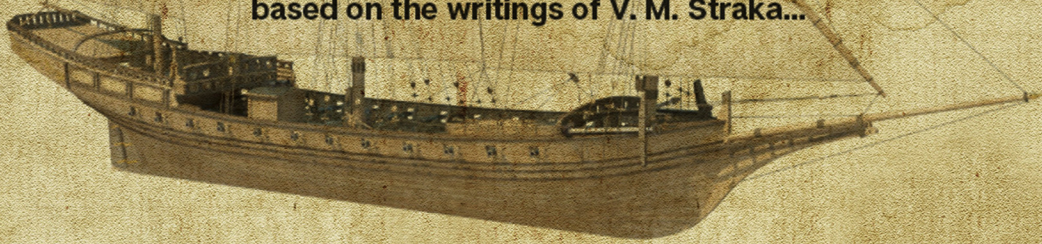


AXIS MUNDI

A tactical game of movement and Other-Worldly Powers,
based on the writings of V. M. Straka...



Morning. Awakening, you find yourself on the main deck of a patchworked, archaic-looking xebec, dressed in rags. There is nothing but ocean in every direction. You smell faint traces of chloroform on your person. Your best guess is that you have been shanghaied. If that weren't bad enough, memories of your past life no longer exist within your conscious mind; you have no recollection of who you are.

As you become somewhat terrified at your predicament, you hear the sound of a whistle – a quick toot that emanates from the vessel's upper rigging, followed by another whistle, at a lower pitch, that comes from aft.

You walk sternward and see one of the crewmen turned away from you. You yell out to him but receive no reply. As you approach him, you notice that he does not look well, with an appearance as disheveled as your own. His fingers, busy tying rope into knots, are afflicted with the blueish hues of hypoxia.

You tap him on the shoulder and he whirls around. That is when you see that his lips have been sewn shut with black thread in a crisscross pattern. The midsection of his lips lack the stitching in a gap just large enough to accommodate a small wooden whistle, which hangs on a necklace around his neck.

As you recoil in shock and disgust, a voice from close behind startles you.

The owner of the voice is a behemoth of a man, clad neck to shin in sailor's osnaburg. One arm of his shirt is full of sags and rips and is discolored in a hundred tones of brown and black; the other is a perfect shade of bone, with a ring of pristine white stitches attacking it at the shoulder. (A quick glance starboard shows that the rest of the crew is also dressed, to varying degrees, in such nautical motley.) The sailor's head is bald and sun-blistered; his beard is a maelstrom of black hair. He does not appear to be wearing a sidearm, but this does not leave you feeling any more secure about your current situation or your future prospects.

“Me?”

You. S——.

“That’s my name?”

The sailor nods.

S——. It means nothing to you. Just a word. Still, you feel calmer suddenly; it is much better to have a name than not to have one.

“What’s the name of your vessel?”

Int mine, the sailor says.

“What’s the name of this vessel?”

Dunt ten’ a name.

“No name?”

Dun once, haps. Dunt n’more.

“What’s your name?”

Ridden o’ mine, the big man says. He nods toward the shuffling crew to the aft of the ship. *They ridden o’tharn. Names’s trouble.*

His accent is a strange thing – it seems not to issue from a specific place but instead is ladled up from a transoceanic stew of dictions and impediments.

“Why was I brought here?”

We’ve ‘structs, the sailor says, to take y’.

“What do you mean, take me?”

Take y’.

“Take me where?”

No where.

“I need to speak to the captain. Where is the captain?”

Int na captain.

“How can there be no captain?”

Int na captain. ‘S us. We viv the ship. He pauses. Do what’s needin.

The big sailor seems calm, but the wrongness of him, of his silent comrades, of this crazy-quilt of a ship and your own presence on it, sends a stab of panic through you. You feel your heart thudding faster, feel your spine turning to ice. You, this alleged *S——*, have no control over who or where or why you are. You feel as though you are falling through the dark, with nothing to believe in but the cruel efficiency of gravity.

Sailing. Weeks of harnessing the wind to parts unknown. Unexpectedly, your captors never force you to assist them in the deck work. You spend your time on a hammock found in the tiny cabin they furnish to you as living quarters, subsisting on stale bread and dirty water. One day, you notice a loose nail in one of the floor planks, and pry it free. Under cover of darkness, you use it to scribe the story of your plight into the cabin's walls. Come daylight, you are shocked to discover that the graffiti's words have been altered. They are now, inexplicably, statements that mock you and your predicament.

You begin going mad. Frightening hallucinations plague you.

And then, landfall.

You spin out of the hammock and hurry up the ladder so quickly that you miss a rung and turn your ankle. You sit yourself on the edge of the hatchway, dangling your leg into the open space, waiting for the pain to drain away. The air is mist filled and bracing, the sky a relentless gray. You inhale deeply and gratefully.

The ship has docked at a decrepit-looking pier on a small, gray island that looks to be the very definition of Nowhere. At roughly the island's geographic center, a monolith of volcanic rock rises a steep thousand feet from the surface, then terminates abruptly in a deep, irregular crater, from which rises an intense beam of yellow light that reaches the swirling clouds in the heavens above. Two jittering arcs of electrical energy protrude from the crater and loop downward, connecting to land at sea level, one about a hundred yards to your left and the other the same distance to your right. An additional arc of electricity emerges from the crater and curves away from your location, presumably making landfall beyond your line of sight.

The only sign of habitation is a long, low-slung warehouse made of weathered wood and connected to the pier by a ramshackle plank walkway. The walkway runs a foot or so above the island's inhospitable surface, which is slickly black and jagged and cruel-looking, likely to gash a bare sole at the instant of contact.

Maelstrom, at the top of the gangway, beckons you forward with his curled finger. When you approach him, he points to the pathway. Having no viable choice but compliance, you start down the path, filled with trepidation. He follows behind you.

The walkway trembles and complains under the big man's weight. You look down at what you'll fall upon when the thing collapses: a shardy expanse of conchoidal black rock, knapped and honed and polished by the aeons. You kneel and run your hand over one of the craggy surfaces. The rock is warm to the touch, and to your surprise, begins glowing a shade of amber, as if your contact has set it aflame.

When you arrive at the warehouse, Maelstrom grabs you by the collar – not roughly, but not gently, either – and pulls you inside.

The warehouse is cavernous, and it is at least three quarters full of crates: crates lining the walls, crates stacked to form aisles that run the length of the room, crates stacked to the ceiling in some places, crates of different sizes, shapes, shades, ages. Despite the dampness outside, there's not a hint of mustiness.

Maelstrom points to a doorway along the back wall, pushes you in that direction.

Y'workins ou' there.

"I - I don't understand" you protest.

Y'got t' make ways a'top so y'can solve y'self.

"But why? What's at the top of -"

Move y'self. Time's scortin.

With that, he steps back down the walkway toward the docked xebec. You loiter in the warehouse's doorway in a state of confusion as he boards the ship, and then you perceive an anomaly in your peripheral vision. A speck of black in the sky's gloom, growing larger by the second.

It takes shape. It's some type of flying creature. Yes - a bird of prey, and a big one at that, moving at an incredible speed straight toward you. Without the time required for a proper defense, you raise your arms to block your face from its impending attack and close your eyes in fright. You feel it grip your right forearm with its giant talons, but feel no pain. Opening your eyes, you can hardly believe what you see: an unworldly raptor of humongous size, aflame with a blaze as black as the great void of nothingness; a bird of negative space, perched on your trembling appendage ready to do your bidding.

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Welcome to **AXIS MUNDI** - where the four compass directions meet; the location between Heaven, Hell, and Earth.

You must travel through this barren island to its center, the **AXIS MUNDI**, gain the other-worldly powers that it bestows upon you, and escape in one piece.

The first player to do so wins the game.

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What begins at the water shall end there. And what ends there will once more begin.

