

AUTHOR'S NOTES

I often, unconsciously or not, recycle themes and ideas when creating adventures for my home groups. This particular work is a combination of adventures I'd run for groups in Vaasa and Helsinki. The combined, finished work was playtested in the weeks before release. The first group suffered no casualties but ran like hell, the second group suffered no casualties but cut a deal most unwholesome in order to survive, and the third group lost four out of eight characters before running like hell. I do consider those results a successful playtest and true to the literature and cinema that inspired it.

The "Weird Tale" and pulp adventure fantasy are both filled with exotic locations where Great Evil from Antiquity is discovered. Often, some great ancient evil is unwittingly awakened, and at that point there are two choices: Escape or Die! Ancient evil is cruel, and so this adventure is cruel. The key is to make sure the cruelty is fair, and in this case I have attempted to do so by making sure it is the players that must trigger catastrophic events (no ticking clock or "gotcha!" traps), and that there are multiple means of escape once those events are triggered. In addition, there is enough treasure to be found, and certainly continuing campaign consequences to be faced, that the whole affair is not simply a "Screw you, players!" exercise in sadism.

I've personally only run this adventure, both in its combined finished form and its original separate parts, for characters 3rd level or less. However, I suspect the main issues will remain challenging through sixth level, and there is one reason: At 7th level, spellcasters gain the ability to speak with plants. While it may be unlikely that players think to use this at its most opportune time, doing so effectively turns this adventure into a mapping expedition in an odd location rather than an adventure where participants will stare death in the eye. Even without that concern, when one gets to the higher levels, the ability to stand and fight becomes a viable, survivable option, and by the nature of the foes I would expect this to be terribly unexciting to play out.

With all that in mind... go forth and terrify some adventurers!

Thanks to James Brian Murphy, by whose suggestion we have *Death Frost Doom* instead of *Death Cold Frost*.

Thanks to Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, who gave form to the hobby we all enjoy to this day.

Thanks to HP Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, Robert E. Howard, Edgar Allan Poe, Robert W. Chambers, Algernon Blackwood, MP Shiel, William Hope Hodgson, Manly Wade Wellman, Arthur Machen, and so many others who inspire me to think in dark colors and minor chords.

Thanks so much to Maria. It's amazing to know what support feels like.

I would very much like to hear about how this module runs for your game in actual play. Post your results, comments, or questions concerning the adventure to the LotFP Message Board or send me an email at lotfp@lotfp.com.

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June 7, 2009

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THE APPROACH

There stands a mountain upon which nobody climbs. Legend holds that a great evil once lived upon the mountain and forever cursed the land. But fear fades with time, and the blood of those supposedly lost long ago lay claim to the fortunes that they say were stolen from their kin. As yet, none dare attempt to retrieve these riches.

This adventure module describes the abandoned shrine and burial location of an old death cult which is located on the side of a mountain.

How this adventure is presented to players should depend on the playing circumstances. If it is to be used in campaign or sandbox play, then determining where it shall be located is the first step to take. From there, determine where the PCs would be able to learn about the existence of the place and any rumors that they should hear. The adventure will have much more impact if there is a settlement of some sort at the base of the mountain. The more established and familiar the settlement is to the players before this adventure takes place, the more intense this adventure becomes.

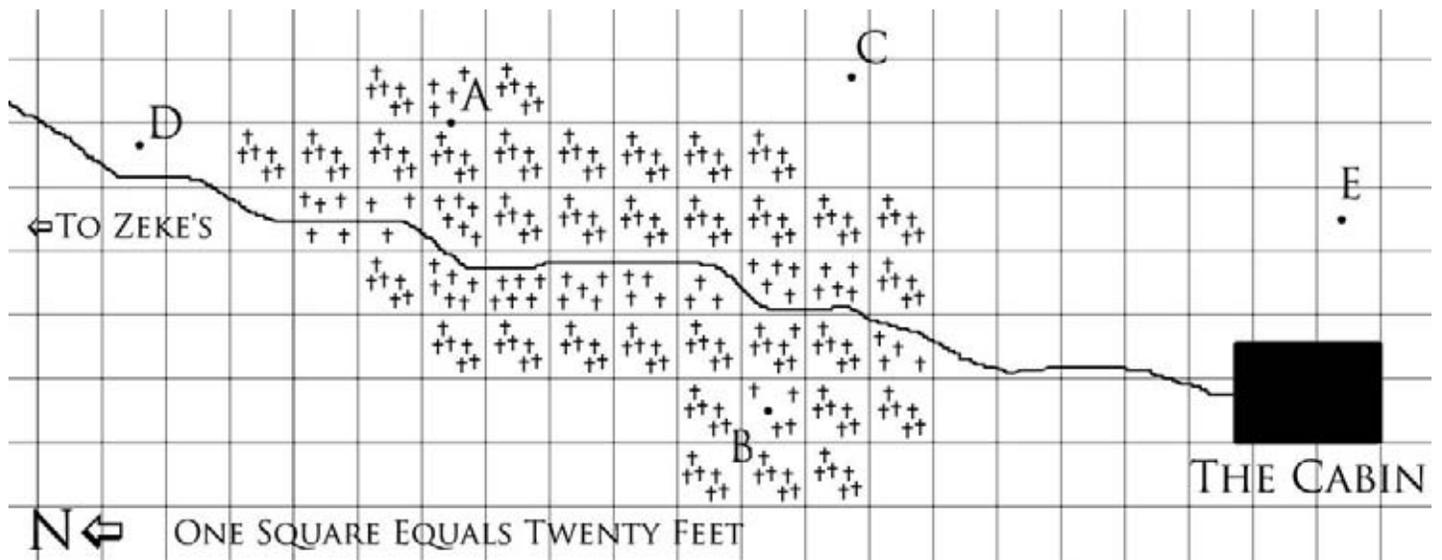
It may also be used as a quest location. If there is any information or an item that needs to be fetched, just place it in this adventure (on the altar in location 22 is an ideal location) and feed the quest/clues to the players in whatever manner best suits the campaign.

If the adventure is used for a convention game or other one-shot purposes, it is probably best to read out the background information, allow the characters to purchase equipment based on that, and start the adventure either at Zeke's or directly at the graveyard, depending on your time constraints and whether the players seem likely to enjoy dealing with some strange old codger.

For those that desire at least a description of the journey up the mountain...:

The mountain is steep and treacherous, with only one safe path going up. Referees should make life difficult for PCs who insist on going up the mountain without using the trail. There will be rockslides, predators, sheer surfaces, and certainly a far, far slower pace face those traveling off the trail. It is not "railroading" to make travel along the trail easier, else the very concept of "trail" is useless. The trail was originally established by the people that built their shrine on the mountain, so it actually goes directly to where the PCs are headed, and they chose this mountain for their shrine specifically for its inaccessibility by other means. They wanted to be left alone and they wanted to be able to easily monitor and control the means of approach. In any event, going up the mountain without using the trail should be difficult, but not impossible.

There is not much of interest on the mountain. About a day's journey up the trail from the base of the mountain is the home of Zeke Duncaster. About eight hours further up the trail is the old cabin which housed the ancient, evil cult.

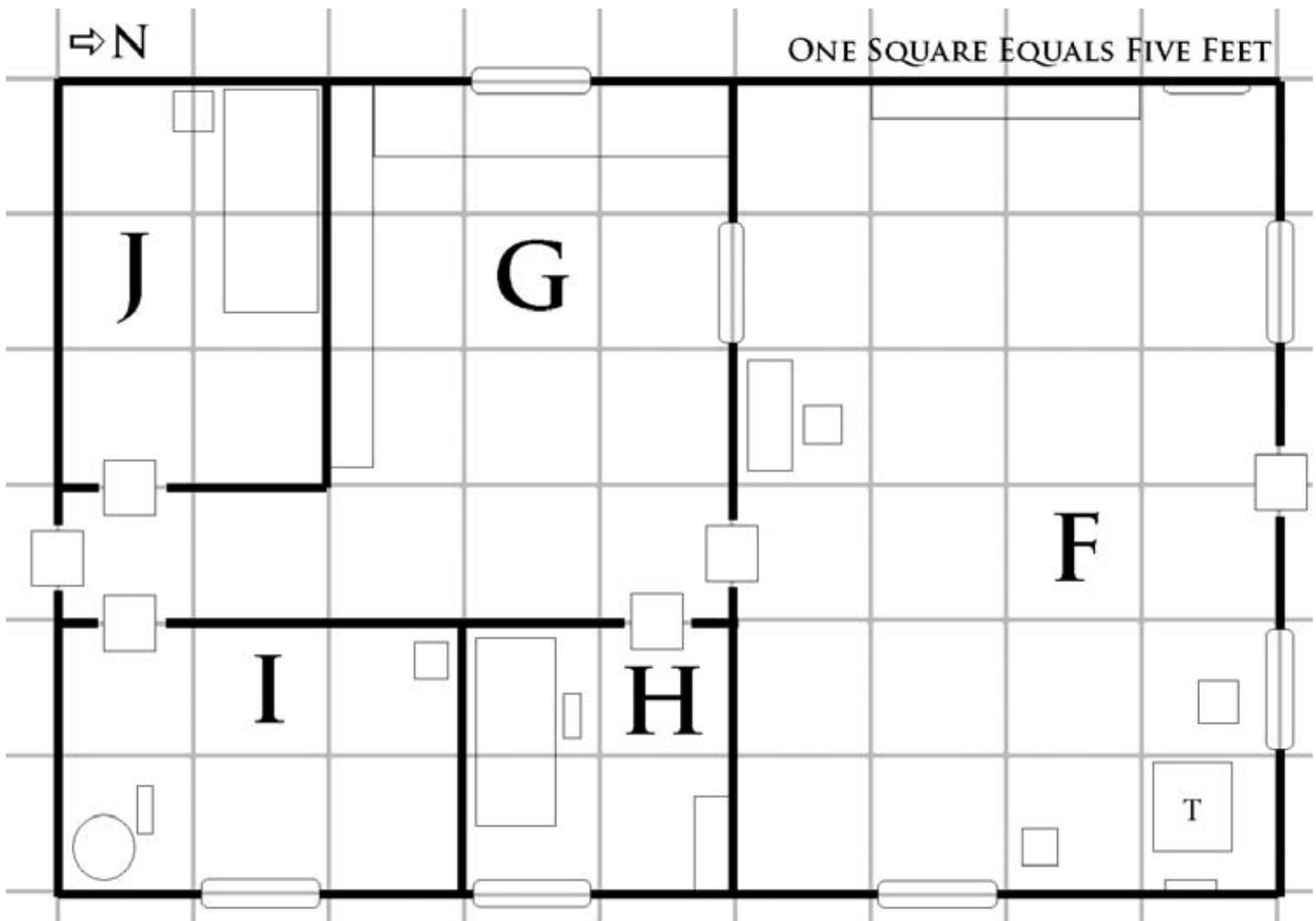


THE SURFACE

The further up the trail one goes, the more unnatural the environment becomes. Insects and such are already rare up in the mountains, but after pressing on a bit too far, all signs of life disappear. No grass or shrubs or lichen or moss grows in the ground or upon the rocks, no birds can be seen flying in the sky, and certainly no larger animals will be seen at all. This might be normal except that this is not so high a mountain, and its tree line and snowlines should both by rights be much higher up. The howling of the wind is not only bitterly cold and perhaps painfully loud, but it becomes almost admonishing; an attempt to convince travelers to turn back before it is too late.

Things change after crossing the final ridge before the cabin, just above the unnaturally low-altitude climatic snowline. The wind stops abruptly at this point, and all is silent, save for an otherworldly susurrus that is at the same time disturbingly penetrating yet barely audible. PCs can see the cabin on a rise several hundred yards ahead. Before the cabin are a couple hundred gravestones, a dozen or so mausoleums, and a few statues, all created and placed by Mr. Duncaster at some point in the past forty to fifty years. Some trees, long dead but still standing, cast their twisted and somehow agonized shadows across the stones. In the daytime, a thick mist covers the area and even the most vibrant colors will seem dull in this atmosphere. At night the air is crystal clear, but the moon itself seems to waver and the trees and statues take on an illusion of trembled movement.

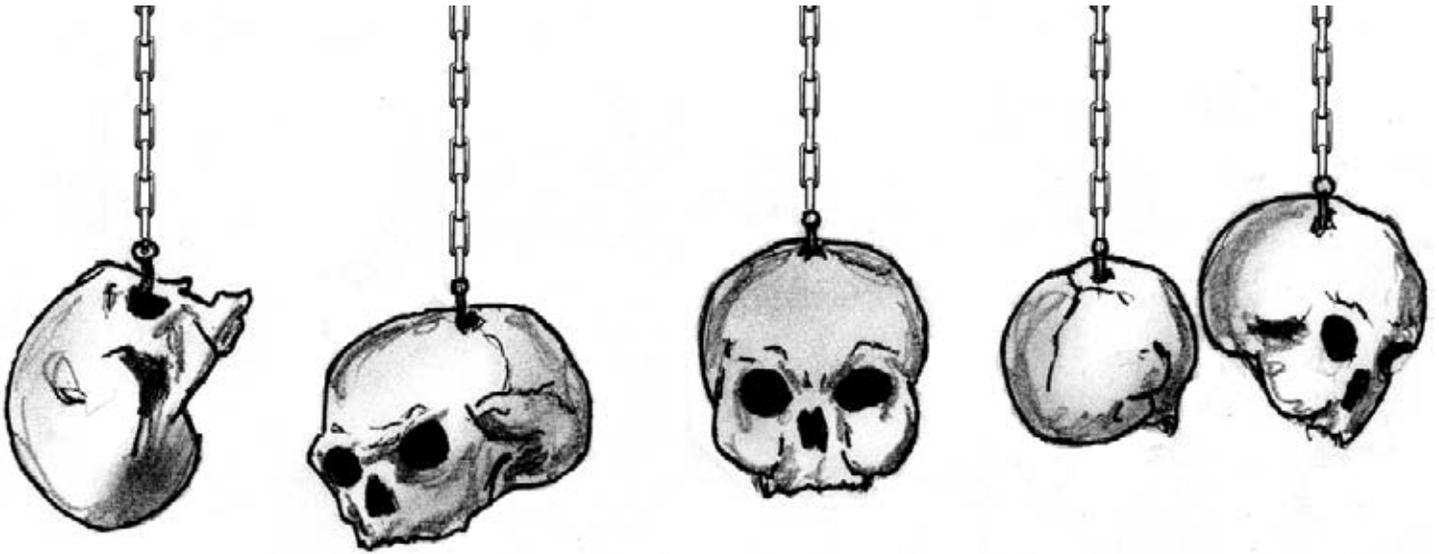
Even highly trained animals will absolutely refuse to enter this area, so characters will have to do without their mounts, familiars, or whatever else they've brought along. Leaving them unattended in the wilderness is a bad idea, but certainly in an area as spooky as this, hirelings will not stand guard alone. Zeke would be happy to look after animals, but he will slaughter horses and mules and such for food if the party does not return within two days. Remember that he figures everyone is going to die anyway.



THE CABIN

The cabin is a shabby looking, run-down place. Its roof seems to sag with the weight of the snow it bears, and its two windows facing the graveyard appear as eyes watching over its grim garden. There are two things which make it completely out of the ordinary: First, the cabin is made of petrified wood, and has stood here for thousands of years. The place would be (and has served as) a fortress if it was properly maintained. Second, every square inch of the surface has minute, calligraphic writing on it. It is etched in the ancient, mystic language of Duvan’Ku. *Comprehend Languages* and *Read Magic* may both be used to read Duvan’Ku. The writing on the cabin holds no useful information, being rather a large collection of exaltations and proclamations such as, “All Hail the King of Death,” “To Rule Life and Death,” “Glory and Pain,” that sort of thing.

The front door (also made of petrified wood) is propped up and leaning against its frame; it is not connected by hinges or any such device. Anyone examining the door before opening it will discover this and be able to quietly move the heavy door. Anyone simply attempting to open the door will not notice this, and the door will fall loudly into the cabin’s main room. The referee should then roll a couple of dice, act like he’s consulting a chart in this text, and either shake his head in disbelief or smirk like a criminal that’s just gotten away with a big heist, whichever would most unnerve the players. And frankly, if the players are not even examining the door before entering this place, the referee might want to check that they’re stocked up on blank character sheets – they’re going to need them.



THE SHRINE

The pit leading from location F travels fifty feet straight down to the shrine level. The strange sounds first heard in the graveyard are louder and more distinct, but just as alien and unidentifiable. The sounds will get louder every time characters open a door between themselves and location 22, and indeed this can be used to move directly towards that location if adventurers are interested in the origin of the noise. The surfaces everywhere on this level, unless specifically described otherwise in an individual location description, are quite well-worked, in most places being cut out of the living rock but in some areas, mostly where there are fixtures or door frames placed in the walls, are a combination of mortared stone blocks and even some brickwork. If the environment above was chilly and uncomfortable, it is even worse down below. There is simply no heat in this place, although somehow nothing freezes down here and there is an oppressively dank quality to the air.

There are no random encounters within the shrine, as it is quite a dead place. Careful and methodical adventurers will be able to find a great deal of treasure with absolutely no personal risk, but a number of adventurers may feel that this is not an exciting adventuring location. Resist the urge to add encounters in the early parts of the shrine, as the succession of deserted (but not empty!) rooms is intended to heighten the atmosphere and build the tension – every player at the table will know that they aren't likely to be playing an adventure with absolutely no enemies, and they are going to get more anxious and perhaps paranoid as they explore more without encountering opposition. If they are clever enough to never meet any opposition, they will likely be unsatisfied with the adventure as a whole without realizing how lucky they were. Yet should the adventurers meet the denizens of the shrine, guaranteed they will be wishing they had not.

Sleeping in the underground shrine itself is a sign that a person just isn't interested in life anymore. The sleeper will have violent nightmares and get no proper rest, will suffer the -1/-5% penalty until properly resting, they will take d4 damage from the nightmares, and they will pick up an insanity. In addition, there is a 25% chance that the sleeper will be possessed by the spirit of one of the cultists (a saving throw applies for this one), there is a separate 25% chance that the psychic assault will be so violent they suffer an additional d6 damage (save versus death for half damage), and a separate 25% chance that the experience will be so traumatizing as to effectively age the character d4x5 years (save versus spell for half effect). The character will be haunted by intense nightmares for months afterwards, but there will be no mechanical penalties assigned for this.

