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# CULTISTS IN CROW'S KEEP



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## *Rumours & Hooks:*

Word on the street is that *Lord Conlon*, the patriarch of an old and respected family of *Crow's Keep*, is looking to recruit some discrete investigators, with a handsome reward on offer.

## **Crow's Keep**

Crow's Keep is the capital of Midlander society, situated on a high plinth of rock overlooking the Great Lake, Forest of Drelnor and the Trackless Moors. Within these fortified walls, the elderly King Uldred holds court, thwarting the schemes of rivals and fending off enemy incursions.

The city is built in familiar western medieval style, architecture reminiscent of the Middle Ages, with a moderate to warm climate. As might be expected, the most powerful noble families are here in great numbers, manoeuvring for position before Uldred passes. The gods, and their mortal representatives, also wield great influence, with throngs of faithful attending the great temples.

## **Cult of Bok'Surpesh**

Morgaine (early twenties, athletic build, brunette with a prominent chin) is the third born daughter of the Everton noble family, an old, enduring and well respected highborn line in Crow's Keep.

Greedy, impatient, and of limited business acumen, Morgaine resents that her elder siblings will inherit most of the family's wealth, and that as the third born, she is expected to uphold the crown's interests as a knight in the armed forces.

Two years ago, few would have put any stock in Morgaine's fighting ability; awkward and unbalanced, with no gift for strategy, she seemed destined for an early grave at the end of a barbarian's spear. Yet in recent times Everton's third daughter has achieved a miraculous

turnaround; swift and deceptively strong, coupled with deadly swordplay and brazen confidence.

Many wonder at Morgaine's remarkable improvement, hoping that they or their squires might mimic her success, but the knight's rise is not the result of training with the captain of the Crow's Guard.

Sinister, more dangerous forces are at work. Morgaine belongs to a secret cult that uses blood magic to merge with alien entities from beyond, granting them supernatural boons. In Morgaine's case, the symbiosis augments her strength, speed and stamina.



As might be feared, such power comes at a steep price. The forbidden rituals are fuelled by blood magic and madness, with the youngest sacrifices procuring the greatest results.

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### Conlon's Bastard

Lord Conlon's 11 yr old secret bastard son, *Merrick*, lived in the back alleys of the *Rookwood slums* until a week ago, when he was unwittingly kidnapped for sacrifice by the cult.

Despite appearances, Lord Conlon loved his son dearly, and is willing to pay 500 crowns (gp) to find out what happened to him. Given the need for strict discretion, involving the city watch is out of the question.



Late one night, Lord Conlon arranges a covert meeting with the party at the *Sewer Sack*, one of the quieter drinking holes on the outskirts of the slums (wooden two storey, cheap ale but expensive food, mostly regulars and a few pick pockets, proprietor is *Crawjack*; 5ft, exasperated, narrow eyed, rotund fellow).

Conlon is in his 50's, a dark haired and pragmatic retired warrior (Fighter 2). He impresses upon the party the need for the utmost discretion, but is desperate to reunite with his son, or at least find out what happened to him.

Conlon last saw Merrick at the *Argonan Orphanage* on *Leadlight Row*. If the party manage to return Merrick to him, or exact vengeance in his name, Conlon will double their fee and owe them a favour the party can call on at some future time. His son has many similarities

to his father (olive skinned, tall, broad shouldered, dark locks, unusually green eyes), with had a pox scar on his chin.

### Argonan Orphanage

Merrick's mother passed away years earlier and the boy ended up in an orphanage run by priestesses of Argona (god of health, wealth and happiness). *Priestess Lividia* (5 ft 6, slim, dark hair, white cowl, necklace with the shield & star of Argona) administers the charity with a number of junior initiates and volunteers. Approximately fifty kids live in the three storey building, who benefit from two meals a day and a safe place to sleep.

Try as they might, there are far too many kids for the priestesses to keep an eye on, and many of the youngsters spend their day exploring the city. Lividia is aware that Merrick is missing, as is his female friend *Drini* (a northerner; pale, blonde, blue eyes, heavy accent), and has reported such to *Captain Larsen* the city watch. The two went missing at the same time, and Lividia is not sure whether they have simply run off together.

If the party quizzes the kids, they learn the following (Charisma (Persuasion) checks might be required depending on the PC's approach/GM discretion):

1. *Demi* (6 yr old female, dark hair, very skinny) tells them that Merrick & Livia were best friends and always hung out together.
2. *Morgurr* (12 yr old male, blonde hair, scratches himself) tells the party the pair had a few favourite locations they would visit in the city, in particular *Busker's Point*, *Westside Markets* and the *Abandoned Tower*.
3. *Alise* (8 yr old female, very short, dark hair, shrewd and practical) charges 1 silver florin for her advice. She can tell the party that she was the last person to see the pair, about midday a week ago, at *South Stables*.



## Random Encounters

Whilst exploring the city, there is a 50% chance of a random encounter every two hours. If an encounter occurs, roll on the following table:

1d20	CROW'S KEEP ENCOUNTERS
1	Two farmers, <i>Mort</i> and <i>Jeraal</i> , are brawling over livestock, foodstuffs or cotton.
2	A gaggle of ducks, chickens or other fowl scatter across the street, causing havoc. There is a 50% chance a pick pocket, <i>Riva "Homeslice"</i> takes advantage of the diversion.
3	A merchant, <i>Egbert "Sell me own mother" Cruthers</i> , is selling an assortment of weapons on a gilded table in the street, watched over by his muscle, <i>Juke</i> (Fighter 4). For the discreet inquirer, he might also have access to more specialized gear, such as hidden sheaths, spring-blade pommels, caltrops, lockpicks and knife boots.
4	4d6 guards patrol the street, eyes wary for thieves. If it's a slow day, they might accost any foreign or dangerous looking adventurers, inquiring as to their business, the duration of their stay, boarding house and whether they have any information they wish to share with the authorities. Impolite or cheeky responses are unlikely to be well received.
5	2d4 Knights of <i>Graxus</i> (war god) are trotting down the street in full battle armour. Bystanders quickly clear a path, fearful of being knocked aside by their 17 hand destriers.
6	A funeral procession winds slowly down the street, bearing the standards of the noble <i>Cildorn</i> family, including pall bearers, cultists of Baal (death, suffering), and sorrowful relatives.
7	3d6 thugs of rival gangs ( <i>Alley Smiths</i> and the <i>Hatchetmen</i> ) clash over turf lines, stabbing at each other with knives and axes. Lingering witnesses, or anyone who attempts to intervene,

	is also set upon. Whatever the outcome, the surviving leader, <i>Ratnak "Lockjaw"</i> (Northerner), does not forget.
8	2d6 overzealous followers of Argona accost the travellers, berating them for their wicked ways of violence and greed. They threaten natural disasters and eternity trapped in the void if the party does not make amends.
9	A 3d6 member performing troupe has gathered a small crowd here. The troupe has knowledge of the local region. There is a 30% chance of pick pockets working the crowd.
10	A pigeon pie seller, <i>Ghirk Galak</i> , is on the corner. Ghirk is a little known street informant.
11	A justicar is presiding over an execution in the square. Three middle aged criminals are to be hanged. A small crowd has gathered. 3d6 guards are in attendance, along with the burly, hooded executioner. There is a 50% chance of a rescue attempt by 4d6 ne'er do wells.
12	A whipcord teenager with red hair ( <i>Bjernvin</i> , northerner) sprints towards the travellers with a pouch clutched in one hand. 200 ft behind, a portly stall keeper struggles to keep up, yelling "Thief! Thief!"
13	A small crowd has gathered around two nobles ( <i>Lord Armont</i> and <i>Lord Brand</i> ) arguing in the street, when Armont draws his sword and demands a duel. Lord Brand, elderly, appears shocked at first, but quickly casts his gaze about the crowd. "I seek a champion. You know my name. Who will fight for me?"
14	A procession of 3d6 druids of Soliri (nature god) are making their way down the road, offering blessings of the World Tree to passers-by.
15	A trio of axemen are selling firewood and kindling. They haven't noticed that one of the split logs is hiding a tiny fey behind a hinged knot.

16	3d6 off duty soldiers are halfway through a pub crawl and quite drunk. They are very angry about a recent enemy skirmish, and will take it out on the next southerner they see.
17	A man in hooded black robes bearing the crescent moon symbol (a priest of Shennog - madness, night, mystery), approaches the party. He whispers something ("the darkest corners conceal the greatest secrets") before handing one of the adventurers a broken hand mirror. He then scuttles swiftly away.
18	A beggar, <i>Sivros</i> , is begging for alms when a chamber pot is emptied from an upper storey and splashes onto him. He curses and splutters "Skin the silver wolf!", before redoubling his call for alms. Sivros has a good ear for the street, and has connections with certain thieves' guilds.
19	A stray hound, dark muzzled and thin, with one cloudy eye, approaches the party. If they treat her well, the hound becomes a fearless companion, willing to give her life for her new packmates. At the GM's discretion, the hound may automatically succeed in a single rescue of a PC (LFG p.48), dying in the process.
20	A town crier is ringing his bell and declaring "The King is dead! The King is dead!"

### On the Trail

The party might follow the leads the kids at the orphanage provide, put their feelers out with other contacts to catch wind of *Merrick* and/or *Drini*, use magic, or employ some other strategy the writer hasn't thought of. Either way, a number of likely avenues of inquiry appear below, some of which provide clues to finding Merrick.

1. *Captain Larsen*. The captain has little interest in allocating resources to find Merrick. He's in the pocket of many a wealthy merchant, with their own agendas, and he's up to his eyeballs investigating a series of murders on

*Ripton Way* (gang related). He's put the word out to his men, but can't promise anything. He is however very interested to know why the party want to find Merrick, anyway?

2. *Busker's Point* is known for its many street entertainers, located near the bustling eastern markets. Singers and musicians are most common, but poetry readers and mimes are not unheard of. There is a 50% chance of a pickpocket (Perc (Detection) vs Dex 14). One of the singers, *Markos* (14 yrs, long dark hair, poor but enthusiastic singer), can indicate (for a few coins) that Merrick & Drini were here a week ago, during the afternoon. They said they were heading to *Thirston Alley* to see *Ratcatcher*.
3. *Thirston Alley* is a gloomy and winding collection of motley buildings, known in certain circles as the head quarters of the *Hatchetmen* thieves' guild (primarily protection rackets, break and enters, and fencing loot). 4d6 thieves (Bandit LFG p.114) are on hand here at any time, along with their boss, *Ratcatcher*.

*Ratcatcher* (40s, albino Karok with silver buzz cut hair, missing his right hand, "cut off for thievin, innit"). *Ratcatcher* can confirm the pair met with him a week ago in the late afternoon. He sent them to deliver two messages (one to *Tight Noose* tavern, then later to *Westside Markets*). Ratty won't spill to just anyone, however, and has a soft spot for the two "young delinquents". If the party want the information from him peacefully, they'll have to (i) tell him who wants to know, (ii) grease his palms with a few crowns, and (iii) owe him a personal favour ("don't go leavin' town now, will ya.")

*Ratcatcher*, *Boss Monster*, AC 13, HD 5, Dagger 1d4+3, 19: Disarm, S13 D16 C9 I14 P13 W13 Ch10 L8, Mv 30 ft. *Ratcatcher* is a *Boss Monster* with all the usual benefits (LFG p.95). He has Backstab, Skirmisher and Finisher



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abilities like a 5<sup>th</sup> level rogue, and may choose from the following tricks three times per combat: *Choking Dust*, *Hidden Blade*, *Quick Reflexes*, *Smoke Bomb*, *Flash Powder*, *Unseen Whip*, *Glue Pot*.

4. *Dawncliff* is a (technically illegal) lookout, situated on the outside of Crow's Keeps' north eastern walls, overlooking the huge watery expanse that is *Lake Argos*. High up on the rocky cliff, the view is spectacular, none more so than at dawn. One of Merrick's favourite hangouts, it requires a Dex (Athletics or Acrobatics) check to successfully climb (else fall 20 ft to a lower shelf) to the sitting ledge, which is wide enough to accommodate five adults. At the GM's option, patrolling city watch might also harass any characters putting their lives at risk here. *Drini* might be found watching the sunrise here (50% and see later), but otherwise there are no clues to be had.

5. *Westside Markets* are a bustling amalgam of traders, hawkers and peddlers, selling any manner of thing to any manner of person. If the PCs ask around, they might learn from *Vermile* (tall female blonde, well dressed, arms always crossed) that she sold the pair some fresh cut flowers for a silver. She overheard them talking about *Dawncliff* and the *South Stables*.

6. *The Abandoned Tower* was once the home of a secret wizard who died on account of a summoning gone wrong. The creature's rampage left the tower in a derelict state, and it is scheduled for demolition in coming months. The kids often take turns daring each other to enter its darkened halls and climb all the way to the top. None have yet made it that far. Merrick & Drini are not in the tower, but it is not completely abandoned. In the highest room is an *Imp*, *Snevorgug*, bereft of its master but bound to guard his study for another 234 years.

*Snevorgug* greets the PCs with "*Hi los ni fin drog*" (you are not the master), and "*Su tada womuda*" (no mortals in this place). If the Imp is defeated, the study contains 1 x 3 HD Lair Treasure and 1 x Scroll (LFG p.140, 152).

*Snevorgug*, AC 15, HD 6, Claw 1d6+1 and Bite 1d4+posion, 19: target rolls on the DDM table, S14 D16 C10 I14 P15 W14 Ch14 L8, Mv 40 ft flying. Imps are demons with the usual benefits (LFG p. 94). A bite causes 1 *Luck* drain and amnesia for 1d4 hours (*Luck* (Will) save resists). *Snevorgug* may choose from the following spells three times per day: *Hideous Laughter*, *Phantasmal Force*, *Suggestion* and *Web*. He is protected by 50% magic resistance.



7. *South Stables* is run by *Letonia*, a dark skinned southerner with wild hair and a genuine love of animals. The stables have a number of horses, as well as several hounds lodging. Letonia is happy for the children to pet the animals and sometimes allows them to ride a friendly nag named *Riggs*. Merrick and Drini did come past a week ago to visit. They mentioned going to *Thirston Alley*,

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which Letonia warned them against, but they needed the money (as message runners for the guild). One of Letonia's dogs, *Wicket*, was a favourite of Merrick, and might be helpful for tracking his scent.

8. *Underhang* is a secret hideout for various street kids and orphans, including Merrick & Drini. Located beneath the middle of Crow's Keep's enormous entry bridge. Access is via small drains on the northern side, leading to a natural cave. Drini is here (see below).

### Cult Interference

Each time the party visits a location searching for Merrick, or for every 3 hours that passes, there is a cumulative 1 in 10 chance that the cult's spies hear about the party's inquiries, and take action to nip them in the bud.

The cultists organise 3d6 slavers to intercept the party, slap them in chains, and put them on the next ship leaving Crow's Keep. The slavers are lead by *Nox* (30s, dark skinned, shaved head, large gold hoop earrings and dragon tattoos down both arms). If the slavers are defeated, they have 1 x Carry Loot. Nox does not know anything about any cult, but he had specific orders to target the PCs.

*Slavers*, AC 11, HD 1, Baton 1d6+1, 19: knocked prone, S14 D10 C10 I9 P9 W9 Ch9 L8, Mv 30 ft. The slavers carry batons and large sacks to stuff unconscious would be slaves in.

*Nox, Boss Monster*, AC 13, HD 5, 2 Fists 1d6+1, 19: knocked back 10 ft, prone or disarm, S14 D16 C13 I10 P10 W16 Ch9 L8, Mv 30 ft. Nox is a *Boss Monster* with all the usual benefits (LFG p.95). He has Martial Arts like a 5<sup>th</sup> level monk, and may choose from the following techniques three times per combat: *Fork the River*, *Formless Water*, *Iron Fist*, *Deflect Projectile*, *Impossible Leap*.

### Finding Drini

Drini is hiding in the small cave colloquially known as Underhang, a secret safehouse the orphan kids (and other children) sometimes employ.

In this case, Drini is in hiding because she witnessed Merrick being assaulted, knocked unconscious, stuffed in a sack, and conveyed to the *Bald Bison* tavern about 2am a week ago. Drini would have been taken too, but for some drunken sailors turning the corner of the alley at the right moment. Drini managed to stealthily tail the kidnappers back to the tavern, who emerged some hours later, without Merrick. She waited all night to no avail, until set upon by two men (the same men, or others, she couldn't be sure?) later that morning as she surveilled the Bison. Barely escaping with her life, Drini fled to Underhang, and has been in hiding ever since.

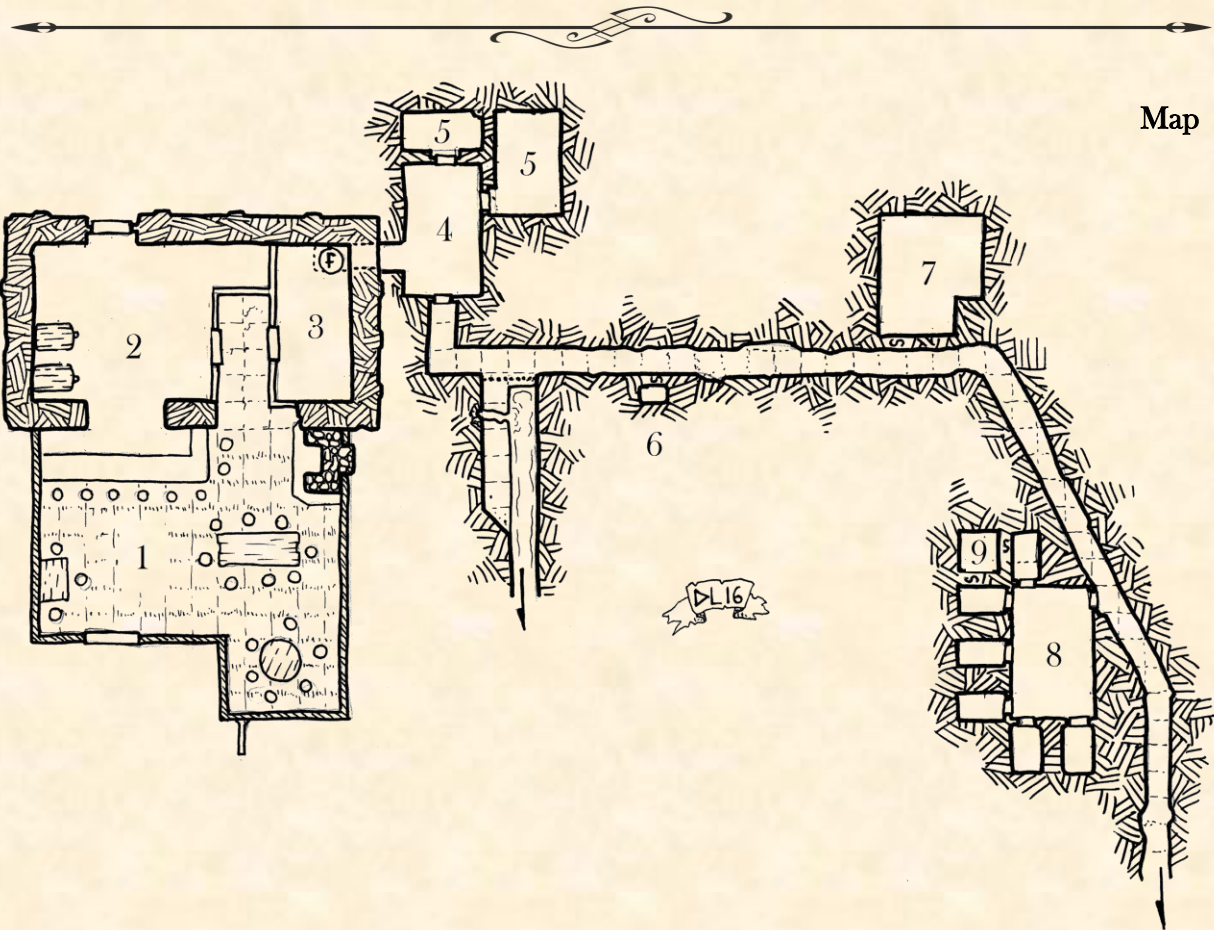
Drini is scared but not alone – she has 1d3 street friends (not from the Orphanage) with her in the cave when the PCs arrive. The kids immediately suspect the party are up to no good, and brandish knives. If the party can convince Drini that they are on her side, she will tell them her story, and pleads with them to find out what happened to Merrick.

*Street Kids*, AC 10, HD 1 (1d4 hp), Knife 1d4, 19: 1d3 street kids appear at the cave mouth to assist, S8 D13 C10 I10 P12 W11 Ch11 L3, Mv 30 ft. The street kids look after their own, gaining advantage on morale checks.

### The Bald Bison

The Bison is a wooden, single storey drinking hole, tucked away in a quiet corner a few blocks from the shipyards. Large flagstones are set into the common room floor, the plaster walls decorated with mildewed pictures of old or distant landscapes. The ale is not particularly good, nor cheap, which keeps most of the customers away, and that suits the cult just fine.





### Area 1 – Common Room

The bar is attended by 2d4 patrons whilst open, half of whom are cultists. After closing (midnight), there is a 25% chance a ritual is being performed in the secret tunnels below, involving 2d4 cult members.

*Jeffrey* (50s, balding, skinny fellow with yellowed teeth, sickly looking, his boon was to stave off terminal illness) owns the establishment, and is a cult member, as is his serving wench *Melindra* (brunette, portly, bright eyes, pregnant – her boon – but pregnant with what?).

*Cultists*, AC 11, HD 1, Knife 1d4, 19: disarm, S10 D10 C10 I9 P11 W9 Ch10 L8, Mv 30 ft. The cultists carry knives. For any group of cultists, 1d2 of them has a boon relevant to combat. Roll 1d8:

1. *Unnatural Strength* of 19, and *Causes Injuries* on 19+ attack roll.

2. *Preternatural Toughness*: 4 HD.
3. *Endless Defiance*: Nearby cultists never check morale.
4. *Gifted*: Cast one random combat related spell (1<sup>st</sup> level (60%), 2<sup>nd</sup> level (30%), 3<sup>rd</sup> level (10%)).
5. *Otherworldly Aegis*: AC increases to 18.
6. *Thought Eater*: Once per combat may force a target within 20 ft to make a *Luck* (Will) save or suffer a serious madness.
7. *Time Slip*: Once per combat may take 4 actions or moves (or a combination) instead of 1 of each.
8. *Doom Pact*: When reduced to zero hp, roll on the *Dark & Dangerous Magic* table entry 11.



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If the party asks Merrick and the three kidnappers from the week before, Jeffrey and the cultists don't remembering seeing anything of the kind. If probed carefully, the PCs might notice one of the cultists seems nervous, a bead of sweat forming along his hairline (Int (Insight) vs Cha).

### Area 2 – Back Room

The sizable back room is filled with the usual bar paraphernalia; casks, bottles, foodstuffs, plates, cutlery, etc. The back door is locked most of the time (Dex (Traps & Locks) check to open). A thorough search of the area however might unearth a dark cowl, fallen behind one of two massive ale barrels (Perc (Detection) check or by player description). If Drini is present, she believes it identical to the cowls of the three kidnappers.

### Area 3 - Bedroom

This 15 ft by 30ft room is extra storage (bottle racks, casks) and a sleeping cot and small wardrobe for Jeffrey, who lives on site. The trapdoor in the northeast corner is covered a rug and the cot. It is kept locked (Jeffrey has the key).

### Area 4 – Waiting Room

This 15 ft by 25 ft room is perfectly plain, white plaster walls and flagstone floor tiles. A hanging lantern provides light. Each of the three wooden doors is painted with what appears to be blood, in runic sigils. An Int (Arcane Lore) check great success (must be skilled) recognises the runes as archaic and highly rare eldritch symbols for *watching* (northern doors) and *welcome* (southern door).

### Area 5 – Initiates' Rooms

1d3 cultists are living in these two chambers, new inductees studying forbidden scriptures day and night for a period of weeks. They are quick to investigate any loud disturbances in the complex. If the rooms are looted, 1 x Carry Loot and 2 x Trinkets & Curios are found (LFG p.136, 141).

### Area 6 – Trap

This section of long 5 ft wide corridor is trapped with poison gas that issues out of tiny holes in the cracks between flagstone, expanding to 20 ft (*Luck* (Con) save or unconscious for 1d6 hours). Clanging bells are also triggered, alerting cultists.

Characters studying the floor gain a Perc (Detection) check to notice hairline cracks of the trigger tiles, which activate if stepped on. Similarly, studying the southern wall might reveal a loose tile and pull ring that opens a secret door. The small cavity beyond houses a gas cylinder which can be dismantled and used as a weapon (or reset as a trap elsewhere, effects as above. Requires a Dex (Traps & Locks) check to repurpose).

### Area 7 – Merging Chamber

This 40 ft by 45 ft chamber can only be accessed by finding the secret latch in the northern wall (Perc (Detection) test), that allows part of the wall to slide aside. The interior has arcane runes carved into all surfaces, and shackled to the floor is a naked woman, *Patrice* (30s, athletic build, prominent nose, bedraggled), in a delirious state.

Patrice is not a prisoner. She is a cultist in the throes of fusing with an otherworldly entity, a painful and disorienting process that often results in disciples manifesting temporary bruises, welts, and madness. Interfering with the merging is dangerous; unshackling Patrice has a 50% chance of transforming her into a *Gibbering Terror*.

*Gibbering Terror*, AC 14, HD 8, Bite 2d8, 19: disturbing howl, enemies within 20 ft must make a *Luck* (Will) save or suffer a moderate madness, S16 D7 C16 I3 P10 W14 Ch1, L9, Mv 30 ft. The Terror has the usual benefits of its kind (LFG p.98).

### Area 8 – Prison Shrine

The cultists store their sacrifices here, shackled in small cells, preparing them for ritual sacrifice. The centre of the chamber which is inlaid with a

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glittering, white quartz pentagram. Anyone entering the inscribed circle immediately feels on edge, breaks out in a cold sweat, gets goosebumps, etc.

When the party arrive Morgaine is here with 1d4+1 fellow cultists, about to commence a ritual/in the middle of performing a ritual/just finished a ritual (GM's choice, or 33% chance of each) involving Merrick. By this time, the 11 yr old is dehydrated and drug addled (if alive) or horribly dismembered (if dead).



Either way, the cultists can't allow the party to reveal their secret, and attempt to kill or shackle them for future sacrifice.

*Morgaine, Boss Monster*, AC 14, HD 7 (61 hp), Ritual Blade 1d8+4, 19: special, S17 D17 C17 I10 P10 W13 Ch10 L9, Mv 30 ft. Morgaine is a *Boss Monster* with all the usual benefits (LFG p.95). She has the Fighter Adaptable ability, with the Single Weapon style. She may change styles three times per combat. On a 19+ attack roll, Morgaine triggers a roll on the DDM table.

If defeated, the cultists carry 1 x Carry Loot (LFG P.136).

## Area 9 – Tabernacle

This secret compartment is adjacent to two cells that are used as storage for wicked torture and dissecting devices, iron rations, spare bedding and other odds and ends. The secret doors are magically locked (*Wizard Lock* at 5<sup>th</sup> level) and only open to a hymn of praise to Bok'Surrpesh (can be deduced via an Int (Arcane Lore) check at disadvantage).

Stored in the tabernacle is an unnamed tome of white leather, full of scrawled ramblings and dementia, but also genuine rites of alien invocation, used by the cult to call their demons. A person studying the tome for some years might be able to replicate the cult's ceremonies, but gains an incurable serious madness.

The tome is worth 1d6 x 500 gp to the right buyer. Also stored in the tabernacle are the cult's tithes, amounting to 1 x 5 HD Lair Treasure (LFG p.140).

## Aftermath

If Merrick is rescued and returned to Conlon, he is overjoyed, and pays the party the bonus, with an additional reward (1 x Valuables LFG p.147) if the cultists were slain. Although Conlon cannot publicly extol the party's deeds, he is sure to surreptitiously send work their way, and will owe them a debt as long as he lives.

If Morgaine and her cult are not destroyed, they relocate elsewhere and continue their practices, with more adults and children going missing from time to time. Eventually they open an orphanage of their own, and begin experiments with merged children and the unborn. Some merges are quite successful, at least for a time, but joining with a Bok'Surrpesh sentience fundamentally transforms the host; the person they were is no longer. Over time they become increasingly insular, callous and wholly uncaring towards non-cultists, considering them primitive, mewling meat sacks, good for only two things: sacrifice or merging.

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## CREDITS

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