

The Black Sword of Shem

by Brian Wille

Inspired by the works of Robert E. Howard

For use with The Black Hack



WHAT'S THIS?

This adventure is designed as an introductory scenario for The Black Hack (TBH), a traditional tabletop roleplaying game played with paper, pencils, and dice and developed by DAVID BLACK.

Part One

"Know, O prince, that between the years when the oceans drank Atlantis and the gleaming cities, and the years of the rise of the Sons of Aryas, there was an Age undreamed of, when shining kingdoms lay spread across the world like blue mantles beneath the stars..."

--R. E. Howard



Starting Location: On the far south-western coast of the Kingdom of Zingara.

Hot, bustling, river-port city of *Jerida*, at a tavern and gambling hall.

The characters have been traveling together, and have blown all their wealth on wine and gambling. They are badly hung over, and they are deep in debt.

Players in this scene are at Disadvantage to all tests, due to dehydration, headaches, and nausea from crushing hangovers. This penalty applies during this scene only.

The *Honorable Senior Magistrate Vilerius* arrives to the tavern, of which is he part-owner, with a squad of veteran *Gunderland* spearmen in armor. They surround the party, and the Magistrate holds an improvised court.

"You are in debt. Debt is not allowed; it is illegal, you are outlaws. But I won't throw you in prison, indefinitely, if you'll do me a simple favor: head down the coast, past Argos, and just over the border to Shem. Bring me back the **Sword of Justice**. Don't return without it. You can keep anything else you find in the tomb, and I'll even provide a ship and a guide."

If the players **refuse**, they are thrown in jail to rot until they agree to do the job, or die of dysentery.

If the players **decide to fight**, don't forget their Hangover Penalty, and be ready to roll up new characters.

Magistrate Vilerius: 3HD, d6 damage, Armored, Very Important Person.

The Spearmen: 1HD, d6 damage, Armored. Twice as many as party, with a reserve of 8 spearmen arriving in 2 rounds after melee starts.

If the party **agrees**, they are escorted to a mid-sized galley: *the Bright Sun*. The *Sun* has a shallow hold full of cargo and a deck full of bales and amphora. It's crowded and busy.



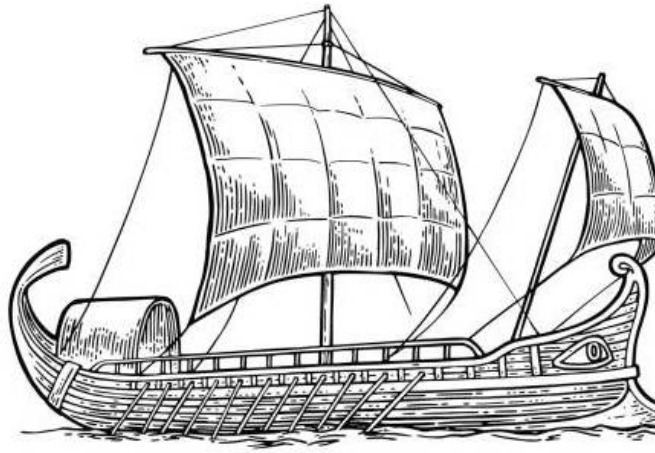
He has also hired a guide (waiting on the ship) to take them to the tomb: *Heterka*, a Stygian. Tall, sharp-faced, bronze-skinned man with dark hair and black eyes. He is quiet and wears dark robes, with amulets and pendants decorated with odd, serpentine shapes.

Heterka the Stygian: 2HD, d6 damage, Armored when on land. Scimitar, jeweled dagger.

Greedy, smart, focused. Has a map to the ruins of the port city and tomb in Shem, a vial of poison (2d6 damage, CON save to take half-damage).

Can cast Shield spell twice a day through magic amulet: Duration: 5 rounds. Invokes a magical shield which provides AP 2 against hand hurled missiles, AP 3 against bows and slings, and AP 4 against all other forms of attack. The Shield also adds -1 to the caster's tests vs. frontal melee attacks.

Can cast Magic Missile through magic charm on wrist once a day: 3d6 dmg or 1d6 dmg to up to 3 targets.



Handling Character Death in this Intro One-Shot Adventure

Maybe you're playing with folks who've never played a game like this before, or you're pressed for time at a game store, convention, or online game. With that in mind, select from two options in case of character death:

The Traditional Way: If a player character dies, they are replaced by one of the sailors from the *Bright Sun*. This is one reason that a few sailors choose to join them on the expedition. Have a couple sailors (Warriors or Thieves) rolled up and equipped that you can give to your player, or have them roll one up quickly—it's fast and easy.

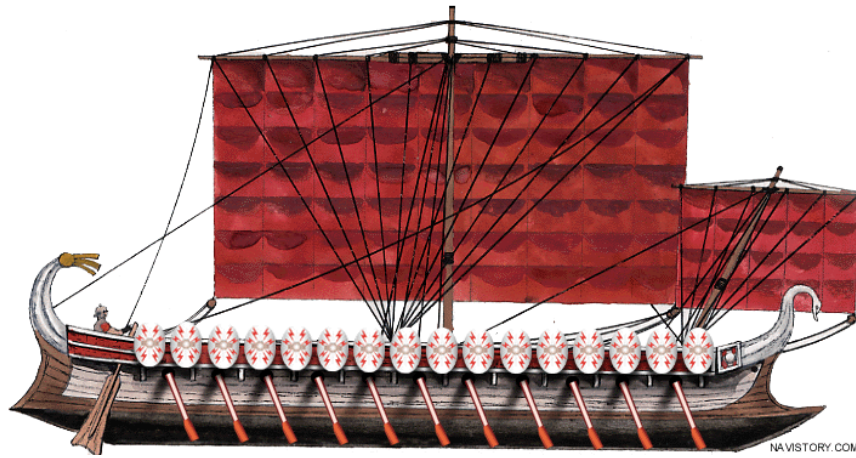
The Heretical Video Game Way: Don't tell the players ahead of time, but they all get 3 lives. When someone dies, their body disappears, and they reappear after 2 rounds because the gods aren't ready to take them. If outside, they fall from the heavens. If indoors, they come flying out of the ceiling, up from the floor, or out the side of a wall. First time they die they arrive intact with all belongings. The second time they arrive without armor, weapons, or equipment and at -1 HP.

-OR-

When someone dies, their body disappears, and they reappear in a safe, nearby place after 2 rounds because the gods aren't ready to take them. For 1 round the gods protect them and they are surrounded by an impenetrable invisible shield; they can move, but they can neither attack nor be attacked. After second death, they arrive without armor, weapons, or equipment and at -1 HP, but still shielded for 1 round.

Part Two

As the *Bright Sun* heads around a peninsula, they see a light, fast galley with a red sail, heading straight towards them: **Zingaran buccaneers!** The pirate ship wants to board and claim the *Bright Sun* and its cargo, not destroy it. To that end, it will try to slow, and then board, the merchant galley.



First it fires a ballista at the *Bright Sun*, attached to a rope. Hoping to slow them.
Then it fires the ballista again, after reloading, attached to a rope. This time at the rudder, to entangle it, and force the ship to move in a circle.

If the party can fight off the pirates from afar, with arrows, oil, or magic, doing serious damage, they will not pursue. **Otherwise, they are boarded!** Melee on the deck!

The *Bright Sun* is unarmed, slower, and less maneuverable than the pirate galley.
Crew Stats: 15 sailors, 1HD, d6 damage (clubs, hooks, daggers), unarmored. Will fight until obviously defeated or captain declares surrender.

Zingaran Buccaneers: 2HD, d6 damage (cutlasses, scimitars, clubs), unarmored. 10 raiders, but they can't all board at once. Check Morale after 25% casualties; they are expecting unmotivated mercenary guards, not Adventurers.

Part Three

The *Bright Sun* makes landfall on the coast of Shem. A narrow beach, in a protected bay. Signs of ancient ruined docks and foundations, made of stone. The terrain rises away from the beach, covered in dense jungle on all sides.

Roll 2d4 to see how many crew want to join the expedition. The *Bright Sun* will stay to replenish fruit and water.

Landing Party Crew Stats: 1HD, d6 damage, unarmored. Greedy but fearful, check Morale after 25% casualties or witnessing a hideous death, as they want easy plunder, not an early grave.

The ship will stay for 3 days, and then leave. They will return a week later after delivering cargo, for one day and one night.

Heterka will lead the way. Eventually a path will appear, the remains of an ancient road. The occasional paving stone and distance marker will be seen.

If they push through the night, everyone will take a point of damage from exhaustion and mysteriously lose 1d3 sailors that came with them.

Camping at night: Attacked by Tentacle Vines! Some crew may be killed or dragged off into the night, but not Heterka. If he is somehow killed or taken, the party finds a simple map to the tomb on Heterka's body, or among his belongings.

Tentacle Vines: Very quiet, will drag victims to a covered hole filled with sharp teeth. On a hit, make a DEX test to avoid being pulled off your feet, or into the jungle if you're already prone--players have 3 rounds to free themselves before being swallowed. Crew disappears into the jungle when hit while prone.

Part Four

A huge ziggurat will appear in the jungle, similar to an Aztec or Mayan pyramid. The area surrounding the tomb is cleared of vegetation; if they arrive during the day, they can see the vegetation has been cut and cleared back from the jungle. At night, it just looks like the tomb sits in a clearing.

There is an opening at the base of the tomb, and also from an open-topped well at the rear of the tomb. The stone around the well is worked with odd runes and decorated with complex wavy line patterns. Why a tomb would require a fancy well is something for the players to think about.

Entrance through the well would require rappelling or climbing down, at Disadvantage to everyone.

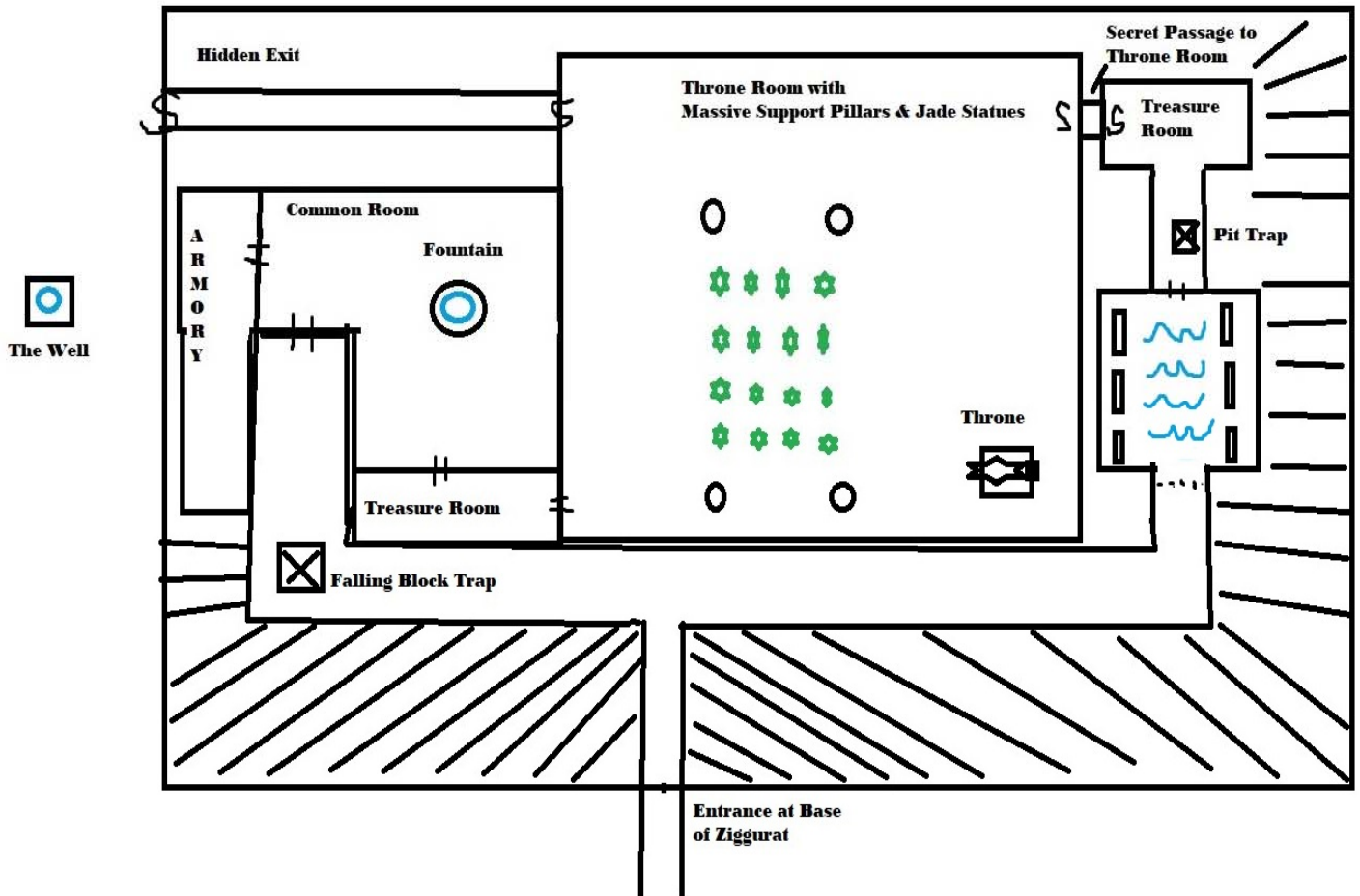
If players climb to the top, they find a small temple with a square stone roof. It has a stone table, darkly stained near the middle, and a large, ancient obsidian knife. It's still very sharp, but it has no hilt and will cause damage to the wielder if used during melee:

Obsidian Knife: +1 to damage roll, causes 1 HP of damage to wielder if used in melee.

Anyone standing at or near the top of the ziggurat can see over the dense jungle all the way to the coast and the *Bright Sun* waiting for them.

Heterka will make camp and wait outside for the party. Any surviving sailors will enter with the party, but keep in mind their morale rule. If they flee while inside, they may activate a trap, or get lost and reappear at the moment you need to replace a dead Player Character.

If Heterka grows impatient and enters the temple to look for them, randomly determine which hallway he takes past the main entrance. If he has a chance to take the sword he will, and automatically fails his WIS roll.



If players enter through the base, and take the hall to the **right**, they will encounter an ossuary that is lower than the hallway, with water over their boots. They will be attacked by **Skeletons**, after a metal grate slams down behind them. The metal grate can be lifted with Disadvantage.

Skeletons: 1HD, 1d6 damage, AP 1. Immune to charm and sleep, half-damage from single-hand bladed weapons and arrows. 6 Skeletons; add more to scale for a bigger size/level of party. They fight without regard to morale.

There is a large bronze door at the other end of the room, engraved with pictograms and serpentine dragons. It opens to a hallway that leads to a room; the glint of gold can be seen in torch or lantern-light.

There is a **pit trap in the hallway**. The pit trap has a lot of bodies, weapons, and standard exploring equipment in it that the party may find useful, if they don't get impaled on the spikes at the bottom of it.

Pit Trap Detection: the trap is old and not completely flush with the floor. A Thief will notice this automatically if they are looking for traps. Thieves roll with Advantage if they approach normally. Other classes get a Normal save to see the trap before they step too far.

Deactivation: it can't be deactivated from outside the pit, but it can be avoided. No roll needed.

Damage: 1d6 dmg for the fall. Make DEX save to avoid falling on a spike; +2 dmg if save is failed.

Beyond the pit trap is a **Treasure Room**. There is a wooden shield hanging on the wall, looking out of place. If it is moved or taken, a secret door will open at the base of a wall. That leads to a low crawlspace-hallway for about 20', which opens into an enormous **Throne Room** (Part Five).

Main Treasure Room: 1000gp, 2000sp. All loose in piles or inside other treasure.
6 semi-precious statuettes, 10gp each, worth more to a collector or historian (up to 100gp each)
Gold cups, goblets, various jewelry (amulets, armbands, bracelets, earrings, signet rings, necklaces, headbands, circlets, tiaras, crowns, fancy coffers, crystal wine decanters, fancy pipes, drinking horns. Antique chairs, a gaming table, sumptuous rugs, tapestries, ceramic vases.
A treasure hoard!

Masterwork wooden shield: light, strong, beautiful. Size as small shield, but protects for 4 AP.

If the party thought ahead, they might have a way to carry this treasure out. More likely they didn't and only have backpacks, sacks, and the decorative coffers in the treasure horde. This sets up the possibility of coming back at some point...

Coins are about the size of a U.S. nickel and weigh about 50 coins per pound.

- A backpack can carry 40 lbs before ripping apart
- A small sack can carry 10 lbs
- A large sack can carry 40 lbs
- A small chest or coffer can carry about 5000 coins, and weighs about 100 lbs.

If they heavily encumber themselves for the walk back to the ship, they should definitely be attacked by an outside patrol of Lizard Men or Tentacle Vines or an absolutely furious Giant Grey Ape.

If players enter through the base, and take the hall to the **left**, they will encounter a **falling-block trap**. There are bones and white powder under and around the trapped area. The party will need to deactivate the trap or somehow avoid being crushed to a thick red paste.

Falling Block Trap Detection: automatic for Thieves, everyone else has to figure it out. INT rolls for those who carefully avoid the area of white powder and bones on the trapped space.

Deactivation: Thieves can roll with Advantage, others roll against INT with Disadvantage. The trap can also be avoided by rolling a DEX save with Advantage to walk around it.

Damage: Sailors who accompanied the party are immediately crushed by the falling block. Players get a Saving Throw against Dexterity: 2d6 damage if they fail, 1d6 damage if success.

Beyond that is an area of the tomb controlled by a cult of **Lizard Men**, who have been guarding the tomb for millennia. They live in a large common room and have an armory full of cool, archaic armor as well as a treasure room full of ancient coins and plunder taken from treasure hunters they have killed. This room has no wooden shield or secret door, but it does have a low, heavy bronze door that leads into the **Throne Room**.

Lizard Men: intelligent, fanatical, armored and armed with macuahuitls, scimitars, or claws/fangs. Low-light vision, excellent sense of smell: players roll with Disadvantage to avoid being detected when invisible or hidden. Can also trip with their tails, test vs. DEX. Scale HD to party.

Lizard Men's Treasure Room: 500gp, 1000sp loose, in piles and inside other treasure. 10 gems worth 100gp each.

Armory: Variety of human and Lizard Man armor; brigandine, leather, chain, plate, helmets, small and large shields.

Variety of weapons; swords, spears, daggers, axes, macuahuitls, clubs, etc.

1 *Masterwork sword*, very light, does not add to Encumbrance

If players enter through the open-topped well, they will reach water and have to swim a short distance underwater and through an opening. Popping up in a large fountain in the middle of the Lizard Men's common room, they'll have one round to act before they are noticed, and another round after that before they are attacked.

Part Five

Throne Room: This is the room directly below the top of the pyramid. There are 12 (4 rows of 4) life-size statues made of jade, depicting soldiers, courtiers, servants, etc. At the end is a massive throne, with a tall skeleton sitting on it--must have been 10' tall in life. It is armored, with a gold and silver helmet/crown.

Across its lap lies a black sword, glowing faintly. It is the "Sword of Justice" that the Judge wants, obviously. But it is not a sword of justice, at all. It is smart, telepathic, alien, and evil.

If the characters approach the throne or otherwise try to take the sword, the long-dead Shemite king stands up from his ancient throne with unnatural speed and attacks:

Shemite Skeleton King: -1 to hit, +1 to dmg, +1 to Initiative, 5 AP, can see in dark as in daylight, 2 attacks per round or 1 attack with Advantage. 1d8 dmg.

If the players flee out the exit portal, make DEX checks at Disadvantage. If failed, suffer d6 damage from the Guardian King's unearthly howls, final attacks, and thrown items. Then they are out, and free. The King will not follow outside the throne room. If the characters have somehow taken the sword, he will quickly dissolve into dust without it.

There are two doors in the Throne Room, besides the secret entrance from the Treasure Room. One opening is hidden but has light coming through the edges and a slight breeze, and leads out to a secret door on the side of the pyramid. The other leads to the Lizard Man enclave, who will come running if they hear any noise (and are still alive).

Part Six

WIS test for anyone that touches the sword, to avoid becoming a new Guardian, followed by becoming an Undead Guardian for all eternity!

On a failed test, the player immediately attacks the party, targeting the strongest player first. If the sword is taken out of her hands, the spell is broken. However the character will seek to hold the sword again, unless restrained or until the sword is out of sight.

Abilities and Curse of Dorcha, Black Sword of Shem listed below:

Dorcha, Black Sword of Shem: Allows owner to see in the dark as if in daylight. Has an agenda: Wants to leave the tomb and cut a bloody path through the world. -1 to hit roll, +1 to damage. Telepathically talkative, always suggests mayhem. WIS test to ignore mayhem suggestions and do your own thing.

The sword will slowly poison your soul and inexorably twist you to evil. The longer you possess the sword the more its dark magic taints your body.

Immediately, the numbing cold of the sword deadens physical pain giving Advantage on Con saves. At the end of each game session you must roll 1d6 to resist its worsening effects:

On **1-4**, the curse advances no further that day.

On a **5-6**, the GM may check off one of the dangers below. When all the dangers have been checked off the impending doom is realized.

The Sword's Curse

At Home in Darkness: Your skin grows wan and your features gaunt and sunken. The light of day is painfully bright and the heat of the sun hard to bear. Gain -1 to act in direct sunlight and +1 to actions conducted in the darkness.

Embraced by Evil: Your veins run black and your skin is cold to the touch. Evil creatures will now treat you as friendly until you prove otherwise. However, you are barred from entrance to holy places and healing magic will give you no benefit.

One Foot in the Grave: Food and drink turn to ash in your mouth and you are gripped by a deathly chill that never warms. At the threshold of death, you have access to insights from beyond the grave. If you meditate about someone or something for 30 minutes, you may ask the GM one of the questions below, once per day:

1. What thing from this world or beyond does your target most fear?
2. What is their greatest weakness?

Dead Man Walking: Flesh sloughs off your rotting body and yet still you live. Non-magical attacks cause you no pain and you suffer no HP loss from them. However, your gruesome appearance is terrifying; you are met with horror, disgust and fear wherever you go.

Impending Doom: Enslavement

Upon realization of the impending doom, you become a wraith, bound to serve the sword for all eternity. Loss of the sword destroys you.

Part Seven

Heterka may be nervously waiting for them near a small fire, smelling strongly of protective herbs against magic, animals, and insects.

Or he may have been killed while waiting for them, his body crushed and mangled, insects swarming on his rapidly decaying body, victim of an angry Giant Grey Ape.

If he's grown impatient and entered the temple to look for them, decide whether he's still inside and if he's been killed. Decide whether he has the Black Sword of Shem. If he has the sword and he's outside, he'll try to kill the party. If they leave without him, he may chase them in anger...

The players will feel strongly that they are being watched on the trip back to the harbor. If they stop to rest at night, they may be attacked again by Tentacle Vines. If they push through, they will take a point of damage from exhaustion and mysteriously lose 1-2 remaining NPCs that are still with them.

The party and galley will be attacked by **Huge Grey Apes** as the party reaches the beach! If they can keep them at bay and cast off, they are home free. It will take 6 rounds for the crew to cast off and row far enough to leave the Ape's throwing range.

5 Huge Grey Apes: Cunning gorillas; fanatical, motivated, smart. Last of the protectors of the ruins and temple. HD: 5

Will rend and tear with teeth and claws if anyone gets close enough. 2 Claws (1d6)+ 1 Bite (1d4)

Special: Can throw large rocks and tree trunks very hard and very far, but not very accurately: +3 to hit the *Bright Sun*, +5 to hit a Player Character. On a successful hit, take 2d6 damage and roll STR or DEX (player chooses) to avoid double damage from crushing.

The Bright Sun Hit Points: 60



Map of Robert E. Howard's Hyboria by Christophe Fernandez (Chrysagon) who has made it available for personal use.

Many thanks for the Effects of the Black Sword of Shem to D. Kenny from the Dungeon World Tavern Community of Google+. RIP, G+.