw a temper tantrum, screaming and jumping like he missed the ice cream truck.

To soothe his ego, I ask very politely, "O Magnificent Magician King of Bellowing Luminosity and Grand Obtuseness, what are your plans for taking power?" He demands more gold for the answers. What a businessman. I toss him the money, and he screams something insane about using the power of the Globe to bring the rest of the idol to him. I search the balcony with my eyes and see the head of the idol bulging from his pocket. The Globe of Charisma. But what he said about using the power of the Globe to bring the pieces to him doesn't make sense. Then I realize it does make sense: I have all the pieces, and sure as hell, I'm standing right in front of him.

I look into his eyes, and then into the dragons' eyes. I grip the scroll I've just stolen, and then I run screaming for my life.

I don't stop screaming until I'm back in Same Mercon.

I STUCK AGAIN IN SAME MERCON

I'm so exhausted when I reach town, I'm dragging my swords — all six of them. After a good night's sleep, I go downstairs to the Drunk'n Dragon for something to eat.

I see the adventurer again, and I look in my Book of Swords to see if the weapon he boasts is there. It is — a magic sling called David that was used to kill the ancient giant, Grukliath. Other than Bruce, it's the only magic weapon on the Continent I don't possess so I purchase it for a very unreasonable price. A few swings tell me that it'll make a nice range weapon.

I leave the tavern and go to the reagent shop to figure out my new scroll, the Pentagram of Infinite Conveyance. The first spell sounds like a beguiling spell called Usus Carus that lowers the cost of talking to people and make people cheat you less. It speaks of Infinite, Light, and Sight. Light is Glow Grass, and Sight is Eye of Owl, but Infinite is a new one. The clue speaks of the immortal creature that rose from ashes, which I knew to be a Phoenix. I decide that this spell is too little, too late, and I don't mix it.

HAND-TO-HAND IN TEL HANDE

Inside Tel Hande, I go to the contest waiting room. Standing among all the awesome fighters makes me nervous, so I bite my tongue and plunge forward into the arena. I put the Hare on my right hand to kill as many competitors as I can from out of their weapons' reach.

The warm-up is simple. I go up against five men, one at a time: Fluffy, Sugarpie, Sweetheart, Babycakes, and Honeybunch. With such formidable names I expect a fierce fight to the death, but instead, I get five weaklings who practically beg to die at my feet. I don't get hit once. And if that isn't bad enough, the next contestant is a dog named Drufus. I feel sorry for him, but have to kill him in case he harbors plans of passing rabies on to me.

Now the real fighting begins. A man named the Captain comes out. He has rudimentary magic skills, so the trick is to get near him. I grab Yin Yang and close the gap between us, taking careful, calculated swings. He manages to hit me a few times before I swing the blade across his neck and sever his head clean. Then comes Eric the Cleric. He has better magic skills, but I take the same approach as I did with the Captain. Eric runs around the arena trying to keep his distance, but I finally chase him down and hack him from behind.

Last is Gruk. I cast a Takus Tyleneus before he gets too close. Gruk doesn't recognize me as the scrawny little thief he saw in the Pink Dragon three weeks ago. As I debate over which weapon to fight him with, the Hare or Yin Yang, I remember that I have David. David killed Grukliath many centuries ago — I wonder if Gruk could be related. I grip David and throw an experimental shot at Gruk. The projectile smashes into him with stunning force. Just as St. George rose to the challenge of the hydra, David is eager to kill Gruk. A handful of shots later, the mighty Gruk is lying in a pool of green blood, and he had yet to lay his sword on me.

With all my opponents lying dead, I rightfully search the room until I find Bruce. I hold it up for all to see, but nobody shares in my joy. Carrying Bruce on my shoulder like a banner, I ride all the way back to Same Mercon knowing that there is only one person standing between me and absolute power in the land.

I stay the night, resting up and making some more spells. Then it's back to Tel Hande, to the top of the Black Tower.

AN EVENING WITH THE MAGICIAN KING

I can't tell if the Magician King recognizes me from the day before or not; he must have, as unannounced visitors seem uncommon in this lofty space. I don't give him or his dragons a chance to greet me like the old friends we are. I immediately attack.

I let loose a devastating blast of Wastus Em! which sends them all reeling from shock as much as pain. Before they recover, I blast them again. The two Blue Dragons are blown off the tower from the sheer force of my spell, plunging to the rocks far below. The Magician King stumbles back, throwing magic blows my way. "Bluto and Brutus! You've killed my beloved dragons. Your soul for theirs!"

I try reasoning. "I didn't *kill* them. I've committed them to the beauty of eternal peace! Don't you see, O Extravagant Magician King of Rampant Neurosis?" I have to remove his advantage of distance so I rush him, casting Killus Deadus just a few steps from him and knocking him off his feet. He scrambles up and casts a barrage of spells, running away as he does. A jingling sound trails him as he moves through the room.

The old man rages. "Your life is mine, little rodent! I will pluck your whiskers one by one! I will skin you down to the tail. I will batter you and fry you and feast on you!" We both unleash near-lethal blows simultaneously. Blood runs into my eyes as I blindly twist in pain. The Magician King also doubles over, reeling from an attack he has never before experienced. I stagger back out of range and cast Goodas Newsus.

Refreshed, I rush him again, swinging Bruce wildly. I strike him twice, but he runs away as fast as I chase, dodging my blows while casting his spells. He's as near to death as I am. Using the last of my strength, I cast one more Goodas Newsus spell.

I chase the Magician King into a corner so he can't run away. "I commit your soul to hell," the old man cries. Invisible thrusts wound me as I furiously swing Bruce again and again. Suddenly, I'm so crazed with fear that the will to live steadies my trembling arms.

"I commit you first!" I strike him twice with renewed strength. The Magician King falls to the ground.

Dead.

I fall to the ground next to him and gasp for breath. I slowly crawl over to him, search his pockets, and remove the Globe of Power. The bastard has almost a thousand gold pieces on him, too. That explains why he jingled when he ran. I

unsteadily rise to my feet, staring at the face carved on the Globe. I feel very beautiful.

I make my way back to Same Mercon, avoiding all confrontation. I have triumphed against the greatest power in the land, but I'm a sneeze away from mortal collapse. I'm lying on my horse, tangled in my many swords, when Same Mercon comes into view.

I THE FINAL SOLUTION

It's time to forge the idol that gave Telloc ultimate power, but I have to do it right. I read through all the scrolls I didn't completely understand before, starting with Telloc's Log. There, on the last page, is the answer in green, black and white: weed, pearl, and egg. In the Pentagram of Infinite Conveyance, I mix Wart Weed, Black Pearl, and Phoenix Egg. Add a lick of flame and I feel a raw power course through my body. Elmus Pastus. Powerful, but still unfocused.

There's a note that also says the spell must be cast without interference from the spell designer. The only way to insure this is for all of the designer's body to be in the abyss. I have to toss myself in the abyss? I sit down to ponder this terrible development when I'm suddenly poked in the butt by something in my back pocket — Telloc's Skull. I grin at it as it grins at me. It's he who's going to get dumped into the abyss of Tel Empor, not me.

I stop at the Black Cross for a full Magic Recharge. While I'm here I buy a partial heal and go up to one hundred percent in all categories. I ride out of town high on my horse, knowing that if I survive, I'll return as the new God-King.

I reach the ruins of Tel Empor and wind through the many passages until I come to the abyss. One last time I do something *OTHER* than what I normally do. With a brief salute, I drop the skull into the abyss. Telloc's screams roar from the emptiness, never to stop.

It is now safe to reforge the idol.

I return to the surface and climb the stairs to Telloc's lab, dragging my huge collection of worldly belongings. I assemble the idol with all six pieces: The Artifact of Mem, the Arm of Wealth, the Arm of Love, the Plate of Strength, the Globe of Power, and the Gem of Wisdom. I'm ready, willing, and able, but afraid. A hundred questions fight for attention in my mind. What if I've forgotten something? What if I've done something wrong? Could this really be all there is to it? As unsure as I am, I'm sure I can no longer stand being unsure. I have to do it. I've

come this far.

I take a deep breath, close my eyes, and cast *Elmus Pastus*.

My eyes bulge open as intense power surges through me and the idol. The stone of the idol glows and pulses with power, and I feel that power within me. I'm invincible, all powerful, and better than everyone else on the continent! I'm the new God-King!

That wasn't so hard.

I WAS A TEENAGE GOD-KING

I returned to the Pink Dragon, back to the waitress who had been so kind to me those few, traumatic weeks. Her name was Babs, and we hit it off very well. I commissioned a palace for us to live in past the ruins of Tel Empor. Five months after the wedding, she had our son, Keef Jr. Everything was fine, even a bit boring, until Keef Jr. found a magic guitar called Jimmy. He started up a heavy metal band with some old acquaintances of mine, and it was too much for my poor wife. She went to live with her sister, Sushi the Mermaid, by the waterfall, and went back to work at the Pink Dragon.

Being a benign ruler had its drawbacks — I hadn't killed anything in months. One day, I went out in the jungle and was ambushed by a couple of brain-damaged creatures that didn't know any better. I killed them leisurely and had the time of my life. I decided that with the proper disguise, I could have a good time killing and maiming my way through the Tri-City Area once again. Myself, that is, and Bruce, Moe, and Achilles. We could go back to the good old days, live the good life...

And we did.

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