

d12 Monthly

WILDERNESS
ENCOUNTERS

Issue 57
April/May, 2026

FREE VERSION

**21 ENCOUNTERS FOR
EVERY TERRAIN TYPE**

ADD THESE TO YOUR RANDOM
ENCOUNTER TABLES

**THESE ARE NOT YOUR
AVERAGE ENCOUNTERS**

THEY WILL GET YOUR PLAYERS THINKING



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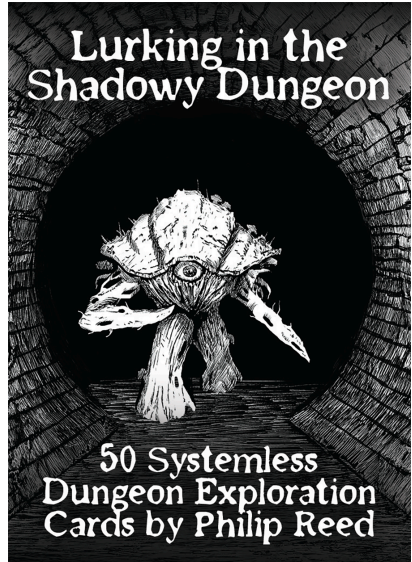
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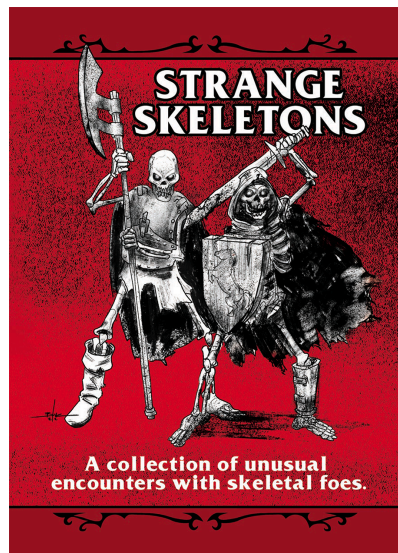
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Issue 57 - Wilderness

Encounters

Random encounters are a cornerstone of old school gaming. But sometimes - if not handled properly - can boil down to a simple monster encounter.

The one-page encounters contained within are to be used to off-set these standard encounters by providing some creative conflicts.

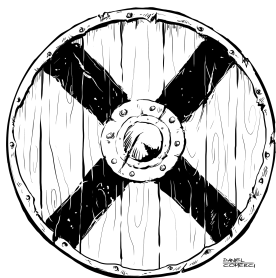
Whether it is trying to figure out how to avoid natural dangers, or dealing with a combination of trap and monster at the same time, these encounters should give your campaign a creative shot in the arm.

Each encounter is tied to a particular terrain which makes it easy to add them into your wilderness encounter tables.

And each has an idea on how to expand it into a larger adventure.

Have fun with this issue. And, as always, happy gaming!

- Russ from YUMDM



Thanks to my Patrons

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... for making this zine as good as it is.

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(Tiers are available to receive a physical copy).

Forest

The Sinking Cairn

In the damp heart of an old-growth forest, the earth is never truly still. Centuries of leaf mold and heavy rains have turned a section of the trail into a bog.

The cairn - a stack of five ancient, rune-carved stones - was placed there many moons ago by a druid by the name of Siklin Bearpaw. It focused his divine spell-casting abilities and allowed him to perform rituals. But the changing water table has caused soil liquefaction.

As the stones have sunk, the power of the cairn has been lost.

The Setup

The party discovers the final twelve inches of a granite pillar disappearing into a patch of unnaturally black, bubbling mire.

The mud here is "thixotropic" - it looks solid until stepped upon, at which point it turns to liquid.

Strwn around the sinking stone are the skeletal remains of a deer, its legs snapped from trying to pull itself out of the suction.

The Encounter

Retrieving the stones requires a systematic effort. The players can't just pull; the vacuum of the mud is too strong. They need to build a tripod of sturdy branches and use a block-and-tackle or a series of lever-and-pulley systems.

The Complication

The current "grounds-keeper" is a massive, ancient Owlbear.

As the players winch the stones up, the Ground-Keeper emerges from a nearby root-system. It is smart enough to try and push characters into the bog instead of just attacking them with its claws.

If the PCs flee, the Owlbear will not follow.

The Reward

Inside a hollowed-out cavity in the third stone is a vellum map leading to an ancient burial site. These graves are legendary for holding heirlooms that haven't been claimed.

Expansion

If the PCs discover the map, they find that it is coded in an ancient language that only a few understand. To find the treasure, they might need to either find the druid's original lair, or find someone who can decipher it.

The Bog

If caught in the bog, a character must not struggle and must make three successful STR tests in a row. If they have help, they gain a +2 bonus to their checks. After 6 rounds, they are totally submerged and will drown in 3 rounds.

Alternatively, if rope is thrown over them (DEX check) those on solid ground can pull them free with three successful STR tests in a row.

The Hunter's Toll

Silas, a local trapper, is facing a harsh winter. His usual game has been scared off by a "Silver-Haired Skitterer" - a beast that isn't native to these woods.

Silas has spent his life savings on heavy-duty, cold-iron traps and "Vanish-Oil" to hide their scent and shine. He has turned a 200-yard stretch of the main trade path into a minefield of jagged iron.

The Setup

The party feels it before they see it: the eerie silence of a forest where the birds have stopped singing.

If the lead scout isn't specifically checking the ground for man-made hazards (not just tracks), they risk triggering a trap.

These aren't simple HP-reducing trinkets (although they will cause 4D4 damage); these are bone-shattering devices designed to hold a 600-pound monster. A triggered trap means a mangled limb, hobbling the victim (this means a 50% reduction in movement speed until properly treated by a healer or surgeon). Magical healing will heal the HPs but not the break.

The Encounter

Silas is perched in a "hide" thirty feet up an oak tree. When the players enter the zone, he hisses at them to freeze.

The Conflict

Silas is terrified. He knows he's blocked a public trail (a crime in most regions), but

he claims the "Skitterer" is right behind the party.

He offers a deal: if they stay as "bait" or help him drive the beast into the remaining traps, he'll share the bounty. If they try to leave or spring his traps, he'll use his bow to "discourage" them.

The Beast

The Silver-Haired Skitterer is a very rare Warp Beast - it doesn't displace, but its fur reflects the forest light so perfectly it creates a "shimmer" effect, making it impossible to pin down its exact location.

It's a predator that plays with its food, and it has already learned where Silas's traps are. It's currently circling the party, waiting for one of them to trip and become an easy meal.

Expansion

If the party kills the beast, they find a collar under its silver fur. This animal was someone's pet!

If you don't have any other ideas, it can be an escaped pet of a nearby eccentric noble.

If the latter, the party and Silas have a dead monster and a looming problem: do they claim the bounty and face the noble finding out (likely), or bury the evidence in a shallow forest grave?



Mountains

The Thinning Air

As the party ascends past the tree line, the oxygen saturation drops significantly.

While hardened adventurers might handle the strain, the common folk often succumb to "Mountain Madness" (cerebral edema).

Scavengers like Harpies have evolved to recognize the signs of altitude sickness, hovering just out of sight until their prey stops moving.

The Setup

At a narrow switchback dominated by a weathered stone shrine to a forgotten wind deity, the party finds six pilgrims.

They aren't dead, but they are in a state of terminal lethargy - blue-lipped, incoherent, and unable to stand. They have collapsed just short of the summit.

Their pack animals have already bolted, leaving them without the heavy furs or fuel needed to survive the night's plummeting temperatures.

The Encounter

To save the pilgrims, the party must induce rapid oxygenation. One of the pilgrims, a low-level herbalist, mumbles about "Lung-Wort," a rare, pungent lichen they were transporting. When burned, its oils create a hyper-oxygenated smoke that can jumpstart the respiratory system.

The Logistics

The players must gather the pilgrims into a tight circle, build a sheltered fire using their own precious rations of firewood, and maintain the lichen fire for at least an hour.

The Complication

The smoke is thick, oily, and bright white. In the clear, thin air of the peaks, it acts as a signal fire visible for miles.

A flight of starving Harpies - gaunt, featherless, and desperate - is circling the peak. They won't attack a healthy, moving party, but the sight of the smoke tells them there is "stationary meat" at the shrine.

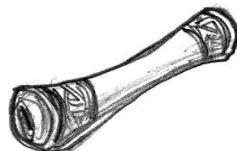
The Choice

Do the players keep the fire going to save the pilgrims, fighting off Harpies while blinded by their own smoke?

Or do they abandon the "weak" to save their resources and their skin? If they stop the smoke, the pilgrims will likely die of respiratory failure before dawn.

Expansion

One of the pilgrims is a disgraced cartographer who was traveling to the summit to map a hidden pass, which leads to an ancient treasure. If saved, he offers the party the secret route and half the treasure.



The Echoing Bridge

The "Gorge of Whispers" is a geological fluke. The perfectly smooth, concave walls of the canyon act as a natural parabolic reflector.

Under specific barometric conditions, sounds produced within the gorge don't dissipate; they "loop," bouncing back and forth with such precision that they remain audible for roughly 24 hours before losing energy.

The Setup

The party reaches a swaying, 80-foot rope bridge spanning a terrifying drop. As the first player reaches the midpoint, the wind dies down, and the canyon suddenly "plays back."

They hear the distinct, panicked screams of a woman, the clash of steel, and the wet thud of a body hitting the rocks far below. It sounds like it is happening ten feet away.

The Encounter

The sheer volume of the sound is disorienting, requiring a save vs. paralysis to avoid losing balance on the swaying ropes.

The Mystery

The players will naturally look for the victim, but the gorge is empty. Through investigation (or noticing the lack of "new" footprints in the dust on the bridge), they realize they are hearing a "sonic ghost."

The Twist

As they listen, they hear the murderers discussing their "next hit": a merchant caravan carrying a specific heirloom (perhaps one the players were hired to protect or seek).

The murderers mention they are heading to The High Watch - a ruin just four hours ahead.

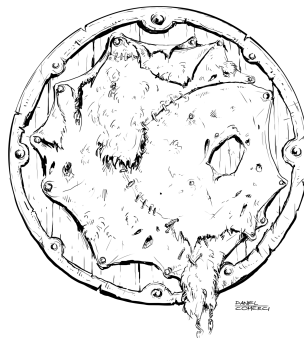
The Grounded Danger

The bridge itself is weakened. The "murder" they heard involved the killers cutting one of the secondary support ropes.

The players must navigate the bridge while it's structurally compromised, all while the cacophony of the "past" murder screams in their ears, masking the sound of the bridge's remaining ropes snapping.

Expanding

The characters can use the information they heard to help the murderers' next victim, which could be another area within the mountains - a remote monastery, temple, or other significant place.



Plains

The Migrating Monolith

Elementals don't have to be humanoid spirits - they can be slow-moving tectonic anomalies.

The Monolith is a 40-ft tall slab of obsidian-like stone that moves at a rate of 10-ft per hour. It isn't walking, but is being pushed by a localized, high-pressure shift in the earth's crust - a "living" fault line.

The Setup

The party sees the Monolith from miles away - a jagged black tooth cutting through the gold of the grasslands. As they approach, the scale of the destruction becomes clear. It has left a deep, 20-ft wide trench in the earth, crushing trees, fences, and a stone bridge like they were made of dry hay.

It is currently three miles away from the frontier village of Oakhaven, specifically their communal granary, which holds the entire region's winter food supply.

The Encounter

A local druid is frantic. They believe the Monolith is a "pointer" on a massive, landscape-scale sundial. If it reaches a specific point, it might "click" an ancient subterranean seal. That may come to pass, but right now, it's just a wrecking ball.

A Solution

The Monolith cannot be stopped by swords or spells. The players must use grounded

Engineering. The druids suggest "The Slick Path": the players must hunt several large, fatty beasts (or a large supply of oil) to grease the ground in front of the stone's leading left edge.

Don't suggest any solutions to this dilemma - let the players figure this one out. Only if they are really struggling, suggest the above solution.

The Physics

By reducing the friction on one side, the players can potentially cause the Monolith to "drift" or pivot, changing its trajectory by a few degrees - just enough to miss the village. This requires massive amounts of animal fat, heavy lever-work with fallen logs, and high-stakes timing.

The Tension

As the players work at the base of the stone, the earth is constantly trembling. Small rockfalls from the Monolith's peak are frequent. If they fail to pivot it in time, the village will starve during the coming winter.

Expanding

Once the Monolith passes the village, the players find that the trench it left behind has exposed a crack leading down into an ancient, airless vault. The druids are terrified; they believe the Monolith was plugging something, and now that it has moved, the "hiss" coming from the trench sounds less like wind and more like a collective breath.

The Sky-Mirror Sink

Beneath the sprawling Amber Sea of the plains lies a massive limestone shelf. Over centuries, rainwater - acidified by decaying prairie grass - seeps into the bedrock, carving out immense subterranean galleries. When a localized "piping" event occurs, the soil above is washed into the deep, leaving only a false "floor" of thick, interlocking grass roots and sod. These sinkholes, often fifty feet deep, fill with rainwater so pure and still that they act as perfect mirrors. In the flat expanse of the steppe, a "Sky-Mirror" is virtually invisible until a traveler is literally walking on the water's reflection, often mistaking the shimmering surface for a heat mirage until the ground vanishes beneath them.

The Setup

The party is traversing a featureless stretch of the plains under a punishing noon sun. The horizon is a blur of heat shimmers. Up ahead, it looks as though a rectangular fragment of the sky has fallen onto the grass - a perfect, unmoving reflection of the clouds.

As they draw closer, they see a merchant's heavy grain wagon tilted at a precarious 45-degree angle. Its rear wheels are suspended over a dark, watery void where the sod has already collapsed. A lone merchant, sweat-drenched and pale, clings to the wooden tongue of the wagon, his feet dangling over the edge of the cenote.

The Physics

The area within ten feet of the "Mirror" is a high-risk zone. The sod is floating on a

cushion of air and water; it feels "spongy" and vibrates with every footstep. Anyone approaching must pass a Dexterity check or trigger a further collapse, sliding into the 40-ft deep water below.

The Conflict

The merchant, a man named Hobb, is transporting three barrels of dry-powder - a volatile, sulfurous alchemical reagent used for treating blighted crops. The barrels are loose in the back of the wagon. If the wagon tips further, the barrels will hit the water, causing a violent chemical reaction - a steam blast - that will destroy the wagon and collapse the entire limestone shelf.

The Tension

The ticking clock arrives in the form of Prairie Vultures. These massive scavengers have sensed the merchant's distress. They begin to land on the high end of the tilted wagon. Every time a 20-pound bird lands, the wood groans and the wagon inches closer to the abyss. The players must find a way to scare off the birds without using projectiles that might jar the wagon, all while setting up a complex rigging and lever system to haul the weight back onto stable ground.

Expanding

If the players peer into the crystal-clear water of the sinkhole once it settles, they see something impossible: at the bottom of the cenote sits a perfectly preserved stone watchtower from a past era. The sky mirror isn't just a trap; it is a portal to a time when these plains were a shallow sea.

Desert / Badlands

The Dust-Choked Well

In the rolling sea of dust and dirt, water is more valuable than steel.

A minor tectonic shift deep beneath the Dry-Stone Rise has fractured a quartz vein rich with soft, friable gold. This fracture intersected the local aquifer, but instead of bringing fortune, the physical sediment has turned the water into a poisonous, metallic sludge.

The Setup

The party encounters the Miller farmstead. It looks like a fortress: the windows are boarded with scrap wood, and the livestock are all dead in the fields, bloated and untouched by scavengers. The air smells of copper and wet earth.

Caleb Miller, the patriarch, sits on the porch with a heavy, notched crossbow. He is visibly dying - his skin is sallow, his lips are cracked to the point of bleeding, and he's coughing up a fine, glittering yellow dust into a rag.

The Encounter

Caleb and his two sons have pulled up dozens of buckets of sludge. After the water evaporates in the sun, they are left with several ounces of pure gold dust. They are sitting on a king's ransom, but they haven't had a drop of clean water in three days.

The Conflict

Caleb is in a state of advanced "Gold Fever" exacerbated by dehydration. He believes anyone approaching is there to steal his strike.

He will offer the players a handful of gold for a single waterskin, but if he sees they have a large supply, he may attempt to take it by force - not out of evil, but out of the primal, dehydrated need to keep his family alive long enough to "get rich."

The Grounded Twist

The gold is contaminated with arsenic or heavy minerals common in deep-vein quartz. Anyone who drinks the well water - or spends too much time (1 week or more) breathing the dust in the farmhouse - must make a CON check or suffer "Heavy Metal Fever" (-4 saves for 1D4 days).

The Logistics

If the players want to help, they must find a way to provide water without being murdered by a paranoid family. They might try to dig a "seepage well" nearby or negotiate a "water-for-gold" trade.

Expanding

If the players help the Millers, they might realize the gold vein suggests a massive, untapped cavern system directly beneath the farm. But digging deeper might collapse the entire valley's water table, sparking a resource war with a neighboring baron who notices the sudden influx of gold dust in the local economy.

The Glass Scar

In the trackless Cinder Waste, a celestial object - a dense, super-heated meteorite - tore through the atmosphere and slammed into the dunes centuries ago.

The kinetic energy was so immense that it flash-melted a 150-ft radius of silica sand into a jagged, bowl-shaped crater of translucent, bottle-green glass (fulgurite).

Over time, the desert winds have scoured the surface, leaving it as smooth and slippery as an ice rink, yet sharp enough to sever a finger at the edges.

The Setup

The party crests a dune and finds the sun reflecting off the Scar with blinding intensity.

Looking down into the translucent floor of the crater, they see a figure perfectly preserved six feet beneath the surface. It is a warrior in archaic plate armor, his face twisted in a silent scream, one hand reaching upward toward the surface.

He was entombed by the liquid sand before it solidified. In his outstretched hand, he clutches a cylinder made of cold-iron, untouched by the heat.

The Encounter

The glass of the Scar is not a solid sheet; it is a honeycomb of hollow, brittle bubbles formed by escaping steam during the impact.

The Physics

Walking to the center requires a successful Dexterity check. Failure doesn't just result in a fall; it means the character breaks through a hollow pocket. The jagged edges of the glass act like a serrated trap, inflicting bleeding damage.

A character will take 2D6 damage from the razor edges, but will lose 2 hit points per round until healed from blood loss.

The Extraction

To get the cylinder, the players must break through six feet of tempered glass. However, the Scar acts like a lens.

The noon sun focuses through the crater walls, raising the temperature in the center to a lethal degree. If the players spend more than ten minutes digging, they begin to suffer from Heat Stroke and exhaustion see *Issue 20 of d12 Monthly* for rules on both of these).

The Tension

The vibrations of any heavy blows or similar destruction will cause the honeycomb to begin a chain-reaction collapse.

Expanding

The cold-iron cylinder contains a *Star Compass* - a device that doesn't point North, but rather toward the nearest deposit of Sky-Metal. However, the meteorite that created the Scar is still buried deep below, which the Star Compass will show.

Swamp/Marshland

The Gas Pockets

In the deep Black-Water Sinks, the lack of oxygen in the mud slows decomposition to a crawl, creating pockets of pressurized, fermented gas.

These aren't magical spell effects; they are concentrated neurotoxins produced by rare swamp fungi. When inhaled, the gas disrupts the brain, making it remember traumatic memories.

The Setup

The party enters a stretch of the marsh where the water is as still as black glass. From the silt bed, dinner-plate-sized bubbles rise slowly to the surface. They don't pop immediately; they linger, glowing with a sickly, bioluminescent pale green light. The air is heavy, humid, and smells faintly of overripe fruit and copper.

The Encounter

Navigating this section requires physical precision. The bubbles are fragile and everywhere.

The Hazard

Each round, unless the characters are being super cautious and travelling at half speed (see The Logistics, below), there is a 2-in-6 chance of popping a bubble each turn.

If a player character pops a bubble (by stepping on it, hitting it with a pole, or being near a companion who does), the gas is released in a 5-foot cloud. The victim

must make a save vs. poison. Failure doesn't cause damage - it causes a "Waking Fugue."

The Hallucination

For 1D6 minutes, the character is no longer in the swamp. They are back at the moment of their greatest failure: the door they didn't lock, the comrade they couldn't save, the lie they told that ruined a life. To the rest of the party, the victim is staggering blindly into deep water or hacking at thin air.

The Logistics

The party must find a way to traverse the gas field. They can probably do this a number of ways, but let them come up with some creative ways in which to get through these natural traps. If they use long poles to pop the bubbles from a distance they may find they eventually fill the entire area with a lethal fog.

Expanding

The players eventually find the source: the Mother-Cap: a massive, submerged fungal bloom that is growing out of the ribcage of a fallen giant or a long-dead dragon.

The gas is a defense mechanism to keep scavengers away while the fungus slowly digests the marrow. If the players can harvest a Mother-Cap spore without inhaling the gas, they possess a rare ingredient that wizards, sages, and alchemists will pay handsomely for.



The Sunken Tollhouse

Ghosts aren't always vengeful spirits. Sometimes they are simply trapped energy - people who died while in the middle of a singular, unfinished duty.

Sergeant Otho was the toll-collector for the Grand Imperial Way eighty years ago. When the Great Flood took the bridge and Otho with it, his legal obligation to the Crown didn't end.

The Setup

A stone tower sits at a 30-degree angle, half-swallowed by the mire. A rusted iron bell hangs from a rotted post. This was once a vital trade crossing; now, it's a dead end where the road simply vanishes into the muck.

As the party approaches, a grey, translucent figure in tattered, archaic armor manifests at the gatehouse.

The Encounter

Otho doesn't roar or rattle chains. He holds a spectral ledger and a quill. He informs the party that the Bridge Toll is three copper per head, plus a Weight Tax for heavy armor or pack animals.

The Conflict

There is no bridge. Behind the tower is nothing but a mile of treacherous, waist-deep peat. If the players try to ignore Otho and wade past, they find the water becomes unnaturally thick - like walking through cooling wax.

Otho begins The Audit.

The Audit

For every ten feet the players move without paying, Otho confiscates the value of the toll from their physical belongings.

A gold coin turns to lead; a silk rope rots into hemp; a ration of dried meat turns to ash. He isn't attacking their health; he is balancing a ledger that the players are technically in violation of.

The Solution

The players can simply pay the toll (which Otho drops into a slot in the stone, where they join a pile of centuries-old coins).

However, if they want to "free" the ghost, they must find the "End of Service" papers - likely located in a nearby ruined keep - or convince Otho that the Crown he serves has fallen, rendering his ledger void.

Expanding

If the players pay and speak with Otho, he reveals that his ledger contains the names of everyone who crossed the bridge in the final year of the Empire. This includes a traitorous lord who fled with a royal relic. Otho can point toward a section of the swamp where that lord's carriage went down.



Hills

The Grazing Graveyard

In the limestone-heavy Whistling Foothills, the topsoil is thin and leached of vital nutrients by constant rainfall.

Local herbivores - from mountain goats to wild cattle - suffer from pica, a drive to consume non-food substances to supplement their diet. Over centuries, these animals have discovered a specific strata of earth rich in calcium and nitrates. By obsessively licking the soil, generations of animals have literally eaten tunnels into the hillsides. The graveyard is the natural result: animals crawl deep into these cool, mineral-rich burrows to lick the walls, become trapped by minor cave-ins, or simply die of old age in the dark.

The Setup

The party crests a ridge to find a hillside that looks like a giant piece of Swiss cheese. Dozens of smooth, low-slung tunnels, polished to a dull shine by the fur of passing beasts, lead into the earth. Near the largest opening, a shepherd named Elian is in a state of panic. His prize ram, a massive beast essential for the village's breeding stock, has bolted into a lick-hole. The ram has Stone-Tongue - a mineral frenzy that leaves the animal unresponsive to whistles or dogs. It is currently forty feet inside a tunnel designed for a goat, not a man.

The Hazard

These are not caves; they are tongue-carved tubes of loosely packed silt and limestone

dust. The stability is abysmal. Any heavy footfalls, the clanking of heavy armor, or a failed Strength check to drag the ram out will cause a silt-shed. This doesn't just bury the player; it fills their lungs with fine, caustic limestone dust, causing choking damage and blindness. The character must make a save vs. breath weapon or take 2D6 damage, but be blinded for 2D4 turns.

The Twist

As the players crawl inside (likely having to remove their packs to fit), they notice the mineral the animals are licking is white and porous. It isn't stone - it is bone. The hill is a mass grave from a forgotten era, where thousands of soldiers were buried in a lime-pit. The animals are consuming the calcified remains of an army. Digging further reveals salt-crustated gear: bronze sword-hilts and iron spearheads fused together by centuries of mineral runoff.

The Conflict

The scent of the freshly disturbed bon-salt acts as an olfactory beacon. A hill-hyena pack - larger and more patient than their lowland cousins - has learned that like-holes are natural traps. They are currently surrounding the tunnel entrance, waiting for the players to emerge, encumbered and oxygen-deprived, with the ram in tow.

Expanding

The map Elian offers as a reward is more than a guide; it's a genealogical record. The symbols on the map match the engravings found on the salt-crustated armor in the tunnel.

The Screaming Vent

The High Reach foothills are a geological honeycomb. Below the thin turf lies a vast network of limestone caverns carved out by ancient water tables. As the weather shifts, the atmospheric pressure outside drops rapidly compared to the stagnant air trapped deep underground. This creates a pressure differential. When a strong wind hits the hillside at a specific northern angle, it forces air across narrow vertical fissures, acting like a massive, subterranean flute. The result is a piercing, oscillating shriek that vibrates through the rock itself.

The Setup

The party is navigating a treacherous, foot-wide switchback path with a sheer drop on one side. As a storm front rolls in, the wind begins to howl, and a terrifying, high-pitched wail erupts from a jagged crack in the rock face just ten feet ahead. The sound is so intense it creates a physical wall of vibration. Slumped against the stone is a merchant named Kaelen; his ears are bleeding, and he is staring blankly into the valley. He has fallen into a state of catatonic shock caused by the relentless, bone-shaking frequency.

The Hazard

The screaming vent is a high-decibel danger zone. The closer the players get, the more their equilibrium fails. Any character within 20-ft must pass a CON save every ten minutes. Failure results in equilibrium loss, imposing a -4 penalty on all ability checks. If they stay for an hour, the damage becomes permanent tinnitus, causing a

permanent a -1 penalty to hearing-based surprise rolls.

The Physics

The vent is partially clogged. Peering into the vibrating crack reveals a tangle of old animal bones, petrified brush, and a heavy iron-bound chest. This obstruction is creating the harmonic pinch that turns a low hum into a deafening shriek.

The Conflict

To rescue Kaelen or claim the chest, the players must clear the vent. However, the air pressure behind the clog is immense. If the chest is dislodged without the built-up pressure released (like drilling a small pilot hole or using heavy iron spikes to brace it), the resulting air blast erupts like a cannon. A character failing a save vs Breath Weapon will be blown off the path and into the ravine.

Expanding

Once the chest is removed, the hills fall into an eerie, total silence. However, the screaming noise was a natural alarm system. For miles, local predators have learned that the sound means the hill is active and dangerous. Without the deterrent, a territorial Wyvern - which usually nests on the opposite peak - will soar over to investigate the sudden silence. The players must now manage a bloodied merchant and a heavy chest while a flying apex predator circles their exposed position on the cliff.



Woods

The Charcoal Pits

In light woodlands near civilization, charcoal burning is a primary industry. It involves stacking wood into huge, beehive-shaped mounds, covering them with sod and dirt, and letting them smolder for days with minimal oxygen. This process creates white ash pockets - areas where the fire has hollowed out the earth beneath the surface, leaving a thin, deceptive crust of grey ash that looks like solid ground.

The Setup

The party enters a clearing where the trees are thin and many have been stumped. The air is thick with a flat, acrid smell of woodsmoke, but there is no visible fire. The ground is a patchwork of blackened earth and patches of powdery grey ash. In the center of the clearing, a heavy logging sled is half-submerged in the ground. The oxen are gone, but a young girl is perched atop the remaining cargo, terrified to step down into the grey snow surrounding the sled.

The Hazard

The ash-crust is a thermal trap. Stepping onto a grey patch requires a WIS check to realize the ground is hollow. A failure means the character breaks through into a pocket of glowing embers and carbon monoxide. They take 2D4 heat damage and, more importantly, must pass a CON check or begin to suffocate from the lack of oxygen at ground level (die in CON score in rounds).

The Physics

The girl on the sled explains that her father and the oxen fell through the ground an hour ago. The players cannot simply walk to her. They must use ladders, planks, or similar - distributing their weight across the stable blackened earth to reach the sled.

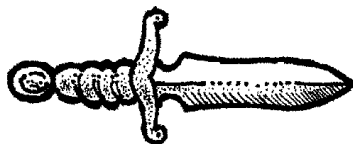
The Conflict

The smoke and the heat have attracted poisonous Ash Vipers - small, heat-seeking serpents that nest in warm pits. They aren't aggressive unless stepped on, but as the players lay down planks, the vibrations draw the vipers out of the ash and onto the cool wood the players are standing on.

Expanding

Her father was carrying the town's tithe - a locked iron box of silver - on the sled. It's still in the pit, slowly heating up. If the players wait too long, the heat will warp the lock or melt the coins into a useless lump of slag. They have to fish for the box using hooks and ropes before the entire clearing becomes a localized inferno. Start the countdown clock.

If the characters retrieve the lockbox, they must decide if they will keep it or return it to the rightful owners. The girl won't want her Father's name tarnished by greedy characters.



The Forester's Screen

In managed light woods, foresters often clear-cut specific lanes to create sight-lines for hunting or to act as firebreaks. Over time, these lanes grow back with thin, spindly birch or willow, creating a screen - a section of woods that looks dense from a distance but is actually a series of parallel corridors. Predators and bandits use these screens to flank travelers who think they are watching an impenetrable wall of trees.

The Setup

The party is traveling along a well-worn trail flanked by what looks like a wall of thick, white-barked birch trees. The woods feel flat, almost like a stage curtain. A local woodcutter is sitting by the road, nursing a wound from a "ghost" arrow (see the whistling arrows, below). He claims he was shot by someone standing very close in front of him, but he couldn't see them through the trees.

The Hazard

Because the trees are grown in narrow, artificial rows, a person standing in the lane has a clear shot for 100 yards, while someone looking across the lanes sees only a solid mass of white bark.

The Combat

A group of poachers is using the screen to hunt. They aren't interested in the party, but they are protective of their lane. They fire whistling arrows (non-lethal but noisy) to drive the party deeper into the screen.



The Logistics

To find the attackers, the players cannot simply charge into the woods. They must move diagonally to the "grain." This requires an INT check to understand the geometry of the grove. If they move incorrectly, they stay in a kill lane where the attackers have 100% cover and the players have 0%.

Expanding

The poachers are actually Shadow Wardens - a local militia protecting a Cull Tree. This is a massive, diseased oak in the center of the screen that is infested with wood blight. The militia is trying to keep anyone from entering the grove and carrying the spores out on their clothes. If the players kill the wardens, they realize they've just murdered the only people keeping an ecological disaster from spreading to the nearby kingdom.

Arctic

The Blue-Vein Fracture

In the deep arctic, the ice is not a static floor; it is a pressurized, slow-moving river of glass. Over millennia, as layers of snow were compressed into glacial ice, they trapped pockets of air from ages past.

Under the immense weight of the glacier, these air bubbles become super-critical, pressurized to the point where the gas acts like a liquid. When the temperature fluctuates or the ice shifts, these pockets - often containing high concentrations of prehistoric rot, methane, or pure oxygen - can breach the surface with the force of a tectonic explosion.

The Setup

The party is navigating a Dead-Ice field - a section of a glacier that has ground to a halt against a mountain range. The ice here is a bruised, translucent indigo, revealing a labyrinth of hairline fractures beneath the surface.

As the party's sled or pack animal crosses a specific point, a sound like a thunderclap echoes beneath them. A hairline crack snaps open, and a violent, freezing hiss of pressurized gas begins to spray into the air, smelling of ancient, frozen musk.

The Hazard

The blue-vein is a network of instability. The gas being released is a flash-freezant. Because it was under such high pressure, its expansion robs the surrounding air of all

heat instantly. Any character within 10-ft of the spray must pass a save vs. breath weapon or suffer frostburn (-4 to Dexterity for 1D4 days).

The Visual

Visible through three feet of the indigo ice is the Blue-Vein's prize. A courier from a previous century - perhaps from a kingdom the players are researching - is perfectly preserved. He is frozen mid-stride, his face a mask of calm, clutching a bronze scroll-tube.

The Extraction

The players cannot simply hack the ice. The vibration of a pickaxe will cause the thermal fracture to spread, potentially shattering the entire shelf. They must use grounded heat - small, controlled fires or warm stones - to slowly melt a chimney down to the courier.

The Complication

The hiss of the gas and the smell of the ancient organic matter act as a dinner bell for glacial scavengers: white-furred wolverines).

Expanding

The scroll-tube contains glacial charts - records of how the ice looked 200 years ago. Comparing these to the current landscape reveals that the glacier has moved over a buried city. The players aren't just standing on ice; they are standing on the roof of a metropolis, and the Blue-Vein they just opened is a vent leading directly into the airless, frozen streets below.

Want Even More?

Looking for more adventure? Back issues are available to download on [my website](#).

I'm also expanding this zine via new articles on the website. This will include web enhancements and other regular features.

Web Enhancements are articles that for whatever reason didn't make it into the zine. They are packaged into a mini-zine around the end of the first month.

<https://yumdm.com/>

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Unless otherwise mentioned, all articles are written by Russ at YUMDM.



Next Month

Next month I will bring you an alternative Players' Guide to Old School Essentials.

This will give you new races, classes, kits, and much more!



Many of these ideas I have developed over years of running campaigns with OSE, and most are what I use in my solo campaigns. I look forward to bringing you this one!

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