

# THE SKULL AND THE SWORD

## A HOLONOVEL OF THE WORLD OF BORALIA

### BACKGROUND

When an ancient being of incredible evil power, the Skull King, arises once more to threaten the world, only one man, Prince Eldred of Armorica, stands between it and the enslavement of the peoples of Boralia. Together with a band of comrades, Prince Eldred must search for the Sword of Vanderlac, the blade his ancestors wielded when they defeated the Skull King more than a thousand years ago. Racing against time and the Skull King's minions, Prince Eldred must succeed to save the world and all he holds dear from the touch of the greatest evil Boralia has ever known.

### THE MAIN CHARACTERS

#### CREWMEMBER PERSONAE

You can run *The Skull and the Sword* for just one player or an entire group, depending upon your circumstances. The main hero of the story, Prince Eldred, can serve as the character for a single player if you wish to run the adventure as a "solo" episode. In that case, you as Narrator can play the NPCs described below—such as Master Maldorius the wizard—or simply ignore them. None of them play a crucial role in the story. If you want to use this episode for two or more players, allow the additional characters to take on a greater role. Let the players review the roles available in the holonovel and choose which ones they want (high die roll gets to pick first, and characters' gender may be altered if necessary). Discard unused characters or run them as NPCs. Only Prince Eldred can slay the Skull King—if no player wishes to run him, you must introduce him as an NPC.

#### PRINCE ELDRED OF ARMORICA

Prince Eldred of Armorica is the handsome young scion of a proud family which has ruled Armorica for centuries. He received training in all the arts and skills appropriate for an heir to the throne—everything from swordplay to diplomacy to the politics of court. As the last heir of the great hero Vanderlac, only he can wield Vanderlac's powerful Sword—the sole weapon which can slay the Skull King.

##### PRINCE ELDRED OF ARMORICA

**Role:** Protagonist

**Type:** Prince, noble warrior and heir to both the throne and the legacy of Vanderlac.

**Backstory:** A prince raised in the valorous warrior tradition of the Kings of Armorica, destined to rule that realm one day.

**Demeanor:** Self-confident, assertive, used to receiving

### GENRE TEMPLATE: EPIC FANTASY

**Examples:** *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Three Stars Trilogy* by Patricia McKillip, *The Belgariad* by David Eddings.

**Imagery:** Sweeping, majestic natural vistas. Noble cities besieged by the armies of the Evil Lord. Magnificent kings leading men into battle to save the world. A group of heroes journeying across the land on a great quest.

**Themes:** Preserving that which is good and true from evil, corruption or dissipation. Persevering against great odds to save innocents who don't appreciate the threats facing them and their world, and who often scorn the heroes.

#### Stock Characters:

*The Subject of Prophecy:* This character, usually a warrior or heir to the throne, must complete a great destiny. Unless he manages to fulfill it (with the help of the other characters), the world will plunge into darkness.

*Quote:* "But I don't understand—how could that be me?"

*The Wise Wizard:* Wearing a hooded cloak (or cloak and hat), carrying a staff and sporting a long gray beard, he contributes his wisdom and knowledge to the group of heroes. He sometimes keeps his wisdom in reserve, since it's more dramatic to keep the other characters from learning the greater, often more disturbing truth. He also wields considerable magical power, but rarely uses it full-force—the sheer fact everyone *knows* he's powerful usually makes them back down.

*Quote:* "Do not tamper with forces you do not understand."

*The Noble Warriors:* Obstacles and enemies aplenty exist to bedevil a group of questing heroes, so many of them must possess skill with sword and arrow. This stock character ranges from the knight in shining armor and the cloaked woodsman to the heroic-hearted mercenary captain.

*Quote:* "Ware arrows! Fall back while we deal with these foul folk!"

*The Nonhumans:* These characters are members of nonhuman races, such as elves, dwarves, gnomes or winged folk. They contribute their race's knowledge, their unique fighting skills or crafts and similar talents to the party.

*Quote:* "In the lands of the Dwarves, he is known as *Tathroz Vaar*, the Foul Shadow."

*The Innocent:* Often a younger person or someone from a faraway land, this character knows little or nothing about what's really going on in the world. He's somehow drawn into the story—perhaps as the ward of another character, through some accident, or because he's also the Subject of Prophecy. He often asks questions so the more experienced characters can explain things to him (and to the audience).

*Quote:* "Why does the Evil Lord want to kill Astorius, anyway?"

*The Evil Lord:* Leader of the forces of darkness which the heroes oppose. This character, often a fallen god or ultra-powerful wizard, embodies all that is evil, corrupt, foul, wicked and despicable. He commands vast magical powers and armies of evil minions.

*Quote:* "Purblind fool! Did you truly think you stood a chance against the power of the Black Throne?"

*The Corrupted:* This character—a king, a courtier or another wizard—fell under the sway of the Evil Lord (directly or indirectly), and works his will as a traitor among the Good Folk.

*Quote:* "Surely, m'lord, you would not risk the lives of the sons of Ilgaria in a futile attempt to oppose the Evil Lord?"

**Plot Devices:** A magical item holds the key to the Evil Lord's defeat, if only the characters can find or properly exploit it. The Corrupted attempts to foil the works of the Good Folk, only to be exposed and defeated by the heroes. The long-forgotten heir of a powerful king steps forward to assume his crown and lead the Good Folk to victory.

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respect (and giving it in turn), expects his social inferiors to obey him.

**Goals:** For this holonovel, Prince Eldred wishes to recover the Sword of Vanderlac and stop the Skull King from destroying the world. In general, he wants to bring honor to his family and his realm, and, in time, to rule Armorica justly.

**Costume:** At court Prince Eldred usually wears colorful doublets or tunics of silk and other fine clothes, with a small golden crown indicating his royal status. In the field he wears sturdier garb, including chain mail and surcoat (+3 Armor against all attacks), and carries a broadsword and dagger (see page 238 of the **Star Trek: The Next Generation Roleplaying Game** core rulebook for statistics on these weapons). He may carry a shield if the player wishes, providing +4 to Block attempts.

### PRINCE ELDRED

Fitness: 3

Strength +1

Vitality +2

Coordination: 3

Reaction +1

Intellect: 3

Perception +1

Presence: 4

Willpower +1

Psi: 0

**Standard Skills:** Animal Handling (Horse) 3 (4), Charm (Influence) 2 (3), Command (Combat Leadership) 2 (3), Planetary Tactics (Small Unit) 2 (3), Primitive Weaponry (Sword) 3 (4)

**Traits:** Bold +1, Shrewd +1

**Resistance:** 5

**Wound Levels:** 5/5/5/5/5/0

## MASTER MALDORIUS

Several of Prince Eldred's old friends and comrades might participate in his quest. The first, Master Maldorius, is one of the few surviving wizards in Boralia. Although his powers do not equal those of the great sorcerers of old, his vast lore and spells serve to protect Prince Eldred from the Skull King's minions.

### MASTER MALDORIUS

**Role:** Supporting Character

**Type:** Wise Wizard

**Backstory:** One of the last wizards in Boralia, Master Maldorius has studied the Arts Arcane for centuries.

**Demeanor:** Knowledgeable yet close-mouthed and enigmatic; inscrutable.

**Goals:** Maldorius's goals, both for this holonovel and in general, are to destroy the Skull King and usher Boralia into a new era of peace and prosperity without his shadow looming over it. Since he knows he's too weak to defeat the Skull King on his own, he protects the one man—Prince Eldred—who can slay him.

**Costume:** Master Maldorius typically wears blue robes and a hat, keeps a black beard and carries a Wizard's Staff.

### MASTER MALDORIUS

Fitness: 2

Coordination: 3

Reaction +1

Intellect: 5

Logic +1

Perception +2

Presence: 5

Willpower +1

Psi: 0

**Standard Skills:** Animal Handling (Horse) 2 (3), Medical Sciences (First Aid) 2 (3), Primitive Weaponry (Staff) 1 (2)

**Special Skills:** Knowledge (Boralia Legends & Lore) 4, Magic 4

**Traits:** Curious +1, Excellent Sight +2, Code Of Honor (Wizard's Oath) -2

**Resistance:** 2

**Wound Levels:** 2/2/2/2/2/0

**Special Ability:** Master Maldorius wields wizardly powers. The holodeck computer assumes he has a special Intellect-based Skill, *Magic*, at level 4. A character taking this role simply gestures and speaks a predetermined casting phrase (such as "Abracadabra Animal Speak") and, if his Magic Test succeeds, the holodeck creates the effect and determines what, if anything, he accomplishes. Maldorius also uses his staff as a weapon (Accuracy 7, Block +3, Damage 2+2d6).

Master Maldorius can use any of the following powers or "spells" with his Magic Skill. Typically this requires a Routine (4) Magic Test, unless noted otherwise.

- **Animal Speak:** He can "summon" and converse with small animals.
- **Bloodweaving:** This difficult spell allows Master Maldorius to heal minor injuries and wounds. If he succeeds with a Moderate (7) Magic Test, he heals up to 3 total points' worth of damage (for one or more characters). He may only do this once per hour.
- **Fire Mastery:** He can control fires of up to 5 meters radius diameter, causing them to blaze hotter, go out or move in a particular direction. To a certain extent he can shape the fire to create simple images. He can also cause the tip of his wizard's staff or one of his hands to burst into flame (this does not harm him or the staff)—anyone touched by this "mageflame" suffers 3+1d6 damage.
- **Flash Lightning:** Master Maldorius can summon lightning from a storm, or project a bolt from his staff, if he succeeds with a Moderate (7) Magic Test. The attack has Range 5/20/50/100 and inflicts 12+3d6 damage.
- **Light Pool:** Creates a pool of light 3 meters in diameter, centered on his wizard's staff.
- **Magesight:** He can detect the presence of magic, enchantment or fantastic beasts.
- **Spellbreaking:** Maldorius can attempt to dispel ("break") the spells or powers of another wizard or the Skull King. This requires an Opposed Magic Test against the opponent. Few such contests should succeed in breaking the Skull King's dweomers; his arcane powers are simply too strong.
- **Weatherworking:** Master Maldorius can alter the weather within a 2 kilometer radius, though he cannot create extreme conditions (tornadoes, hurricanes, blizzards). This requires a Moderate (7) Magic Test.

## CADMON DRUCE

A huntsman, tracker and archer, Cadmon Druce has served the Kings of Armorica all his life. His skill with bow and woodcraft matches his luck with the ladies and dice, both of which are considerable. As one of the Prince Eldred's tutors when the Prince was young, and the most skilled woodsman in Armorica, Druce feels honorbound

to assist Eldred with his quest.

**CADMON DRUCE**

**Role:** Supporting Character

**Type:** Noble Warrior

**Backstory:** A huntsman who's served the Armorican throne for years, Druce's family was slain by trolls, giving him a special hatred for that fell folk.

**Demeanor:** Druce is quiet, speaking only when spoken to or other necessity demands it. His hawk-like eyes constantly watch everything around him. He seems ever alert to dangers of which others are, at best, dimly aware.

**Goals:** To protect Prince Eldred and help him with his quest in any way.

**Costume:** Studded leather armor (+2 Armor against all attacks), huntsman's cloak and tunic, dagger, battle axe (Accuracy 8, Block +1, Damage 5+2d6), and a longbow with 20 arrows (Range 5/15/45/120, Damage 2+2d6).

**CADMON DRUCE**

Fitness: 4

Coordination: 4

Dexterity +1

Intellect: 2

Perception +2

Presence: 3

Psi: 0

**Standard Skills:** Animal Handling (Horse) (Falcon) 3 (4) (4), Athletics (Hunting) 3 (4), Command (Combat Leadership) 1 (2), Planetary Tactics (Small Unit) 1 (2), Planetside Survival (Forest) 4 (5), Primitive Weaponry (Axe) (Longbow) 3 (4) (4), Stealth (Stealthy Movement) 3 (4)

**Traits:** Rapid Healing +1, Obsessive Tendencies (kill trolls) -3, Vengeful -2

**Resistance:** 4

**Wound Levels:** 4/4/4/4/4/0

**SIR BEREK WULFHHERE**

In contrast to Cadmon Druce, Sir Berek Wulfhere never felt at home in the woods. A knight of great prowess and renown, he prefers the tilting-field, battlefield or palace to taking long journeys through the dark lands of Boralia. Still, he swore to guard Prince Eldred's life with his own, so where the Prince goes, he goes. He wears plate armor and a steel helmet, carries a shield emblazoned with the arms of House Wulfhere, and wields the sword Talvring, a blade of honorable lineage and great accomplishment.

**SIR BEREK WULFHHERE**

**Role:** Supporting Character

**Type:** Noble Warrior

**Backstory:** A peer of Armorica, Sir Berek pledged his life to protect that of the King and the Prince.

**Demeanor:** Self-assured to the point of arrogance, haughty.

**Goals:** For this holonovel, Sir Berek must protect Prince Eldred and help him with his quest in any way. In the long term, he would like to obtain more and better titles and settle down to the life of the landed nobility.

**Costume:** At court he wears only the best, but in the field he dons shining plate armor (+5 Armor against all attacks) with a navy blue surcoat depicting his coat of arms (three eagles on gold). He wields a broadsword and also uses a lance while on horseback only (Accuracy 9, Block +0, Damage 6+3d6). He also carries a shield providing +4 to Block attempts.

**SIR BEREK WULFHHERE**

Fitness: 3

Strength +2

Vitality +1

Coordination: 2

Intellect: 3

Presence: 3

Psi: 0

**Standard Skills:** Animal Handling (Horse) 3 (4), Command (Combat Leadership) 2 (3), Planetary Tactics (Small Unit) 2 (3), Primitive Weaponry (Sword) (Lance) 3 (4) (4)

**Traits:** Promotion +3, Weapon Master (Sword) +4, Arrogant -1, Code Of Honor (Chivalry) -2

**Resistance:** 4

**Wound Levels:** 4/4/4/4/4/0

**ALVETHIA**

The strangest member of this small band of heroes is *Alvethia*, one of the *Turosa'skaa'Choreth*, or "Cloud Falcon People." While in most respects she resembles her four fellow protagonists, the two large wings sprouting from her shoulder blades make it obvious to all she comes from the Turosa cloud-castles. With her swift-darting rapier and razor-sharp *I'shala* throwing blades, not to mention her ability to fly out of harm's way, she makes a fierce and deadly opponent in battle. She joins Prince Eldred's band as a goodwill gesture from the Turosa, who wish to form a better relationship with the people of Boralia—and, of course, safeguard themselves from the Skull King.

**ALVETHIA**

**Role:** Supporting Character

**Type:** Nonhuman

**Backstory:** A diplomat of the Cloud Falcon People, she trained in their arts of war. Alvethia volunteered for a mission to approach the Ground Folk about developing closer alliances and trade routes. While "down below," as her people say, she became fond of the "Groundlings" and joined their quest as a preemptive means of protecting her own people.

**Demeanor:** Calm, rational, always in exquisite control of herself.

**Goals:** Right now Alvethia wants to see the Skull King destroyed. Fostering greater ties between her people and the Ground Folk remains her long-term goal.

**Costume:** Alvethia wears no armor. She dresses in sturdy, comfortable clothing. She carries a rapier-like sword, a

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dagger with a sky-blue stone set in the pommel, and several *I'shala* throwing blades, a type of throwing blade her people use (Range 5/10/25/50, Damage 1+1d6). She flies at a rate of 20 meters per round (the holodeck simulates this with tractor beams), with aerial agility based on her Coordination and Flying Maneuvers Skill. She carries her few belongings in small belt pouches.

### ALVETHIA

Fitness: 2

Vitality +1

Coordination: 5

Dexterity +1

Reaction +1

Intellect: 2

Perception +2

Presence: 3

Psi: 0

*Standard Skills:* Charm (Influence) 3 (4), Primitive Weaponry (Sword) (L'shala) 2 (3) (4)

*Special Skills:* Flying Maneuvers 3

*Traits:* Excellent Sight +2, Night Vision +2, Peripheral Vision +1, Sexy +2, Impulsive -1, Phobia (Claustrophobia) -3

*Resistance:* 3

*Wound Levels:* 3/3/3/3/3/0

If more than five players participate in this adventure, the Narrator can create additional characters for them to play. Some possibilities include a dwarf, elf or other member of the Fae Folk (see below) serving as ambassador to this expedition; a priest who received a vision from the gods to join the Prince; or a young and guileful thief from the Free City of Kalumard who stumbles into this whole mess in Chapter Three. For the most part their goals agree with those of the characters describe above: help Prince Eldred find the Sword of Vanderlac and save the world from the Skull King, though some may also pursue agendas of their own.

## SUPPORTING CAST CHARACTERS

### THE SKULL KING

The greatest force of evil in Boralia is the Skull King, a powerful being whom some think was a fallen god. The Skull King threatened the world with destruction and slavery once before, more than a thousand years ago. The hero Vanderlac defeated his plans. The Boralians believed Vanderlac slew the Skull King—unfortunately he only grievously wounded the fiend, and a being of the King's power does not die easily. It took more than a millennium for him to heal and reassemble his might. With the power of the newly-recovered Stone of Corruption to aid him, and a troll army of thousands at his beck and call, the Skull King seeks to conquer the world and slay all who oppose him.

### KING VLADOS MURAT

King Vlos Murat of Karellia, a northern realm east of Armorica, joined the Skull King and works to bring his schemes to fruition. A greedy and ambitious man, King Vlos hopes to rule Boralia as the Skull King's regent after conquering the land.

## SYNOPSIS

This holonovel chronicles the adventures of Prince Eldred and his companions as they try to find the Sword of Vanderlac so the Prince can confront and destroy the Skull King, saving the world. The novel opens with Drogan, King of Armorica, explaining the Skull King's rising to his son and heir, Eldred. The Sword of Vanderlac was lost ages ago when the hero supposedly dispatched the Skull King. Prince Eldred must sail across the Gulf of Armorica to the island of Eirin to consult the monks at Montfairn Abbey about the sword's possible resting place. Along the way, an unnaturally fierce storm tests his skills and those of any comrades accompanying him.

At Montfairn, Prince Eldred learns the only person who might know of the sword's location is the famed scholar Timros, who lives in the Free City of Kalumard. The band of heroes sails south, arriving at the wild port city a few days later. They find Timros near death. Shortly before they arrived, someone broke into his tower, injured and robbed him. With his dying breath, Timros gives Prince Eldred the information he needs to continue his quest.

Based on this clue, Prince Eldred and his companions journey north and east toward the Thuringian Reach. There, amid the towering mountain peaks, they seek the Vale of Shadows, where Vanderlac went to die after his final confrontation with the Skull King. They must race against a group of competitors hired by King Vlos who forced the information from Timros before they killed him. After an ambush and desperate battle, the heroes proceed to the Vale where they find the Sword of Vanderlac. Sword in hand, the heroes head north once again, this time for the Tower of Skulls itself! Along the way, minions and spies of the Skull King harass them, hoping to kill them or capture the sword. Since time is short, Prince Eldred may elect to journey through the Forbidden Pass, a terrifying road through the otherwise impassable Trollheim Peaks.

After barely making it through the Trollheims, the heroes find themselves in the Skull King's domain, the vast and terrible Northern Waste. Here they must dodge groups of trolls and other threats as they make their way toward the Skull King's Tower. Once there, Prince Eldred must walk through its shadowed hallways and terror-filled chambers to the Gargoyle Throne of the Skull King itself! There, in a hall made chill by the Skull King's almost palpable evil, Prince Eldred must fight the final battle to save his world.

## SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

As a fantasy adventure, this episode features activities like swordfighting and riding horses—the character may not know Primitive Weaponry or Animal Handling (Horse), but they can use these Skills untrained (**Star Trek: The Next Generation Roleplaying Game** core rulebook, page 121). As they progress through this holonovel, characters may develop an interest in the weapons of the period and begin studying the appropriate Skills so they can play the novel better.

If Master Maldorius needs other powers, you may give them to him using the spells in his description as guidelines. Award creative players who “invent” spells of their own on the fly, working within the spirit of the high-fantasy setting.

## THE WORLD OF BORALIA

Slightly more than a thousand years ago a malign being known only as the Skull King made his presence known. He seemed to come from the Northern Waste, a region so desolate only the fierce, brutish trolls could live there. Although no one knew his origin, every wizard in Boralia could tell what awesome power he wielded. Gathering the trolls to him, the Skull King built his fearsome Tower of Skulls and led his forces through the Forbidden Pass into Boralia on a mission of conquest. He carried with him the Stone of Corruption, an item possessed of foul magics which magnified his power many times.

First Karellia then Thuringia fell to the Skull King’s hordes.

When dozens of wizards, a breed of men never common in Boralia, challenged him, the Skull King destroyed them with his arcane might. Some say their souls were sucked into the Stone of Corruption to further empower the King. After annihilating a force composed of Thuringian, Thracian and Illyrian soldiers at the Battle of Greystone Dales, the Skull King marched south and laid waste to the proud Kingdom of Thracia.

The Skull King bypassed Armorica, thinking it a small kingdom of little consequence. This proved his undoing. As he ravaged the southlands, King Vanderlac of Armorica assembled an army and marched south, first communicating his intentions to the noble and valorous Duke Talerain of the Rosalian Palatinate. Vanderlac carried an enchanted sword forged for him out of star-iron and thunderbolts by the wizard Zoltravian.

Armorican and Rosalian forces caught the Skull King’s vast troll army between them on the northern border of the Thracian Greatwood. In a terrible battle lasting two days and two nights, they gradually broke the back of his trollish defenses and scattered his army before them. Some trolls fled into the Greatwood, where their descendants live today.

With a retinue of his closest advisors and servants, the Skull King fled north to his tower. Vanderlac pursued and caught him near the gates of the Tower of Skulls. In a

climactic battle that lit the northern sky with fire and lightning, Vanderlac slew the Skull King with his sword, but himself received a death-wound. Taking the Stone of Corruption with him, he mounted his horse and rode south, leaving the Skull King’s moldering body behind him. Somewhere in the Trollheim Mountains he cast the stone into a fathomless cleft, so no man might ever control its evil. Then, neither sleeping nor eating, dripping blood from his wound all the way, he rode south to rejoin his knights before he died.

Alas, the wound proved too great for even Vanderlac to withstand. As he passed the Thuringian Reach, he felt his death close upon him. Turning west, he rode into the mountains. Since then no man has seen the Sword of Vanderlac.

## MAGIC

In the fantasy realm of Boralia, magic exists, though it isn’t an everyday phenomenon. Persons known as wizards cast spells and work magic rituals, as can some other races and creatures. People recognize wizards by the staffs they carry and, in many cases, their inscrutable, know-it-all-but-won’t-tell-you demeanor.

Two thousand years ago wizards were common in Boralia, and their spells reshaped the land and the politics of the world. After that their profession declined and their numbers diminished. During the Skull King’s attack, many gave their lives in a futile effort to stop him. Today only a scant handful of wizards remain. Most isolate themselves in towers and hidden sanctums, refusing to have anything to do with the rest of the world.

## *The Adventure*

### CHAPTER ONE: REVELATIONS AND PORTENTS

The story begins when Prince Eldred and his companions enter the holodeck into the courts of King Drogan. They assemble in one of the King’s meeting halls in his castle in Calabria, where he awaits them.

The vast hall contains the fine wood and leather furnishings one expects in the fortress of a Boralian ruler. A fire blazes in a large stone fireplace; above the mantelpiece several hunting trophies gaze dispassionately over the characters. Shields depicting Armorican nobles’ coats of arms line the walls.

King Drogan’s stern, no-nonsense demeanor masks a kindly heart and spirit of true nobility. He wears the casual robes and crown of the Kings of Armorica. He’s well into middle age, with traces of gray showing in his black hair and beard—but he remains tall and strong, able to acquit himself bravely on the field of battle. King Drogan provides information to Prince Eldred and the other characters, stressing to them the seriousness of the situation. He must compel them to undertake the dangerous quest

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to defeat the Skull King.

You may read the following text to the players, paraphrase it, or let them learn it from the King through questions and roleplaying.

“Thank you for coming so swiftly, son. I’m sorry to draw you away from your other duties, but a matter of terrible import has arisen, and only you can serve the kingdom in its hour of greatest need.

“As you know, more than a thousand years ago our ancestor King Vanderlac defeated and destroyed the Skull King before the gates of the Tower of Skulls. For a millennium we Boralians have known the evil King was dead, and only the trolls remained to threaten our peace and safety. Unfortunately, it now seems we were wrong, and our hopes were in vain. Dark clouds gather in the North, and the Skull King has arisen once more!

“For years the wizards and sages of the realm sensed a growing presence of evil in the North, but its nature remained elusive. We thought it some great troll-lord who gathered a measure of power to himself, perhaps as a way to raise an army to attack the South. Sadly, the threat has proven far worse. The Skull King lives!

“It seems our ancestor failed in his quest to kill the Evil Lord. In his pride and folly, he thought dealing the Skull King a death-blow was enough to slay him, as with an ordinary man. But the Skull King is no mortal, and thus the ways of men do not apply to him. Somehow, maybe with the aid of his trollish servants, he survived the wound.

“Perhaps it took him a thousand years to recover his strength and power, or he regained his power long ago, and simply bided his time. I know not. But I suspect he spent the centuries of his recovery seeking something he lost, or rather, which Vanderlac took from him: the Stone of Corruption. Now, I believe, he has found it, and uses it to augment his already vast power.

“Our scouts brought us word that he gathers the trolls to him once more. Two conclusions are inescapable. First, he intends to attack the Boralian kingdoms soon. Gathering and commanding the trolls would prove difficult even for one of his power, so he dares not do it unless ready to move on the southlands at once. Second, he will seek vengeance on Armorica before he does aught else. We spelled his doom a thousand years ago, and he will not again make the mistake of passing us by. His troll legions will burn our towns and villages and lay waste our castles unless we stop him before he marches south.

“That is why I called you to me, son. Only the Sword of Vanderlac can defeat the Skull King, and we know not where it lies. You must find it and use it to destroy the

Evil Lord once and for all. I am too old to undertake such a quest, and must remain here to command the army. It is a heavy burden, I know, and I would take it from you if I could. But this road you must walk on your own. I pray it brings you to a good end, for if it does not, the world itself is doomed.

“I cannot tell you where to find the sword, for even I, a son of Vanderlac, know not where he chose to make his final resting place. But I am no scholar, though some among the loremasters might tell you more of Vanderlac’s final days than I. Go to the monks of Montfairn Abbey on Eirin. If anyone can start you on your road, they can, for their chronicles of Boralia’s history are unmatched.

“Good luck, my son, and walk your road carefully. The Skull King has ever been a master of treachery and deceit. If he came into his power long ago, as I suspect, he may have spies and agents everywhere, perhaps even here in court! Be miserly with your trust, and watchful with your eyes and heart, lest through arts more subtle than sorcery the Evil Lord defeats us.”

## CHAPTER TWO: A FAREWELL TO INNOCENCE

Prince Eldred (and his friends, if more than one player participates in this adventure) must prepare for the journey to Montfairn Abbey. Allow them to obtain whatever clothing and supplies they need, within reason. Make sure you find out whether the Prince intends to journey publicly (wearing his princely clothes and regalia) or incognito, since his appearance affects how NPCs initially react to him.

King Drogan supplies the characters with pouches of gold coins for expenses during the trip. He also arranges for one of his warships, the *Brezantia*, to take Prince Eldred to Eirin.

## CHAPTER THREE: STORM RISING

A twenty-year veteran of the Armorican fleet, Captain Tavros Ahlin, commands the *Brezantia*. Dressed in rough sailor’s garb, with only a heavy gold bracelet to mark his authority aboard the ship, he does not look like a skilled naval commander. He must transport the Prince safely to Eirin—no more, no less. Although deferential to the Prince’s royal station, he brooks no challenges to his authority or questioning of his orders, particularly by characters who lack his experience at sea.

About halfway to Eirin, shortly after the ship sails from the Gulf of Armorica, an unusually strong storm from the north engulfs the ship! Within a few minutes the sky darkens, waves become taller and stronger, and bolts of lightning split the clouds. Soon the sky is almost black as

## CHAPTER FOUR: MONTFAIRN ABBEY

night, and large drops of rain fall. Captain Ahlin and his sailors scurry about the deck like madmen, desperately trying to secure or protect everything on the vessel before the storm hits.

The storm breaks without any warning. Waves the size of houses crash, nearly capsizing the *Brezantia*. Rain and hail pound the ship from above and lightning threatens to set the rigging on fire or destroy the mast. All characters should make a Moderate (6) Coordination Test (or Athletics or Acrobatics, if they know those Skills). Failure means the character takes 1+1d6 damage from being thrown about a cabin or hit by flying objects. Characters on deck who fail their roll may wash overboard, requiring heroic efforts to rescue them. Feel free to create other perils with which the characters must cope.

If Master Maldorius accompanies the Prince, he can use his *weatherworking* spells to try calming the storm. Unfortunately, even his best efforts only lessen the storm's severity a little; he cannot dispel it entirely.

After a seemingly eternal period of suffering in the grip of the storm, the ship manages to make it through to calmer waters as the storm passes south. Fortunately, only one or two men were lost, and the ship itself suffered relatively little damage.

Besides providing a few moments of action and excitement, the storm gives the characters some new information to work with. It impresses upon them the Skull King's strength. A storm so sudden and strong could only be his work, and no wizard in Boralia could create a tempest of such fury so far away. Only luck or a miracle prevents the loss of the ship. If Master Maldorius participates, tell him this and let him relay the information to the other characters through roleplaying. Otherwise Captain Ahlin offers a few choice opinions about such a strong, sudden storm, and you can let the players draw their own conclusions.

The stormy attack reveals that the Skull King has agents within Castle Armorica itself! It seems highly unlikely he could so quickly know where the Prince was going and what quest he was undertaking. Master Maldorius knows—and any other character can remember with a Routine (5) Intellect roll—that the Skull King never possessed powers of clairvoyance (“farsight”) before. It's unlikely he found the Prince by scrying with a crystal ball or some similar method. The character who figures out the storm signals the presence of a spy earns +1 Experience.

**Troubleshooting:** The players may not want to sail to Eirin on the *Brezantia*, since doing so makes their journey obvious to spies and anyone else who watches for such things—hiding the unscheduled departure of an Armorican warship is impossible. They may instead make their own travel arrangements. It makes no difference which ship they take, as long as Captain Ahlin commands whatever vessel they choose.

After a day or so the *Brezantia* lands at the Eirianian port city of Dunderrial. There the Prince and his companions must buy horses and ride to the abbey (a Routine (4) Bargain Skill Test). The trip takes about two days by horse, four on foot. Unless you wish to arrange a colorful encounter for the characters along the way (meeting a hermit, suffering an assault by bandits, another attack by the Skull King), the holonovel simply advances to the scene at the abbey.

Montfairn Abbey, an ancient religious institution, rests in an idyllic valley deep within the Slevgarion Hills. As the characters approach, they see monks farming the fields around the abbey and herding cattle along the nearby hills. The Abbey itself, a sturdy, two-story building of gray stone, has a domed temple toward the rear and two broad wooden gates in front. While not a fortress, it clearly can defend itself if necessary.

After the characters knock on the gates and identify themselves, the monks admit them. A young monk escorts them first to a refectory (if they wish to eat), then to small, spartan rooms where they stay during their visit, and finally to an audience with Abbot Dowan himself.

An elderly balding man with a gray beard, Dowan, Abbot of Montfairn, wears the robes of the White Temple's high priest. Although his voice quavers slightly and his hands shake with palsy for a short while during the audience, he projects an aura of calmness, self-assurance, wisdom and benign concern for his “flock.” He sometimes seems nervous in the presence of Alvethia or any other nonhuman holonovel character. Dowan still manages to set aside his personal issues to help the characters find the Sword of Vanderlac.

Upon learning of the characters' mission, he pales and quickly agrees to aid them in any way possible. “I know not what information the Abbey's library holds about the Sword of Vanderlac, but I assure you the brothers will search every book if necessary to find the information you seek.” He offers to let Prince Eldred and any characters who can read assist the monks with their research.

During two days poring over dusty tomes and scrolls, any characters searching the library may make a Moderate (7) Search Test. Those who succeed discover a volume entitled *The Chronicles of the Black King* (if no character passes the Test, a monk finds the book). The *Chronicles* detail the Skull King's history, his rise to power, his war on the kingdoms of Boralia, his demise, and the aftermath. Unfortunately the back half of the book was burned beyond legibility during a Vulkring attack on the abbey several years ago. But the author's name—Timros—was not defaced.

Abbot Dowan informs the characters that Timros, a famed scholar, used to live in the Free City of Kalumard. He knows not whether Timros still lives there, or lives at all, for that matter—but it gives the characters a clue to follow.

## CHAPTER FIVE: KALUMARD

The characters return to their vessel and set sail for Kalumard. Unless you want waylay them with a storm, sea-serpent or some other marine threat, the holonovel advances to their arrival in the Free City's harbor.

Even from the ship the characters sense the rollicking spirit of excitement and action that pervades Kalumard. Vessels from a dozen nations and trading houses fill its port with colorful sails and banners. Towers of every shape and description form a chaotic skyline of unusual beauty and charm.

After the *Brezantia* docks and pays its harbor fee, the characters search for Timros the scholar. The harbormaster never heard of him, so they must keep asking until they find him. They work their way through the steep, winding streets of Kalumard, asking shopkeepers and merchants. For a humorous interlude, the characters encounter citizens who ask questions in response to their queries—"Who wants to know?" or "Timros! That greasy-bearded fiend owes me three silver crowns. What do *you* want with him?" These townsfolk might even give them conflicting directions. Let the characters roam the city for a while, getting lost and then finding their way again.

## CHAPTER SIX: THE TOWER OF TIMROS

Eventually someone points the characters to Timros' tower, a three-story edifice bordering the Artists' District. The wooden door appears normal, but when the characters knock on it, it swings open—it wasn't locked, very unusual in Kalumard. If they enter, the characters soon discover why: someone's robbed Timros! The thieves overturned shelves and tables, smashed furniture, ripped up paintings and shattered alchemical glassware.

On the third floor, his library and astrological viewing platform, the characters find Timros lying in a pool of blood. His assailants beat and stabbed him, and it's obvious, even with Master Maldorius' magic, Timros has only a short time to live. The library is a shambles—few of Timros' dozens of books remain in one piece.

Timros barely lives, though. When he sees the characters enter his library, he recognizes the Prince. Timros feebly beckons them over to him. When they get close enough, he whispers, through coughs and in a pain-racked voice, "Wanted... *Chronicles*... Sword... found book, couldn't stop them... Vale of Shadows..."—and then he dies. In his death-throes he gestures desperately toward a partially-smashed cabinet on the floor.

Smart characters should investigate the cabinet which interested Timros so much in his last moments. They must smash it open since it remains locked and they cannot find the key. Years ago, Timros placed the notes from which he wrote the *Chronicles* inside this cabinet, and his killers stopped searching for them after they found a copy of the book itself.

The notes describe the legends Timros collected about the Vale of Shadows, a semi-mythic place where the goddess Shalaria was born. According to the legends, "twin peaks of fire and ice" guard the entrance to the Vale, and "silver-leaved oak trees" line its meadows and rocky hillsides. Other legends say the gods recognized Vanderlac's accomplishments by causing a spring to bubble up from the rock where he laid down to die.

**Troubleshooting:** If the characters disguise themselves, Timros may not recognize them at once. Roll three dice for his Intellect against a Moderate (6) difficulty to realize the Prince's true identity. If this roll fails, Timros dies without divulging any useful clues. Instead of Timros telling the characters about the Vale of Shadows, they find beneath his body a blood-soaked copy of *The Chronicles of the Black King* he somehow hid from his killers. The book mentions the Vale of Shadows as the supposed final resting place of Vanderlac.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: STREET BRAWL

With these slim clues to follow, the characters must proceed to the Thuringian Reach and try to find the Vale, and, hopefully, the Sword of Vanderlac. But first a surprise awaits them. The thugs King Vlados hired to obtain the *Chronicles* from Timros left an accomplice to watch the tower. When the characters entered, he alerted the killers to their presence. Before the PCs leave the city, another group of leg-breakers hired by the first group attacks the characters to delay them—giving the first group a head start finding the Vale.

If the characters look around before entering Timros' tower, they can make the usual Opposed Test to perceive the accomplice (their Search Skill or Intellect versus the accomplice's Stealth). If spotted, the accomplice runs, escaping into the maze of streets in the Artists' Quarter (which he knows quite well). Then he alerts the thugs.

Stage the attack wherever it seems most dramatically appropriate—right outside Timros' Tower, at the docks as the characters return to their ship, in a tavern where they decide to spend the evening, the livery stable when they buy horses for the journey north. Enough thugs should confront the characters to give them a good fight; at least one thug per character.

When defeated, the thugs (if any remain alive) quickly confess they were working for another group of ruffians led by a man named Gorlag. Gorlag recently left town and headed north in a hurry.

**Troubleshooting:** If the characters suffer defeat at the hands of the thugs—hopefully an unlikely occurrence—you can end the adventure and declare that the players lost; it's reasonable the thugs simply kill them. If everyone wants to continue the adventure, the thugs take them prisoner, hoping to ransom them. Roleplay their great escape and ultimate victory over the thugs.

If any characters die during the fight, the Crewmembers can simply restart the scene, hopefully doing better the

**TYPICAL BORALIAN THUG**

**Role:** Antagonist

**Type:** Warrior

**Backstory:** These ruffians grew up on the streets of Boralia's cities, making their living by stealing, bullying and hiring themselves out as thugs for those who could pay. They live to acquire whatever pitiful wealth they can and satisfy their need for violence.

**Demeanor:** Usually bold and obnoxiously aggressive until threatened by a superior combatant, when they back down like dogs.

**Goals:** In this scene, the thugs must delay, and if necessary kill, anyone sniffing around Timros' tower.

**Costume:** Usually shabby clothing and leather armor, various weapons (mostly swords and axes), sometimes a shield as well.

**Fitness:** 3

**Coordination:** 2

**Intellect:** 2

**Presence:** 2

**Psi:** 0

**Standard Skills:** Animal Handling (Horse) 1 (2), Dodge 1, Intimidation (Torture) 1 (2), Primitive Weaponry (Sword) 1 (2), Stealth (Stealthy Movement) 1 (2), Streetwise (Kalumard) 2 (3), World Knowledge (Boralia) 1 (2)

**Traits:** Bloodlust -2, Greedy -1

**Resistance:** 3

**Wound Levels:** 3/3/3/3/3/0

second time around.

**CHAPTER EIGHT: QUEST FOR THE VALE**

With fresh horses and supplies, the characters set out to find the fabled Vale of Shadows. By now they should suspect agents of the Skull King have also begun searching for the Vale.

Unless you need to roleplay it for dramatic purposes, the holonovel skips to the characters' arrival in the Thuringian Reach. These towering peaks seem harsh and intimidating, yet beautiful. Based upon other legends and myths they've heard, the characters start their search near the center of the range.

There's no need to spend a lot of time on the early, fruitless parts of their search, except perhaps to mention they occasionally find the remains of some other group's campfire or horse tracks (the tracks never last long enough to follow, unfortunately). Depending upon the players' mood, you may wish to describe the weather as a symbolic way of accentuating their feelings—for example, if they've begun to give in to despair, the weather turns rainy.

Eventually, though, one of the characters notices two unusual peaks one morning or late afternoon. (Prince Eldred should discover this, but you can have them make a Search Test for it.) Set close together, they seem very similar—almost twins. As the sun strikes them, one side of each appears as if on fire, the other remains icy and cold. These, of course, are the "twin peaks" mentioned in the legends.

Riding toward them, the characters soon enter a rough, rocky defile difficult to traverse. You may require them to make some Animal Handling or Athletics rolls to emphasize the danger. Once they make it through the defile they enter a lush, beautiful, isolated valley. Soon they notice the large oak trees with leaves whose underside shows a distinctive silvery sheen when the wind blows. If they make Intellect or Tracking rolls, they also notice horse tracks—Gorlag and his men have found the Vale, too!

**CHAPTER NINE: VANDERLAC'S TOMB**

After searching the Vale for a time, Prince Eldred and company find what resembles a sort of path between some beautiful flowered bushes. It doesn't appear used—but the plants, trees and rocks in the area seem to have formed a natural trail.

The path leads toward the Vale's edge and up into the hills. Eventually it winds its way out of the woods to a grassy plateau bordering a sheer rock cliff face. A huge stone slab stands flush against the cliffside. The symbol of the Royal House of Armorica, a thorn-bush encircling a crown, is engraved on the stone, unfaded by time or weather. A spring bubbles up from between some nearby rocks, sending a stream cascading over the plateau edge. The entire clearing evokes a feeling of reverence and awe in the characters, as if some holy presence inhabits this place.

Only Prince Eldred can move the stone slab. Any effort by the other characters is wasted; they can neither move nor damage the stone in any way. This is a Nearly Impossible (20) Test for those characters who insist on trying. But if Prince Eldred touches the crown in the stone's center, it slowly sinks back into the ground with a low, deep rumble. The noise also attracts Gorlag and his men waiting in the Vale to ambush the Prince once he obtains the sword.

Behind the slab the characters find a cave. A faint glow emanates from deep within. If they proceed, they soon find a large, dome-like cavern. A skeleton wearing chainmail and holding a sword lies on another, finer stone slab in the center. A mysterious light suffuses the air in the cave, making everything and everyone seem to glow faintly.

**THE SWORD OF VANDERLAC**

Vanderlac's skeleton holds a broadsword with a gold hilt and guard. Polished lapis lazuli decorates its pommel. The entire sword emits a very faint light—Prince Eldred soon discovers the light blazes brighter the closer the blade comes to the Skull King.

For the most part, the sword functions as a normal broadsword. When used against the Skull King, however, reduce its Accuracy by two and add three to the damage it inflicts. No one and nothing can break the Sword of Vanderlac except for the Skull King.

## THE SKULL AND THE SWORD

### GORLAG AND HIS MEN

While Prince Eldred and his friends investigate Vanderlac's tomb and recover the famed sword, the Skull King's minions wait in ambush. King Vldos hired Gorlag to find the Sword of Vanderlac and retrieve it before Prince Eldred escapes with it. At some point before they leave the Vale, Gorlag and his men ambush the heroes. Since the tomb entrance won't open for someone like Gorlag, he waits until Prince Eldred gets the sword before attacking.

As before, the opposition should match the characters' strength. If Prince Eldred is alone, he encounters only Gorlag. For every additional character, you probably need at least one thug. Gorlag is a big, strong, ugly fellow who's reputed to have trollish blood in his veins. Even if that's not true, he's definitely a tough opponent.

If the characters capture or kill Gorlag, they find a coded letter in his belt-pouch. Any character with Espionage (Cryptography) can try decoding the message; it simply commissions Gorlag to obtain the Sword of Vanderlac and kill or delay Prince Eldred for a large sum of money. But all characters notice the message was marked with the royal seal of King Vldos of Karellian!

#### GORLAG

**Role:** Antagonist

**Type:** Warrior

**Backstory:** Half troll and half human, Gorlag never fit into either society. He led an outcast's life among street ruffians and country brigands, using his strength to win influence and power. King Vldos sometimes hire him to carry out his underhanded schemes.

**Demeanor:** A loud, proud, swaggering bully and killer, he's not afraid to fight any man. He relishes the sight of his enemies' blood.

**Goals:** Stop Prince Eldred's quest from succeeding, preferably by killing him, and recover the Sword of Vanderlac for King Vldos. If possible, squeeze more money and other advantages out of this whole deal.

**Costume:** Gorlag himself is exceedingly ugly, with swarthy, pockmarked skin, several unpleasant-looking scars, a ratty black beard and mop of hair. He wears clothing now worn and dirty from lack of care beneath rusty chain mail. He carries a sword, longbow and several knives.

Fitness: 4

Strength +2

Vitality +1

Coordination: 3

Reaction +1

Intellect: 3

Presence: 3

Willpower +1

Psi: 0

**Standard Skills:** Animal Handling (Horse) 2 (3), Athletics (Running) 2 (3), Command (Thugs) 1 (2), Dodge 3, Intimidation (Torture) 3 (4), Primitive Weaponry (Sword) (Bow) 3 (4) (4), Search 2, Stealth (Stealthy Movement) 2 (3), Streetwise (Kalumard) 3 (4)

**Traits:** Mixed Species Heritage (Human, Troll) +6, Quick-draw +2, Bloodlust -2, Greedy -1, Rapid Healing +1

**Resistance:** 5

**Wound Levels:** 5/5/5/5/5/0

## CHAPTER TEN: NORTHWARD

With Sword of Vanderlac in hand and King Vldos' agents defeated, the characters must head northward toward the Tower of Skulls itself! As they travel north, you might inject several mini-scenes to impress upon the characters the gravity of their mission and the its timing. They dare not dally or let the enemy delay them, or else the Skull King's schemes may bear evil fruit. Some possible mini-scenes include:

- A stop for the night in an inn somewhere along the way. While resting they overhear two merchants talking worriedly about "the fighting up north."
- A momentary pause to look out over the fields where the Battle of Greystone Dales occurred. Although the battle raged more than a thousand years ago, people still consider the site a place of evil and dread because so many died there. It should serve as a grim reminder of the consequences of failure. If the group stays the night, a ghost could confront them.
- Passing a group of refugees heading south, who say they fled "the trolls" and don't plan to go back.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN: A TRAITOR REVEALED

Unfortunately the Skull King anticipated Prince Eldred's quest and acted preemptively to stop it. Knowing the Prince would almost certainly risk the Forbidden Pass to reach the Tower of Skulls as quickly as possible, the Skull King began his attack on the southern kingdoms. An army of trolls and traitorous men (mainly from Karellia) now occupies the wilderness between the Black Forest and the Tirellion River. Meanwhile, scouts and outriders search for the Prince.

Prince Eldred, even with the help of his friends, cannot confront an entire troll army. He must find a way to sneak around it. Going the long way (perhaps through Armorica and around the western end of the Trollheims) takes weeks longer than the straight route—too long.

Let the players choose their route. Possibilities include moving stealthily through the Black Forest, sailing up the Tirellion in small boats, and trying to slip through the trollish lines in disguise. Sooner or later, though, the characters encounter a group of mounted warriors. Leading that patrol is none other than the Karellian King, Vldos.

Vldos sneers at the Prince and pronounces his doom. He has a cold, insulting manner, a rapier-like wit, and a fiendishly clever mind—he doesn't hesitate using them to goad Prince Eldred into a potentially fatal confrontation. The players must decide whether to try escaping the mounted patrol or fight their way out. A skirmish would be tough, but not impossible to survive; escape requires some deception or outside interference (such as Master Maldorius conjuring a storm).

King Vldos' appearance reveals his participation in the Skull King's plot and gives the players a choice. Since

**KING VLADOS MURAT OF KARELLIA**

**Role:** Antagonist

**Type:** Warrior, King

**Backstory:** Hungry for power, King Vados conspires with the Skull King to conquer Boralia.

**Demeanor:** Regal, haughty, expects obedience from all but other kings, constantly watching everything and everyone around him, confidence bordering on arrogance.

**Goals:** Conquer Boralia.

**Costume:** King Vados is a darkly handsome man with black hair and beard. His green eyes smolder with jealousy at anyone else's power or success. He wears the finest of royal robes when at home; in the field he wears plate armor and carries sword and shield.

**Fitness:** 4

Strength +1

Vitality +1

**Coordination:** 4

Dexterity +1

**Intellect:** 4

Logic -1

Perception +1

**Presence:** 4

Empathy -1

Willpower +1

**Psi:** 0

**Standard Skills:** Administration (Karellian Court) 4 (5), Animal Handling (Horse) 4 (5), Command (Military Leadership) 3 (4), Dodge 3, Law (Karellian Law) 3 (4), Persuasion (Debate) 2 (3), Planetary Tactics (Karellian Army) 4 (5), Planetside Survival (Forest) (Mountains) 2 (3) (3), Primitive Weaponry (Sword) (Lance) 4 (5) (5), Search 2, Stealth (Stealthy Movement) 1 (2), Strategic Operations (Boralian Strategies) 3 (4)

**Traits:** Alertness +2, Arrogant -1, Dark Secret (alliance with Skull King) -2, Vengeful -2, Weapon Master (Sword) +2

**Resistance:** 5

**Wound Levels:** 5/5/5/5/5/0

**KARELLIAN SOLDIER**

**Role:** Antagonist

**Type:** Warrior

**Backstory:** These minions of King Vados follow his orders unquestioningly, despite his alliance with the Skull King's forces.

**Demeanor:** Confident, obedient.

**Goals:** Support King Vados; survive.

**Costume:** Karellian soldiers wear chain mail and carry swords and shields.

**Fitness:** 2

Vitality +1

**Coordination:** 2

**Intellect:** 2

**Presence:** 3

**Psi:** 0

**Standard Skills:** Animal Handling (Horse) 2 (3), Dodge 1, Planetary Tactics (Karellian Army) 2 (3), Planetside Survival (Forest) 1 (2), Primitive Weaponry (Sword) 2 (3), Search 2, Stealth (Stealthy Movement) 2 (3)

**Resistance:** 3

**Wound Levels:** 3/3/3/3/3/0

**TROLL WARRIOR**

**Role:** Antagonist

**Type:** Enemy race

**Backstory:** Vicious, cruel humanoids who serve the Skull King.

**Demeanor:** Crude, brutish, immensely strong and powerful.

**Goals:** Obey the Skull King and destroy his enemies.

**Costume:** Trolls have hard, leathery, gray-green skin. They wear crudely-manufactured leather and chain mail armor, and wield large weapons inflicting +3 damage.

**Fitness:** 5

Strength +2

Vitality +2

**Coordination:** 2

**Intellect:** 1

Logic -1

Perception -1

**Presence:** 3

**Psi:** 0

**Standard Skills:** Planetary Tactics (Skull King Army) 1 (2), Planetside Survival (Mountains, Waste) 2 (3) and (3), Primitive Weaponry (Troll weapon of choice) 3 (4)

**Special Skills:** None.

**Traits:** Excellent Metabolism +1, High Pain Threshold +2, Leathery Skin (counts as +2 Armor against all attacks), Toughness +2

**Resistance:** 7

**Wound Level:** 8/8/8/8/8/0

escape is the best route, don't make it impossible. Vados and his men shouldn't surround the Prince's group or trap them in a lethal ambush. He's haughty and proud—quick to assume he's trapped the Prince without truly cutting him off. Perhaps one of the other characters, such as Sir Berec, sacrifices his life to allow the other characters to escape and continue toward the Forbidden Pass.

**CHAPTER TWELVE: THE FORBIDDEN PASS**

The characters must traverse the Forbidden Pass to reach the Tower of Skulls in time to stop the invasion of the southern kingdoms. The pass presents the only hope for reaching the Skull King before his troll army ravages Armorica and Thuringia. Unfortunately, squads of the Skull King's troll warriors now use the Forbidden Pass regularly, making it even more dangerous than normal for Prince Eldred. Stealth and speed become essential.

Have the players make four Routine (5) Stealth Tests. If half or more of them fail a particular roll, a squad of trolls has found them, and they must run or fight. If any of them obtain a Dramatic Success, they manage to slip past a squad unnoticed.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN: STORMING THE TOWER

The heroes encounter few difficulties between the mountains and the Tower of Skulls. The Northern Waste is cold and forbidding. Unless our heroes are foolish enough to come this far without enough food and warm clothes for the journey, the conditions are merely uncomfortable. Trolls patrol this area in numbers, but cautious characters hide from them in the scraggly thickets and copses which dot the landscape. The farther north they go, the more overcast and darker the skies become. Ominous flashes of lightning illuminate the landscape below.

When the characters approach within a kilometer of the Tower of Skulls, the Sword of Vanderlac starts glowing much more brightly. Only wrapping it up completely conceals the light.

Soon the characters see the Tower of Skulls—an enormous structure of classic fantasy architecture, with a gigantic skull as an entranceway, several large skulls carved into the battlements and gargoyles everywhere. As they survey the area, the characters realize the troll guards have left! The tower looks almost abandoned, its gate standing open. But Prince Eldred senses the Skull King awaits him—and only one of them will survive the coming confrontation.

When the characters enter the fortress, the Sword of Vanderlac begins subtly drawing Prince Eldred toward the Skull King's throne room. If unaccompanied, the Prince simply walks through the dim and oppressive halls, encountering no one else. If other characters join him, the Skull King springs a trap—several trolls attack. The other characters must hold them off long enough for Prince Eldred to reach the Skull King.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN: THE FINAL BATTLE

Prince Eldred finds the Skull King in his terrible Throne Hall. This enormous chamber must be at least half a kilometer long, and just as tall. Enormous, torch-like columns line the hall; huge goutts of flame flickering from their tops provide a fitful light. Vast arches support the ceiling; walking beneath them feels like walking under a gigantic guillotine.

At the far end of the hall stands the Gargoyle Throne, a gigantic seat made of iron carved in the shape of hideous gargoyles. It dwarfs even the tallest troll, yet somehow the skeletal figure seated upon it suffers no diminishment. The Skull King wears robes of a foul greenish color and a bejeweled, verdigrised crown. The characters can feel his evil; approaching him would be impossible without the Sword of Vanderlac's light to cut through the gloom. The atmosphere inside the castle is oppressive. The holodeck achieves this by using tractor beams to weigh the characters down.

When the Prince comes within hearing range, the Skull King speaks: "Thrice-damned fool! You should never have come here with the sword. Had you but sworn allegiance to me, forsaking your paltry birthright, I would have given you a kingdom more vast than any in Boralia. Now I shall give you only death!" He stands up, clearly showing the Prince the large, evilly-glowing **Stone of Corruption** (Accuracy 8, Block +0, Damage 2+2d6) grasped in his right hand.

Because the Sword of Vanderlac protects Prince Eldred from the Skull King's magic, the fiend must battle him for mastery of Boralia. If the Prince cannot defeat him in combat, the King shall conquer Boralia and enslave all its inhabitants.

Remember, the Skull King is *evil*, but in a melodramatic fantasy way. He won't kill Prince Eldred out of hand; he's too overconfident for that. Instead, he taunts and goads him, hoping to enrage him and lose control of himself. If he manages to stun the Prince, he's likely to let him recover (at least once or twice) so he can continue to "play" with him in a cat-and-mouse fashion before slaying him for good.

### THE SKULL KING

**Role:** Antagonist

**Type:** Evil Lord

**Backstory:** Many think the Skull King a fallen god—his powers certainly seem godly. He tried enslaving Boralia once before, more than a thousand years ago. Although believed dead, he has risen again to threaten the world. This time he will not allow some unknown hero like Vanderlac to dispatch him.

**Demeanor:** Utterly evil.

**Goals:** Conquer the world; kill everyone who opposes him

**Costume:** The Skull King is a skeletal being wearing black robes. His eye sockets are filled with eerie, red-gold flames. He carries the Stone of Corruption, a fist-sized, red-glowing rock which exudes evil like a middenheap exudes stench.

**Fitness:** 6

Strength +1

Vitality +2

Coordination: 4

Intellect: 5

Perception +1

Presence: 6

Willpower +2

Psi: 0

**Standard Skills:** Command (Trolls) 3 (4), Dodge 4, History (Boralian) 4 (5), Primitive Weaponry (Stone Of Corruption) 3 (4), Stealth (Stealthy Movement) 3 (4)

**Special Skills:** Magic 8 (+2 of this is from the Stone of Corruption)

**Traits:** Invulnerability (can only be harmed by the Sword of Vanderlac) +6

**Resistance:** 8

**Wound Levels:** 8/8/8/8/8/0

**VICTORY!**

If the Prince prevails, the Stone of Corruption shatters and the Tower of Skulls immediately begins to rumble, shake and collapse. Eldred and his companions must escape quickly or become trapped and killed as it crumbles to ruin.

In the south the Skull King's troll armies find themselves leaderless. Without his driving force they are no match for the determined armies of Boralia. Most of the trolls flee back into the mountains.

**DEFEAT**

If the Skull King wins the battle, the Prince dies, the Sword of Vanderlac shatters, and the players lose the holonovel. Better luck next time.

END PROGRAM.

**SEQUELS**

*The Skull and the Sword* is one of many holonovels set in Boralia; new ones are programmed every year. Some possible sequels to this one include:

***The Troll War:*** Instead of breaking and fleeing when the Skull King dies, the troll army rallies under the leadership of General Vorak, an enormously strong, extremely intelligent and devilishly clever troll warrior. He leads his people on a war of conquest and slaughter. Prince Eldred and his companions must lead the human army opposing him.

***Ships of the Vulkrings:*** For those who prefer more mundane fantasies, this holonovel pits Prince Eldred and his companions against a force of Vulkring raiders pillaging the northern coastal towns. They must track the raiders down, stop them, and open a door for cordial relations with the more peaceful Vulkring kingdoms.