

THE NECROMANCERS' WISH

An adventure location by Michael Prescott

THE SITUATION

Each summer, the necromancer Nandoleeb leads his goblin-like Ricalu people on an underground pilgrimage, travelling by giant isopod to a sacred network of cliffside caves.

There, the very air is filled with the power of a host of ancestral necromancers. Their whispers grant Nandoleeb an unconscious, transformative power over his surroundings.

Before the scratchings and diggings of the Ricalu, the caverns were a mine system dug by the now long-dead Martoi. It is here they once sourced their rare and magical pigments. Some of their treasures remain.

THE FIREKEEPER'S CLIMB

A craggy shaft slopes 60' down from the entrance into the old Martoi mine tunnels.

MINE TUNNELS

Nandaleeb expects to encounter none but Ricalu in these tunnels, and thus it is so.

Anyone spending more than a few moments in the caves will be transformed into a Ricalu (see over).

Nandaleeb walks these tunnels for solitude and guidance (it is the sole purpose of the Ricalu's annual visit).

The necromancer will be stern with any Ricalu other than Firekeepers found here (including the party), and will send them below via the shaft.

The walls are etched and chipped by mining tools, but also bear many Ricalu prayer sigils. These tell a sorry tale: badly inbred and now totally sterile, the Ricalu have been declining sharply in both numbers and morale.

They reproduce only ritually (see below), but now the ancestral host has devised for Nandaleeb a ritual of calling - named and praised in the sigils many times, but not described.

UNDERHALLS OF THE RICALU

Here are found most of the Ricalu, twenty-six in all, each very different in size and shape.

The large central chamber is for gathering and working - smoking game or boiling lacquer for Matanaga, preparing fungus gruel for the others, playing boisterously, fighting or just sitting and dozing.

FIREKEEPER'S PERCH

A narrow crevice pierces the cliffside about 60' above the ground. This is the only upper-world entrance used by the Ricalu, and it is guarded either by Azribol and Pitala. On cold nights the orange glow of firelight can be seen from outside.

LAIR OF THE ORACLE

Wind whistles through a ground-level entrance, almost entirely blocked by a large boulder. Within, the air is heavy with the scent of a large animal, the great cat Sarcas. He is some 10' long, nose to tail, and Martoi pigment has dyed him in garish, ever-changing hues.

Nandoleeb's transformative expectations have made Sarcas more than a mere desert predator, but a wise oracle able to dip into the wisdom of the ancestral host.

Despite his calm manner, he loves chaos, and he will encourage adventurers down into the mines just to see what happens.

He is formidable in his lair - he knows the caves blind, moves silently and can make great leaps. If forced to fight, he will attack light-bearers or apparent leaders to buy time to retreat elsewhere for a possible ambush.

Of everyone here, even the necromancer, only Sarcas understands the effect Nandoleeb's power is doing. If Nandoleeb dies, Sarcas becomes the mute beast he once was.

THE ORACLE'S PERCH

Sarcas often rests here to observe the Ricalu far below or listen to the vault's whispers. He can make the jump from here to the upper cavemouths in either direction. A Martoi Gargoyle rests in the debris.

CAVE OF PIGMENTS

This hard-to-reach cave holds the last remaining seams of pigment, which are visible as glittering veins. If smelted, up to 30 lbs of pigment dust could be extracted.

LEVIATHAN'S FEAST

A vast store of smoked meat (including a dried gnome) is piled here, to be used as Matanaga's departure-inducing feast.

VAULT OF THE ANCESTORS

The towering cavern bottoms out in a wide, circular chamber with a floor of coarse, dry sand. The bottom 20' of the central pillar has been etched with Ricaluan sigils that describe the exploits of dozens of previous necromancers.

The tales are surreal to the point of nonsense, but the astute may realize they describe a vast swath of the astral landscape in great detail.

The crude sigils were hammered into an older work of Martoi design. All that remains of that era of writing is a single panel which carefully explains a ritual: the Torment of Fallen Foes.

Beneath the sand lies several thousand coins' worth of jewellery (mostly crudely hammered silver and gold with Ricalu necromantic motifs), several small pouches of semi-precious gems, and sixteen compacted bricks of Martoi pigment.

If the column or treasure is disturbed, or Nandoleeb is slain, the ancestors awaken: 10d6 skeletons emerge from the sand, armed with hooked staves and curved daggers.

They cannot be turned while in the vault.

MATANAGA'S WAITING PLACE

The gravel floor is the upper end of a massive underground thoroughfare, usable only by isopods and other burrowers. Here rests Matanaga, a centuries-old leviathan isopod (90' long, 20' tall), raised from birth to serve as transportation for the Ricalu.

In its youth, countless 'fistula' were bored into its still-soft carapace. These holes now serve as berths, which Ricalu occupy during the long, noisy ride to their wintering grounds.

d3-1 Ricalu are here at any given time, scrubbing or painting Matanaga's carapace with noxious lacquers, or repairing fistula doors.

An altar rests at the top of a small flight of steps, and behind it a tunnel leading to Nandaleeb's chamber containing a simple cot, his vestments, ink and parchment.

Beyond is a tall shaft, easily climbed by means of crude handholds.

To the side is a network of four small caverns where the Ricalu sleep - some comfortably.

THE NECROMANCERS' WISH

RUMORS

Any communities nearby will offer players a chance to pick up rumors about the caves. All are true, more or less.

1. Something in the cliffs calls any who wander nearby to their doom.
2. On summer mornings, smoke can be seen coming from the cliff.
3. A great, colored cat once ate a hunting party.
4. Sleeping within a league of the cliffs is likely to get you eaten
5. A giant desert cat has grown a taste for wine

IN THE CAVES DWELL ONLY RICALU

After a brief time in the caves, adventurers will find their lights oddly bright, then painful, and finally blinding. Someone will then realize that the party has been transformed. The change is always imperceptible, for the sense that it is right and normal that only Ricalu exist in the caves is powerful, and suffuses everything.

Any who leave the cave system are restored, just as subtly.

FORMS OF THE RICALU

Determine everyone's new Ricalu appearance randomly (d6). Re-roll duplicates:

1. Heavy, short and hideous
2. Near-spherical torso and long, bony limbs
3. Very hairy, peg-like climbing nails
4. Tiny eyes, whip-like tongue
5. Sticky skin, a yeasty stink
6. Hairless, hunchbacked albino

Ricalu see perfectly in the dark, and cannot tolerate light.

Those who somehow magically resist the change will be attacked by the ancestral host.

Transformed adventurers will be accepted among the Ricalu without question - not even a hint of awareness that they are newcomers.

Food in the caves is plentiful but unpleasant. Hard work is expected, and petty squabbles are unfortunately common.

TODAY AMONG THE RICALU

1. Breaking discarded giant isopod carapace into chips for use as knives and other tools.
2. Drying meats for Metanaga until the eyes and throat are raw from the smoke.
3. Chewing dried fungus strips into edible gruel for the others.
4. d3 Ricalu are looking for suckers to muck out Matanaga's cavern.
5. d3 elderly Ricalu are looking for an excuse to perform the Child of Ouroboros ritual.

6. d4 feisty youngsters wanting to fight for status (for the pick of food and sleeping spot)
7. d2 amorous Ricalu looking to 'play'.
8. A tough Ricalu picking a fight to prove his worthiness to succeed Nandaleeb.
9. Azribol looking for a temporary Firekeeper so he can meet with Pitala.

NANDOLEEB THE NECROMANCER

The leader of the Ricalu is a short, wrinkled creature, with iridescent, tattooed skin.

He comports himself with a mixture of enthusiastic ferocity and compassion, and stares piercingly at everyone he encounters.

If observed quietly, he can be heard muttering lines of a ritual, practicing to himself. This is the new ritual of calling, which will bring forth the weak willed of all the nearby communities, for him to transform and embrace as fresh Ricalu blood, before leading them underground.

He carries a circlet that, when rubbed, teleports Sarcas to his side, as well as two Martoi Gargoyles.

He is unaware of his transformative powers.

AZRIBOL THE FIREKEEPER

A miniscule Ricalu of great agility, he spends half his time watching the lands beyond the crevice from the Firekeeper's Perch.

He carries with him a contraption of bronze and quartz which he can use to peer beyond the horizon to places up to twenty leagues distant.

He has been using it to spy out settlements at Nandaleeb's request. The device is fiddly, and using it properly is a feat of dexterity.

Azribol will not fight directly, but protects himself with numerous wire snares that he strings up wherever he sits for long.

PITALA THE FIREKEEPER

Married to Azribol, she is the other of Nandaleeb's two trusted firekeepers. Unlike her spouse, she is massive, easily 7' tall and of trollish proportions.

She is jolly, perceptive, and will crush a skull without hesitation when she needs to.

Birds and vermin are irresistibly drawn to her whispers, and she catches most of the food being smoked and dried for Matanaga.

THE ANCESTRAL HOST

Now mostly gone to dust, forty spirits still advise Nandaleeb through whispers and visions. It is their only wish to see the Ricalu restored to vibrancy at any cost. If they must, six have the strength to manifest as violent spectres.

ARTIFACTS AND RITUALS OF THE CAVES

RICALU RITUAL: CHILD OF THE OUROBOROS

Both a blessing and a sign of the Ricalu's desperation, this ritual is a sacred act of restoration for the subject and the community. If cast within thirty leagues of the ancestral host, it has a startling effect:

The spell's target is relieved entirely of all injury and disease, but they also become pregnant with a clone of themselves, a vessel for the reincarnation of one of the ancestral Ricalu.

The pregnancy occurs regardless of the sex of the subject. Male subjects cannot deliver, of course; the child will grow until it is removed (surgically, magically, etc.). If carried beyond term, it will die and likely kill the parent with necrotic infection.

If born, the child will gradually reclaim memories of its former life beginning in its tenth year.

DUST OF THE MARTOI

Millennia ago, the Martoi came here to mine their precious dust, the foundation of their many artifices.

It gives the cave walls a steely glint, like silver ore. It can be smelted out, for it liquifies as easily as lead. Unlike other metals, it doesn't solidify, but becomes a powder as soft and fine as flour - but dense and not easily blown about by the breath.

It is iridescent, and tends to invert the color of whatever light falls upon it:

- * The light of a cloudless sky turns it a brilliant orange.
- * Direct sunlight turns it a deep purple, torchlight turns it blue, glowing coals or a dying fire bring out a greenish lustre.
- * On overcast days, it is as black and shiny as polished jet
- * Under moonlight, it shines like gold.
- * It appears gray and lifeless under magical light of any sort.
- * To those who can see in total darkness, it gleams like pure white chalk.

If the dust falls upon the skin of someone who has consumed alcohol within the past day, it sets fast like a gleaming, permanent tattoo. When this occurs, it remains whatever color it was showing when it set, regardless of changes in lighting conditions.

It is said that legendary Zeichus prepared his magical pigments from this dust, though that secret is surely lost. (It is an easy matter to mix

it into lacquers and resins, however.)

MARTOI GARGOYLES

The fist-sized stone gargoyles found here are in fact artifacts of Martoi. The design is highly stylized and they are nearly spherical except for a tiny, open mouth that reveals they are hollow.

When dropped or tossed into the air, a gargoyle will immediately begin orbiting the nearest non-magical light source within 10', quickly settling on a radius of about 3' and as close to horizontal as possible.

Gargoyles move quickly, striking any objects in their path with the force of a hammer blow. They exert a corresponding force on the light source, and so tend to yank it around as the gargoyle whirls as if on an invisible leash. Holding such a pivot light is exhausting unless multiple gargoyles are launched in counterbalancing orbits.

The effect ends if the gargoyle is forcibly stopped, by a firm grasp or a solid object (e.g. carelessly walking too close to a cavern wall).

Orbits last up to a quarter hour, then won't move again until "fed" an ounce of pigment dust.

MARTOI RITUAL: TORMENT OF FALLEN FOES

This ritual is engraved on the pillar in the Vault of the Ancestors. It is apparently a curse to torment one's enemies (written Martoi is not easily understood), but in fact torments Kedh, one-time Martoi master of the mines and a Bright Seraph of the Martoi nobility.

A victim of the Final Queen's purges as the Martoi empire turned in upon itself, Kedh became imprisoned during an assault on the mine by royal sorcerers. Kedh is frozen in that moment, endlessly scalded by royalist sorcery.

As the ritual is performed, all present will hear Kedh's pained anguish. If the ritual is ever miscast, interrupted or left unfinished, Kedh's prison collapses and she appears in a gout of black sorcerous flame, mid-swing.

Kedh appears clad as she was on that day three millennia ago, in the battle dress of her station: flowing green silks and iridescent plate armor. She is permanently hasted, and fights with paired lightning flails. Much of her face and left hand has been burned by witch-fire.

Until she realizes otherwise, she behaves as if she is still fighting the Queen's minions.

Kedh of course knows about countless sites of the Martoi, now ruins, but her generosity is unlikely to be improved upon learning that everything she ever loved has passed into dust.