

THOUGH FLESH BE VAST

An adventure by Michael Prescott

THE SITUATION

Among the dradkin, prophecy holds that the under-god Inceraugh would one day lead them to the prosperous surface world, where mute beasts grow fat on endless plants. Now, though, the faith's last known temple stands on the brink of social collapse.

GHARIAL'S PERCH (DIM)

Basthenes the gharial fell into the cavern three decades ago, and has grown massive on the plentiful fish.

He is a devoted narcissist, deeply lonely, who longs for interesting conversation and better sport than fish.

THE SUNLIT POOL (DAY)

A blinding patch of sunlight edges around the waterfall shaft; at noon, the sun touches the water and fills the cavern with blue light. Fish abound.

A small but feisty whorl drains water to the fungal cavern down a water-filled tunnel. 10-15' deep.

ABANDONED SHRINE (DARK)

A 12' statue of Inceraugh dominates the shrine; roughly bovine, it beckons with six legs that frame a distended belly. Its front is studded with hundreds of garnets (a handful are rubies) representing the promised beast flesh. Anyone meeting the idol's gaze finds hunger.

Wall etchings show hundreds of dradkin eating the flesh of a recling Inceraugh, vast and never-dying.

The side chamber by the idol is empty but for the husk of a dradkin flesh-priest, still gnawing on the hem of its cassock. Devotional writings on wax tablets recount the legend.

Beneath the flesh-priest's cot is a bundle of isopod shells, etched with a ritual intended to provide hope and comfort, but it was never finished.

THE GORGE (SKYLIT) AND BAT CAVERN (DIM)

A river gorge ends suddenly at a deep fissure - the water falls 120' straight down before thundering into an underground pool.

A crevice to the east opens into a large bat roost, where a second fissure drops into darkness.

GORGETIP CAVERN (DIM)

The gorge ends in a cavern: Szimalt, a dradkin, lurks in the darkness. Bravest of the heretics, she alone dwells above ground, subsisting on mosses and gorge skinks.

She makes nightly forays along the river, looking for other habitable caves or holes, and might share details about Incerat in exchange for surface survival lore.

UNCLAIMED LEGACY (DARK)

An illusory wall conceals a dry cavern, undisturbed for years. Within is an enchanted set of bone-scale armor, a kin-leather cloak of stealth, and four stone urns of good oil.

THE SALT MINE (LIT)

The mine chief, Goccan, will be (d6) 1-3: gambling with d3 pious-caste fellows, or 4-6: supervising d6 carreg mine slaves as they dig.

The mine chief is quite mad, having somehow contracted spores from the privy cavern. The dreams have plagued him for months, and he believes them to be true visions from Inceraugh.

The visions insist he drop bodies down the privy, though the law forbids this.

To this end he has murdered two carreg slaves and a Dradkin salt-carrier and stashed their bodies in the salt pile.

He believes in his task, but he is afraid. Goccan has prayed many long hours for someone who understands to come and aid him.

HALL OF WAITING (DARK)

The outermost hall of Incerat is a shrine decorated in high relief, showing dradkin hunting and roasting ineptly rendered surface animals.

The hall contains d3 pious-caste dradkin, praying in the dark, or d2 pitiable heretic sympathizers waiting for an opportunity to relay news.

CAVERN CLIFFS

The natural caverns are joined by steep drops (20-30', variously). While the climbing is not particularly difficult with good light, anyone who tarries at the top risks attracting the attention of d3 ghost bats from the ceiling.

MIST-SHROUDED CAVE (DIM)

Foggy air roils as the pool's humidity meets the chill of the depths, limiting sight to 20' (given noon light, or light sources).

This area is frequented by dradkin fishing parties (2d6 individuals) entering from the Miners' Hall.

Hiding in the mist are 15 heretics, exiles from Incerat. Led by Dussa the Squint, they refuse to wait any longer for prosperity, and have etched out a crude ladder that makes the terrifying 110' climb up into the bat roost.

From there, they have made several forays into the surrounds, but their exploits so far have been limited by the drying heat and light of the sun. They are eating well on goat, but grow desperate, fearing reprisal from Incerat.

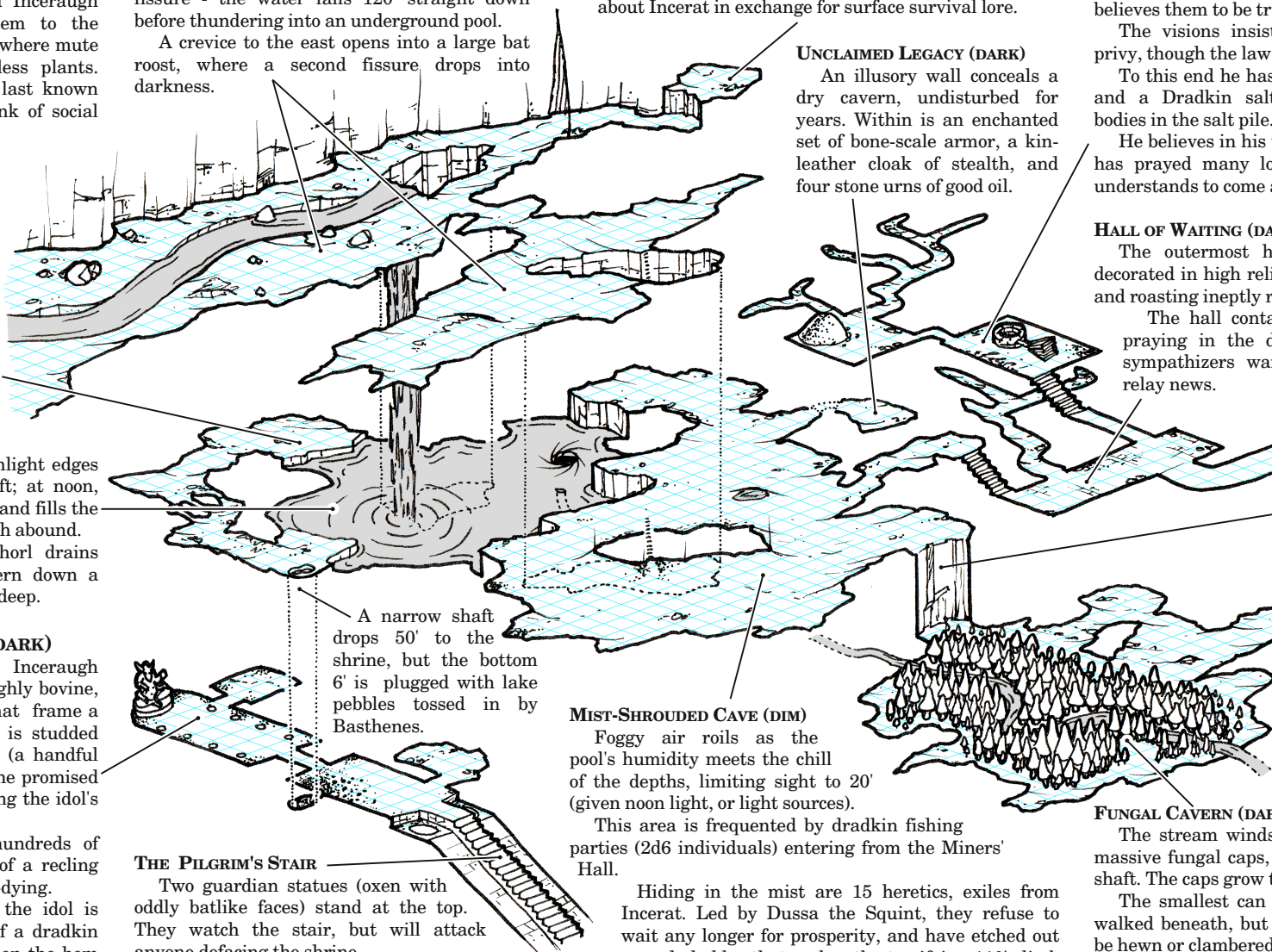
FUNGAL CAVERN (DARK)

The stream winds briskly through a forest of massive fungal caps, then plunges into an airless shaft. The caps grow tightly packed, with no gaps.

The smallest can be stepped over, the largest walked beneath, but those of person height must be hewn or clambered over, or crawled under.

The sickly-sweet smell of rot wafts from the bend in the stream, where two goat carcasses lie bloating (accidentally herded over the waterfall by Dussa's heretics).

Gatherers (2-4) from the dwelling chamber come often, alert because of the strange smell.



INCERAT THE HIGHMOST

Founded centuries ago as a monastery, Incerat was funded by the largesse of wealthy pilgrims from the depths. Several weeks' hard travel from the underlands, it gradually achieved self-sufficiency on fish, fungus and oil.

The flow of pilgrims ebbed centuries ago, and the community has stagnated into three castes: the fleshpriests, the pious warriors, and the pitiable.

HALLS OF THE PIOUS (LIT)

Here dwell the pious fighting caste: nine warriors and their families, 27 in all. Warriors wield bone and steel blades, wear bone-scale armor and chitin helm. Each is attended by a lamp-bearer.

THE CHAMBERS OF PITY (LIT)

The dwelling place of the lowest caste Dradkin, 30 individuals in all. They will be (d6) 1-2: just starting; 3-4: in the midst of; 5-6: just finishing:

1. cooking, eating, gambling and gossiping
2. a long period of sleep and sex
3. praying as one
4. wringing oil from carefully gathered apocalypse larva
5. serving food to the other castes
6. a funeral and body gift-making

About half will fight, armed with bone or metal-tipped spears or blades.

Abscon the Filch, disgraced fleshpriest, knows rituals of defeaning and weakness.

THE SLAVE PENS

The slave warden watches over 2d6 carreg, used for the worst of Incerat's physical labor, as well as arena sport.

In the last cell is a gnome, who has died only recently. He bears the scars of many fights in the arena.

THE PRIVY CAVERN

The communal privy from the dwelling chamber empties here. Over many years, a thread-like fungus that suffuses the vast pile of dung has become intelligent.

Anyone bearing the invisible dust of its spores will hear its will: it desires that

THE GREAT LIBRARY (LIT)

A pool of cleansing; urns of melted wax over oil-burning braziers. In the far chamber, bone-inlaid stone shelves bear hundreds of heavy wax tablets.

Most are devotional, 2d6 are inscribed spells.

d6 fleshpriests of uniform gender will be present at all times, bathing, tablet-making, praying or transcribing.

THE PRIESTLY CHAMBERS (LIT)

The priestly caste lives in two separate apartments, males and females living apart. In each, elders are waited on by the younger, and status is conferred seniority first, and then by ritual knowledge.

Their practices have stagnated, and new magic will divide their opinions bitterly.

UPPERMOST HALLS (LIT)

The exclusive domain of the high priestly couple, Uth and Semorpha, and their occasional guests of the priestly caste. Observing avatar feeding from the high gallery is a coveted honor. The few servants that come here are pious.

THE ARENA (LIT)

Here carreg slaves fight for their lives against the captured abominations of the lower world.

This is supposedly a sacred act, feeding Incerat's "avatars" so that he may in turn feed his faithful.

A chute in the southern corner allows the keepers to return uncooperative avatars to the pens.

HALL OF THE AVATARS (LIT)

Currently held are a pair of greater cave squid, and a horse-sized, three-necked hydra.

By a quirk of lineage, the avatar keeper is low born, and allows frequent visits by curious youngsters from the Chambers of Pity. He knows a cantrip that, within Incerat, will force cave squid to ground.

At the top of the ramp is a feed store, packed with dried larva.

AERIE (DARK)

The pious captain of the bailey maintains an aerie of trained ghost bats. It is her gift to know their speech, and they are fiercely loyal to her, or least to the scent of her large, kin-leather gauntlet. Twelve hang in the guano-filled chamber, awaiting eagerly.

BARRACKS (DARK)

Equipped with cots for twelve, the barracks are now empty save for the captain and her occasional guests.

THE BAILEY (LIT)

Once the primary entrance to Incerat for visiting pilgrims, the bailey stands at the end (or beginning) of the pilgrim road, a winding trail that tracks through the dimreach, along the shore of Ur-Menig, and into the underworld.

The path is no longer safe, and pilgrims never come. 1-2 guards will be listening for whip scorpions (and worse), or holding lights to guide a returning hunting party.

The upper gate room has arrow slits facing the dimreach, and an inner balcony overlooks the entrance hall.

THE DIMREACH BEGINS (UNLIT)

An enormous cave system extends several leagues to the south, overhanging cavernous Ur-Menig. Apocalypse larva and fire beetles are numerous; whip scorpions and ghost bats are frequent. Cave squid are rare and feared.

It is thick with trails from the occasional Incerat hunting parties, in search of food and any abominations finding their way up from Ur-Menig.

THE DRADKIN OF INCERAT

To surface people, dradkin look fine-boned and delicate, with jerky and unsettling movements. The majority are albino, some yellowish with ruddy features.

Their eyes are small, and bright light hurts them. They are at home in darkness, but use tiny lamps or naked wicks when they can afford oil.

They have excellent hearing, which they supplement by placing their long fingers against the cavern walls.

They make no cloth, but wear skins made from their dead (a final gift), tailored with thread spun from hair, and make tools and buttons of the bones. Each of their garments is named after the giver, and precious to them.

STRANGE PRESUMPTIONS

Among Dradkin, it is the norm to answer questions confidently. They are **never evasive** - rather, it is more polite to **lie outrageously**. Bear this in mind whenever adventurers make statements the Dradkin might not believe. Hesitation or partial answers indicate concealed weakness, which will arouse suspicion.

Dradkin will assume that surface dwellers can only endure sunlight for brief spells, too, and therefore know many safe places.

FOUR CASTES

Within Incerat, it is the right of the **fleshpriests** to create the accepted meaning of

significant events (e.g. the appearance of the PCs). They secretly dread the prophecy, for this will upend their world. They act to preserve the status quo vigorously.

The **pious** seek prosperity and status for their families - over the pitiable, but also over one another. It is their right that their complaints be heard by the fleshpriests.

The **pitiable** want justice from the persecutions of the pious, and many have heretical leanings. When the pitiable fail in any way it is seen as accidental by other castes, however outrageous. It is considered confirmation of the lowliness and incompetence ascribed to them.

The **heretics** need help surviving on the surface, but by leaving Incerat they have lost all sense of safety, and are wracked with paranoia.

WHAT'S THAT DRADKIN CARRYING? (d20)

1. Strips of edible fungus
2. d6 devotional garnets (5% one is a ruby)
3. Tin lamp half-full of beetle oil
4. Heirloom kin-leather coat or breeches, lined with ghost bat fur
5. Glass vial of whip scorpion acid
6. An engraved bone prayer rod
7. A heretical prayer rod
8. A bone-handled sickle, wickedly sharp
9. A devotional medallion of underworld
10. A pouch of salt chips (to eat)
11. A flake of lodestone (held on the tongue for wayfinding)
12. Braided kin-leather cord (d6x10')
- 13+ 3d6 coins

RITUALS OF THE FLESHPRIESTS

Dradkin ritual study has devolved into reformulations of stale, ancient formulae, and debate centers on irrelevant stylistic flourishes. Most pertain to masonry.

Nevertheless, the library contains an arsenal of useful rituals which the fleshpriests, if roused to action, can quickly prepare.

RITUAL: SOMATIC TRAITOR

This turns d20 of the victim's limbs against them.

RITUAL: DIMREACHER'S HUM

Ruins echolocation, and dradkin/carreg vibration sense within a 15' radius.

RITUAL: RECLAMATION

Salt crystals form on the victim's skin, having been drawn from their bodily fluids, causing

muscle spasms, fainting, and lasting weakness.

THE CARREG OF UR-MENIG

Genderless, with skin like supple clay. When healthy, they are cool and moist.

They have small mouths, slitted nostrils and no eyes or hair: unlike dradkin are quite alien to the surface peoples. They "see" by means of air currents and ground vibrations, and are unaware of light. They tolerate the air of Ur-Menig, which sends others into a deathless sleep.

THE DIMREACH CONTINUES

A league from Incerat, beyond where Dradkin venture, the floor of the dimreach becomes a maze of fissures and sinkholes. It ends in a vast, crumbling drop, a thousand yards into Ur-Menig.

APOCALYPSE LARVA

Fat white grubs (2-3' long) cling to cavern walls, sloshing with precious lichen oils. Passive, but if poked they burst, splashing anyone near with flaming oil.

FIRE BEETLES

The brief adult beetle (2') stage of the larva, they fly noisily on crystalline wings.

They occasionally spurt small flames, which the observant can use to survey the dimreach.

WHIP SCORPIONS

Nightmares of black chitin (5' long), they patrol incessantly, seeking sound or movement. Seizing prey with great claws, they then spray it strong acid from their stiff, whip-like tails.

They are perfect climbers, moving easily along walls and ceilings.

GHOST BATS

These giant bats (3-4' bodies, 12' wingspan) are swift and nearly silent, but delicate. A sizeable colony roosts out by the drop to Ur-Menig.

They attack climbers and larger prey near steep drops (common in the dimreach) with buffeting strikes, hoping to dislodge them so they can devour the crippled victim leisurely.

Their fur is greyish-white and of unrivaled softness.

CAVE SQUID

A cloud of black tentacles, hanging in the air like an inkdrop in water. They 'swim' through the air, fronds wafting on unseen currents.

Normally constricted to a mass 4-5' across,

their tentacles stretch up to 12' if need be, and given time they can squeeze through gaps only a few inches wide. Highly resistant to crushing or piecing attacks.

Their venomous touch causes paralysis, searing pain, or control of whichever of the victim's limbs has been seized, depending on the squid's vile purpose.

They hunt alone, and act intelligently.

HIGH UTH AND SEMORPHA

The rulers of Incerat are rarely seen, supposedly spending most of their time in prayer in the uppermost shrine.

The lavish bedchamber next door is never used, for Inceraugh's blessing has rendered them undead: they sleep in the moist soil of the secret chamber behind the shrine.

The pair produce dradkin ritual effects at will, and may take on the form of cave squid once every 13 hours.

The shrine idol has thirty platinum claws, and among countless garnets blanketing its belly, there are twenty large rubies.

THE INVERTED PROPHECY

Uth and Semorpha harbor a dark secret learned through augury: Inceraugh's ascension is involuntary, a terminal sentence imposed by great powers of the deep.

The weekly "avatar" feedings merely give the under-god the strength to delay the inevitable. If they stop, Inceraugh dies, his death throes manifesting as d10+10 cave squid that materialize randomly throughout Incerat.

The squid feed rapaciously (and can each digest a humanoid daily).

BEGINNINGS AND ENDS

PCs may become aware of Incerat a number of ways:

1. Peasants discover a lone dradkin heretic sheltering in their barn
2. Heretic parties begin organized raids, stealing cattle regularly
3. Heretics find a mediocre shelter (e.g. dense wood, a crappy cave) allowing them to venture further
4. Civil war breaks out in Incerat; heretic refugees turn up in surface settlements in desperate condition
5. Inceraugh dies; cave squid begin appearing on the surface
6. Incerat's lower gate falls, and underworld abominations enter in numbers, some making it to the surface.

