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First published in Great Britain in 2016 by Orbit

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

HB ISBN 978-0-356-50639-5
C format 978-0-356-50638-8

Printed and bound in Great Britain by TBC

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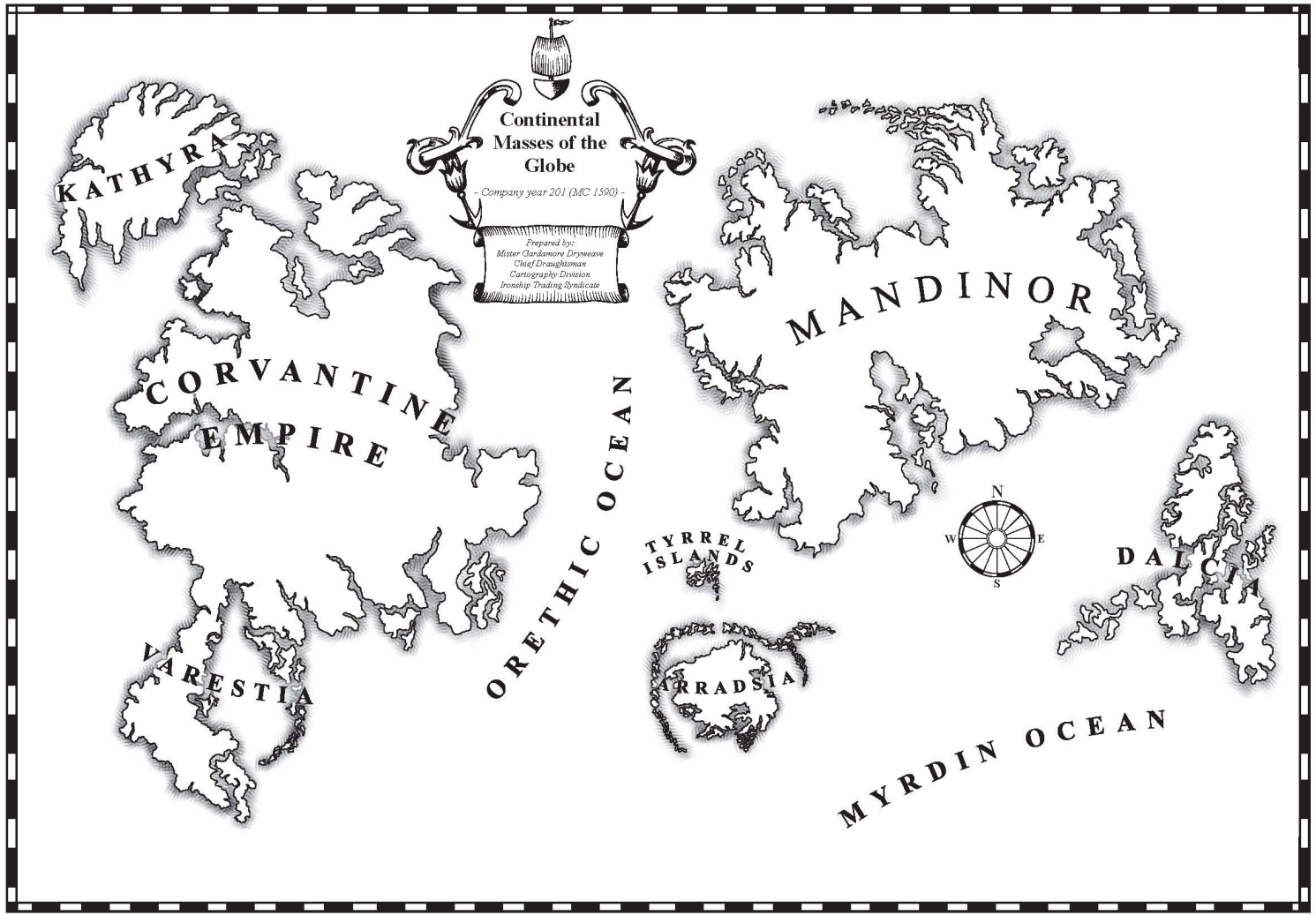


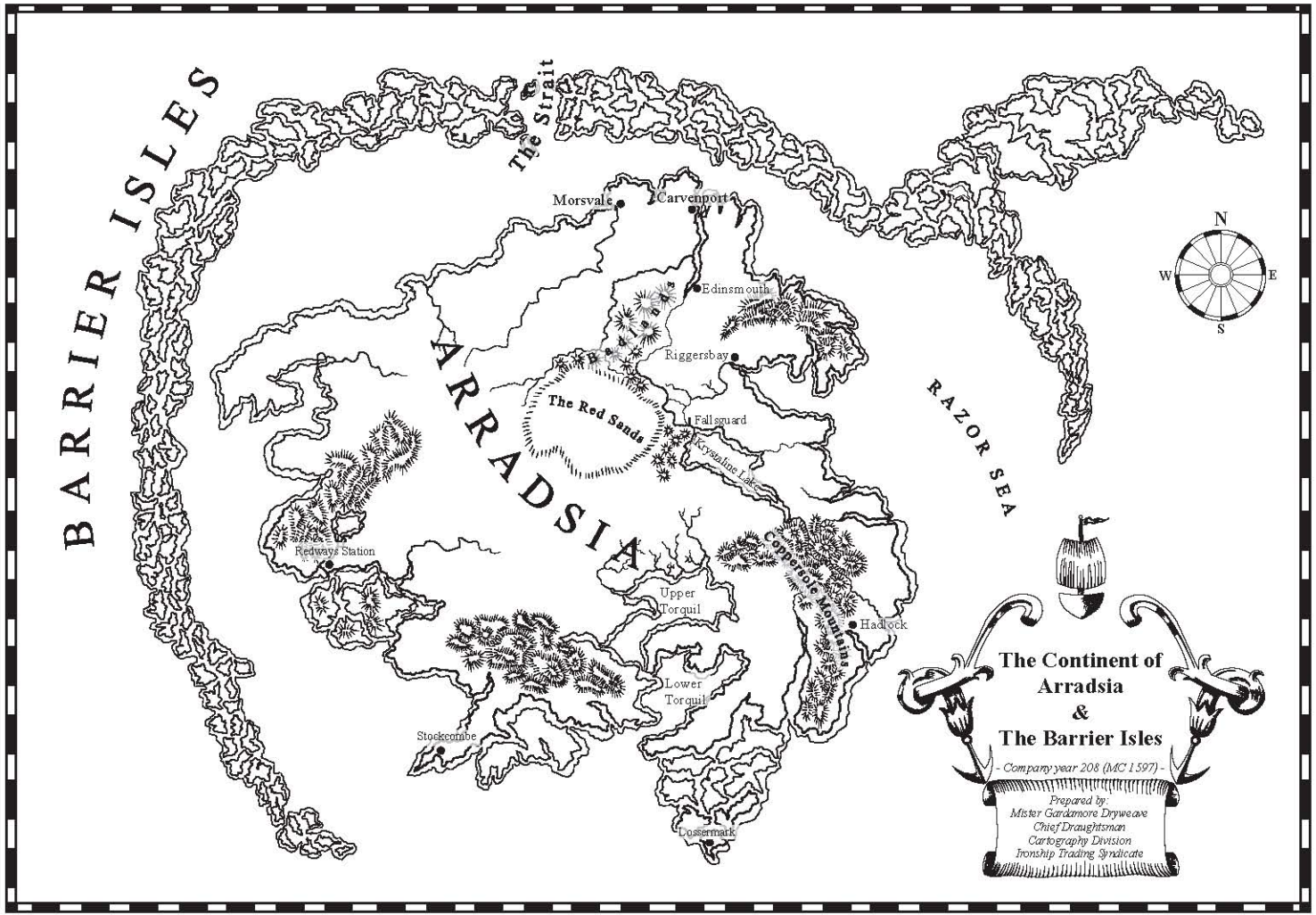
Orbit
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

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For Paul,
because sometimes the only reward for fighting the good fight
is in knowing you did it.


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PROLOGUE

REPORT TO: BOARD OF DIRECTORS
IRONSHIP TRADING SYNDICATE
HOME OFFICE
FEROS HOLDINGS

Report by: *Lodima Bondersil—Acting Director, Carvenport Division, Arradsian Continental Holdings*

Date: *Settemer 29, 1578 (Day 166 of Company Year 135 by the Corporate Calendar)*

Subject: *Events surrounding the demise of Mr. Havelic Dunmorn, Director Carvenport Division, Arradsian Continental Holdings*

Esteemed Sirs and Ladies,

By the time this report reaches your hands you will, no doubt, have received word via the Blue-trance of the demise of my immediate superior, Mr. Havelic Dunmorn, and an initial estimate of the associated deaths and considerable material destruction accompanying that tragic event. I have compiled this written account in the hope and expectation it will obviate any asinine and ill-informed rumours spread by competitors or Syndicate employees (see addendum for a list of recommended dismissals and contract terminations). It is my intention to provide a clear and unbiased account

of events so as to better inform the deliberations of the Board and any subsequent directives they may see fit to issue.

The incident in question took place in and around the Harvesting and Dockside quarters of Carvenport on Settemer 26. The Board will recall Mr. Dunmorn's Blue-trance communication on 12 Dimester which described the successful capture of a wild Black by the Chainmasters Independent Contractor Company, following a lengthy expedition to the south-western regions of the Arradsian Interior. I also refer the Board to the previous ten quarterly written reports from this Division concerning the increasing attrition rate amongst pen-bred stock, with Blacks proving the most short-lived of all breeds. I am sure the Board requires no reminder of the ever-decreasing potency of product harvested from inbred and youthful stock. Therefore, the capture of a live and healthy wild Black (the first such capture in more than a dozen years) was greeted with considerable excitement throughout the ranks of Syndicate employees, in that it offered the prospect of thickened blood lines and quality product for years to come. Unfortunately such expectations were soon revealed as premature.

The Black, a full-grown male of some sixteen feet in length, proved extremely difficult to handle, perennially unsettled and prone to dangerous lunges even when sedated and its jaws firmly muzzled. Several harvesters were injured in wrangling the beast and one maimed when it contrived to crush him against the walls of its pen after feigning somnolence for several hours. The cunning of the various breeds inhabiting these lands has oft been remarked upon by harvesters and naturalists alike, but I must confess to a considerable personal discomfort at the vicious calculation displayed by this particular animal, traits so far unseen in all my years on this continent.

In addition to its frequent violence the Black also refused to mate with any pen-bred female, reacting with either indifference or aggression whenever one was placed in its proximity. Added to this was the extreme reluctance on the part of the female Blacks to remain anywhere near their wild cousin, all becoming excessively agitated and vocal at the mere sight of him. So after four months, with no prospect of a successful mating and costs of feeding and caring for the specimen increasing, Mr. Dunmorn ordered the beast be harvested. I have attached minutes of my discussion with Mr. Dunmorn which are fulsome in their description of my opinion on the matter and require no repetition here.

Mr. Dunmorn determined to make a celebration of the harvesting, a sop to local morale which has suffered recently due to the dip in markets and consequent reduction in contract terms. It was decreed, therefore, that the harvesting would take place on the same day as the Blood-lot, not often regarded as a day of merriment elsewhere but in these far-removed lands has become something of an annual festival. The prospect of a child finding themselves elevated to a life of prosperity by mere chance holds considerable resonance for those who often find their own ambitions curbed by the reality of individual ability.

To add to the festivities, Mr. Dunmore intended to retain one fiftieth of the harvested product for distribution to the populace by means of a raffle. Given the current market price for undiluted Black, I am certain the Board will recognise the popularity of this contrivance, the principal reason why the area surrounding the harvesting vat was so crowded at the decisive moment.

PERSONAL NARRATIVE

I remain hopeful of the Board's understanding in reporting my failure to establish the precise chain of events leading to the ultimate calamity, a task that remains unfulfilled despite my exhaustive efforts. Many first-hand witnesses are now sadly consigned to the grave and those remaining amongst the living are often unreasoned to the point of lunacy. Exposure to undiluted product can have unpredictable consequences. As for my own account, I was not present for either the Blood-lot or the harvesting, having opted to remain at the Academy to address a large glut of unresolved correspondence.

At approximately twenty minutes past the fourteenth hour I was drawn from my labours by the tumult of screams from beyond the window. On going to investigate I was struck by the sight of numerous townsfolk running through the streets with considerable, nay panicked alacrity, many a shocked, pale or weeping face amongst the throng. Spying one of my students amidst the mob I opened the window and called her name. A bright and resourceful child, as my girls invariably are, she managed to extricate herself from the rush by means of clambering up the academy railings, clinging on as she made her report: "It's loose, Madame! The Black is loose in the town! Many are dead!"

I must confess to a shameful loss of decision at this point, for which I naturally crave the Board's pardon. However, I trust you will recognise that this particular circumstance had never, at any point, occurred during the entirety of my three decades on this continent. After an inexcusable delay of several seconds I was finally of sufficient mind to formulate a question for my student. "How?"

At this point the girl's countenance took on an uncharacteristic confusion and it was a full half-minute before she spoke again, her words halting and imprecise. "The Blood-lot . . . There was a woman . . . A woman with a child . . ."

"It is customary for parents and children to gather at the Blood-lot," I told her, not without some impatience. "Clarify your report!"

"She . . ." My student's face then took on an expression of equal parts wonder and horror. "She jumped."

"Jumped?"

"Yes, Madame. With the child . . . She gathered up the child and . . . jumped."

"Jumped where?"

"Into the vat, Madame. Just as the harvester tapped the Black . . . She jumped into the vat."

From the blank mystification on my student's face, and the copious scorching and bloodstains besmirching her dress, I divined she would be unable to furnish further useful intelligence. Having ordered her to proceed to the dormitory and see to the security of the younger students, I recovered a full set of vials from my office safe and made haste towards the Harvesting quarter. I will not burden the Board with a full description of the destruction I witnessed during the journey, nor what I found on reaching the site of the Black's harvesting, or pause to enumerate the number of corpses, but suffice to say I saw enough to confirm the veracity of my student's account.

The vat itself was completely shattered, the solid oak planking blown to splinters and scattered in a wide radius, as was the beast's blood. It lay in thick pools on the cobbled street, or spattered onto surrounding houses where all windows had been flung open to witness Mr. Dunmorn's spectacle. Those spectators not killed outright by ingestion were stumbling about or flailing on the ground, either in madness or agony. Being resistant to the blood's effects I was able to approach the remnants of the vat, observing

the body of a woman half-submerged where the blood lay thickest. Her age and identity were unguessable as her skin had been blackened and charred from direct contact with the product, but from her slender proportions I judged her as young. The only sign of the Black was the shattered remnants of its chains. As for the child my student spoke of, I saw no trace at all.

A flurry of rifle-shots drew my attention towards the dockside, easily viewed from my present vantage point via the path of destruction carved through successive rows of housing. Amidst the sound of gun-fire a distinctive roaring could also be discerned. At this point I felt it opportune to imbibe a goodly portion of Green which facilitated a rapid approach to the docks whereupon I first spied the unleashed beast. It had smashed its way to the wharf, trailing blood from the tap in its neck with every step but, despite its loss, continued to wreak havoc with furious energy. I watched as it dashed the Harbour-Master's house to pieces with successive swipes of its tail before turning its attention to the vessels moored alongside the quay. A number were in the process of drawing off, the crews working with feverish industry to seek the sanctuary of the open sea, but a half-dozen evidently lacked the hands or decisiveness to effect escape.

The Black leapt atop a sturdy coastal steamer, the IRV *Equitable Share*, submerging it by virtue of its weight alone, unmuzzled jaws snapping at the flailing crewmen in the water. Turning its attentions to a neighbouring freighter, a Briteshore Minerals vessel of some two hundred tons displacement, it set about wrecking the wheel-house and stacks, all the time gaping its mouth as it sought vainly to bring forth its fire. I must pause at this point to emphasise the wise foresight of the harvesters who first took charge of the beast in severing its naphtha-ducts. Had they not the consequences are frankly too appalling to contemplate.

At this point I saw the Black rear in shock as a rifle round struck its flank, voicing a great roar of fury before launching itself at the next vessel on the quay, the cauterised stumps of its wings twitching as it instinctively sought the air. I soon identified the source of the rifle-shot, spying a figure atop one of the taller, as yet undamaged, cranes crowding the wharf. Thanks to the effects of the recently imbibed Green I scaled the crane's scaffold in a matter of seconds, finding a man perched on the armature and taking careful aim at the Black with a longrifle. He fired and I saw the Black rear again, before bounding onward, landing on the broad deck of the IRV

Drakespite, a Blue-hunter recently returned from the southern seas. The crew had unwisely chosen to contest the beast's assault, assailing it with various fire-arms, none of sufficient calibre to inflict more than a minor wound.

The rifleman swore in copious and uncouth terms as he reloaded his weapon, falling silent as I strode along the armature to his side. "Y'pardon, ma'am," he said in the accent of the Old Colonials, his origins also plain in the dark hue of his complexion. Having scant time to deliver a lecture on propriety, I took note of his worn but hardy clothing before settling my gaze on his longrifle: a Vactor-Massin .6 single-shot breech-loader favoured by the more successful Contractor Companies.

"Personal weapons are required to be lodged with the Protectorate on entry to Carvenport, sir," I said.

The marksman gave the barest grin in response before nodding at the still-rampaging beast. "Reckon I'll earn myself a pardon when I put him down, ma'am. If only he'd cease his fury long enough for a skull shot."

I watched as the Black's tail swept the last remaining crew from the deck of the *Drakespite* whereupon it threw its head back to voice a victory roar, the blood continuing to flow from the steel spile in its neck. "A good sight more lively than it should be," the Contractor opined, taking aim once more then biting down on a curse as the beast bounded on. "All that blood leaked away."

"Your name, sir?" I enquired.

"Torcreek, ma'am. Braddon Torcreek, fifth-share hand to the Longrifles Independent."

I took the vials of Red and Black from my supply and drank it all before taking another deep draught of Green. "I'll hold him for you, Mr. Torcreek," I said. "See if we can't earn you that pardon."

With that I leapt over the marksman and sprinted the length of the armature, launching myself at a tilted mast arising from the deck of a listing freighter, one of the older ships which continue to retain sails as insurance against engine failure. The distance was perhaps thirty feet or more, well within reach of a Blood-blessed sated by Green. I caught hold of the rigging and used the resultant centrifugal forces to propel me in pursuit of the Black, a basic manoeuvre I had been teaching my girls for the better part

of two decades. Arcing towards the Black at considerable velocity I called upon my reserves of Red to assail it from the rear. Naturally its hide was scorched but largely undamaged by the resulting blast of heat, but like all its kind, it proved incapable of ignoring a challenge.

It had landed atop another freighter, the crew displaying considerably less aggression than that of the *Drakespite* in the rapidity with which they hurled themselves from her rails, my Red-lit fires no doubt adding impetus to their flight. The Black whirled amidst the flaming tangle of rigging and timber, mouth gaping to cough its fiery response then howling in frustration as the flames failed to gout. I landed hard on the deck barely twenty feet from him, the glut of Green preventing a disabling injury, and stared into his eyes in direct challenge, a thing no male could ever tolerate for long. It roared again and charged, claws tearing the deck into splinters and tail coiling for a strike, whereupon it froze into absolute immobility as I called on the Black I had ingested bare moments before.

That it was a fearsomely strong beast was self-evident, but before now I had not truly appreciated the power of this animal. It strained against my Black-born grip with all its might, draining my reserves of ingested product with such speed I must confess to a sudden sheen of sweat on my brow and a growing impatience for Mr. Torcreek to make good his boast. Strange then, that it is at this juncture that I must describe another sensation, a certain insight beyond the general alarm and urgency of the situation. For, as I maintained my vigil upon the beast's eyes, I discerned something beyond its animal craving for flesh and triumph: a deep and consuming terror, and not of me. I realised in that instant the Black had not been seeking revenge for its capture and torment, nor for the insertion of a steel tap into its flesh. It had been trying to get away, seeking escape from something far worse than these small, two-legged pests. It was as my mind tracked over the course of the beast's flight, from the shattered vat with its mysterious corpse through the close-packed streets to the docks, that Mr. Torcreek proved himself no braggart.

The rifle-bullet made a faint whine as it streaked overhead to smack precisely into the centre of the Black's sloping forehead. It gave a single spasmodic jerk, its long body undulating from head to tail, then collapsed onto the part-destroyed deck with a choking gargle.

CONCLUSION

The Board will find a full list of casualties and tally of damage at Addendum II, together with a cost estimate for repairs. As stated above, the compilation of an exact and incontrovertible account proves impossible, however, certain facts can be established beyond any reasonable contradiction.

Firstly, a woman of unknown identity, accompanied by a small child of undetermined gender, did indeed climb onto the platform alongside Mr. Dunmorn as he was concluding a rather lengthy discourse on the merits of company loyalty. In all truth, Mr. Dunmorn was not widely regarded as the most compelling orator which may account for the inattention of much of the crowd at the critical moment. Despite this, I have collated statements from six individual witnesses, all of good character and reliable judgement, attesting that the unidentified woman stepped out of the line of parents and children awaiting the Blood-lot and made an unhurried passage onto the platform, unnoticed by either Mr. Dunmorn or the team of harvesters making ready to apply the spile to the Black's neck. The woman is described as young but I have made no progress in obtaining a more detailed description. One of the male witnesses did testify to a certain conventional attractiveness in her form and bearing but viewed her at too great a distance to provide details of hair colour or complexion. Descriptions of the child are equally vague but its height would indicate an age of eight years, the correct age for presentation at the Blood-lot.

It seems that it was barely seconds subsequent to Mr. Dunmorn's order to commence harvesting that the woman gathered up her child and leapt into the vat. It is at this point that most accounts, perhaps understandably, become somewhat confused. However, my correlation of various testimonials has unearthed some key points of agreement. It seems clear that the vat shattered from within, killing poor Mr. Dunmorn and the harvesters in the process. Also, the Black was not responsible for this particular piece of destruction, being secured by chains to the harvesting rig when it occurred. Following the destruction of the vat and the resultant dispersal of so much product, a general panic seized the crowd but three witnesses retained sufficient presence of mind to attest that the Black's chains were nowhere in sight as the product rained down, after which it began its desperate flight from the scene.

My conclusion is alarming but inescapable; the Black was set free by the agency of a Blood-blessed, upon whose shoulders the deaths of Mr. Dunmore and so many others can now be placed. The list of suspects wishing harm to Syndicate interests on this continent is long, the Corvantine Empire being worthy of perhaps greatest attention. But I find it difficult to comprehend what advantage even they could gain from this incident. Also, what connection this hidden agent has with the unknown woman, or her purpose, remains singularly mysterious. As reported above, the woman's body was recovered, albeit in an unrecognisable condition, but the child she bore into the vat was not found at her side. Several children did perish in this incident, mainly those gathered for the Blood-lot, but all have been claimed by grieving relatives. Who this child was, or where he or she may have gone, remains perhaps the most troublesome mystery to emerge from this entire episode.

I assure the Board that my efforts to resolve these questions are not exhausted and I will continue to expend all necessary energy to provide the requisite answers.

In lieu of the arrival of Mr. Dunmorn's replacement, I remain,
Sirs and Ladies, your most loyal employee and Shareholder,

Lodima Bondersil
Acting Director—Carvenport Division
Arradsian Continental Holdings

I

The Red Sands

What do we mean when we use the term "product," that otherwise innocuous word that has become so burdened with significance over the course of the preceding century and the advent of the Corporate Age? Most readers, I'm sure, would reply with just one word, "Blood." Or, if they were of a more verbose inclination, they might expand their definition thusly: "Drake Blood." This is basically correct but has a tendency to mask the truly vast complexity of the subject addressed within the pages of this modest tome. For, as even the most superstitious Dalcian savage or illiterate Island brute can attest, there is no one type of product. I will spare you, dear reader, a fulsome technical description of each variant, and the increasing list of derivatives reaped from the carcasses of the Arradsian drake. Instead, I feel it would be more apposite, and perhaps amusing, to simply repeat a mantra taught to students at the Ironship Academy of Female Education, amongst whom I am proud to count myself:

Blue for the mind.
Green for the body.
Red for the fire.
Black for the push.

From *A Lay-person's Guide to Plasmology* by Miss Amorea Findlestack.
Ironship Press—Company Year 190 (1579 by the Mandinorian Calendar).