

THREE FOR THE GRAVE

AN ADVENTURE LOCALE BY MICHAEL PRESCOTT

THE SITUATION

A shrine's woeful legacy has damned the lands it once protected. Their leader lies dying, or so it seems. In truth, he is sweating out the final stage of a ritual that will bring a dangerous, primordial power to the land.

RUMORS FOR NEARBY PLACES

- A group of outlaws is paying silver for bodies—or even bones!—no questions asked.
- It's said that grave robbers are working from the old shrine.
- Several of the Neathfen villages have sent word that they need bear hunters.
- In Lurrock, the wind is not to be trusted.
- Cannibals lurk in the Neathfen villages.

LAY OF THE LAND

'Lurrock' is the name given to the vast, swampy basin that holds the winding Lurrock River. The river empties into Wint Lake. Following its courses inland takes boaters through the low-lying Neathfens wetland. Copses of cedar and spruce are separated by reedy marshes and patches of open water. Forty miles from the lake, the river passes through the shadow of **Raal**, an old holy mound, once the **Shrine of Three Springs**.

d6	LURROCK ENCOUNTERS (50% chance, 3 times/day)
9+	Neathfen villagers (d6)
7-8	Wildlife
6	Grave robbers (d6 or d3)
5	Cursed bear
4	Demonic air
2-3	Raal foraging party (d6)
1	Unthinking ghouls (d4)
+1 to the roll for each 10 miles from Raal	

THE NEATHFEN VILLAGES

Dotted through the fens are a dozen villages, each between six and twenty huts, all very poor. The 'fenners' grow rice in their small, flooded fields, and forage for cress, eels, and marsh fowl.

They dredge witch gum from the oily pools, boil it down to a thick tar, load onto rafts, and sell downriver. The gum seals both their huts and their boots, and the oily stink of it is often the first sign of nearby fenners.

They are keen for coin, and except at planting or harvesting time, villages can spare d6 youths willing to guide or carry for coin. Each village has a specialty it provides to the others—a cobbler, a potter, a smith, a seer—which binds them into a tight community. Regular trade means news travels quickly.

They are worried about the bears, and when encountered away from villages (gathering wood, fishing, or ferrying witch gum) will be armed and watchful.

THE SHADOW OF RAAL

Life is precarious here, and when food is scarce, the fenners must turn to **Raal** for aid. The young are the first to make this dire choice, while the village elders look the other way, but rare is the fenner that has not tasted the **black gruel**.

They do not discuss this with outsiders.

POLSA LONGKNIFE

One fenner who does break ranks is Polsa. Once an armorer in Darshore, she fled here a decade ago, an outlaw wanted for murder. She has made a home in Han-wil, last of the fen villages, where she makes steel tools of all sorts, especially long knives, hooked fishing spears, and barbed arrowheads. Her accent and black hair stand out from the native fenners, but her skill has earned her a valued place here. She vocally opposes any dealings with **Raal**, and will happily help anyone likely

to cause trouble for that cursed place. If she thinks strangers are after the bounty on her head, she will use the knives.

WILDLIFE

Except in winter, Lurrock is alive with the sounds of animals. Fenhawks (a trainable, burrowing raptor) can often be seen patrolling for mice or red hare (fine game, but which cause stomach cramps unless eaten with Hayden's root). Yompies—raccoon-sized rodents with coarse, algae-streaked fur—are inquisitive and fearless in all seasons.

GRAVE ROBBERS

Silver from **Raal** has drawn unsavory sorts to Lurrock in low skiffs and stolen dinghies. Organized groups (d6) come with bones or funerary relics stolen elsewhere. The worst sort bring victims, either strangled or still alive, hired on downriver and unwittingly rowing to their own deaths. The most desperate groups (d3) bide their time to steal local bodies from fenner graves. The villagers refuse to deal with any of them directly, and the grave robbers prefer to avoid contact with strangers unless forced.

THE BLACK GRUEL

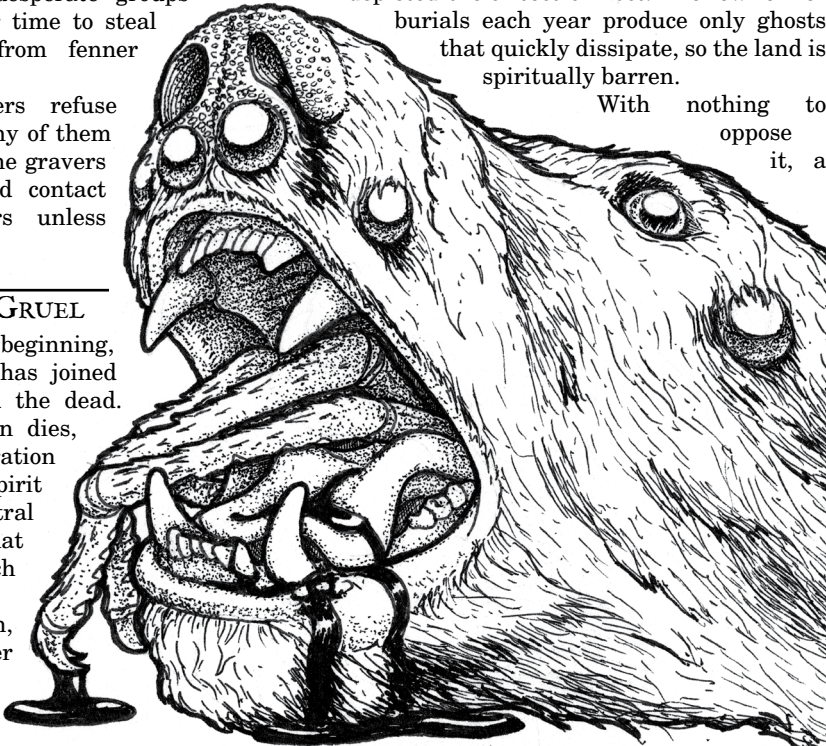
Since the beginning, a great bond has joined the living and the dead. As each person dies, their consecration joins their spirit to the ancestral host that surrounds each community. In this form, they watch over the living, subtly

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aiding, guiding, and protecting them. The consecration of the newly dead is therefore of vital importance to the health of any community. The bones of the dead are not inherently magical, but they have a talismanic power over the spirit that bore them in life. For centuries, the shrine-keepers at **Raal** have used this power to lure the spirits of the dead, to trap them, and to consume them. The strongest energies they retain for themselves, but desperate fenners who make the journey to **Raal** will be fed the black gruel. Eating the gruel carries with it the emotional burden of cannibalism; the soul rejects it as the body feeds. A bowl of it sustains life for a week, but the enmity of the dead lasts forever. No prayers are answered in Lurrock.

THE DEMONIC AIR

The years of blasphemy at **Raal** have depleted the ancestral host. The few fenner burials each year produce only ghosts that quickly dissipate, so the land is spiritually barren. With nothing to oppose it, a



loathsome force has ascended from the deep earth. It travels as a breeze, a demonic air.

It is cruel, powerful, but also very naive; it has learned the speech of the fenners, but has no grasp of subtlety or manipulation.

It speaks its thoughts and hopes aloud, compulsively, urgently. Its voice is sometimes whispers on the breeze, sometimes loud voices in the distance. After a time, it learns to imitate voices it hears.

“Fall into that brook—break your leg.”
“Burn your food as an offering!”
“Go west and be devoured by my children!”
“Rest here a while.”
“Eat that. Eat it. Eaaaat eat eat eat it.”

THE CURSED BEARS OF LURROCK

To say the bears are behaving oddly is an understatement, for they are cursed. The demonic air has made them its first victims, injecting them with its “children”: insectoid embryos, growing to maturity. 22 bears have been affected, another each week.

Roll randomly to determine the stage of development.

d6	Demonic Gestation
1-3	Initial infestation: black spider eyes poking through back fur; random aggression
4	Demon mouth opens in random part of body, this is now the ‘front’. Half speed.
5	Failed birth: spider demon thrashes inside the dying bear, legs tangled in its ribcage
6	Mature form: bear carcass dangles from massive spider legs, gallops short distances when hunting

THE WAYWARD SHRINE

Centuries ago, the hilltop shrine gave hope and comfort to the entire region. There, the voices of the dead were heard most clearly, and their wisdom aided all who listened.

But the seers there were greedy, and forced visions from the dead not meant for the living. They glimpsed a ritual of strength, of freedom from hunger, and they used it.

What they had really seen was a

sacrament to the deep powers of the earth. In its perfect form, it transforms the petitioner into a **primordial orc**, but their vision was incomplete.

Nevertheless, the shrine-keepers used it extensively, and to this day the order attempts it as often as they dare.

It proceeds in the same way as the making the black gruel—an ancestral spirit is called, trapped, and consumed, but instead of dividing the portion among fifty-five, the ritualist consumes all.

The odds of success are 50/50, but either way the ritualist is transformed.

d6	Ritual Success Effects
1-2	Glowing eyes, night vision
3-4	Leathery hide
5-6	Inhuman strength; claws
7	Regeneration (major injuries heal in a week); immunity to non-magical disease
8	Sand and soil become edible
9	Natural aging ceases
For duplicate results, take the next	

d3*	Ritual Failure Effects
1	Numbness (random limb)
2	Weakness, hair falls out
3	Leprosy
4	Rotting flesh
5	Unthinking ghoul
6	Death
* Modify roll by +1 for each previous failure	

All 18 shrine-keepers have a handful of ritual gifts and infirmities. Those that fall to ghouldom are driven out, to wander the hills.

The shrine-keepers consider themselves fenners, spiritual custodians of the region, but the love is not mutual.

THE RAAL MOUND TEMPLE

The temple complex is comprised of five rooms. The northern shrine (A) houses

d6 keepers fallen to leprosy, while the remainder sleep in the dormitory (D).

The dormitory also contains **Vorser Gruntle** and **Nymquee**.

The central hall (B) is used to receive villagers in need, and to conduct occasional business with grave robbers.

The black gruel is prepared in the southern shrine (C), under the watchful gaze of twin idols, celebrating the original seers.

Shrine babies move throughout.

THREE SPRINGS

The natural caves existed before people ever came. The springs no longer flow, but the stagnant water in the stone-lined pools still bears power.

The shrine-keepers come here only to make shrine babies.

By tradition, the fens’ stillborn are brought here. The shrine-keepers coat them in clay and leave them in one of the pools (E).

Sometimes the child re-emerges as a “shrine baby,” a tiny, clay humunculus.

Initially mute, they soon learn to clean the shrine, light candles, and prepare the daily food, as well as tending the lepers.

Other than the pool rooms, the caverns are completely dark.

A cavemouth (F) exits the western side of the mound (a stream once flowed that way), though it is now overgrown with juniper.

NYMQUEE & VORSER GRUNTLE

At the far end of the dormitory, lies the head of the shrine-keepers, Vorser Gruntle, a tall, strong man in his fifties.

Last winter, he consumed a king’s portion of gruel and fell into a coma, but even so, he seems undiminished. Other than his pallor, he radiates vitality.

Nymquee tends him. Eldest shrine baby, she has served the keepers for six generations. She is chipped and gray, with a piercing stare.

NYMQUEE’S SECRETS

Unbeknownst to all, Nymquee has plumbed the depths of the shrine’s power. Her visions of the gray land of the dead are not flawed.

She knows that Vorser was successful, and has become a primordial orc, hunter of the dead and harbinger of demons, and she knows the true form of the ritual.

She prolongs the coma with a paralytic paste of marsh marigold.

She cares only for the shrine babies,

who cannot leave without magical intervention.

She foresaw the adventurers’ arrival but not their intentions, and is waiting to decide how best to use them. She is perfectly willing to barter with the ritual, kill Vorser in his sleep, or awaken him to usher in an age of darkness.

