

THE BLACK RUINS

BY COREY RYAN WALDEN



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Blackened esoteric obelisks, henceforth known among most folk as 'The Yore Standing Stones', dot a strangely unnatural hill. The runes are inscribed with runic scripting, but it is what looms below the forlorn hill that should chill any good serf to the bone.

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Maintaining compatibility with any old school fantasy role-playing game or retro-clone, this is an adventure for 4-6 players arrayed around levels 1-3. This work can be made compatible with newer editions with minimal effort.

An adventure such as this works best as part hexcrawl, part dungeon-delve. Having run this adventure as a one-shot, this author can confidently say there is content herein to last at least one session, if not be the starting point for an on-going campaign. There are various places of interest that may be explored within this 'realm'. First it is assumed this land is populated sparsely. Existing populations if not exclusively human, are at least dominantly. Second it is implied that the region is substantially isolated from most nearby civilisation (see Geographical Hex map). In this land each small hex represents 1.5 miles, while the larger hex represents approximately 5 miles. The Referee is at substantial liberty to change this adventure to suit her or his purposes, indeed, they are encouraged to. Be inventive for this should springboard one's imagination rather than dictate it.

Conversion notes:

For those who wish to run this adventure with a newer vintage of fantasy role-playing games there should be scant difficulty. For most encounters the reader is referred to a particular creature, most of which can be located within your system's monstrous tomes. If saving throws are requested substitute the saving throw for one that is appropriate for your system of choice. When in doubt, wing it.

HEX #1



This hex is comprised of four substantial features: north lies a muddy, swampy land inhabited by vile frogmen and mudholes; south is the town of Honem; west is a wood - enigmatic yet inhabited by strange creatures; and east and south give way to a Bandlands where travellers scarce wander.

The Northern Swamp

Within the outskirts of the stinking, putrid quagmire live croaking frogmen. Anyone wandering in this area for a substantial amount of time (say an hour or two) shall roll 1d6, matching the result with the table below:

- 1-3 Frogmen who fight as orcs or similar low hit-die creatures. Probably, though not necessarily hostile.
- 4 Mudhole. Roll saving throw versus dragons breath. Failure means the traveller is stuck and sinks 3 feet every round. In 10 rounds unless saved, the traveller will be engulfed in the mud and will drown.
- 5-6 Save travels.

The Southern Town of Honem

Honem is small and may be scarce considered a town. It is more accurately described as being farmland with a Holdfast. The Holdfast is a sodden defensive mound, built into the earth. The Viscount of Honem swears fealty to the nearby stronghold of Zhairmont. The farmers are primarily concerned with their sheep and pastureland, tending to their flocks' needs. They have no adventuring bones in their body, and farming is all that occupies their attention. There is a lone armoured within Honem named Chark who does work metal, though primarily beats horseshoes and the like, rather than any especial focus on weaponry. Knights from nearby Zhairmont are oft located a few miles up the road in a lodge where the occasional men-at-arms may be hired for an amount equal to 1d6x10gp per month of service. Likewise other hirelings may be convinced to delve within the depths of a dungeon for a fee of 1gp per month of service.

There is a rumour that an escaped villain by the name of Rolf of Haris is wanted for murder, rape and thievery, being a particularly bad sort. Rolf may be identified as being without one ear and possessing three absent fingers from his left hand. He was last seen heading west into the forest. There is a half crown reward (5gp) for his immediate capture. A single ancient runestone within the town marks the way to Zhairmont in the west and the badlands in the south and east. A shabby trail runs west through the town.

The Western Wood

Spending even a short time within the wood can be dangerous. For parties lingering within roll 1d6. There are 1-2 chances outlaw foresters will be encountered fighting with bows, axes, daggers or clubs. An additional 1-in-6 chance exists that a wandering ghoulish creature may be encountered, seemingly dead

but somehow walking. Those who defile the laws of the land — consciously or otherwise — customarily flee into the wood for refuge, banding together in their criminality.

The Badlands

Some say the Badlands stretch for some 50-100 miles into the south and east respectively. Those foolhardy enough to test this theorem will encounter various hazards each day spent in this perilous land. Roll 1d6.

- 1-2 A crazed hermit will be encountered who attacks as a 3 hit-die berserker (+2 to attacks and damage).
- 3-4 Hillfolk. Hillfolk are dour and bloodthirsty creatures, dressing in dust-coloured robes and attacking as dwarves with 1 hit-die. They are generally encountered in groups of 1d6+2.
- 5-6 No encounter. Three whole days within this unforgiving clime will result in death, unless a guide can be sought and hired, for water is essentially non-existent unless one knows where to look.

HEX #2



Adventurers pursuing the godforsaken quagmires of the north will inevitably enter Hex #2. By day travellers are beset upon by droning mosquitos and flies, the sound becomes plaguing, and the touch of the insects maddening. Loathsome Frogmen and a strange sect of humankind called Quagkings generally populate the bog. The swamps are deep and wretched. Unless one is of hearty disposition the sheer forlorn aspect of this area will weary even unflappable travellers. For every hour spent within the quagmires roll 1d20:

- 1-5 Frogmen who fight as orcs. Numbers encountered will be equivalent to the amount within the party.
- 6-8 A small Quagking community (between 12-50). These are men who dwell in shacks on stilts and navigate the putrid waters on small canoes or rafts. These men are not always hostile but they are wary and untrustworthy. They will always have 1 shaman among their number. They speak in a broken and degenerate version of the common tongue, practicing strange rites.
- 9-10 Mudholes. Roll saving throw versus dragons breath. Failure means the traveller is stuck and sinks 3 feet every round. In 10 rounds unless saved, the traveller will be engulfed in the mud and will drown.
- 11-12 1-3 Nixies. One has Charm Person.
- 13 A Pteranodon is encountered — either flying overhead or diving for flesh.
- 14-20 Safe Travels.

HEX #3



This western hex holds much curiosity for travellers. In the northern swampy lands travellers may encounter licentious Frogmen with webbed hands and feet, or human fishermen. Otherwise...

Wood

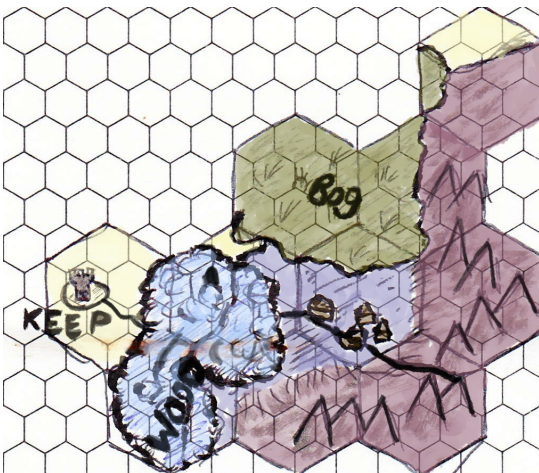
The forest is primordial. Trees within are vast, mysterious, and when one's back is turned it would seem the trees whisper with breathy tongues. Besides the enigmas within are some very tangible threats. Roll a d20 and match the result on the table below when spending a few hours within the depths of the wood.

- 1-4 Foresters who fight with bows, axes, daggers or clubs. These are all wanted men, so murdering them would cause no grief within the realm.
- 5-6 An enclave of Dryads (their purpose is at the discretion of the referee, though it should be tantalising or esoteric).
- 7 Forest Sage. Wandering the forest, and indeed is the forest incarnate, the forest sage is a walking godling. He holds the acorn as an icon and appears as a tall slender man with skin resembling an ancient tree's bark. He cannot be killed and is immortal.
- 8-12 Rolf of Haris will be hiding in the woods weeping. He has a dagger but fights like a serf (commoner).
- 13-17 Ruin (See 'Forest Ruin' below).
- 18-20 Safe Travels.

Plains

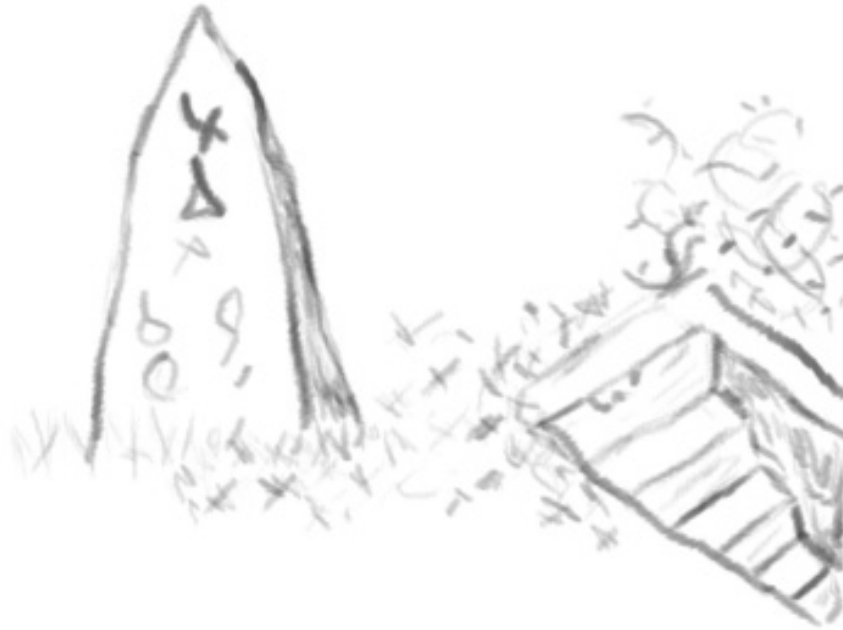
Upon the plains, and on the western side of the wood, rises a hill upon which a stronghold is built. This is Zhairmont, and is ruled by Sir Al'Morteq Vhan. If any foreigners are detected within the surrounds, a retinue of 2d6 mounted knights will vacate the stronghold and challenge any fighting-men in the party to a joust. They will provide free lodgings if the joust is accepted, provided the fighting man is either victorious or proves to be a worthy foe. Sir Vhan wishes a nearby cave to be cleared out by any who would accept the challenge. A creature known as 'Leatherman' inhabits the cave. Leatherman fights as an ogre. A reward of 25gp will be awarded if the inhabitant is successfully destroyed, or if Sir Vhan is convinced it has been destroyed.

HEX #?



The referee is encouraged to determine the contents of other nearby hexes the players may wish to explore.

FOREST RUIN

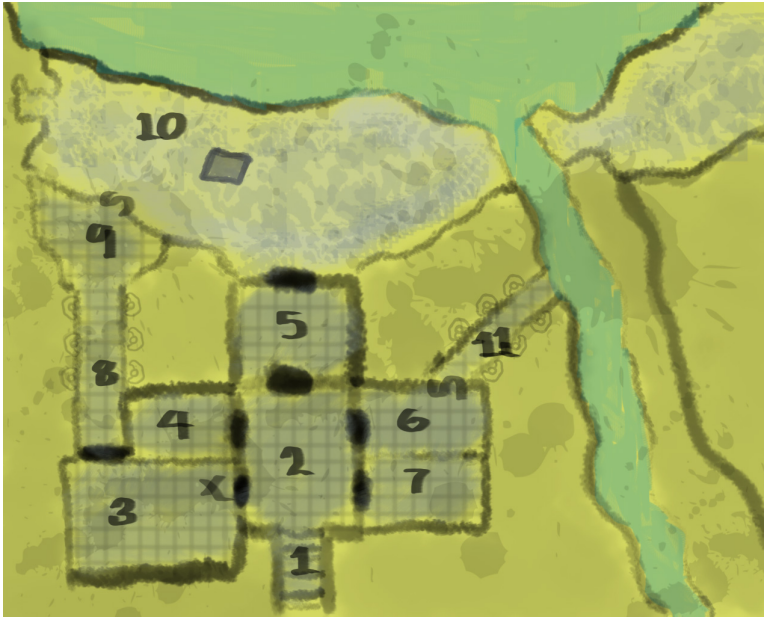


Interlopers in the wood may discover an unnatural hillock atop which dreadful black obelisks, inscribed with runic scripts, are perched. A grassy dike runs around the centre with an earthen ramp to bridge the still-deep gulf. A lone statue of a loathsome being can be found among the stones. It depicts a creature with octopus head, bat wings and the quarters and tail of a rat. Moss grows over everything and a slick staircase leading to a lower vault may be eventually located hidden among brambles and thorns. The druid and his brethren within the vault may pass through the growth with ease, though it should be obfuscated from casual gaze. A sneezy yellow mould permeates the entrance. Any characters poking around should roll versus poison or succumb to a sneezing fit for 10 minutes.

Artefacts

Various curiosities may be discovered in the area by anyone possessing patience and persistence. Examples that may be unearthed around the site include: clay jars, a hoe, grinding wheel, bronze breastplate, trident, a discharged ray gun, spoon, harness for a small animal, digging tools, looking glass, and colossal bones of some humanoid shape.

For parties descending the staircase consult the dungeon map.



#1 Staircase:

Slick and slimy: characters slip on a 1-2 on a d6 (or suitable failed saving throw). Those who fall suffer 1 point of damage. There is a door at the bottom of the stair that is locked and stuck. It can be bashed open by a strong character or two, though doing so will create a copious amount of noise. Otherwise the lock may be picked, or the hinges removed.

#2 Entry Chamber:

30x40 feet. There are 5 doors leading to different rooms. A dark and mouldy draft assails the

nostrils upon entering. It is otherwise empty, though when the room is entered an unknown gong reverberates throughout the vault.

#3 Armoury:

When entering have characters roll a saving throw versus poison. A pressure plate on the floor releases a noxious fume and the heavy doors slam shut. Failed saves take 1-6 damage from suffocation and utmost nausea, which they continue to suffer until vacating the room or dying. There are a dozen living elephant trunks along the southern end of the room. Putting one's hands inside the trunks will reveal jewels whose accumulated value equals 100gp. Additionally 1 random magic item may be discovered. Permanent invisibility lingers on the trunks and their contents, so characters attempting to look inside the trunks will see nothing. Grasping within will cause one's hand to come in contact with the solid items. Once the item is removed it becomes visible thereafter. This room may have been an armoury at one stage.

#4 Empty Room:

This room is 20x30 feet. There is nothing here except remnants of hay fibres on the floor.

#5 Worship Chamber:

A 3rd level Druid and two Berserkers occupy this chamber. They will attack intruders immediately being entirely warped and depraved. They are part of a cult devoted to the grotesque carrion crawler in #10. They frequently entice impressionable humans and then sacrifice them for the crawler on a stone altar in the cavern beyond. Various robes, sensors and vestments are displayed in this room, along with torturous tools.

When attacking, the berserkers come to the fore, guarding the druid as he casts *Sleep*. They attack with a +2 bonus and deal the same amount of extra damage due to their ferocity. The druid will wear leather armour and have an assortment of spells including *Sleep* and *Cure Light Wounds*.

#6 Dungeon Cell:

Evidently this room is a dungeon cell. It is 20x35 feet and is empty. A secret door in the northern wall may be located.

#7 Dungeon Cell:

This is another dungeon cell of the same dimensions. It is empty also.

#8 Hallway:

Stone columns flank the hallway engraved as stone statues. The hallway is some 45 feet in length. Some statues hold stony weaponry others hold stony scrolls. Anyone touching the middle-left statue must make a save versus death or die. Touching the middle-right statue will eventuate in its +1 sword coming to life, which may then be kept as treasure.

#9 Chamber:

Oddly shaped and damp, this chamber is empty. The referee may determine to place a monster of his or her choosing within, otherwise the room remains empty. A secret door carved into the northern wall may be discovered leading to the underground cave and lake.

#10 Underground Cave & Lake:

A Carrion Crawler resides in this area, worshipped by the cult that has taken residence within this forgotten under-cavern. Any gold or silver placed within the lake turns into platinum. The Carrion Crawler often swims within the lake, and is incredibly creepy, startling all but the most perceptive. If it senses prey it will pick one detached from the main group to devour.

The cave is vast, while the lake is gloomy and obsidian in hue. Bones of myriad creatures crunch underfoot within the cavern – animals, humans, creatures of monstrous aspect, and so on. There is a stone altar within the middle. Dried blood is irredeemably caked onto it. A river runs into the lake and may be followed to #11 below.

#11 Secret Hallway:

Like #8, columns with carved statues line this hallway. When someone touches the middle-top statue they must save versus death or meet their doom. Touching the middle-bottom one turns the statue bearing a vial to yield a Potion of Giant Strength.

CONCLUSIONS

There are no distinct 'conclusions' within this supplement. Destroying the cult is a worthy task, though that can be but the beginning of a larger adventure. Players may be interested in learning more about the strange script on the obelisks and the nature of the hideous statue above the vault. This can lead onto subsequent adventure too. Alternatively players may wish to explore beyond the areas and things described within this short work. That's fine too, though will require additional effort on the referee's part. Rolf of Haris may be located and brought back to Honem, in which case reward will be offered, and Rolf will be drawn and quartered. 'Leatherman' may be destroyed which will appease those in Zhairmont, and further missions may be provided for adventurers to pursue.



MAPS

