

THE VILE WORM

BY JIMM JOHNSTON WITH JEFF LYNK



Art & Cartography: Andy Taylor
Layout: Pat Bellavance
Proof-Reading: Leif Hamman
Mitch Williams
Colin Chapman
S&W Conversion: Pat Bellavance

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INTRODUCTION

This module is a short, but challenging scenario for a party of low-level characters. The adventure will probably play out in a linear fashion, beginning with a meeting in the woods where the party stumbles upon the hermit and his “dog” and then leading to the numbered encounters from Areas 1-3. Once the party has discovered the hermit's prisoners, their primary goal should be to rescue them from the tentacled cavern worm. Characters will need to be: 1) resourceful in descending into the two chambers where the worm dwells; 2) attentive to the entire chamber if the worm begins attacking them from above; 3) lucky at rolling when they begin to be exposed to the worm and the hatchling's paralyzing bite and slime; 4) and still be strong enough to fight or flee from the awakening Eldritch Oak as they exit the scenario.

ADVENTURE BACKGROUND

Deep within the forest, an ancient oak has grown huge, twisted, and evil. Ages ago, a savage cult haunted these woods and this tree became the focus of their unspeakable rites. Below it, they carved out a chamber of sacrificial horror where innocent victims were offered to a hideous worm-like god. As the centuries passed, the cult faded into the mists of time, but the twisted old oak stood fast, awaiting the day when the creeping evil in the dark below would be summoned once more.

And so it happened that a crazed warrior came in his wanderings upon the great, brooding tree. In his madness, he believed that the tree whispered to him, invited him, shared with him its dim secrets.

Over the course of many years, the folk of the borderlands have come to know the old berserker as “the mad hermit of the woods.” While pretending to be a kindly, albeit eccentric, old priest, he secretly scours the forest and nearby areas for human (or humanoid) prey to be sacrificed to the “worm god” that dwells below the ancient oak.

Several nights ago the hermit attacked the family of Bior the shepherd in their secluded cottage on the edge of the forest, forcing forcing his wife, Mira, and their son, Cullen, to drag Bior's unconscious body through the tangled forest to the huge, ancient oak. He imprisoned the family in a chamber below the oak, and offered the shepherd to the “worm god.”





THE HERMIT

The hermit is an aging berserker who wears an old, battered suit of leather armor. He is now completely delusional and insane, and believes himself to be a “priest of nature” whose duty is to feed the tentacled cavern worm that dwells below the oak. He lives in the rotted hollow of the old oak, and, like the tree itself, his hair and beard have grown wild and twisted. When he walks abroad in the forest he carries his axe and wears a brown robe over his armor. When first wounded in combat, he will fly into a berserker rage, gaining a +5 hit points and a +2 to all attacks, damage, and saving throws while in combat. After 1 turn this madness fades. He then loses the extra hit points and drops dead if this brings his total below zero.

Hermit (Berserker): HD 2; AC 7[12]; Atk 1 weapon (1d8); Move 12; Save 17; AL C; CL/XP 2/30; Special: +5 hit points and +2 to all attacks, damage, and saves in berserk state.

GIANT LYNX AND WOLF

The hermit has raised two “pets” which he uses as loyal guards and hunting animals. The first is a forest lynx. It lairs in the branches of the oak and, when first encountered, will automatically gain surprise if attacking from this position. The second is a wolf. The hermit considers the wolf to be his “dog,” and it accompanies him whenever he is away from the oak.

Lynx, Giant: HD 2; AC 6[13]; Atk 2 claws (1d2), 1 bite (1d4); Move 12; Save 16; AL N; CL/XP 2/30; Special: Rear claws, surprise.

Wolf: HD 2+2; AC 7[12]; Atk 1 bite (1d4+1); Move 18; Save 16; AL N; CL/XP 2/30; Special: None.

BEGINNING THE ADVENTURE

The adventuring party has traveled some distance into a large forested area. The Judge may wish to devise a short background for the adventure based on his own ideas about this scenario and the needs of his overall campaign. Maybe the party is searching for a chaotic outpost, or perhaps they are simply lost? Any plausible explanation will suffice.

When the hermit is first encountered, he will be stalking the forest with his wolf. He will claim that he is a reclusive “priest of nature” who lives in the woods with his “dog” and hunts small game for sustenance. He will feign amity, in an effort to gain the party's trust, and will manipulate them into following him back to the oak. To this end he may offer a meal, pretend to show them the way out of the forest, or if all else fails, he will tempt them by offering a magical scroll from the treasure horde buried in his “hovel.”

If he can convince the party to follow him, he will lead them into an ambush, signaling the lynx to attack as he nears the location of the eldritch oak. The Judge should not force the party to follow the hermit if they are absolutely set against it. Instead, allow them to continue on into the forest, eventually stumbling upon the eldritch oak by chance. In this case, they are likely to be taken by surprise by the hermit's “pets.” The wolf sleeps in the bushes near the hollow oak, and will probably surprise anyone searching the area. The hermit will emerge from the hollow of the oak and immediately attack with berserk fury.

AREAS OF THE MAP

Area 1 - The Hollow of the Oak:

Over the years, the trunk of the twisted old oak has rotted within and become hollow, creating a cave-like chamber (about 20' x 25'). The entrance is well concealed behind a stand of large bushes. This is where the hermit lives and sleeps when he is not out hunting. The hollow contains a cask of wine, a wooden table and chair, a rough wooden cup and plate, and a bed of loose dirt and leaves.

Beneath this pile of leaves, the hermit has buried a small chest near the wall of the oak. It contains 23 gold pieces, 33 silver pieces and an old iron ring with 3 large keys on it.

NOTE: These keys are for the cages, shackles, and table irons in Area 2, below.

There is a concealed trap door beneath the dirt in the center of the room. If any character is actively searching, the trap door can easily be found and may be discovered if any steps upon it. Stepping on it makes a distinct hollow sound in this section of floor and any character with a Detect Sound ability will bolster the odds of finding it quickly. The trap door opens onto a rough spiral staircase carved out of the dirt and rock. At the bottom of the stairs, a passage leads to a barred iron door.

Area 2 - Chamber of Torture and Feeding:

he iron door opens onto a 90' x 90' chamber with a 30' high ceiling. The walls are reinforced with stone brick, but in many places the bricks have crumbled and fallen away, revealing loose dirt. The room contains the following:

- A: Two 10' x 20' cages, one along the north wall and one to the south. The cages contain scraps of clothing and human waste. In the cage to the north is Mira and her young son, Cullen. They are hiding amongst the debris, but will be easily discovered by anyone inspecting the cages. Mira is in a state of shock and will not speak. Cullen can only give simple descriptions of what has befallen them. He witnessed his father being dragged below by a many-tentacled monster, and will implore the party to rescue him.

Mira and Cullen (Peasants): HD 1d6hp; hp 3 (mother), hp 2 (child); AC 9[10]; Atk None (in shock); Move 12; Save 18; AL N; CL/XP B/10; Special: None.

- B: Three pairs of iron leg-shackles are bolted to the floor. Close inspection will reveal blood stains on the floor as well as a number of human bones.
- C: Two large stone tables are in the east part of the chamber. They are equipped with hand- and foot-irons for holding a person. Inspection of the tables will reveal blood stains here as well.
- D: Wall racks containing whips, prods, and other tools of torture. The Judge is free to add any other fiendish devices. (Suggested items include: saws, the boot, the heretic's fork, etc)
- E: A large iron bell stands here, mounted between two upright stone slabs. A rope attached to the rim of the bell rises up to the ceiling. If any character is able to inspect this (by climbing or other means), they will find that the rope disappears into the ceiling through a small hole.
- F: This room is hidden behind a secret door that is opened by depressing a stone brick to the right side of the door. From within this 10' square room, the cavern worm can be summoned by pulling the rope which rings the "dinner bell." There is a peep hole (disguised and unnoticeable from the outside) which allows the occupant of the room to observe.

If the bell is rung, a deep, barely audible tone will sound. The air will begin to reverberate with a low, almost painful throbbing, setting up subtle, but noticeable vibrations in the floor, ceiling and walls of the chamber. Within 1d4+1 rounds, the tentacled cavern worm will emerge from the central hole in the floor. The creature expects to feed, and will attack any living thing it sees. (See Area 3). If the worm suffers 8 hp of damage or more, it will attempt to retreat down the hole and back to its lair in Area 3.

Area 3 - Caverns of the Worm:

For centuries, a tentacled cavern worm has dwelt here. Long ago it was worshipped and fed by a primitive cult in the area. It took to feeding further underground when the cult died out, but always returned to this cavern to lair. When the hermit, who was already deranged, discovered the purpose of the bell in the feeding chamber (Area 2), he believed it was his calling to provide fodder for the beast.

The upper area of the cavern is about 40' across. A steep slope on the south side descends about 40' to a ledge just above the shaft that leads to the worm's lair (Area 3B). The opening to another cavern (Area 3A) can be seen from the ledge. To get to this area, however, a character must somehow cross the mouth of the shaft that leads to Area 3B.

A thief might be able to climb the side walls. Other characters may attempt to leap across, but the shaft opening is quite wide (12-15 feet). Should any fall into Area 3B, they may also become paralyzed by the worm's slime if they do not make a save against paralysis.

A clever party, may, of course, devise some other method to cross the shaft. The success or failure of any such attempt is left to the impartial determination of the Judge.

Area 3A: The cavern worm's treasure is hoarded here in great piles of mixed coin and other precious objects. It includes 2,450 copper pieces, 1,120 silver pieces, 598 gold pieces, a gold torc engraved with twining dragons worth 75 gold pieces and 2 large green agates worth 30 gold pieces each.

NOTE: If the worm has not already been slain, it will be lurking in the lower cavern (Area 3B) unless some commotion in Area 3A draws its attention. Characters throwing coins into a sack, arguing, or shouting up the shaft to Area 2, are examples of behavior that will alert the worm. If this occurs, it will quietly climb into this area in 1-3 rounds, staying in the shadows in order to position itself on the ceiling above any characters who are in the treasure cave. Unless a character informs the Judge that he is watching the shadows or the ceiling, the worm has a very good chance of remaining undetected.

Once positioned above a character, it will cling to the ceiling with its back legs, while its head and tentacles lunge down upon its target. If all of the characters in this area have been paralyzed, the cave worm will quickly drag them down into Area 3B, where they will be impregnated with worm eggs if they are not rescued within 6 turns.

Area 3B: This slime filled cavern is the lair of the tentacled cavern worm.

Tentacled Cavern Worm: HD 4; AC 5[14]; Atk 5 tentacles (1 dmg) or bite (1d6); MV 12; Save 13; AL N; CL/XP 4/120; Special: Paralyzing Slime

This creature is a giant, bloated symphylan with large black eyes and cnidarian tentacles. These tentacles constantly secrete a sticky, paralytic ooze that will instantly immobilize any creature it touches for 24 hours unless a successful saving throw is made. However, any sort of magical healing will restore full movement to a character. The worm dwells in this underground cavern and often scavenges for food. Note, it is aggressive and will attack anything it can consume - or use as a host to impregnate with its eggs! A character violated in this manner can only be saved by magical healing within 3 days of the eggs being deposited. The worm is an excellent climber and can negotiate walls and ceilings with no penalty to its movement rate.

The worm's translucent slime also coats the floor and walls here. An observant character will allow them to notice a large number of small flying insects have perished in the slime. Anyone falling into it or touching it with bare skin must also make a saving throw or become completely immobilized.

If the cave worm has not already been slain, it will be lurking in the shadows at the back of this cave. It will try to remain hidden, attempting to position itself and attack using the same tactics as described above for Area 3A. There are four impregnated, bloated bodies in this cavern. The first three are small, translucent man-creatures with sharp fangs (goblins) and the fourth is a human male (shepherd).

Worm eggs have been deposited in all of them. The young worms growing inside the goblin bodies have used them for nourishment and the goblins are now quite dead. The worms gestating within do pose a threat. The shepherd, however, is still alive – though just barely. If magical healing is not applied to him within 6 hours, he will be killed by the worm larva within him.

Bior (Peasant): HD 1d6hp; hp 4; AC 9[10]; Atk None (in shock); Move 12; Save 18; AL N; CL/XP B/10; Special: None.



Every round, there is a chance (1-2 on 1d6) that 1d3 hatchlings will explode from a bloated goblin corpse. The hatchlings are 3' long, and have five 1' tentacles (but only one attack per round).

Tentacled Cavern Worm (Hatchling): HD 1d6hp; hp 1; AC 9[10]; Atk 1 tentacle (1 dmg) or bite (1d3); MV 9; Save 18; AL N; CL/XP 1/10; Special: Paralyzing Slime

REVENGE OF THE ELDRITCH OAK

If the party successfully rescues the shepherd and his family, and slays the tentacled cavern worm, the Oak itself will become angered and will awaken. As the seemingly victorious adventurers emerge from the hollow tree, its limbs will become animate as it seeks to kill those responsible for the destruction of its servants and the plundering of its treasures. In addition, the oak will also attempt to charm a member of the party and turn them against their fellows.

Eldritch Oak: HD 3; AC 5[14]; Atk 4 limbs (1d6); MV 0; Save 14; AL C; CL/XP 4/120; Special: Charm

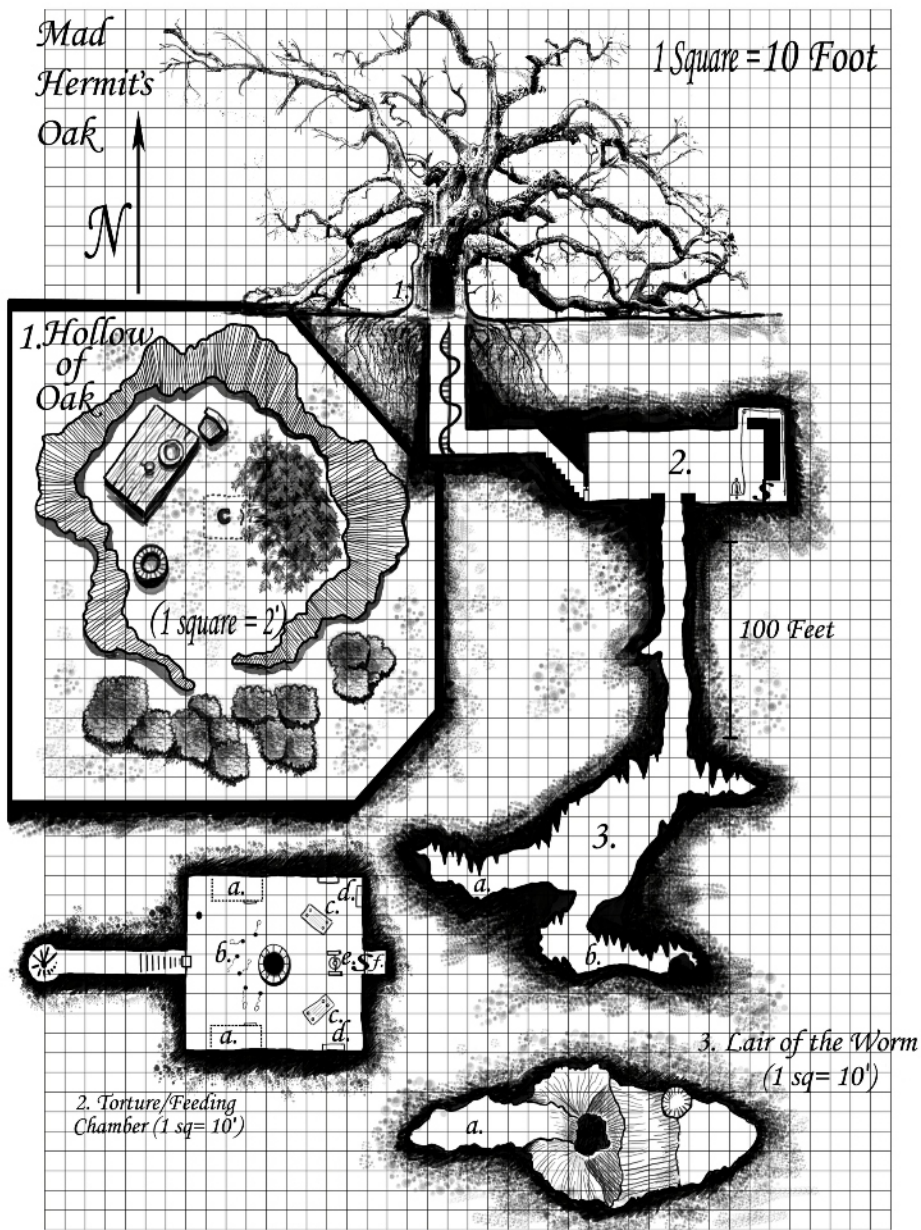
This huge ancient tree may once have been an abhorrently evil treant that lost its mobility and power of speech. It will brood for centuries without revealing its eldritch nature, but when finally aroused it is a force to be reckoned with. It can detect living creatures within 120' of its gigantic, gnarled trunk, and will attempt to charm them to act as its servants and as guardians of its secrets. Its charm ability may be used once per day. The oak communicates with its charmed servants by telepathy, which takes the form of maddening whispers within the mind of the victims.

After defeating the eldritch oak, the grateful shepherd and family will tearfully thank the party for saving them and promise to provide food and a safe place to stay whenever the characters travel through this area in the future.

EXPANDING THE ADVENTURE

As mentioned in the description of Area 3, the worm occasionally seeks prey further underground when necessary. At the back of the cave in Area 3B there is an 8' wide shaft (not indicated on the map) that descends straight down. If the Referee desires, this deep shaft will lead to additional encounters, or even entire levels of the mystic underworld!

For example, the first level may hold an abandoned complex where the original worshippers of the worm lived. Maybe one level further down is the mausoleum where they interred their honored dead. Another level may contain a small colony of goblins. Further down might be the abode of a wizard who has spent so many centuries alone in his subterranean workshop perfecting the animation of new types of undead, that he is not even fully aware of his own undead status. Below that level might be an ancient city of highly advanced, pale, ape-like man creatures. Maybe the shaft even has a few ancient portals not used in an epoch that can transport the character to exotic and dangerous alien dimensions?



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