

INTRODUCTORY ADVENTURE

THE PUZZLE BOX



For GMs only: Players please do not read!

The following is a short adventure that can be used as an introduction to roleplaying in Talislanta, or incorporated into an ongoing Talislanta campaign. This scenario includes a number of options that will allow the GM to customize the adventure to fit almost any locale or style of play. The GM should read the adventure first before playing, in order to decide which of these options will best fit their gaming group.

This adventure has been designed for beginning or intermediate PCs. If using more advanced PCs, the scenario can be made more challenging by adjusting the statistics for all encounters upwards as needed.

OVERVIEW

Location: A tavern or inn anywhere in Talislanta.

Why are the Player Characters There?: The PCs could be travelers just passing through, or locals to the area. They could be meeting a friend or Contact, or perhaps they served as an escort to a newly arrived trader (such as the NPC, Orzo, described further on in the text) and are now busy spending their hard earned cash.

SYNOPSIS

The PCs are approached in the tavern by a Pharesian Peddler, who offers to sell them an enchanted

puzzle-box. One way or another, the PCs will end up with the box in their possession. Trying to decipher the secret of the puzzle-box, they are transported to a dark and mysterious chamber. Only by finding a way out can they discover who or what was responsible for their dilemma.

BACKGROUND

Before starting, the GM should give the players the following NPC Contacts to add to their Character Sheets. The GM can try to match Contacts to PCs based on their homeland or profession or just distribute the Contacts at random. Be sure to hand out all of the Contacts, even if it means that some PCs get more than one. Some of these NPCs could be used during this adventure, so the GM may want to make a few notes on the Contacts prior to play.

Depending on the location, it is entirely possible that the PCs may meet one or two of the Contacts during play. Perhaps they could even be waiting in the tavern to meet a Contact, or staying at the tavern while visiting one who lives locally. The only Contact the PCs should not meet is Aquilane.

- **Orzo:** an Orgovian trader whom you met in the Wilderlands. You gave him a silver armband as a gift and offered fair barter for his wares. This earned you Orzo's trust — no small matter to an Orgovian.

- **Jajuka:** a Gao sea rogue who claimed to be the daughter of a Chana witchman. You met her in a port tavern in Tarun, where she'd come to sell a quantity of stolen k'tallah. She bought you a drink; when you woke up she was gone, and so were most of your possessions. You haven't forgotten.
- **Macado:** a hotheaded Zandir duelist who once challenged you to fight for the hand of the lovely Shaliza. The duel ended in a draw, and you and Macado became friends. This did not please Shaliza.
- **Aquilane:** a rogue magician with a fondness for the color purple and a propensity for unkind "practical jokes" (hence his sobriquet, "The Prankster"). You crossed him once in Cymril; he vowed to even the score someday.
- **Yato Faj:** a Yitek tomb robber who once hired you to help him excavate a crypt. He was an expert at reading symbols, and taught you to recognize certain royal seals used during the early Phaedran Age.
- **Kirata:** a Kang warrior who lost an eye while battling Saurans in the Volcanic Hills. You met her in a tavern in Hadran, when she grabbed your hair and kissed you. Not your type, but you parted on decent terms.
- **Rawk:** a Gryph injured in a fight with a band of Stryx. You helped bind his wounds and watched over him until he was well enough to fly. In return, Rawk promised his help if you were ever in need.

THE SETTING

This adventure can begin in a tavern or inn anywhere in Talislanta; we'll call this place The Wayfarer. As the GM you can decide whether the Wayfarer is a quiet, respectable place, a den of iniquity, or something in between. The Wayfarer's clientele should be comprised of members of the local populace, and perhaps a few travelers from other lands. The nature of the establishment will generally determine the type of clientele it attracts.

The proprietor of the Wayfarer can be one of the locals or a foreign expatriate. The style of architecture and the type of food and drink available should be based on the indigenous culture (consult the Society entry in the region you've chosen for details). If this is your first game, decide all of these details in advance. That way, when you start to play the adventure, you'll be prepared.

Tell the PCs that they've come to The Wayfarer to eat and relax. Set the scene by briefly describing the surroundings. Then have the proprietor come over to tell them about the local fare and take their orders. Once the PCs have settled in, the plot begins.

THE ADVENTURE

The adventure can be broken down into 3 main scenes:

Scene One - The Peddler

A Pharesian peddler enters the inn and entertains the patrons with performing miniatures. Afterwards, he approaches the PCs and tries to sell them an antique puzzle box. If they don't purchase it, he steals one of their mounts during the night and leaves them the puzzle-box as 'payment'.

Scene Two - Deciphering the Puzzle-Box

Attempting to decipher and open the box, the PCs can either turn to the help of one of their Contacts, or seek out the Sindaran antiquarian Nasi Darune. Given the answers they need, they finally open the box, triggering a Witchgate that transports them to a dark and mysterious chamber.

Scene Three - Into the Dark

Trapped in a room with no apparent exit, the PCs discover a pair of skeletons, and clues hinting that things are far more than they seem. If they can find a way out of the room they face an attack by a Scavenger Slime. Finally entering the inner chamber, they are attacked by a Ghast and the entire plot is revealed as the elaborate revenge of Aquilane (one of their Contacts). To escape to freedom the PCs must find a way to defeat the Ghast.

THE PEDDLER

Through the doors of the Wayfarer comes a figure attired in a multi-colored cloak, tunic, and breeches. His head is shaved except for a single, bright blue scalp-lock; his skin is a whorl of many hues. A patchwork satchel is draped over his shoulder, and his crimson boots are covered with the dust of travel. The PCs may recognize him as a Pharesian peddler, from Cymril of the Seven Kingdoms.

The peddler takes a seat at a table near the PCs, nods politely in their direction, and orders "a bottle of your finest aquavit" from the proprietor (if aquavit is not available in this locale, he'll happily settle for whatever is). Then he reaches into his satchel and brings forth a number of miniature crystal figurines carved to

resemble Thiasian performers. Arranging them on the table before him, he speaks a single word and the figures suddenly come to life: singing in high voices, dancing the caperetto, and performing clever acrobatic feats.

Some of the patrons notice and come over to watch the show, which ends with the tiny Thiasians jumping onto the peddler's hand, taking a bow, and reverting to inanimate form. The peddler then produces a colorful hat from his satchel and passes it around, thanking all who make a donation. If any of the PCs chip in, the peddler will smile and thank them as well.

Whether the PCs pay or not, the peddler will come over to their table a moment later, bow courteously, and say:

"I noticed that you seemed to enjoy the antics of my miniatures. I am Savrille, a Pharesian from Cymril of the Seven Kingdoms, and a dealer in rare curios. I believe I have something that will be of interest to you."

Reaching into a pocket, Savrille takes out an ornate box, intricately carved from rich hardwoods and decorated with archaic symbols and silver inlay. The GM should try to describe this item in such a way that it will seem fascinating to the players, for instance:

"The item appears to be an ornate jewelry box, intricately carved from rich hardwoods and decorated with archaic symbols and silver filigree. The polished wood has a deep and warm luster, and the silver inlay shimmers in the tavern light. The arcane symbols seem to radiate an aura of magic and mystery. It is obviously an item of exceptional craftsmanship."

Any PC with artisan, merchant, collector, or antiquarian Skills will recognize the worth and superior craftsmanship of this piece, and realize that it is both very old and very valuable. PCs with magical or scholar Skills can tell that the symbols are ancient and possibly magical in nature, though they will not be able to decipher them.

Savrille explains:

"This is a Phaedran puzzle-box, a rare and costly item that magicians once used to store their most secret treasures. I obtained it from a Gnorn, who found it in a gravesite on the banks of the Sascasm River, in Werewood. What wonders or riches it contains, I do not know. To date, I have been unable

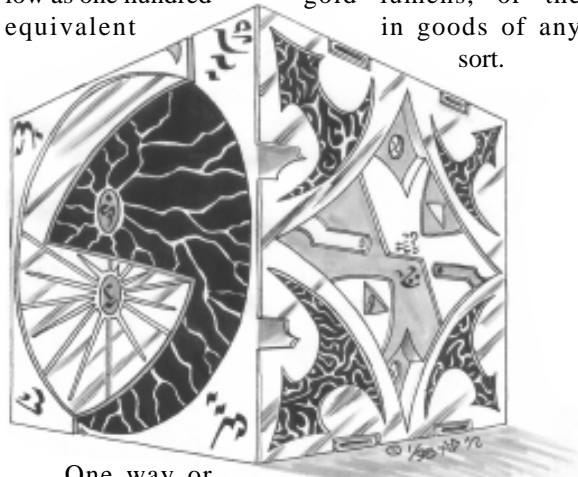
to decipher the symbols inscribed on the box, except this one:"

Savrille touches a raised sigil at the box's center and it begins to unfold as if by magic, changing in shape from a cube to a pyramid. Visible on a newly-revealed face of the box are more inscriptions and four raised metal squares, each engraved with a different symbol: the twin suns, the seven moons, a rainbow, and what looks like seven drops of water. Savrille shows the symbols to the PCs, then presses another sigil and the pyramid folds back into a cube.

Savrille remarks:

"Never would I think to sell this device, but I find that I have no choice. My faithful steed fell ill and died this morning, and I must procure another. So it is that I am forced to sell my puzzle-box for the meager sum of five hundred gold lumens."

This is Savrille's asking price, but by no means is it his final offer. If the PCs refuse outright he'll come down to three hundred. If any of the PCs have haggling or merchant Skills, encourage them to roll vs. their Skill Rating on the Action Table; if successful, Savrille drops his price to two hundred. If the PCs don't have such Skills they can use their Charisma Rating (CHA), or they can simply make counter offers. Savrille will go as low as one hundred gold lumens, or the equivalent in goods of any sort.



One way or another, the GM needs to find a way to get the PCs to buy or otherwise acquire the puzzle-box, which plays an important part in the adventure. If there are any thieves in the party, have Savrille spend the night in the inn and give them a chance to rob him. Or as a last resort, have Savrille steal something from the PCs (such as a steed) and leave them the box as payment. Once the PCs have the box, go to the next part of the adventure.

DECIPHERING THE PUZZLE BOX

The symbols on the puzzle-box are very old, obscure, and complex. Tell the PCs this, and if any of them tries to decipher the writings apply a -18 penalty to their Action Table die rolls. The very best result any beginning-intermediate level PC should be able to achieve is to identify the writings as an unusual variation of the old Phaedran tongue. Attempting to break or force open the box will not work; the device is enchanted, and is much more durable than it appears. In short, if the PCs want to open the box they will need help.

Some of the Contacts mentioned at the beginning of this adventure could be of assistance in this regard, if the PCs are located anywhere near them. The Yitek, Yato Faj, would probably be the best bet, though Orzo or even Jajuka might be able to recognize some of the symbols. If no Contact is available, the PCs will need to hire the services of an individual with linguistic or antiquarian Skills. Attempting to locate such an individual could be a mini-adventure in and of itself, if the GM wishes. One such person is Nasi Darune.

THE COLLECTOR

Nasi Darune is a Sindaran collector and antiquarian who specializes in dead languages (Linguistic Skill rating of +15). She normally resides in the Seven Kingdoms, in the Sindaran mesa-top settlement of Nankar. However, Nasi also travels on occasion in order to acquire ancient stone tablets from the Phaedran era, which she collects. As such, she may be found in the vicinity of the PCs, if the GM desires.

Like all Sindarans Nasi is tall and emaciated looking, with sandy-hued skin, a bony chin spur, and a row of horn-like protrusions running along the crest of her skull. Normally prone to long-winded dissertations, Nasi has another appointment soon and so will seem more business-like and to-the-point. To simulate the Sindaran style of speech, have Nasi use plenty of multi-syllabic words.

The PCs can hire Nasi to appraise and decipher the symbols on the puzzle-box for 40 gold lumens (GL.), or half this if one of the PCs is a Sindaran. She will not haggle, and is far too intelligent to outwit. If the PCs take too much time arguing over price, she will politely tell them that she is very busy, and only has a short amount of time available. If the PCs agree to obtain her

services, Nasi will examine the puzzle-box and provide them with the following information:

- The puzzle-box is an authentic antique worth a minimum of six hundred GL. It appears to be of Phaedran make and is at least six centuries old, though Nasi believes the box may be even older than this.
- The writing on the box is in Phadrosian, an obscure dialect of the old Phaedran and Elder tongues in use during the early days of the Phaedran Empire. The symbols on the cube's surface say: "Property of the Wizard, Nastrovian." The name, Nastrovian, is familiar to Nasi, who believes he may have been a member of one of the first royal families of Phaedra.
- One of the symbols on the box is a rune of command meaning "Open". This is the symbol that Savrille pressed, which caused the box to fold into a pyramid.
- If the PCs have Nasi examine the pyramid she says that the raised symbols are buttons that, when pressed in a certain order, will cause the pyramid to open. The inscription is a riddle, which Nasi translates as follows:

"Always the morning follows the night, the rainbow after the rain.

Two days shall pass, the first one clear, for so it is ordained

Start out at night and follow the way, to undo all the locks

Press seven squares and you will see, what's hid inside the box."

At this point Nasi will excuse herself, saying that the translation is complete and she must tend to another appointment. The players will have to solve the riddle without her.

THE RIDDLE OF THE PUZZLE-BOX

Only by finding the correct solution can the PCs open the puzzle-box. Pressing the squares in order, the solution is: night, day, night, day, rain, rainbow, night. This causes the box to open, emitting a blinding light and revealing the secret kept within: the puzzle-box is actually an ancient Witchgate that will draw everyone within ten feet of it through an enchanted portal. If any PCs are not within range when the box opens, they will see their comrades vanish before their eyes. If they want to follow they'll have to open the box again.

INTO THE DARK

Characters drawn through the Witchgate will find themselves in complete and total darkness. The air around them smells stale, dank, and heavy with dust and mold. All is silent. If any of the PCs have night vision, they will be able to see in the dark. Others will be virtually blind unless they have access to some source of illumination.

The GM should try and make the crypt experience suspenseful and eerie. Set the scene, describing a place as dark and silent as a tomb, the only noise the sound of the characters' breathing. If they have a torch or lantern give them the feeling that if their light source were to vanish, the darkness would rush in and consume them. Mention that 'things' seem to scuttle away, into the darkness. Even characters with night vision should feel uneasy, although they will be able to see quite clearly.

Using night vision, illumination, or their sense of touch, the PCs will find that they are in a windowless chamber approximately ten feet square. The walls, ceiling, and floor are made of stone, and are cold and damp to the touch. There is no door or exit visible on any of the walls. In one corner of the room are two skeletons, lying side by side.

If the PCs search carefully, this is what they will find:

The Skeletons

Both are humanoids, 5-6 feet in height, one somewhat larger than the other. No sign of traumatic injuries, though there is not a speck of flesh on the bones. The larger skeleton has a heavy gold and onyx ring on its finger (worth 300 GL) but no clothing or other possessions. Clutched in its right hand is what looks like a silver comb inlaid with six small rubies (180 GL); one edge of the comb is badly scratched and worn. The smaller skeleton has a necklace of green pearls around its neck (worth 1200 GL). Any PC with naturalist, healer, or scholar Skill can confirm that one skeleton is male and one is female. Any PC with naturalist or tracking Skill will note that the remains are not ancient, but are as recent as 4-5 months - unusual, given the complete decomposition of the bodies (a clue foreshadowing the presence of the Scavenger Slime, which is nearby).

The Floor

Solid stone, covered with a heavy layer of dust. PCs with tracking Skill can spot the faded remnants of numerous tracks (barefoot, male and female, partially covered over with dust). In the corner opposite the

skeletons is an old torch; if the PCs have a way to light this it will burn for about an hour before going out. Close and careful inspection will reveal the presence of something scratched into the floor near the larger skeleton: the word, BETRAYED, in High Talislan script (a clue indicating that these are not ancient remains but recent victims).

The Walls

The walls are made from two-foot square blocks of stone, held together with mortar; aside from a few small cracks and crevices, the stones appear to be very solid. There is an archaic iron sconce on one wall, but it is rusted and has no torch in it. Close inspection reveals that the mortar on all four walls has been scratched in many places, up to a height of about seven and a half feet. The scratch-marks appear to have been made with a sharp object of some sort (the silver comb).

This is an *important* clue, showing that the victims checked every inch of the chamber looking for secret doors — except the last and highest row of stones, which were too high for either of them to reach. Even if PCs with the Traps Skill check the lower walls or wall sconce for secret doors they too will find nothing. However, if one taps on any of the highest row of stones (with a staff, sword, etc.), a section of the wall near the skeletons will open, revealing the chamber's hidden exit.

THE STAIRWAY

The door opens into a stairway that spirals downwards into the earth. The air is cold and damp, and the stone steps are slick with moss and mold. *Any Jaka characters will feel distinctly uneasy, sensing the presence of danger lurking ahead.* Choose a PC at random and tell him that something just dripped down on his shoulder from above. If the PCs have a light source and look up they'll see a dripping mass of translucent slime and writhing tendrils, clinging to the ceiling above them. Whether they look up or not, the awful-looking thing drops on the PCs from above.

This is a Scavenger Slime, a large single-celled organism that feeds on organic materials of all sorts. Roll on the Action Table for its attack, giving the creature a bonus of +5 for degree of difficulty (attacking from above in a narrow stairway). On a full Success the slime engulfs one of the PCs in its soft, viscous body and begins to dissolve the unlucky victim with its corrosive bodily fluids (DR 6, meaning 6 points of damage per round). On a Partial Success, the slime lands amidst the PCs and has grabbed one of them with a tendril.

Scavenger Slime Statistics

Size: 8' in height, up to 10' in diameter, 500+ lbs.

Attributes:

INT -14 PER -5 WIL -5

STR -2 DEX -5* CON +5 SPD -1

* When attacking; otherwise, -15

Ability Level: 1-4

Attacks/Damage: Whip-like Flagella: DR 4; Acidic

Internal Fluids: DR 6 per round

Special Abilities: Bodily fluids dissolve all types of organic materials, unaffected by poisons, acids, or illusions

Armor: None

Hit Points: 25

THE INNER CHAMBER

At the bottom of the stairway is an iron portal, at the center of which has been affixed something that looks like an ancient and ornate silver amulet. The PC who knew the Yitek Contact, Yato Fej, will note that this device resembles the royal seals used in ancient times on the tombs of princes (PCs with certain scholar or antiquarian Skill might also be able to recognize this). Scholars or antiquarians will recognize that it is 4-5 centuries old, appears to be of Phaedran make, and could be worth as much as 100 gold lumens. It can be removed from the door if anyone wants to inspect or take it. Attempts to detect magic will reveal that the device is enchanted, though it will appear to have no apparent powers or properties (the back of the device is inscribed with a Ward against Ghosts, but the symbol is hidden by a 24th level spell of Concealment; both of the magical Order, Wizardry).

The door is locked. PCs with lock-picking Skill can attempt to open it, at a penalty of -7 (Degree of Difficulty, due to the complexity of the lock). The door can also be forced open, using a roll vs. one or more of the PCs' Strength Rating, at a penalty of -12. If a Jaka character enters this room he or she will immediately sense the presence of danger, but will be unable to locate where it is coming from.

Inside is an unlit chamber approximately thirty feet square, lavishly decorated in the manner of an archaic sitting room. At the center of the room is a sarcophagus of blue crystal, the lid of which is carved with the image of a princely figure dressed in rich raiment. Placed upon the figure's chest is a silver seal similar to the one on the door. Otherwise, there is nothing else in the chamber, and nothing behind the curtains except stone walls.

The silver seal is not attached to the sarcophagus, and can easily be removed if desired. If the lid of the sarcophagus is lifted, it will fall off. The minute it is removed the lid of the sarcophagus will fly open, to reveal a gaunt and horrid creature known as a Ghost. "Greetings from Aquilane," it hisses, then springs to the attack (the second seal is the same as the one on the door; it is also inscribed with a hidden Ward against Ghosts, and once it is removed the Ghost can escape the sarcophagus).

At this point at least one of the PCs will realize that this entire scenario has been an elaborate and potentially deadly prank played on them by Aquilane, one of the NPC Contacts provided at the beginning of this adventure. The PCs can think about that later; right now, they'll have their hands full just trying to stay alive.

When describing this attack, the GM should try to make the transition from suspense to frantic combat as sudden as possible. Don't give any player more than a few seconds to react; if they hesitate, so do their characters. Ghosts tend to scream and shriek, and are prone to cruel and sadistic behavior. While you don't have to act like a Ghost, your portrayal of the creature should reflect its unnerving nature. The players (and PCs) should have little chance to catch their breath before the Ghost is out of the sarcophagus and upon them.

That having been said, the GM should be advised that a Ghost is a very dangerous antagonist that could pose a serious threat to beginning or even intermediate-level PCs. If you have a fairly large and powerful group of PCs, this shouldn't be a problem. If not, you may want to tone-down the Ghost's abilities by having it alternate between lethal and non-lethal attacks. For example, on one round you might have the Ghost slash one of the PCs with its claws, as per its usual form of attack. On the next round, have the Ghost grab a PC by the throat, stare into his eyes, then shriek loudly and toss the PC across the room like a rag doll. The second attack might not even cause one Hit Point of damage, but it is no less scary than the first.

The Ghost can only be harmed by spells and silver or magical weapons. However, it will not attack or even touch any PC that is holding one or both of the silver seals. These devices were placed on the door and sarcophagus by Aquilane when he set-up his "practical joke". Each is enchanted with a Ward that will cause the Ghost extreme pain should it try to pass or approach the seal (the seal is what's kept the Ghost imprisoned in the sarcophagus all this time).

The seals can be used to keep the Ghast away, or even force it back into the sarcophagus or out of the chamber. As they are silver, the devices can even be used as makeshift weapons (DR: 2 + STR). Using one or both of the seals is the easiest way to defeat the Ghast.

Statistics for the Ghast

Size: 7'6"-8', 160-200 lbs.

Attributes:

INT +5 PER +8 WIL +8 CHA -7

STR +7 DEX -5 CON +10 SPD +2

Power Level: 16

Attacks/Damage: Claws: DR 13

Special Abilities: Necromancy with five Modes at Power Level, night vision, detect invisible/astral presences (range: 100 feet per level), harmed only by silver or magical weapons and spells

Armor: None

Hit Points: 42

RESOLUTION

Once the Ghast has been dealt with the PCs are out of danger. However, they'll still have to find the way out of this place (a trap door under the rug in this chamber leads to a secret passage and exit). Where is the crypt located, what awaits them when they get out, and how will they get home? Will they try to get revenge on Aquilane, and if so, how? What part did the peddler, Savrille, play in this plot? Who were the man and woman whose skeletons were found in the first chamber, and how did they get there?

The answers may be found in their next adventure, or not. As the GM, it's up to you to decide.

AFTERMATH

Every PC who survived this adventure earns at least 10 Experience Points (the GM can adjust this figure upwards or downwards for a Heroic or Grim Fantasy campaign). The GM can also award an additional point of XP to any PC who showed exceptionally good roleplaying and/or problem solving during the course of the adventure.

The jewelry found in the first chamber can be sold for at least 75% of its appraised value. However, if the signet ring is recognized, the PCs may have some explaining to do.

The two silver seals are very good imitations of antiques, worth no more than 5-10 GL apiece. The

enchantment placed upon them will turn out to be a Ward invoked against that particular Ghast by name, and is so specific as to be of no practical use to anyone.

The crystal sarcophagus is a genuine antique of the latter Phaedran era, and is worth over 1000 GL. Getting it out of the burial chamber may not be the easiest thing to do, as it weighs over 600 pounds.

The victims in the first chamber were two Zandir lovers. Both were acquaintances of Aquilane, and one was once his lover. On their wedding night they received a beautiful puzzle-box as a present from a "secret friend". Neither was ever seen again.