

April 2001 Scenario Club

MAGESTONE AND MANIPULATION

The Relic thrummed with power. Caber Landwalker felt it. In his bones, and deep in his gut. Like the penetrating, basso growl of an earth dragon. Even if he closed his eyes, Caber could still see the monolithic artifact pulsing a dark blue-black against the darkness. Like the afterimage of staring too long at the sun.

But he didn't close his eyes for long. He didn't dare. Around him the battle of four warlords still raged, and only his thick troll skin and disregard for the occasional glancing blow allowed him to approach the Relic with alacrity. Haelen Erba had been right to drag the warhost into Fairhaven, and now the healer-priest fought to give Caber time. Time to investigate the Relic. To discover its secrets. If the troll cenobite could do so.

He certainly expected a greater difficulty than it turned out to be.

Placing his large hands against the marbled stone, Caber marveled at the Relic's magnificence. At the living warmth that bled out of the rock. A true artifact out of the Age of Mists, come alive again, summoning the perceptive, the powerful. The radiating force grabbed the monastic troll, pulled him inward. For a moment, Caber was the Relic, standing tall over this newest battlefield, stone crown stabbing up at the sky and feet planted well into The Land. Then he bled downward, into the earth, his consciousness swept along in a chaotic torrent that tumbled and twisted along a dark path. At times he felt dwarfed by a mighty river. Other moments he became part of The Land itself. A rock. A speck of earth. Not an event for the weak of mind. Caber called upon his time at Bloodrock Sanctuary, the years spent in personal contemplation. This was one of the 'great mysteries.' He would not turn away.

He would seek the truth. Always the truth.

Magestone and Manipulation, cont'd

Johannis Verrick studied the map of his small kingdom, made to look much larger in this bold drawing that fell off both sides of the table. On it, even such minor hamlets as Three Pines and Gobbler's Crook held impressive stretches of Fairhaven's territory. No matter that they comprised only half a hundred of his citizens. Between the two.

And marching across the map were clusters of pawns, knights, bishops and rooks—pieces scavenged from several chess sets, now employed to represent the recent influx of warlords and their armies. King Johannis worried for the early crops, and the collateral damage these skirmishes might cause to the farming communities. He also worried for his small army of loyal warriors, sent out to contain the trouble.

But Magestone? A possibly untapped source? That would be more than they could handle.

“You are certain of these reports?” he asked, more for the sake of killing the silence than with any doubts.

Still, Magus Roquan did not answer quickly. He always gave the King of Fairhaven a deliberated answer. “Yes, Sire. The Relic is an ancient beacon tied into the leylines. When a large deposit of magestone forms, the leylines shift and the Relic summons attention. If approached by a strong mind it attempts to show a path.”

“But Jans Zubrek did not fight at the Relic.” Johannis nodded at the black bishop near his border. “He is heading straight for the old stripmines...” The import of what he was saying sunk in slowly. “He knew?” A pause, considering. “The Guild knew.” Of course they did. When it came to magestone, their records would be most complete.

Roquan nodded. “We felt the Summons and researched the Relic from our histories. I was commanded to reveal nothing, Sire. I am sorry. And I would recommend that you do not challenge the Guild. Stay out of the way of Jans Zubrek.”

“This is still my kingdom, and your place here is rigidly defined,” Johannis said, automatically placing his advisor in the camp of the Atlantis Guild. Then he relented, slightly. For all the benefits he enjoyed as a protectorate of the empire, including their guarantee of his mostly-autonomous rule, standing in between the Guild and a source of magestone could only bring ruin on him and his people. Especially when he was effectively under invasion.

“The resources of Fairhaven are not to be stripped away without compensation,” he said guardedly. “The forms must be obeyed.” He saw Roquan’s subtle nod of encouragement. “I will send my son to Jans Zubrek. Aaron will act as liaison, and when the time is right we can demand restitution.” But then he again cast a worried eye toward the map, and the path his son would have taken toward the neighboring kingdom of Duncastor. Right into the teeth of several warhosts. “If he can still be located.”

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Face down in the sour mud, choking on the foul scent of blood mixed with earth, Aaron Verrik felt rough hands at his side, pulling his arms together. Leather straps bit into his wrists, which was nothing next to the pain pounding into the side of his head. It felt as if his skull had been caved. Against the back of his eyelids, he replayed over and over the memory of a large ax chopping at his head. He couldn’t recall if it had been the blade or the butt swinging in, so the weapon was reduced to a gray blur.

“This him?” The voice came from somewhere distant, fighting against the ringing in his ears. A woman’s voice, but hard. Cold. “Turn him over. Let’s see what kind of catch you’ve made.”

The darkness spun and Aaron’s eyes fluttered open. A face hung over him, stared down with some of the coldest green eyes he remembered ever seeing. Her eyebrows arched back like feathered wings, and delicate ears peaked out of dark, red-tinged curls. Elven, he thought at first—though not quite. She crouched next to him on one knee, rapier balanced across her leg. The tip of her tongue touched the center of her lip as she paused, considered, as if weighing his value.

“Ah...I...mmm.” His brain didn’t want to work, finding it difficult to wrap itself around a few simple words. He had to try again. To let her know. “I’m...Aar-ron...”

She nodded. “I know who you are Prince Verrik. I know what you’re worth.” She rose and turned away from him in one fluid motion, reholmed her sword. “Clean him up. Keep him bound. Bring him to me.”

The rough hands grabbed his arms again, hauled the prince upright like so much baggage. Scaled hands. Green hued, and taloned. Draconum. The long face of the dragonkin stared down at him with little pity. “You’re lucky day,” he said.

Aaron groaned. He felt like death. And though he was still alive, he certainly didn’t feel lucky. Even in a pain-filled haze he had recognized his captor, and knew that today he had cost Fairhaven much. Maybe more than it could ever afford to pay.

Delivering himself into the hands of the Black Thorn.