

BEYOND THE BLACK GATE



PLUNDERGROUNDS #6

04/2018

200 Word RPG Challenge

Design a Tabletop RPG
using 200 words or fewer

What can YOU do with 200 words?

Begins **May 18th**, 2018

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CREDITS

Plundergrounds is a zine series made for use with *Dungeon World*, the fantasy role-playing game by Sage LaTorra and Adam Koebel (www.dungeon-world.com).

Text, cover art, and interior illustrations are © Ray Otus, 2018. Back cover illustration is by Michael Clarke.

Plundergrounds uses variations on the dungeon starter format created by Marshall Miller. Additional creative contributions came from patrons Jason Cordova, Jim Jones, Dirk Detweiler Leichty, Brian Holland, and Logan Howard.

A huge thanks to my Delver crew for their over-the-top support: Paul Bachleda, Chloe Cameron, Brett Casto, and Lu Quade!

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Character death is a part of *Dungeon World* and the Last Breath move is one of the game's signature elements. But what if death were the *focus* of a session or three? What terrible purpose would cause characters to journey in Death's realm? What strange things lie beyond the Black Gate? How would they escape Death's greedy clutches?

Journeys into the underworld are as old as literature, literally. Gilgamesh enters the land of the dead hoping to bring back the secret of immortality. Odysseus, desperate for advice, sailed to the edge and poured out libations to the seer Tiresias. Finding himself lost in the dark valley, Danté navigated the rings of hell to find a way back out. And those are just a few stories from *Western* culture. Look up Yudhishtira, Izanagi and Izanami, the hero twins of the Maya, Kaknu, and King Gesar!

"Appendix N" works for this issue are:

- ◆ *The Earthsea Trilogy* (books, 1968-72), Ursula K. Le Guin. In *Earthsea*, dead spirits go to a dark valley under strange stars. That was my starting point.
- ◆ *City of the Singing Flame* (short story, 1931), Clark Ashton Smith. I have always loved stories about magic portals and this story haunts me with its alluring, immolating column.
- ◆ *The Passing of the Grey Company* (chapter in *Return of the King*, 1955), J. R. R. Tolkien. The tone of Aragorn's ride to call out the oath breakers is so freaking awesome!
- ◆ *What You Carry* (200 word RPG, 2017), Evey Lockhart. First line: "Awaken and fall through the bottom of your grave." It's amazing; read it and others at <https://200wordrpg.github.io>.

As always, be sure to tag your AP reports with #plundergrounds so I can find and read them!

— Ray

1. CROSSING OVER

Letting go is much, much harder than you thought it would be.

You imagined simply floating free of your body, but your spirit clings desperately to the flesh. The tension between the two is a new sensation for you. Until now you were one thing: the flesh and the breath of life together in a seamless whole. Now you know which part of you is which and it's...

Alarming. Nauseating. Wrong!

The next step will tear your two selves apart, but the wall between the land of the living and the dead demands this sacrifice from you! You must let go to enter the cold land under strange stars.

You just hope you can find your way back.



WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?

These questions will be helpful for characters who haven't already adventured together and/or formed a collective reason for entering Death's realm.

Answering "Why" is critical! This setting is just a bunch of set pieces and threats, the ultimate threat being that Death himself is hunting you, but it makes no sense if the characters aren't here for some other desperate reason.

Each question below has several parts. Characters should select one, and reveal their answers piecemeal, at appropriate and dramatic moments.

- ◆ **Someone close to you died unexpectedly.** With them went the answer to a question you desperately wish you had asked. Who was it? What kept you from asking them before? What was the question?
- ◆ **You must cross over to gain entrance into an exclusive society.** What group requires this insane initiation rite? How have you prepared? Why does your mission create even more peril for your fellow adventurers?
- ◆ **You simply have to know!** Why is it so important for you to personally experience what happens to souls after death? What do you plan to do with your knowledge if you make it back? Why is that plan dangerous?
- ◆ **You want to die and you don't plan to come back.** Why do you deserve or desire death? What reason have you fabricated to satisfy others? What happens (later) that causes you to discover you don't really want to die!?
- ◆ **People shouldn't have to die.** That's your opinion and you have a plan to disrupt the natural (or as you see it, unnatural) process of death. What secret thing did you bring with you that you believe will help you accomplish your plan? What difficult thing must you do with it for it to work? How exactly will it change the way death works? What might go wrong - what is the worst-case scenario?
- ◆ **An attempt at resurrection failed.** Your best friend was murdered. You took their body to the temple and paid in diamonds, but while the priests could make contact, they couldn't call your friend's spirit back to the body. Why won't they return? What terrible purpose has convinced you to go after their spirit? How long do you have before it's too late?
- ◆ **The secret died with them.** A notable person died knowing a secret location, recipe, or bit of lore. Who was it? What was the secret? How is it tied to your fate? Why didn't they tell anyone? Why would they tell you?

HOW WILL YOU CROSS OVER?

Assume all characters use the same method for crossing over. The first character says which method the group used, the rest of the characters each answer one of the follow up questions.

- ◆ **You died ... on purpose.** How did you convince the others to suicide with you? What did you do on your “last day?” What method of death did you choose? Why was it unexpectedly traumatic? How is your body being kept safe? What is your plan for getting back into it?
- ◆ **You performed a ritual in a place of power.** What is particularly awful (scary, disturbing, gross) about the place you have chosen? What do you risk just by being here? Did you sneak in, or have to fight your way through ... what? What was the ritual like and what nagging doubt do you have about how it went? The ritual, if everything worked correctly, will snap you back into your bodies when you complete your quest; what is the return trigger and why will it be difficult or risky?
- ◆ **You came through the lair of Lord Muomaug** (see *Plundergrounds* #3) How did the old graveworm trap you? What bargain were you forced to make to come through in your physical form? What has he said he will do to you if you fail him? What insight did you get about Muomaug in your interaction with him or just by being so physically close?

If the players choose this last method, you are essentially starting a mini-campaign *in media res*. When it is time for the players to get back out of death's realm, you could jump back in time and play their way through Muomaug's lair until you reach the bargaining scene. Then jump forward again and play out the characters escaping Death and paying Muomaug's price!

WHAT DID YOU DO TO PROTECT...

- ◆ Your body from deterioration while you are “away?”
- ◆ Your spirit from being detected or tracked?
- ◆ Your mind from the terror that you will face?

These are simple questions you can ask characters to trigger the often-underutilized Bolster move. Consider giving them a black stone or other token to remind them they have a resource that can be used on an important roll related to their protection later.

THE BARRIER

The mist clears and you see ... (Choose one impression.)

- ◆ A low wall of stacked, unmortared stones – pock-marked and stained with age and yet no moss or lichen grows on their damp, gray surface. There is no gate, one must simply summon the courage to step over.
- ◆ A high wall of wrought iron, punctuated by a single towering gate. Permeating the black metal are a constantly shifting phantasm of bones, ghostly faces, and terrifying, unearthly beings.
- ◆ A curtain of blackness that absorbs not only light, but wind, sound, hope, happiness, dreams, thoughts... You blink, wondering how long you have been staring at it and feel slightly altered. There is no discernible point for passing through, and yet you are called to a specific spot.
- ◆ A worn track through an increasingly barren land. You come to a crossroad over which hangs a rusty iron cage. The skeleton within points a bony finger onward and you know that your next step is irrevocable.

THROUGH THE GATE

- ◆ When a carefully prepared and executed ritual allows you to pass through the Black Gates of Death's Kingdom, roll+1 if you have been to the Black Gate before and escaped, otherwise roll+nothing.
 - ▶ On a 10+, you slip through the gates unheralded and unnoticed.
 - ▶ On a 7–9, an alarm sounds in the form of hundreds of clattering bones. You feel Death stirring and know he will be searching for you!
 - ▶ On 6-, the gates close behind you. The echoing clank of the latch falling into place sounds all too final. Something has definitely gone wrong and you can no longer sense your physical form behind you. What will you find on your return? If you *can* get back, that is.

USING THE MOVE

Have one player roll and apply the result to the group. Choose the character who has come the closest to dying before, or the one most afraid of dying.

The 7-9 result essentially jumpstarts the Death's Count is Off danger (following), which the GM can use to put pressure on the characters. The ritual worked, but their unnatural entrance into the kingdom has been noticed.

The 6- result indicates the ritual went wrong somehow. You could use this result to take something away or threaten harm.

You may want to leave the effect hanging to complicate the adventure's end. When players attempt to go back to their bodies they may find it has rapidly decayed, something *else* has taken up residence in it, an enemy has placed magical wards on the body to block them, etc. Make it a nasty surprise!

The critical effect of this move should be to make players feel as if they have done something extremely risky and probably irreversible. Even on a 10 make sure they feel an oppressive silence; every step on the brittle grass or loose gravel should cause them to fear detection.





2. ON THE OTHER SIDE

The magic sauce of this setting is the combination of why the characters take this desperate step, established above through questions, and the pressure that descends on them after they cross over. Two primary and pervasive forces work on the characters: Death's dislike of trespassers and the inexorable pull of the Well of Souls. The GM can use this list of portents, Death's Count is Off, to put a "clock" on the characters' time in Death's realm. Similarly, if the adventure may end with the characters reaching the Well of Souls where they will Stare into the Abyss (a move in The Ice Field section).

DEATH'S COUNT IS OFF

Death is a merchant. He deals in souls and keeps a tight ledger.

- ☐ The numbers don't add up! Death now knows that a small number of souls have forced their way in. The characters hear a scream of frustration, see burning eyes in the sky, or experience some other foreboding of Death's awareness.
- ☐ Bitter cold slowly overtakes the characters. First, they see their "breath." Next their fingers and feet become numb. Soon their soul aches with it.
- ☐ The characters glimpse a spectral reaper observing their activities from a distance. As they watch, the specter points knowingly at them and evaporates into a wisp smoke.
- ☐ An excited baying breaks out behind the characters. Death has sent a pack of hell hounds to track the them down. The vicious dogs wear the faces of deceased loved ones.

What face did you most want or fear to see in this dark realm?

(Stats for Death's Hound appear in the Lingerers section.)

- ☐ An eerie but beautiful singing fills the characters with a delicious numbness, irresistibly pulling them toward the ice field and central well. The thought enters their minds "It will all be over soon. Blissful nothingness awaits." Unless the characters can plug their ears with soft wax or better, they can't shut out the song. They can act normally, except they must keep moving toward the well, no tarrying or side quests.
- ☐ The characters come Face-to-Face with Death (move below).

DAMAGE AND DYING

Whether the characters somehow get through the gate in their physical bodies or are just spirits, the forces of life and death work differently in Death's realm.

- ◆ Damage to characters should seem different than it does in their physical form. Rely on description to communicate the strangeness:
The sword tears through your flesh. You feel as if your lifeblood is spilling out and ribbons of... something ... pull away from you with the blade, but when you look down there isn't even a mark. And yet you feel diminished.
- ◆ Though they function normally, all non-magic metallic arms, armor, and tools become brittle. The GM may shatter one as a hard move when they are in use. (This should not apply to the fighter's signature weapon. Consider it to be magical, even if it is not specifically enchanted.)
- ◆ Natural healing does not occur. In fact, while the characters believe they need to breathe, eat, eliminate waste, etc., they don't. Their bodily functions have suspended. Magical healing is effective, however.
- ◆ Generally, souls who lived to do the work of the gods have a measure of protection beyond the gate. They walk purposefully toward the second ring, shrouded in coruscating auras. Most creatures will not touch them for fear of reprisal from devout pilgrims' gods. The characters, having broken in, are unlikely to have this protection. It's possible that their very presence beyond the gate is an offense to their god as well as to Death himself.
- ◆ At 0 HP, a character comes Face-to-Face with Death.

FACE-TO-FACE WITH DEATH

- ◆ When you come face-to-face with Death in his own realm, roll+1 if you have lived as a person of faith.
 - ▶ On a 10+ you reach a crisis and have three choices:
 - Your god rescues you and sends you back, or keeps you as a servant in their own plane. You carry a new mark of their favor.
 - You may "leap" back into your body and escape Death, if you act immediately.
 - You may commit to this reckless enterprise; treat the result as 7-9.

- ▶ On a 7-9 Death touches you and your color drains away. You are truly dead now. Nothing else really changes, except that you may never leave this realm. Eventually something will swallow you up or you will leap into the Well of Souls. Even a successful attempt to resurrect you by someone from the other side will only reanimate your corpse. Who knows what will actually take up residence in it! If you have any chance at all, it lies in convincing Death you deserve a different fate. Yeah. Good luck with that.
- ▶ On a 6- Death takes you then and there! No more chances, no more excuses. Everyone else will get a glimpse of Death suddenly and shockingly appearing and ripping you away/apart. You may be taken to a special Hell personally designed by Death for trespassers.

DEATH'S VISAGE

Death looks different with each appearance. Roll a d6 on a few tables, or just choose a mix of results you like. It may be best to roll up a manifestation of Death or two beforehand to mentally explore how all the pieces fit together.

D6 VESTMENTS

1. Perfect, naked skin of alabaster or ebony (or both?)
2. Shredded grave clothes hanging over leprous skin
3. A robe of pure white
4. A nacreous shell with bizarre projections like an exotic beetle
5. A cloak of oily black feathers
6. Tight leathers (human skin?)

D6 ODORS

1. An astringent perfume that makes your eyes water
2. Skin, warmed by sunshine
3. Rotting fish
4. Burning tar

5. Baking bread, candles, and other scents of a happy home
6. Cold, damp earth, with a hint of decaying leaves and worm slime

D6 EYES

1. A cluster of hard to count and constantly shifting spider eyes.
2. Bright, innocent eyes of blue that hold an infinity of sadness.
3. Featureless orbs of jet
4. Giant fly eyes
5. On stalks, like a giant snail
6. Openings onto a universe of infinite black and cold stars

D6 MOUTHS

1. Drooling maggots that die as they fall
2. Yellow and black rotten stumps of what were once teeth
3. Translucent points of bone, like the jaw of a predator fish
4. Sensuous and full
5. Sideways mandibles, as a locust
6. None, either a blank space where one should be, or more eyes.

D6 “HAIR”

1. Hollow tubes that wave in some unfelt wind, softly keening a grating dirge
2. Finger bones, not all human, flexing of their own accord
3. Hidden beneath a deep hood
4. Weeping runes incised in a bald pate
5. An exposed brain, skin flayed back on all sides and held in place with bone needles
6. Sleek, perfect hair of iridescent black.

D6 VOICES

1. Words intermingled with the hiss and crackle of a camp fire
2. Metal sliding against metal
3. Bones slowly and then violently breaking

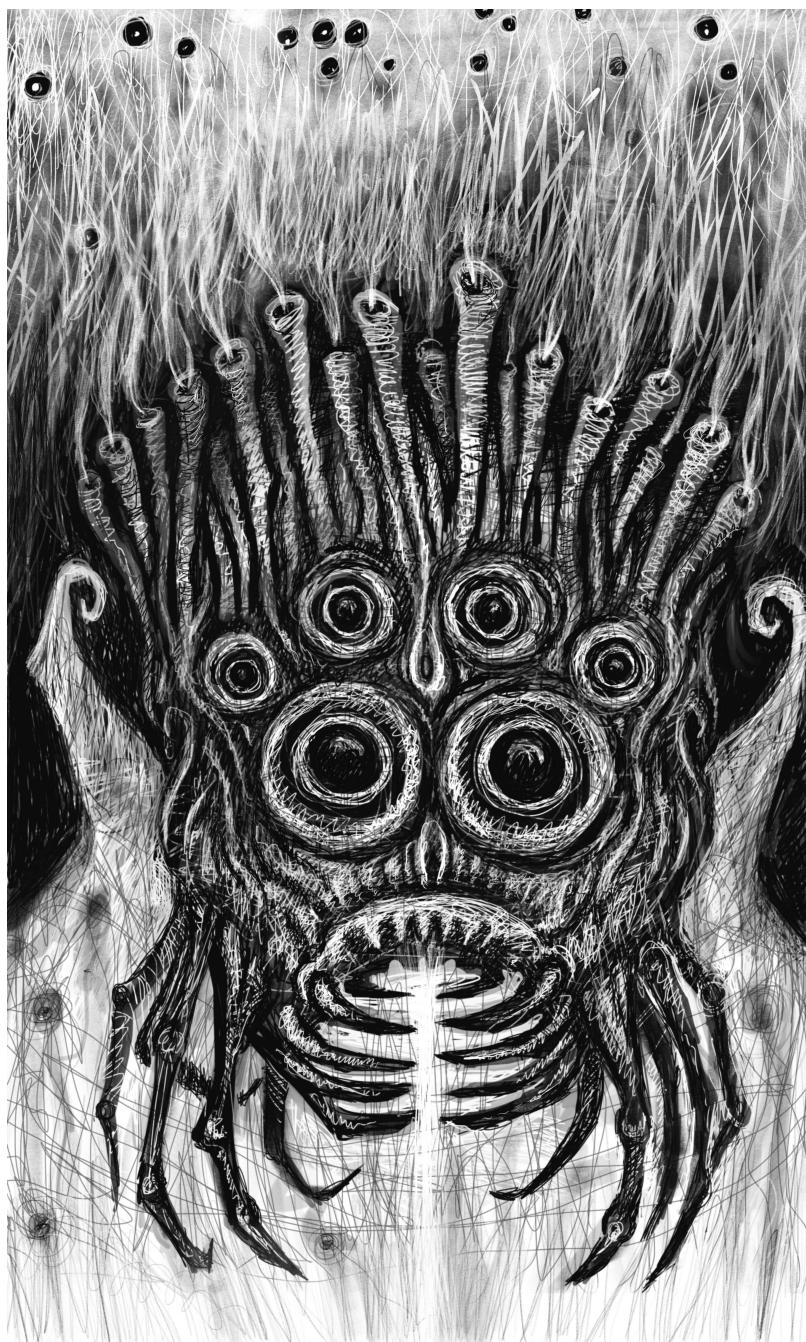
4. A whisper from a long-forgotten memory
5. Your mother’s soothing tone
6. A thousand, clashing chimes

D6 RETINUES

1. A trail of giant slugs
2. A murder of crows circling above, a pack of rats tumbling along at his feet, and spiders head-to-toe
3. A goat that speaks for Death
4. A flutter of purple-black butterflies, each wing sporting half of a white skull pattern
5. An owl on his shoulder that only faces backwards
6. A pair of hungry, “smiling” jackals

D6 REAPING INSTRUMENTS

1. A staff with a scythe blade of purple smoke
2. A satchel that opens onto a void; Death tosses you in with a careless gesture
3. A swarm of beetles that pick your bones clean in seconds
4. A two-handed sword that cleaves you down the middle
5. Scales; your soul must weigh less than a golden feather
6. An hourglass, you have one minute to compose your thoughts.





3. ACROSS THE RINGS

Three distinct plains, in the shape of concentric rings and separated by low mountains of obsidian, surround the the Well of Souls. Each mountain range has a single pass through which souls migrate, moving inward and downward, as if caught in a giant funnel.

The first plain is a dreary land of lost souls, ghouls, and other strange creatures that hover between death and life. The river Styx originates in a lake at the foot of the pass through the first barrier of obsidian peaks.

The second ring is a blasted battlefield where the avatars of a thousand gods fight over the souls of the religious.

The third is a windswept field of ice, dotted with living “trees.”

Without luck, strength of purpose, and wise choices the characters will be consumed by creatures beyond the gate, be caught by Death, or throw themselves into the Well.

What happens then? Do they find peace? Do they fall forever in a terrifying plunge? Are they torn apart into smaller and smaller pieces until nothing left? Or do they come out the other end in the body of a newborn babe?

There's only one way to find out.





THE LINGERERS

Not everyone who dies moves on quickly. Those who die abruptly or have unfinished business, often linger near the edges of Death's realm. There are many creatures that have learned to feed on these souls, blood hawks and ghouls being the most common.

IMPRESSIONS

- ◆ A cluster of dour, stone houses forms a haphazard town. Dead souls shuffle around, miming the routine of their bygone lives. Few look at you as you pass; those that do make you feel invisible.
- ◆ A yard of tiny headstones is guarded by the skeletons of long-dead pets: dogs, cats, birds, toads, and other things. Their eerie howling and screeching warn you to keep your distance, while the ghosts of children chase each other around the stones or watch you with curiosity.
- ◆ A dark bird appears overhead, the color of dried blood. Soon it is joined by another, and another. At first they just circle, but as more gather they become noisy and menacing.
- ◆ An impenetrable wall of mist hovers over a body of black water, barring your path forward. The water sluggishly laps at the shore before you. What you first take for seashells are the countless bones of tiny animals partially buried in the gray sand. The spikes of some odd form of water lily break the surface of the water in places, suggesting it is not very deep. From out of the mist you hear low grunting and sloshing sounds.
- ◆ A giant, bizarre creature - part giraffe, part horse, part seal - swims out of the mist. Its internal organs, some filled with skulls, can be seen through its translucent skin. The creature heads straight for you: bellowing, rolling its blood red eyes, and snorting puffs of steam.
- ◆ A black sun in a sky of streaky gray. A white "night" sky filled with black stars follows. Ahead, you see a wall of dark peaks broken by a single V-shaped notch.
- ◆ Obsidian rocky walls, within touching distance on either side of you, are riddled with deep, echoing holes.

MONSTERS OF THE FIRST CIRCLE

- ◆ **Bloodhawks:** group, flying. Instinct: to drink hope. Moves: smell fear, terrifying scream, suck away hope. Attack (d6, near), 3 HP, 0 Armor.
- ◆ **Ghouls:** group, organized, intelligent, cautious. Instinct: to feed on rotting flesh. Moves: gnaw off a body part, gain the memories of their meal. Talons (d8, 1 piercing, close, reach), 10 HP, 1 Armor.

The ghouls are organized in packs, but have a self-styled king, Chan-Ree-Chan! The ghouls will sniff out (literally) that the characters are different and may ask odd questions about where their physical bodies lie!

- ◆ **Chan-Ree-Chan:** solitary. Instinct: to gather strength. Moves: rile the pack, hide from Death, hoard the secrets of lost souls. Chiller (d8, close, reach, freezing), 13 HP, 1 Armor.

A strike from Chan's magic sword fills a foe with paralyzing cold; Defy Danger CON to get moving again. He hoards secrets, hoping to make a deal with Death. Why? What does he want?

- ◆ **Waterscorpions:** group, large, immobile, amphibious. Instinct: to never let go. Moves: look like a harmless plant, tip over floating things, latch on, inject digestive sap. Sting (d4, 2 piercing, hand, poison), 8 HP, 1 Armor. Defy Danger STR to break free once it latches on.



A water scorpion will sting anything trapped in its claws as soon as it can. The poison damage does d4 per turn until the character rolls a 10+ on Defy Danger CON. On a 7-9 the poison only does 1 damage but continues. The sap of waterscorpions is a universal solvent. Many have found this out the hard way.

- ◆ **The Thing in the Lake:** solitary, amorphous. Instinct: to carry souls across. Moves: emit a terrifying bellow of welcome, grant passage for the cost of a skull, pick up passengers with its prehensile tongue. Attack (d6, close), 10 HP, 2 Armor. It will only attack in self-defense.

The recipe for getting across the lake to reach the first pass is simple, wait for the “thing” and pay for your passage with a skull, one per rider. The trouble is, the thing is terrifying! It comes right at you snorting and bellowing. If the characters don't attack it, or offer it a skull, the thing will eventually get bored with them and leave. It might nudge them first with a few licks of its long slimy tongue. Those who cross the river by other means risk getting caught in the clutches of the waterscorpions.

- ◆ **Death's Hounds:** group, organized, planar, terrifying, hide of shadow. Instinct: to pursue. Moves: follow despite all obstacles, wear the face of a loved one, breathe out a cloud of biting flies. Bite (d8, close), 10 HP, 1 Armor.

- ◆ **Guardians of the Pass:** horde, construct. Instinct: to take the semblance of life. Moves: mirror the actions of a living humanoid, form and transform from miscellaneous bones, prevent souls from turning around in one of the passes. Slam (d6, close), 7 HP, 1 Armor.

The obsidian mountains are rife with these eerie creatures. Often crazy conglomerations of bones from various creatures, these skeletal constructs vary greatly in size and configuration. Some will be huge. Some will have extra legs and be really fast. Others will have multiple arms for extra attacks. Occasionally several will merge together to form a kind of animated bone wall. The guardians are harmless as long as characters move inward. They will swarm out of holes and attack any creature that tries to move backward to a ring more distant from the well.



THE HARVEST

The pass suddenly opens out to reveal a huge, cratered plain. Crawling around the blasted earth, hovering over it, and (judging by the piles of earth) tunneling beneath it are some of the strangest creatures you have ever seen.

Massive eye-filled bladders tethered to the earth by shifting tendrils. Rolling wheels within wheels that change directions every few seconds. A caravan-sized “snake” leaving a wake of phosphorescent slime.

None of them take notice of you, yet, focused as they are on the souls running across the plain for the far mountains. Every few seconds one is snatched away, swallowed, or torn apart by one of these hideous behemoths.



IMPRESSIONS

- ◆ Out of this cracked plain pokes a number of smoky crystal formations. Their power is part of the fabric of this place but you wonder what a piece of it would do if you brought it back to the land of the living.
- ◆ An army of strange, spectral humanoids, noble of visage, marches across your path. They come from gods-know-where and are headed to some unknown battle. A trumpet sounds, calling you to join them!
- ◆ A hole with a phosphorescent light at the bottom of indescribable hue, in your heart you know it leads to one of the 9 heavens.
- ◆ The brass tower of a demon, a kind of embassy in this blighted land and almost an eyesore in its incongruity, juts out from the obsidian wall near the last pass. You feel eyes watching you from its black windows.

RUN FOR YOUR “LIFE”

- ◆ When you cross the blasted plain as a group, everyone either rolls+DEX to use stealth or +CON to run full out. Those who roll DEX and those who roll CON are treated as separate groups. Each person rolls and earns hold.
 - ▶ On a 10+ hold 2 and take +1 forward; you have hit upon a workable strategy for getting by the behemoths.
 - ▶ On a 7-9 hold 1.
 - ▶ On a 6- your draw the attention of one of the behemoths. If more than one person rolls a 6- there is a chance multiple behemoths will be distracted by, and fight each other. Roll on the Agendas table (below) to determine what each wants.

When you have accumulated hold equal to three times the number of players in your group, you reach the other side.

THE BEHEMOTHS

Behemoths are terrifying, have infinite HP, and do lethal damage if they hit. If a group is brave or foolish enough to attack one and does a truly impressive amount of damage, it may vanish and reform elsewhere on the battlefield.

To determine the appearance of any given behemoth, roll once or twice on the Locomotion table, and then two or three times on the Attributes table; add further bizarre details as needed.

D6 AGENDAS

- 1 A behemoth suddenly turns, looks directly at you, and emits a warble of hatred. It doesn't make sense, but you understand exactly why it has singled you out. Explain!
- 2-3 One of the behemoths attacks your group in a frenzy, it doesn't feel personal. The monster is literally eating souls right and left.
- 4-5 A behemoth has you and a dozen other souls momentarily trapped in a crater. Lose 2 hold.
- 6 A behemoth "escorts" your party as it moves across the plain. A long-forgotten memory flares up in your mind; what did you once do to warrant a god's protection?

D6 LOCOMOTION

- 1 Burrowing
- 2 Crawling, Slithering, or Rolling
- 3-4 Walking
- 5 Hopping or Spinning
- 6 Flying

D20 ATTRIBUTES

- | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------|
| 1 Chain Arms | 11 Elastic |
| 2 Swarm | 12 On Fire |
| 3 Made of Shadow | 13 Reflective |
| 4 Gaseous | 14 Liquid |
| 5 Giant Maw | 15 Two-Dimensional |
| 6 Thousands of Eyes | 16 Gelatinous |
| 7 Translucent | 17 Insectoid |
| 8 Of an Unknown Color | 18 Hairy |
| 9 Toxic Stench | 19 Needle-nosed |
| 10 Spiked | 20 Tentacled |



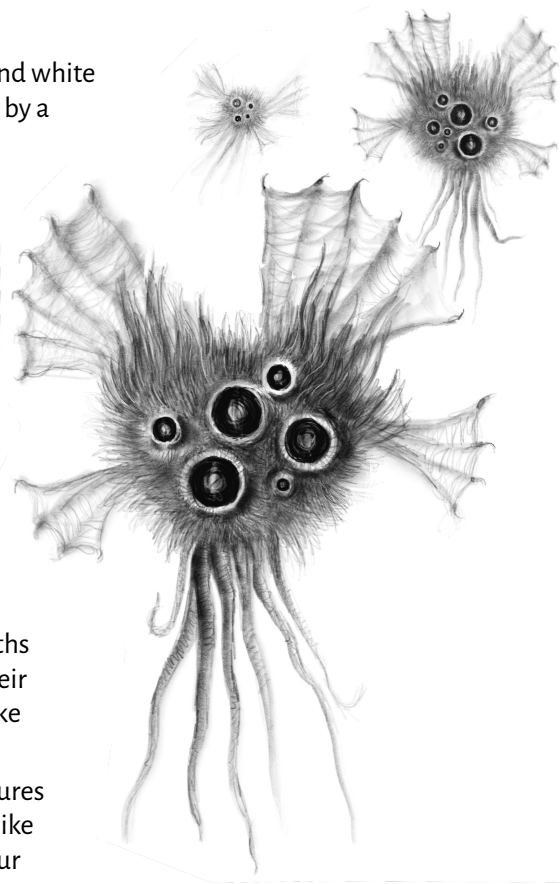


THE ICE FIELD

The final plain is a barren place of bitter cold ice and wind. Very little moves here except the buzzing psychopomps and the dark-robed cenobites. All that remains is to follow the river styx into the well.

IMPRESSIONS

- ◆ Endless, dirty gray ice and white swirling mists, bisected by a channel in which the River Styx flows.
- ◆ An annoying buzzing grows and fades around you, the only interruption to the incredible silence. When you turn to look you catch glimpses of dark, hovering orbs but they remain obscured by the mist.
- ◆ Leafless, tree-like growths slowly wave and curl their tendrils above the ice like giant crinoids.
- ◆ A line of dark-robed figures in bulky fur boots look like they might intersect your course. They seem to be wearing some sort of mask on the lower halves of their faces.
- ◆ Beneath the ice lie the giant shadowy shapes of frozen gods.
- ◆ The river spills into a massive hole in the ground, at least a mile across, when you look into it you see... What? Stars? Colors? Faces? Home?



CREATURES OF THE INNER CIRCLE

The creatures of the final ring are strange beings, passive in a physical sense, but just as deadly as a tiger in a jungle. They pursue prey with a deceptive, slow energy, born of the sureness that they *will* feed! To attack such creatures is largely pointless. The best defense is to keep moving, avoiding them as much as possible.

- ◆ **Psychopomps:** horde, planar, devious, flying. Instinct: to echo. Moves: hover (out of reach) around souls, project target's worst memories, feed on resulting emotions. 3 HP, 0 Armor.
- ◆ **Hell Carrots:** solitary, amorphous, immobile. Instinct: to "comfort." Moves: call to wanderers in the voice of their loved ones, sooth them with tender caresses, cradle them to "sleep." 22 HP, 0 Armor.
- ◆ **Cenobites:** group, mute, intelligent, organized, divine connection. Instinct: to care for the carrots. Moves: give intruders the evil eye, quiet a carrot or wasp with a psionic "lullaby," move quickly on the slippery ice. Psi-blast (d8+2, close), 9 HP, 0 Armor.
- ◆ **Hell Wasp:** solitary, insectoid, flying. Instinct: to harvest nectar. Moves: spitefully sting the living, attack from above. Barb (b[2d6]+2, hand, poison), 7 HP, 3 Armor.

HELL CARROTS

Hell carrots resemble the edible kind only in superficial outline. They quickly grow to lengths of 12-18', with two-thirds of their bulk hidden under the ice. Above the surface are feebly waving tendrils, striped in shades of black, gray, olive green, and ochre. Below is a hard, tapering cylinder with up to three giant, disturbingly-human eyes. The color of the carrot's skin is a dark purple, though it's just a gray blur when seen from above the ice.

Hell carrots feed on wandering souls, which they lure into their tentacles with a soothing psionic call. There they cradle a victim lovingly, while slowly absorbing its energy until nothing is left.

Though planted in patches, only a few carrots survive to their second year, at which time they send up a cluster of white flowers on a twisting stalk. The care and proper pollination of these flowers is the life and obsession of the cenobites, a monastic order of mortal humanoids that only-Death-knows-why is allowed to dwell in this final circle of the dead lands.



As each stamen matures, red, marble-sized grains of pollen are harvested and sorted, traded among tribes and families in a complex war of eugenic breeding. As each stigma opens, the correct grain is selected and married to it in a ritual both sacred and technical. Man-sized masarinae wasps, trained to the flowers' nectar, aid in the pollination and enable trade with distant patches.

The pollen is strangely imperishable, and the cenobites keep genetic archives going back centuries, housed in carved-ice vaults. The carrots themselves never live past their second year.

Humans who eat the pollen become addicted. Their faces take on a stretched look, with lidless eyes that don't blink or sleep. Pollen-eaters all share the same hallucination: a seven-eyed carrot, always just out of view, in the periphery, over the shoulder, unthinkable and unbearable to look at.

The carrots know about this use of their sacred grain, and it is an abomination to them, but there are some who will trade away pollen for aid in their geno-politico schemes. Thieves who come for the pollen should remember: the wasps don't eat meat, they just like killing people.

STARE INTO THE ABYSS

If characters escape Death's clutches and make it to, or are pulled to, the Well of Souls, they will be irresistibly drawn to stare into the abyss.

- ◆ When you stand and look into the Well of Souls, roll+true friends present.
 - ▶ On a 10+ you may turn and walk away. You have looked into the abyss and faced your fears, doubts, regrets ... and you have left them there. From this day forward you are *Dauntless*: immune to the effects of terror, sadness, and doubt. You won't always know what to do, but you will have peace in every decision! You do know one thing, though, you must immediately step back into your body. This is no place for you.
 - ▶ On a 7-9 you are frozen. Someone may pull you away. Eventually, if they don't ...
 - ▶ On a 6-, you step off the ledge.

Let the characters decide what "true friends" and "present" means. If they step off the ledge, consider the possibilities. Is it a tragic but poignant end? Do they find peace in dissolution? Are they somehow reborn? Or is their fate a darker one. This could be the end, or just the beginning.

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*"Did I file that under E for Explosion
or D for Devastating Explosion?
Just give me a minute, please."*



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NEXT ISSUE

Listen kid, the odds are stacked against you. Once you've been down the hole as many times as I have, you know in your bones: the dungeon always wins.

The fools who go out “adventuring” call you a Rusty Sword—an old campaigner mentally and physically scarred by your time in the dungeons. You swore you would never go back down. You escaped your fate by the narrowest of margins, over and over again. Why risk the few years you have left for a couple gold pieces and a case of slime rot? You are too old for this shit!

And yet, here you are. Staring into the mouth of the dungeon, while every fiber of your body is screaming, *run!*

Forced out of retirement for one last mission, you must now put your failing body to the test and face your worst fears in the perilous world below.

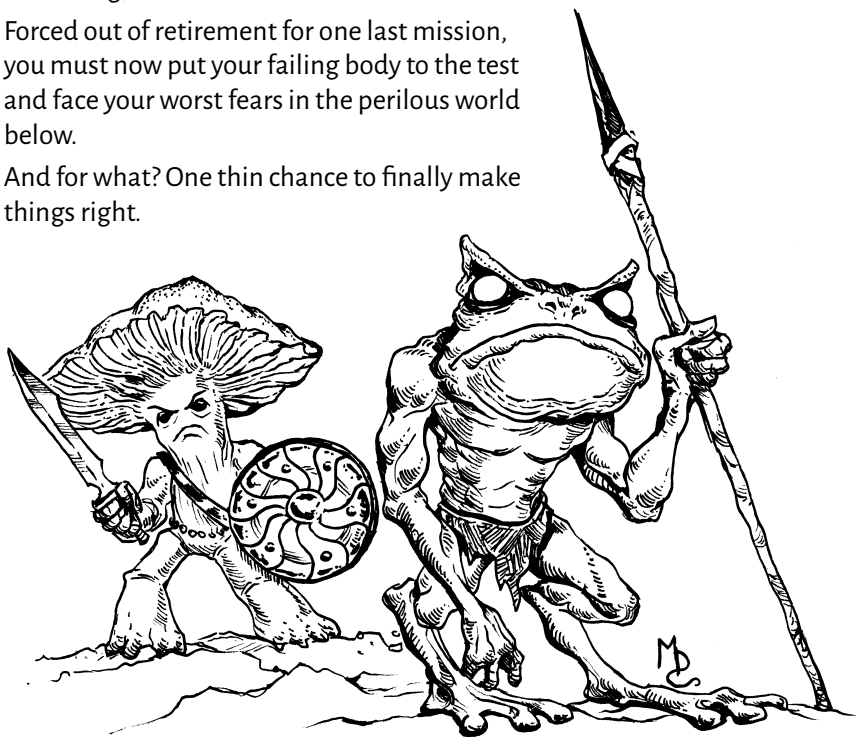
And for what? One thin chance to finally make things right.

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