



OFFICIAL GAME ADVENTURE



Curse of the Azure Bonds

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction | 2 |
| Chapter 1: The Awakening | 7 |
| Chapter 2: Tilverton | 11 |
| Chapter 3: The Thieves | 17 |
| Chapter 4: The Sewers | 21 |
| Chapter 5: The Fire Knives | 25 |
| Chapter 6: Into the Realms | 34 |
| Chapter 7: Gulash | 39 |
| Chapter 8: The Temple of Moander | 47 |
| Chapter 9: Zhentil Keep | 51 |
| Chapter 10: The Temple of Bane and the Tower of Fzoul | 56 |
| Chapter 11: The Village of Hap | 63 |
| Chapter 12: Haptooth Hill | 67 |
| Chapter 13: Myth Drannor | 71 |
| Chapter 14: Tyranthraxus! | 77 |
| Appendix I | 80 |
| Major NPCs, magic items, and new monsters | |
| Appendix II | 92 |
| Wilderness encounter tables and players' maps | |



Curse of the Azure Bonds has a stranger history than most adventures created for the *ADVANCED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS*® role-playing game. The adventure book you hold in your hands is based on the novel *Azure Bonds*, by Kate Novak and Jeff Grubb, and set in the sprawling *FORGOTTEN REALMS*™ campaign setting. This adventure is also tied directly to the *Curse of the Azure Bonds* Computer Game, produced by Strategic Simulations, Inc., under license with TSR, Inc.

The result is the first “triple-play” story in TSR’s history—a novel forming the basis for a role-playing adventure (something we have gotten very good at over the years) and a computer adventure game. The computer game and the role-playing adventure are closely tied but do not mimic one another—each has been designed for maximum enjoyment in its element.

We have done the computer-RPG tie-in before, of course; many of you are familiar with the earlier *FORGOTTEN*

REALMS module, *Ruins of Adventure*, as well as its companion product, *Pool of Radiance*, the first *AD&D*® computer game from SSI. Some of the places and personalities from *Ruins of Adventure* and *Pool of Radiance* reappear in this product, and in some senses *Curse* is a continuation of *Ruins*—but it is not necessary to have played the earlier module before beginning to enjoy this one.

Likewise, playing the *Curse of the Azure Bonds* computer game (or reading the novel) is not necessary before playing this adventure, though your enjoyment may be enhanced by picking up the computer game and/or the novel. By the same token, the computer game and this adventure are not duplicate products designed for different mediums. While the gaming products follow the same plot for the adventurers, they are very different in the nature of monsters and encounters, as well as portrayal of the maps. A player of the computer game will get the feeling of his computerized adventure through playing this adven-

ture, but he should not expect that the same tactics that saved his characters in one situation will prove equally effective in the other. This is provided only as a warning: both games are branches from the same tree, similar but not exact.

Background

Azure Bonds (the novel) is the story of Alias, a warrior woman who awoke one morning with a strange set of mystic tattoos branded on her arm and a large lapse in her memory. She quickly discovered that the tattoos were magical in nature and very dangerous. They caused her to perform actions against her will (for example, she attacked a young noble named Giogi Wyvernspur, who had the misfortune to be doing a very good imitation of King Azoun of Cormyr). Her tattoo-like brand was made up of a number of smaller symbols, and what those symbols stood for indicated that an evil alliance of some sort was responsible for her condition.



Ordinary magical methods proved useless for removing the brands, so Alias set out to discover who was responsible for her curse. She was joined in her quest by three allies: Dragonbait, a mute creature similar to a lizard man; Akabar, a merchant from the South with moderate magical abilities; and Olive Ruskettle, a halfling who claimed to be a bard but seemed to be much more along the lines of a thief.

The adventurers passed through many perils (as is the lot of adventurers), including a battle with a crystalline elemental, a confrontation with a beast called a kalmari, a duel of honor with a dotty old red dragon, and the freeing of an elder god, Moander. Moander was one of the individuals responsible for Alias's curse, and with his defeat, his symbol faded from her arm.

Alias and her companions were captured by the evil alliance, and the secrets of the brand and of her own origin were revealed. The alliance responsible for her condition consisted of the followers of Moander (now broken in power following the defeat of their god's physical form on this plane), a thieves' guild called the Fire Knives (which holds a grudge against the King of Cormyr), an evil female mage named Cassana, a lich named Zrie Prakis, and a powerful entity from the Lower Planes named Phalse.

A second attempt to slay Dragonbait and bind Alias to her masters resulted in the destruction of Zrie Prakis and Cassana and the breaking of the power of the Fire Knives. Alias and her companions tracked Phalse down to his extradimensional lair and destroyed him with the aid of Elminster the Sage and the Nameless Bard. The adventurers, worn and bloody but triumphant, returned to the Realms and their own lives.

Those events took place during Mirtul and Kythorn (May and June), four months ago. At about the same time, a group of adventurers in Phlan, far north in the Moonsea, discovered the Pool of Radiance and its malefic protector, the daemon Tyranthraxus. The daemon was defeated but not destroyed, his threat to the North averted but not entirely eliminated. Tyranthraxus retreated and began to spin his plots anew.

There were few survivors of the alli-

ance that created Alias's bonds. The great magic-wielders of the group—Zrie, Cassana, and Phalse—were apparently dead. A few followers of Moander and a smattering of Fire Knives fled Westgate for safer havens to the north. These fleeing minions were of low level, but carried the tales of the Azure Bonds and their use in controlling others. These survivors encountered agents of Tyranthraxus, and a new plot began to form in the daemon's mind. Gathering new allies in the form of the Zhentarim and a renegade Red Wizard of Thay, Tyranthraxus formulated another plan for gaining power in the Realms.

As with the original alliance, each member of the New Alliance of the Bonds has its own agenda for the use of controlled characters. The Fire Knives are still seeking the death of the King of Cormyr. The followers of Moander (now called the Survivors of Moander) are seeking a reinstatement of their god. Zhentil Keep is looking for a way to turn good characters to evil, and sees this bonding as a test case for that experiment. The renegade Red Wizard of Thay wishes to enlist the aid he needs to create another Flight of Dragons, similar to the one that ravaged the North a few years ago.

And Tyranthraxus sees the new bonding process as a way that he can create multiple, living Pools of Radiance, allowing him to possess several individuals at once and control them for his own ends. His rise in power thereafter will be exponential as his influence spreads, creating his own army of minions whose souls belong to him.

But Tyranthraxus is also afraid. In the Dalelands exist magical items which were forged long ago to bring about his initial defeat. He chose his allies with an eye toward the fact that they are rumored to have these items, and seeks to have his agents (the player characters) bring these items to him in his lair in Myth Drannor, so that he may destroy them. Then nothing will stop him from his domination of the Realms.

It is now the month of Marpenoth, also called Leafall, which corresponds with October in our calendar. The trees of the Dalelands are just beginning to turn a rainbow of colors. Like the wheat and

the pumpkins, Tyranthraxus's plan has come to full ripeness. The Curse of the Azure Bonds has returned.

Running This Adventure

This adventure is designed for a party of 4-8 characters, each of 6th-9th level. It is assumed in this module that the heroes have previously gone through the adventures detailed in *Ruins of Adventure*, but this is not necessary for enjoyment of play.

The adventure may start in one of two ways, at the DM's discretion or as dictated by circumstances. The first method is to move the characters directly to Chapter 2. The heroes awaken in their quarters in Tilverton with a lapse of a month in their memories, and with strange blue tattoos branded on their forearms. The heroes must discover what has happened to them during the lost time.

Alternately, the DM can run through the events of Chapter 1, ending with the ambush encounter in which the heroes are captured. This method works best when playing the adventure in connection with a long-standing campaign. It has the disadvantage that player characters, being a wise and crafty group, may elude multiple attempts to defeat and subdue them. If the player characters prove to be too effective at eluding the ambushes, the DM should feel free to simply place the heroes at Tilverton, and let them try to account for the missing time.

The Azure Bonds

The player characters will be branded by the markings of those who seek to control their actions. These brands appear as bright blue tattoos, usually inscribed along the sword arm of the individual being controlled. The magical arts of creating a living vessel to control, and of hiding the brands, are lost to this New Alliance of the Bonds. Tyranthraxus wants the player characters to know who is responsible for their branding, as that will lead them first to his allies (and their hidden magic) and subsequently to him.



The tattoos—each character wears all five of the mysterious images—are the symbols of the various factions involved in the curse, all placed against a darker blue background of lines that appears to be a mixture of thorning plants and waves. Each of the symbols seems to be made up of smaller, identical symbols. That is, the symbol of the Zhentarim is actually made up of a collage of smaller Zhentarim symbols, each of which has been reduced to a speck the size of a pencil point.

The brands reflect light in the same way that stained glass does, and they give off a dull blue illumination of their own, though this is noticeable only in total darkness. In normal daylight, a brand may be mistaken for a “normal” tattoo, though one of extreme size and complexity.

The Azure Bonds are magical and dangerous. They represent a link between the characters and the New Alliance of the Bonds. If any divination spells are cast upon a bond, it will radiate a strong blue illumination, shooting bright rays into the air (treat as a *light* spell, in particular, if anyone is looking directly at it). In addition, it will function as a *symbol of pain* to the individual the divination-type spell is cast upon. This “light snow” and resulting effect is a physical repulsion of those spells by the bonds. Divination spells will reveal nothing about the bonds or the Alliance.

Attempts to remove the bonds through magical or clerical means will be resisted by the magics in the bonds. The bonds are 100 percent resistant to spells directed against them specifically (as opposed to spells that are directed against the individual who has been branded). Further, the bonds have their own protections against being removed:

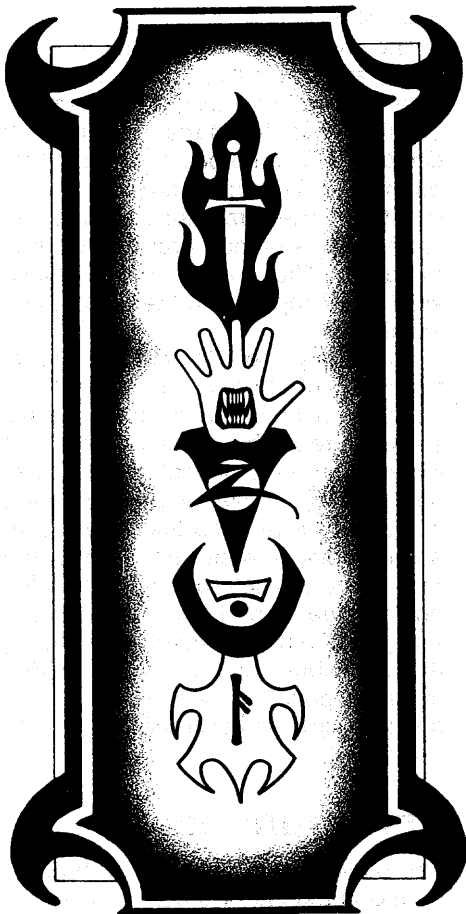
- * A windstorm will start up in the area occupied by the spell caster when removal of a brand is attempted, whether from the arm of the spell caster or another character. Loose objects will be cast about, and there is a 60 percent chance an object will hit the caster, certainly breaking the spell and possibly (DM's judgment) harming the caster.
- * The character who has been branded must make a saving throw ver-

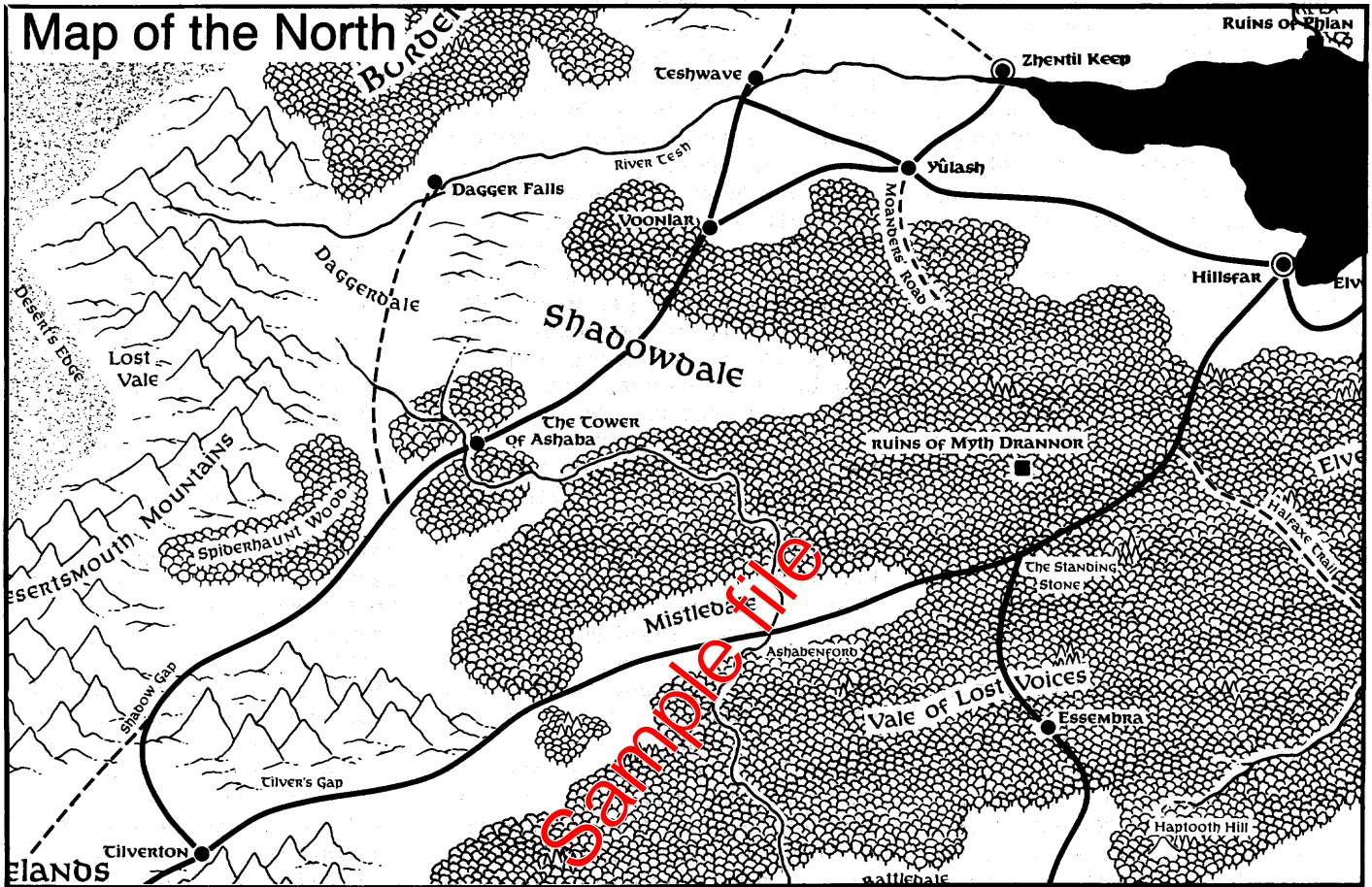
sus spells, or be overtaken by a berserker rage and a desire to slay the spell caster. This rage will permit the character to snap normal bonds, and will last for 2-8 rounds. This effect does not occur if the spell caster is the target of his or her own magic.

Dispel magic and *remove curse* will never have any effect on the brands, except to bring about the results mentioned above. A *limited wish* spell (if successfully cast without the death of the magic-user) will remove one of the marks from one individual. A *full wish* spell will remove up to three of the marks. Short of these actions, the Azure Bonds will prove extremely difficult to delete. Attempting to cut off the arm and *regenerating* it through magic will result in the brands merely reappearing on the new limb.

The Azure Bonds have been created by a group of individuals we refer to as the New Alliance of the Bonds (their predecessors from the novel carried no such high names, and were more chaotic in nature). Each group belonging to this alliance has its own reason for and its own methods of branding the characters. The Azure Bonds will force the characters, to perform actions they would otherwise not perform. The general goals of the members of the New Alliance are:

- * *The Fire Knives* seek the death of King Azoun IV of Cormyr. Player characters, because they have been branded with the Fire Knives symbol, must make a saving throw versus spells whenever they hear the sound of Azoun's voice. Failure to save means that they will attack the source of the sound until it is destroyed, the character is disabled or killed, or the encounter is ended in some other fashion.
- * *The Survivors of Moander* wish to bring their lord, also known as The Jawed God, back onto this plane, from where he has been banished since the death of his mortal form. They want the characters to reach Moander's temple beneath Yulash, where they will be slain and their deaths used to open the “worm-hole” to Moander's plane.
- * *The Zhentarim* see the characters





as a test project, part of an experiment to determine the success of forcing good and neutral heroes to perform evil acts. If this experiment works, the Black Network may capture others and similarly brand them. The Zhentarim have placed in their branding the desire for the PCs to commit random, evil acts, and ultimately to make their way to Zhentil Keep to report. These random acts become more frequent and more severely evil as the group nears Zhentil Keep. Opportunities to perform chaotic actions will appear throughout the text. They will affect single individuals, and not the entire party.

* *Dracandros the Mad*, also known as the Red Wizard of Thay, is currently in disfavor with the other Red Wizards. He feels that if he creates a great enough disaster in the

Dragon Reach area, he will be redeemed in the eyes of his fellows and allowed to return to Thay. A few years ago, a Flight of Dragons from the North ravaged the Dragon Reach and the Dalelands. As a result of being branded with his mark, the characters will answer to the sound of Dracandros's voice whenever they hear it, and will be compelled to perform whatever task he requires of them.

* *Tyranthraxus* seeks to destroy those magic items that could banish him forever from the Realms, and to convert the player characters to living Pools of Radiance, allowing him to increase his power in the Realms. His intent is to lead the characters to the various magic items held by the other members of the New Alliance, and have them bring these items to him.

The effects of the compulsions implanted by the various members of the New Alliance are similar to those of a *quest* or *geas* spell. Ignoring the long-term compulsions (to go to a particular place, such as Yulash or Zhentil Keep) will result in the characters feeling ill, losing one hit point per day because of a wasting sickness for every day spent resisting these compulsions. Such penalties do not apply while the characters are actively seeking out the individuals responsible for their brandings.

The more short-term orders (such as slaying the King of Cormyr when a character hears his voice) can be resisted if a character makes a saving throw. The magic of the bonds starts out very strong, but weakens over time. To reflect this, the first saving throw against any specific short-term order (likely to occur in Tilverton, where the party will encounter King Azoun) is made at -6 to the die



roll. The second such saving throw (whether against the same or a different short-term order) is made at -5, the next at -4, and so on, until the penalty is removed and player characters are saving against spells as normal versus the effects of the bonds. Note on a separate sheet of paper the number of times a character has had to save against the effects of the bonds. Making the saving throw indicates that the individual has resisted the effects of that particular order—if the order is given again in another encounter (or if the situation causing that order arises again), then another saving throw is required.

When the characters are operating under a long-term compulsion or a short-term order, the DM may either choose to play the characters as NPCs until the moment passes, or may choose to let the players continue to run their characters under the effects of the order. Such activity may be detrimental to the character's continued good health (and thus against the basic nature of the player running that character), so in recognition of a sincere and successful attempt to role-play a character under a potentially harmful compulsion, the DM should consider awarding bonus experience points (100 xp per encounter is suggested) to any character whose player demonstrates this sort of good role-playing ability.

The members of the New Alliance, Tyranthraxus in particular, are unaware that the effects of the bonds diminish over time. He feels that, given the characters' prowess (experience levels), the chance of them breaking free of his control is very small.

About the Dalelands

Most of the action of this adventure takes place in the northern parts of the Dalelands. The name "Dalelands" is properly used to refer to various allied dales that hug the borders of the Elven Woods, but the term is often used in the more "civilized" areas of Cormyr and Sembia to refer to their entire northern border, reaching as far north as the city-states that border the Moonsea. While these city-states are neither as small nor as rural as the dales, and in fact are openly hostile in some cases, the name

has stuck in popular usage in the South.

The dales themselves are rolling farmlands, dotted with individual holdings and small family farms. Usually each dale has a center of trade and government. For example, Shadowdale's center of trade is at the Tower of Ashaba, and the town that has grown up around it is referred to as Shadowdale as well. Daggerdale's center of trade is at Dagger Falls, at the town of the same name. Battledale's trade center, on the other hand, is the town of Essembra, safely located far from warring armies.

The Dalelands themselves were settled by an agreement between the Dalesmen's ancestors and the Elven Court, a large elven nation that occupied the forest the dales now surround. The elves permitted the Dalesmen, migrating from the east across the Dragon Reach, to settle the borders of their forest, on the condition that the Dalesmen not make further incursions into the Elven Woods. The elves had already lost much of their forests to "civilized" men from Cormyr and Sembia, and sought the Dalesmen as a counterbalance to this threat.

The Dalesmen agreed, and the Standing Stone was erected to commemorate the pact between man and elf. The calendar of Dale Reckoning dates from the erection of that stone, and in the time since then, old dales have been abandoned or destroyed and new dales founded. In the area we are discussing, the major dales are Daggerdale, Shadowdale, Mistedale, and Battledale.

Recently, the Elven Court has abandoned the Realms entirely, retreating to the elvish island nation of Evermeet. While some elves remain, the elvish nation that once dominated the forest and kept adventurers away from such dangerous locations as Myth Drannor has vanished virtually overnight. Adventurers are just now beginning to discover that there are new places to delve for treasure as a result of this relocation of power.

To the south of the Dalelands are the nations of Cormyr and Sembia. These lands have regularly pushed their borders northward, expanding their power in a fashion that often brings them into conflict with local forces. Most recently,

the King of Cormyr has sent troops to Tilverton, bringing that city under Cormyrian control. The reason for this intrusion involves the king's daughter, and the player characters will become caught up in this plot in the first adventure of this module.

To the North of the Dalelands proper are the city-states of the Moonsea. While not as unified as the southern nations of Cormyr and Sembia, these city-states are very powerful both in armed force and in the strength of magic and adventurers they can claim.

The major cities of the western Moonsea are Zhentil Keep and Hillsfar. The former is a multiwalled city dominated by the Zhentarim, also known as the Black Network. It is an evil town, filled with informers and dark plots. Hillsfar is little better, but for different reasons. It seems to be run by more uncaring, mercantile forces, and its new ruler's intentions toward the Dalelands remain a mystery.

The cities of Phlan, Teshwave, and Yulash are decimated ruins, only now beginning to recover from the effects of war, pestilence, and a plague of dragons. A Flight of Dragons, a migratory wave of the great lizards, passed over the Dalelands several years ago, leaving great destruction in its wake.

Phlan is only now rebuilding from the devastation, its recovery hampered by the plots of Tyranthraxus, who was subsequently foiled by a company of brave adventurers. Teshwave fell to constant raiding by Zhentil Keep, and is now little more than a ruined way station, dominated by a garrison of Zhentil Keep soldiers. Yulash is a contested city, its wreckage fought over by forces from both Zhentil Keep and Hillsfar.

Lastly, the independent town of Voonlar lies between the Moonsea lands and the Dalelands. Independent in name only, the town is under the influence of agents of Zhentil Keep. These rulers have a more lenient attitude toward their people than do the Keepers to the north, but still will not cross their masters. Voonlar has been a staging area for Zhentil Keep raids to the south and west.

For more information on these locations, see Chapter 6.