

LAKE OF DUST

by Steve Winter



LAKE OF DUST

Dedicated to the memory of Terry Pavlet (1956-2022)

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Lake of Dust

Lake of Dust is a 5th Edition adventure for 5th-level characters.

In **Lake of Dust**, characters investigate a dried-up desert lake that long ago was the site of a sahuagin temple complex. The structures were submerged during the age when the temple was in use, but the lake dried out centuries ago when the surrounding countryside died off and became desert. Now the lake holds nothing but dust, the sealed remains of the temple, a clan of nomadic gnolls, and a cursed creature hibernating under the bed of the lake waiting for circumstances to awaken it and call it to vengeance.

This adventure allows characters wide latitude in how they deal with some of its problems, especially with regard to how they approach the savage gnolls. Once characters arrive at the lakebed, they must deal with the gnolls somehow before they can do much of anything else. After that, they're free to explore the caves. Eventually, they'll probably awaken the creature slumbering beneath the sand, which triggers the adventure's climactic showdown between the characters, the monster, and the gnoll clan.

Background

The continental shelf and lightless abysses of the deep ocean are the sahuagins' natural habitat. They swim up rivers only when they're raiding inland settlements for treasure and prisoners. Very rarely, for reasons known only to their priestesses, sahuagin sometimes establish small religious colonies in remote freshwater lakes. The likeliest reason is that the area has (in the sahuagins' minds, anyway) some obscure significance to their bloodthirsty, shark-like deity.

This wasteland wasn't always a desert. Centuries ago, it had rivers, lakes fringed with date palms, and seasonal greenery. The rain petered out, and the lakes and rivers dried up. Now only a few meager, widely spaced oases remain. (If your characters played **The City that Dripped Blood**, they already have some experience with the danger of the Wasteland.)

Sahuagin Language

The language of the sahuagin is impossible for land-dwelling creatures to speak intelligibly without using magic. This isn't because of its complexity — it's relatively simple as languages go — but sahuagin speech consists of vibrations in water instead of air. Human vocal cords are built for pushing air; they can't do much more than create bubbles underwater. Likewise, sahuagin vocal apparatus is next to useless out of water. In a pinch, a sahuagin can make itself understood out of water better than a human can underwater. When sahuagin and humans communicate, it's usually done by both races speaking their own language to members of the other race who understand it, or more commonly through sign language, *comprehend languages*, *telepathy*, or similar magic.

One of those long-gone lakes in the Wasteland was the site of a sahuagin temple-colony. It flourished for centuries at a site where the sahuagin turned three underwater caves into temples dedicated to their shark-like deity, variously known as Seggolak, Theko-ahala, Sselkahalk, and similar names. As the land gradually baked into sere desert, most of the temple's complement of sahuagin retreated to the sea, but a cadre of fanatics refused to abandon the temple. They clung to their sanctum as the water receded, eventually calling on unholy magic to survive the burning sun and choking dust. Even the power of their alchemy and sorcery couldn't stop the river from going dry and the lake from evaporating into a mud hole, then a baked, cracked basin. Their magical protections and talismans did, however, keep the sahuagin themselves alive — but at a cost. They mutated into creatures able to survive in the dusty air that should have seared their gills. Some of them still remain to protect their ancient, abandoned temples.

The lakebed also is home to a clan of caravan-raiding gnolls. They largely avoid the caves ringing their camp, believing (with good

reason) that those dark mouths into the underworld are best left alone.

A third entity also inhabits the ancient lakebed: an immense purple worm that sleeps beneath the dust. It was summoned and put into stasis by the original sahuagin priestesses as a final protective measure against enemies who might attack the shrine after the temple guardians departed. Looting the temple and destroying the ancient sacraments is exactly the sort of thing that triggers the creature to awaken and devour everything in its path.

If your campaign takes place in the Lost Lands, the western Kanderi Desert is a good site for this adventure. We suggest the region southeast of Fort Castrobol.

An interesting possibility might be to run **Lake of Dust** as a flashback adventure set in the wake of the year 2491 I.R. That was when the poles of Boros shifted and caused widespread devastation, including causing the sea to retreat from western Libynos. The sahuagin religious colony survived for a time in a brackish lake, but the desert kept expanding and the lake kept shrinking until only the desiccants could remain.

Hooks

Any of the following hooks can be used to draw characters into **Lake of Dust**.

- ◆ Characters are with a caravan crossing the desert, either as guards or as paying travelers, and the caravan is attacked by gnoll bandits. The attack is driven off without much loss, but some important travelers are captured and carried off. Few fates are worse than falling into the hands of gnolls, so friends of the missing people offer a 3,000 gp reward for their rescue (negotiate this up or down as necessary). One of these friends is a sage who provides the howling skull. This rescue mission leads characters to the gnolls' camp and the temple caves.
- ◆ If you play **The City That Dripped Blood** before this adventure, then residents of Temelpa could mention this abandoned temple to the characters as an old Wasteland legend. The person telling the tale either knows someone who saw the site or might even have seen it first-hand. Alternatively, the gnolls from that adventure could be from this camp and could inadvertently lead characters to it. Players can find or be given the howling skull in Temelpa.
- ◆ Characters are hired by a member of the Collegium Aetheria to accompany them on an expedition into the Wasteland. Familiarize yourself with the Collegium's background in **Appendix B** and start the adventure using "Agents of the Collegium."

Wasteland Trek

Either before characters set out or during the early stage of their trek, make sure they acquire the howling skull (see **Appendix A**).

The former lake is 60 miles from the nearest settlement at the edge of the Wasteland. Characters can reach it after two or three days of travel, depending on their speed, as shown below.

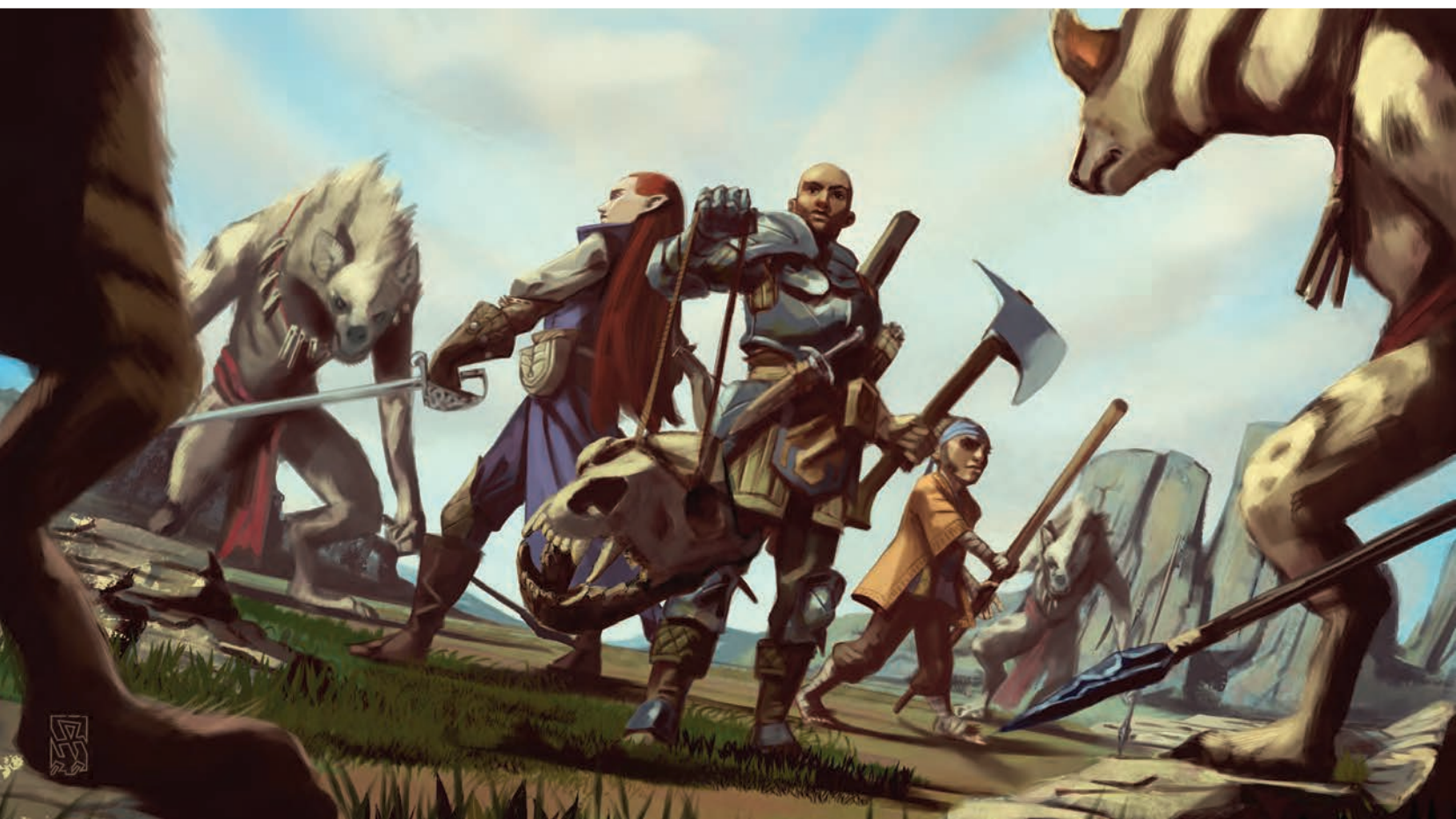
| | | |
|--------------------|---------|----------------------------|
| Slow Pace | 3½ days | can surprise or evade foes |
| Normal Pace | 2½ days | — |
| Fast Pace | 2 days | -5 on Perception checks |

Roll 3d20 for each day the characters travel. A roll of 18, 19, or 20 indicates an encounter, with 18 occurring during the morning, 19 in the afternoon, and 20 in the evening/nighttime. It's possible for two or three encounters to occur during the same part of the day. Overlapping encounters can be combined or staged back-to-back, if you want. A morning or afternoon encounter occurs while the group is on the move, so both the characters and the monsters or NPCs could be surprised. An evening/nighttime encounter is an attack against the party's camp, during which only the characters can be surprised. The Perception penalty for fast travel still applies during nighttime encounters; the characters are tired and doing things in haste, including setting up sentries.

If an encounter occurs, roll 1d12 +1d8 to determine what's met. The encounter's difficulty for a group of four 5th-level characters is indicated in parentheses. An encounter's difficulty can be increased by adding more creatures or by making it an ambush where characters are more likely to be surprised. Unless more than one encounter

occurs per day, don't fret about throwing a hard or deadly encounter at the characters, as they'll have plenty of time to recover before their next battle.

| Roll | Encounter |
|-------|---|
| 2 | Hydra (deadly) |
| 3 | Air elemental (medium) |
| 4 | Earth elemental (medium) |
| 5 | Basilisk x2 (medium) |
| 6 | Hill giant x2 (hard) |
| 7 | Harpy x4 (easy) |
| 8-9 | Goblin x12 + goblin boss (easy) |
| 10 | Giant lizard x10 (easy) |
| 11-12 | Giant scorpions x3 (hard) |
| 13 | Gnoll x8 (easy) |
| 14 | Gnoll x10 + gnoll pack lord (medium) |
| 15 | Gnoll x10 + gnoll pack lord + gnoll fang (hard) |
| 16 | Bandit x10 + bandit captain (easy) |
| 17-18 | Hyena x20 + giant hyena x3 (easy) |
| 19 | Giant wolf spiders x6 (easy) |
| 20 | Salamander + fire snake x5 (deadly) |



First Contact

At some point during the journey, whether or not the dice indicate a random encounter, you should impose Encounter N° 15. If characters are already a bit beaten up or low on resources from a tough encounter earlier in the day, so much the better. These gnolls can't be surprised or ambushed, but the characters can be according to the standard procedures. The gnolls spot the characters quickly and pursue if the characters try to evade.

If an NPC from the Collegium Aetheria is with the characters, that NPC may remind characters about the howling skull before the two sides actually come to blows, if you think it's necessary.

When the gnolls see the skull, they quickly stop howling and surging forward. Several of the foremost exchange a few snarls in Gnoll, then the pack leader steps forward and, in harshly uttered Common, says "We respect the totem. If the smooth-skins have something to say, say it now."

Allow characters no more than a minute to decide what they're going to say to the gnolls. The character with the skull must do the talking; anyone else is ignored.

Exactly what the characters say doesn't matter too much. They might argue that if the two groups fight, many gnolls will be killed and nothing gained; they might be honest about their objective and ask only for safe passage; they might demonstrate the power of their magic; or they could take a different tack entirely. The gnolls just squat and listen, without responding.

If the speaking character presents an argument that a savage gnoll would find persuasive, that's enough for success. If the statement

was weak or wishy-washy, have the character who did the talking make a DC 13 Charisma check, adding whichever proficiency bonus for Deception, Intimidation, or Persuasion is most appropriate to the speech. The character has advantage on the check if the howling skull was on display during the exchange or disadvantage if the argument was especially bad or if characters passed the skull around among themselves as if it were nothing more than a sign of who has the floor. If the check fails, the pack leader snarls something about treacherous outsiders and the gnolls attack. If it succeeds or if you judge the argument to be persuasive, read the following.

Several of the gnolls converse quietly for a few moments, then the biggest, nastiest looking one of the bunch steps forward, weapons in hand. "You may go. Do what you came to do. Kill our rivals if you can, but then leave. The Wasteland is ours. If we meet again, hyenas will feast on your corpses."

These gnolls aren't afraid of the characters. They've simply deduced that the party is headed into the territory of a rival clan, and they're content to let outsiders carve up their foes a bit. They won't make any more trouble for the characters unless the characters become insulting as the two groups part; even gnolls have their limits.

The important lesson you want this encounter to impart to the players is that displaying the skull creates an opening to negotiate boldly with the gnolls of the Wasteland.

Gnoll Camp

The dry lakebed is home to a pack of gnolls that live there because the low ground shelters them against windstorms and from being spotted by creatures and travelers crossing the Wasteland. The gnolls maintain a constant watch from concealed positions around the lake, so characters who approach without taking precautions against being seen (such as traveling at night, using cover or camouflage) are spotted while still at least a mile away. Gnolls aren't especially alert sentries, though, so if characters approach the site stealthily, a successful DC 10 group Dexterity (Stealth) check is all that's needed to reach the edge of the lakebed without being spotted.

Sneaking from the edge of the lakebed down into the gnoll camp itself is more difficult; that takes a successful DC 16 Dexterity (Stealth) check from a lone scout or from the group.

This pack contains **40 gnolls** (adult males and females), **2 pack lords**, a **fang**, 24 noncombatant juveniles, and countless roving **hyenas**. This is enough to overwhelm most parties of 5th-level characters in a stand-up fight. If your players are of the charge-in-without-thinking variety, emphasize the size of the camp and the host of potential enemies they're facing when they get their first look into the camp.

The dry lake bottom hides a semipermanent gnoll camp. A dozen low structures built from stone, hide, and immense bones dot the southern half of the dusty bowl. Gnolls lounge in small patches of shade, gamble with knucklebones, or snarl and snap at each other around torn carcasses and heaps of bones.

Lake of Dust

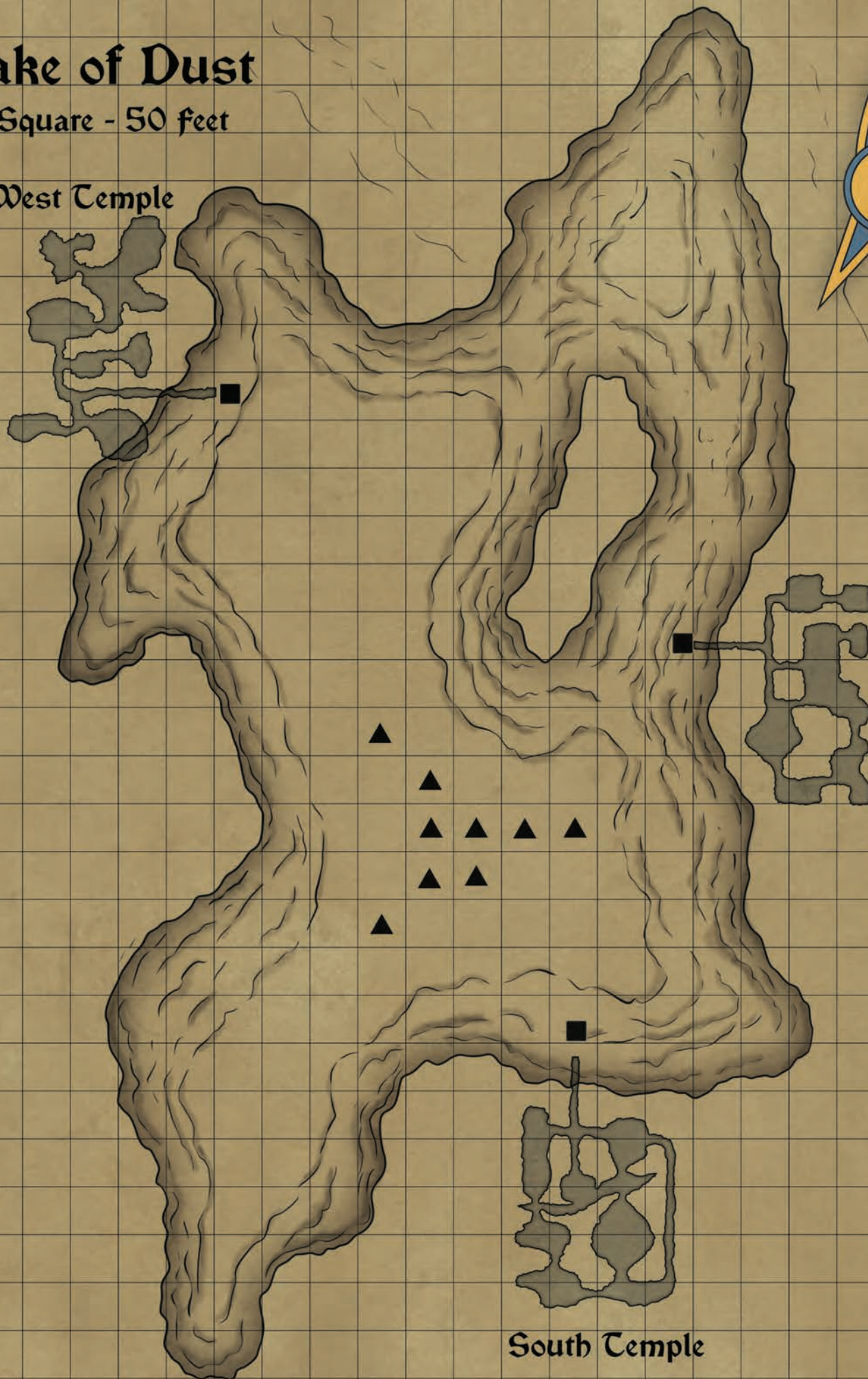
1 Square - 50 feet

West Temple



East Temple

South Temple



A character who makes a successful DC 15 Intelligence (Nature) check can estimate the number of gnolls in the village at 50 to 60. If the check fails, the estimate is either 30–40 gnolls (on an odd roll) or 80–90 (on an even roll).

Characters have several options for dealing with this situation.

Stealth. Characters who reach the lake undetected might decide to stay under cover and search for the caves without being noticed. That's not as crazy as it sounds. Gnolls aren't especially watchful and don't have the Keen Smell of dogs and wolves. They do have darkvision 60 feet, but the lakebed is big enough that characters can easily stay outside that range if they move around at night without lights.

The real risk with this tactic isn't being spotted while characters are moving between caves but their tracks being spotted during the daytime. If characters take no special pains to cover their tracks, there's a 4-in-6 (67 percent) chance each day that a gnoll spots their footprints. If characters try to cover their tracks, have the character with the best Survival bonus make a Wisdom (Survival) skill check each time they make a significant move across the area (such as from one cave to the next). The result of that check becomes the DC for the gnolls' Wisdom (Perception) check that they make each day to notice the tracks. Only one check is made each day, against the lowest of the characters' Survival skill checks if they've made more than one.

If tracks are noticed, the gnolls set an ambush outside whichever cave the characters are in. They won't follow characters into the caves because of their superstitious fear. They'd prefer capturing the intruders over killing them, because prisoners can be sold or kept and tortured to death for amusement before being eaten. The characters' only alternative to fighting their way through (unlikely) is negotiating or buying their way out — or freeing the purple worm and letting it wipe out the gnolls!

Diplomacy. The gnolls are savage killers and sworn enemies of humankind, but they've fought enough furless bipeds to know how dangerous those foes can be, especially if the party contains any apparent spellcasters. If characters brandish the howling skull, the gnolls are willing to negotiate at least until they get a sense of what the characters want and how powerful they are. The gnolls speak only their own language (Gnoll) fluently plus a smattering of pidgin Orc and Giant.

Remember that the skull doesn't influence the gnolls, it only gets them to listen. The key to a successful negotiation is either giving them valuable gifts (magical items, martial weapons, and medium or heavy armor with a total value of at least 300 gp) with a promise of more to come from the caves, or fighting the pack's champion in a one-on-one duel. Both approaches have pros and cons.

Gifts worth at least 300 gp are guaranteed to win a temporary truce with the gnolls. They need to be given more gifts every day worth at least 100 gp or they become hostile. That doesn't mean they attack immediately; they become surly (more than usual) and demand more gifts. Gnolls aren't as impressed with cash or jewels as they are with weapons, armor, and magic. If cash or jewels are included in the gifts, count them at only half their actual value. If characters refuse to give more gifts, the gnolls might attack immediately, but they're more likely to grumble and plan a sneak attack for later. If players grumble about this, point out that they're being allowed to live in the gnolls'

territory, possibly for several days, and gnolls have no tradition of hospitality toward humans but a long tradition of ferocious animosity. For a few hundred gp in gifts, the characters are getting off cheap.

The pack's champion in a **duel** is a **gnoll pack lord**. Weapons and armor are allowed in a duel but must be nonmagical. The gnolls insist no magic of any kind be used; they inspect weapons and armor, watch the characters very closely to prevent any spellcasting or use of potions, and insist that all extraneous jewelry, belts, etc., be removed to ensure there's no cheating. Before the fight begins, the gnoll champion downs a horrid, steaming concoction that causes it to vomit violently. If characters object, the gnolls insist (truthfully) that it's nothing more than a ritual purifier. They refuse to let anyone cast **detect magic** to confirm that because they suspect the character might cast another spell at the same time. They will, however, let the characters' champion drink the same concoction. A non-gnoll who drinks it vomits immediately and must make a successful DC 15 Constitution saving throw or be poisoned for the next hour. A character who drinks it does earn some limited, grudging respect from the gnolls, regardless of whether their saving throw succeeds or fails.

When everyone is ready, conduct the battle with standard combat rules. If the gnoll reduces the character to 0 hit points, it Rampages and bites the unconscious character, inflicting two immediate death saving throw failures for the critical hit. After that, the gnoll backs off and allows characters to stabilize or heal their comrade. If the gnoll drops to 0 hit points, other gnolls rush in to stabilize it before it dies.

Regardless of who wins, as long as the character fought hard and bravely, the party wins some respect from the gnolls. Neither outcome, however, is ideal. If the character lost, the gnolls begin suspecting maybe the characters aren't as tough as they look. That leads to insults, laughter (see "Gnoll Humor"), and possibly an eventual attack. If the character won, the gnoll champion resents being humiliated in front of the pack and, after recovering, urges the pack leader to demand a rematch. They do so on the next day. This time the opponent is a **gnoll fang**. Combat follows the same procedures as before. If the character wins again, the gnolls are intimidated as a pack and, while they're not happy about the situation, they won't give the characters any more problems. If the gnoll wins the second bout, five other gnolls join it in relentlessly taunting the characters. Characters can face down these six gnolls with a successful DC 13 Charisma (Intimidation) check. If the check fails or if they ignore the problem, the gnolls eventually attack. The fight is limited to the **5 gnolls** and the **gnoll fang**; the rest of the pack watches but doesn't join in. Once the gnoll fang is dead or intimidated, this particular problem is resolved.

Magic. *Charm person* and comparable magic can turn a few gnolls into temporary allies. This is guaranteed to backfire, for two reasons. First, once the magic wears off, the gnolls know they were bewitched and that infuriates them. Second, the pack has a strict social hierarchy with the strongest at the top, but any gnoll can be challenged for supremacy at any time. If a leader starts acting in ways that weaken the pack or that look suspiciously as if he or she has fallen under the sway of magic-wielding outsiders, other gnolls turn on them quickly and tear them to pieces. They then turn on the outsiders.

Intimidation. The pack can't be intimidated with a simple skill check. Any attempt to do so leads to a combat challenge as described above.

Gnoll NPCs

Gnolls don't translate their names into Common for the benefit of creatures who don't speak their language. Names are presented here descriptively. You can simply read these names as printed, but it's better if you try to reproduce the sounds as the gnolls would pronounce them and insist characters do the same. Gnolls don't like it when their names are mispronounced, but they also find it hilarious when smooth-skins try to speak like a gnoll.

These are the most important gnolls in the camp. Their tribal structure is matriarchal. Males fill many important roles in the pack, but the pack leader is always female.

[Growl-yip] (gnoll) is the current leader of the pack, but she's aging and slowing down, as evidenced by her gray muzzle and chest. She doesn't trust [growl-howl] the shaman or [growl-growl-pant]; she suspects (rightly) that they're scheming to kill her and take over the pack, and [growl-yip] knows she's no match for [growl-growl-pant] in a fight anymore. [Growl-yip] has no love for outsiders or for smooth-skins, but she'll work with the characters as long as they provide gifts and while she believes they can help against her enemies in the pack.

[Howl-yip-yip-yip] (gnoll pack lord) is [growl-yip]'s bodyguard and protector. She is 100 percent loyal to [growl-yip] and defends the pack leader against any threat. She's also the champion who fights for the pack in a preliminary duel.

[Growl-howl] (gnoll) is the pack's shaman. He has no mystical power beyond his ability to manipulate the pack's countless superstitions, but he's a master at that. [Growl-howl] hates smooth-skins in general and the characters in particular because he believes their presence (and their presents) will upset the balance of power in the pack. He has limited control over [low growl], which is more than anyone else has.

[Growl-growl-pant] (gnoll pack lord) is [growl-yip]'s top rival for control of the pack. She's been waiting for the best moment to challenge [growl-yip] for leadership, and gnolls don't have much patience. The only thing holding her back at this point is [growl-howl]'s advice, but the arrival of the characters could change that. Like most gnolls who are larger and stronger than average, [growl-growl-pant] is a vicious bully and a raging egotist.

[Pant-whine] (gnoll) is the pack clown and [growl-yip]'s jester — a thankless and dangerous job, but vital nonetheless. Alone among the gnolls, [pant-whine] sees the bigger picture and tries to make [growl-yip] aware of it. He is the best possible ally for the characters among the gnolls if they want to understand what's really going on in the pack, and he pesters them with questions — very intelligent and probing questions, but seemingly endless — about their intentions and about the world beyond the Wasteland. [Pant-whine] knows that [growl-howl] and [growl-growl-pant] are plotting a coup. Obviously, [growl-yip] can't run the pack forever, but [pant-whine] will do almost anything to prevent [growl-growl-pant] from seizing leadership.

[Low growl] (gnoll fang) is [growl-howl]'s "secret weapon." Only [growl-howl], [growl-growl-pant], and their most loyal supporters in the pack know of his existence. He's kept hidden in the eastern



cave but is set loose once [growl-growl-pant] takes over the pack. [Low growl] is basically a murder machine on standby. When he thinks at all, he thinks about killing. He's been told to stay in his cave, so he stays, but no one told him not to kill whatever falls within his grasp.

Gnoll Humor

Gnolls are cruel, bloodthirsty, and diabolical, but that doesn't mean they don't enjoy a good laugh. Unfortunately, the things they laugh at are also cruel, bloodthirsty, and diabolical. Most of their jokes are practical, and the funniest ones always end with blood, broken bones, severed ears, and chipped teeth.

If the characters spend much time among the pack, they'll see vicious pranks being inflicted on weaker gnolls and as outsiders, they'll fall prey to such jokes themselves. They might retire in the evening to find their blankets crawling with venomous ants or awaken and find their boots lined with razor-sharp thorns that slice their feet to ribbons. The gnolls find these things hilarious, and the more the smooth-skins scream or fuss, the funnier it becomes.

No amount of complaining can make the situation better. The complainer only makes himself or herself look weak and a more inviting target for increasingly vicious pranks. The best way to get the gnolls to ease off is to strike back with pranks that draw as much blood and inflict even more pain and injury. The only way to not be picked on by gnolls is to make them believe you'll hit back harder than you were hit.

What the Gnolls Know About the Temples

The gnolls are aware that the three caves around the lakebed lead into ancient temples, and they're superstitiously terrified of them. They never enter the caves, except for the occasional cub who dashes a few yards through an entrance to prove its courage to its companions.

They do believe, however, that the caves contain far more treasure than they actually hold. Gnolls suspect characters are lying if they claim the caves contain little treasure.

Because the gnolls fear the temples, they have no names for them (and wouldn't speak such names aloud if they did have them). They refer to the temples only as "stone gullets" and indicate a particular one by pointing in its vague direction.

Inside the Temples

The only light inside any of the temples is what characters bring with them. The East Temple reeks like an animal den. The West and South Temples haven't been opened to fresh air for many decades, and the desiccants' *airy water* makes them stink of saltwater and rotting fish.

Unnumbered chambers are empty.

Corridors

Unlike most dungeons with squarish corridors, the tunnels in these temples are roughly circular in cross-section, like sewer pipes. The lake was full of water when sahuagin occupied it; they didn't need level or smooth floors because they swam everywhere through their temples. Unless noted otherwise, all floors in all three temples are difficult terrain for walking creatures.

The circular tunnels aren't a problem for creatures walking and fighting in single file down the center. Creatures that try to fight side-by-side, as they normally would in 10-foot-wide dungeon corridors, are unbalanced by the curving floor; they have a -2 penalty on their attack rolls, Dexterity ability checks, and Dexterity saving throws. This applies only in 10-foot corridors, not in chambers, which have more-or-less level (but not smooth) floors.

Characters proficient in Acrobatics aren't affected by the -2 penalty on rolls but the floors are still difficult terrain for them.

Slopes

Some squares of the map are marked with arrows. These indicate spots where the tunnel or the floor slopes down at a 30-degree angle, so the lower end is about six feet below the level of the upper end. This is a steep slope, about the same as a typical flight of stairs but with no steps to give secure footing. Characters walking up or down at full speed must make a successful DC 8 Dexterity (Acrobatics) check; failure means a fall that lands them in a heap at the bottom, along with everyone else who was below them on the slope. Characters can avoid the check by moving carefully (halving their speed again, in addition to the penalty for difficult terrain). You need to enforce these penalties only during a fight. Outside of a combat situation, they serve mainly to help set the scene.

Airy Water

The West and South temples are flooded with an alchemical vapor — *airy water* — that allows the sahuagin desiccants to live in the dry tunnels. Water-breathing creatures can breathe in *airy water* the same as they breathe in water. If it's concentrated enough, creatures can even swim in it (treat a swim speed as a fly speed). Some of the temples' sahuagin occupants have jugs of concentrated *airy water* they can smash to increase the concentration in an area.

Airy water is a problem for air-breathing creatures; they can drown in it! The vapor collects in low spots the same way water would, so the danger increases as characters descend into the temples. Each time a character moves downward across a dotted line on the maps of the West or South temples, he or she must make a DC 15 Constitution saving throw. Each character makes just one saving throw for crossing a particular line, the first time the line is crossed, and its outcome remains in effect until the character completes a long or short rest. Success means their situation doesn't get any worse until they descend farther and must make another saving throw. Failure has these effects:

| Failure | Effect |
|-------------------------|--|
| 1 st failure | Creature feels as if it is breathing through a wet blanket; no other effect. |
| 2 nd failure | Creature struggles to breathe; has disadvantage on attack rolls and ability checks. |
| 3 rd failure | Creature is drowning; unless it was holding its breath when the saving throw was failed, it can survive a number of rounds equal to its Con modifier (minimum of 1); after that, it drops to 0 hit points and is dying. It can breathe again if it moves back to a higher area where its saving throw succeeded. See the standard rules on suffocation for more details. |

Penalties persist until a creature completes a short or long rest in clear air. Drinking a *potion of water breathing* renders a creature immune to *airy water* while the potion is in effect and wipes out any ongoing negative effects from failed saving throws against *airy water* that occurred previously.

East Temple

1 Square - 10 feet



East Temple

Unknown raiders opened and looted this temple long before the gnolls arrived. Superstition keeps most of the gnolls away, which makes it easier for [growl-howl] to use the chambers for his own devious purposes. All the gnolls know [growl-howl] spends time in this cave, but only [growl-growl-pant] knows fully what he's up to.

[Growl-howl] houses [low growl] here, along with several hyenas and a few adult gnolls that were created from those hyenas. By feeding [low growl]'s kills to selected hyenas, [growl-howl] is creating a cadre of gnolls that are fanatically loyal to him alone. He's proceeding at a slow and cautious pace lest others in the clan figure out what's going on. With a dozen or more bloodthirsty, feral killers behind him, [growl-howl] believes he can tip the balance in the clan's power struggle however he chooses — which will be in his favor, of course.

Even if characters have no interest in the clan's politics, forgotten corners of this temple still hold items they'll find beneficial when they explore the other two temples.

Unless characters made a point of entering this area while [growl-howl] was somewhere else, he'll be here. Even if they made sure he was somewhere else when they entered, [growl-howl] is likely to come back while characters are ransacking his lair; the wily shaman has a sixth sense about that sort of thing.

If much fighting happens in this section, and especially if [growl-howl] is killed, it won't be long before the rest of the clan finds out. Gnolls have keen noses for the scent of blood. [Growl-growl-pant] pounces on [growl-howl]'s death as a chance to stir up the clan against [growl-yip]'s weak leadership. If the characters made contact with the gnolls, they'll be blamed for the death regardless of evidence.

In that event, their only chance to avoid being immediately attacked by the whole pack is to describe (quickly and in simple terms!) what [growl-howl] was up to. (The skull might help them be heard.) Using the kills of a gnoll fang to create new gnolls without the knowledge and consent of the pack is a serious breach of clan "law." [Pant-whine] points this out to the characters if he has the chance, or quietly plants the question in [growl-yip]'s ear if he can't reach the characters. Revealing [growl-howl]'s crime gains characters the support of [growl-yip] and about two-thirds of the pack, which is enough to force [growl-growl-pant] to back down — and intensifies his hatred for the characters even more.

Entryway

A character who makes a successful DC 18 Intelligence (History) check sees a similarity between the carvings on the doorframe and the glyphs used by sahuagin, but they're too worn and unfamiliar to be interpreted. A character who makes a successful DC 18 Intelligence (Religion) check recognizes symbols that represent the sahuagins' shark deity. *Comprehend languages* provides no help because the carvings aren't a message; they're just decorative pictograms.

A doorway is set into the sloping ground of the old lakebed. The opening is roughly circular and about eight feet in diameter. Carvings in an obscure, unfamiliar style adorn the stone doorframe.

Chunks of shattered stone that must have been the former doors lie on the ground, half-buried in sand and gravel. The remnants show the doors were nearly a foot thick when intact. They were either burst open from the inside or pried open and then broken into fragments. Judging from the weathering on the fragments, it happened too long ago for any clues to remain as to which it was.

The scent of animals is strong near the entrance, like the smell from a bear or wolf den. The tunnel beyond is roughly circular in cross-section, like a pipe, rather than being squared off with a flat floor like a typical mine or other human excavation; it might be tricky footing in a fight.

There's no *airy water* in this portion of the old temple.

1. Gnoll and Hyena Den

The exact placement of the 6 **hyenas** and 4 **gnolls** in these two chambers is up to you.

Gnawed bones and scraps of rotting meat litter the floor. Half-a-dozen hyenas wrestle over the scraps while four gnolls watch from the shadows.

Although these gnolls are indistinguishable from any other adult gnolls, they were transformed from hyenas less than a month ago by [growl-howl]. In terms of intellect and self-control, they're barely more than hyenas now. [Growl-howl] provided these gnolls with spears but no bows or shields yet.

The hyenas are wary if strangers enter the chamber, but the gnolls see only prey; they attack the moment they see an opportunity. Once a fight starts, the hyenas join in. These creatures don't spread out their attacks but prefer to gang up on injured foes without mercy. The hyenas in particular continue attacking a creature even when it's at 0 hit points, hoping to drag it away from the group and get a head start on eating it. Unless someone steps in to protect or heal a fallen ally, a character who drops to 0 hit points is in mortal danger here.

2. [Growl-howl]'s Den

Bones and filth are scattered across the floor of this den, but so are books, writing implements, and a random assortment of laboratory gear. The room is lit by a pale, eerie light from softly glowing, wolf-like skulls hanging on the walls.

As noted above, unless characters purposefully entered this cave when they knew [growl-howl] was elsewhere, they encounter him here (unless he was drawn to an earlier fight somewhere else). [Growl-howl] isn't such a fool that he'd attack a party of heavily-armed adventurers — at least not by himself.

But he's not by himself here: **[Low growl]** is next door in **Area 4**; **hyenas** and feral gnolls are in **Area 1**; and 5 **ancestor skulls** (see **Appendix A**) are perched around this chamber. [Growl-howl] tries to keep the characters talking while his minions creep into position for a surprise attack. Even if they've befriended [growl-yip], the shaman knows that if he kills the intruders in his own den, no one in the clan will challenge the rightness of it. Better yet, that would make [growl-yip] look weak and further undermine her authority.

The books, writing implements, and laboratory gear were looted from caravans crossing the Wasteland or taken from doomed travelers who fell into the gnolls' clutches. [Growl-howl] speaks no language but Gnoll, and he can't read or write a word of anything (there is no written form of Gnoll). The shaman believes the writings have innate power that he might unlock if he stares at them long enough. Around the corners of the chamber are books and scrolls torn to pieces in frustration when they refused to surrender their secrets. All these items are too badly damaged by [growl-howl]'s mishandling to be worth anything.

The formula for making ancestor skulls is the only bit of real arcane power [growl-howl] ever mastered. He pried the secret from a captive necromancer through torture.

3. Hyena Nursery

Eight hyena cubs and one nursing female hyena appear to be the only occupants of this large but filthy pit.

Filth, bits of tattered cloth, and gnawed bones are the only things here besides the eight hyena cubs and their **hyena** mother. The mother fights if her cubs are attacked. Otherwise, they have little interest in anything besides eating, sleeping, and tussling over bones. Someone with proficiency in Animal Handling might be able to raise a few cubs and train them to obey simple commands, but they'll never be "tamed" like a dog or cat.

4. [Low growl]'s Den

Unless characters are exploring this cave while [growl-howl] is elsewhere, they've probably already met and dealt with [low growl] by the time they reach this chamber. If he's still here, then include the bracketed paragraph when you read the following. If he's not, omit that paragraph.

This portion of the cave is repulsive even by the standards of a gnoll's den. Filth is smeared into deep claw marks on the walls; thickened blood stands in puddles crawling with maggots; and splinters of bone and scraps of fur are strewn everywhere, most appearing to be the remains of hyenas or even gnolls.

[Crouched across the chamber, barely perceptible in the shadow near the wall, is the hulking shape of a gnoll. Even squatting on its haunches, you can see it's taller, bulkier, and more feral looking than other gnolls. Chains are anchored to the wall, but you can't see whether the creature's wrists or ankles are shackled.]

The remains of a weird and unfamiliar machine are pushed against the wall. It's badly smashed, but you can still see its construction is unlike anything you've seen before. It was built entirely from seashells, shark leather, fish bones, and other material from the sea. Whatever it did, it's too badly mangled now to reveal much.

If he's here, [low growl] isn't shackled. The chains kept him restrained during the first savage days of his existence, when he would have torn anyone apart and eaten them, including [growl-howl].

Alternative Staging. If characters came here while [growl-howl] is gone, [low growl] might be shackled to the wall — for his own protection (to keep him from wandering outside) as well as the safety of the other gnolls and hyenas. Even shackled, he isn't helpless. The chains allow him to reach most of the chamber but not to leave it. He's wily enough to try to make intruders think the chains are short so he can lure them into his reach. In that case, he'll grapple someone with one arm and try to keep them pinned while biting and clawing with his free arm.

The machine is an *airy water* generator identical to the ones in the West and South temples, except this one is smashed beyond repair. Characters can't learn much from it because of its condition.

5. Nonfunctioning Portal

In the furthestmost portion of an otherwise bare chamber, you see a dim, twinkling blue luminescence. The glow isn't steady or consistent but comes and goes. Even when it's visible, the light is never more than a flicker — perhaps it's only the suggestion of light rather than actual illumination, a trick played by pressure on the eye.

Otherwise, the chamber contains nothing but scattered rubbish: bones, bits of hide, seashells, and strings of multicolored pebbles.

The flickering light is all that remains of a teleportal constructed by the sahuagin when the lake was filled with water. This portal connected to **Area 3** in the South Temple. It malfunctioned long ago, and the sahuagin desiccants don't have the know-how to put it back in working order.

If characters study the lights for at least five minutes, they realize the flickering always appears in a roughly circular area about eight feet in diameter and a few inches from the rock wall. Players might conclude on their own it's a dead portal; if they want confirmation of that idea, a successful DC 11 Intelligence (Arcana) check provides it. If they offer no ideas of their own but simply want the dice to do all the work for them, a successful DC 18 Intelligence (Arcana) check is needed. In neither case do they get any information about where this portal led. It's entirely unusable in its current state.

Treasure. Characters who spend a few minutes poking through the rubbish tossed around on the floor are rewarded with a coral and pearl idol of Sekolah (250 gp), a dagger with a narwhal-tusk handle (50 gp, but also a unique item of the sort people notice and comment on), two small jars of aromatic ambergris (100 gp each), 1d3 *potions of water breathing*, and three intact necklaces made from fish bones and pearls (250 gp each). A *detect magic* spell reveals extremely mild conjuration magic on the necklaces. They are keys that allow characters to use the functioning portals in the West and South temples.

West Temple

During the waning days of the sahuagin in the complex, the West Temple was used primarily for tormenting prisoners in ways that would fill the ears of Seggolak with the pleasing sound of their shrieks and cries for mercy. Some remnants of that function remain as clues for the characters.

More importantly, the teleportal between this temple and the South Temple still functions. It's the only way to get into the South Temple short of tunneling through the massive stone seal blocking the entrance. Of greater immediate concern is the fact that sahuagin desiccants use the portal to travel between the two temples, and some of them are present here and ready to ambush characters as they explore.

The entrance appears tightly sealed from a distance, but characters who approach within 100 feet (40 feet if viewing in dim light) see that, in fact, the seal is broken and the door is slightly cracked open. A Small or Tiny creature can slip through with ease. It's a tight squeeze but passable for Medium characters unless they're in rigid armor such as plate; that needs to be stripped off and passed through in pieces, then re-donned inside. Nothing Large or

larger can fit through without a special ability for slipping through tight spaces.

A doorway is set into the sloping ground of the old lakebed. The opening is roughly circular and about eight feet in diameter. Carvings in an obscure, unfamiliar style adorn the stone doorframe.

The door is made from a single, circular stone slab. Sometime in the distant past, someone forced the massive door open using wedges and levers. The door is slightly ajar along the right side. The gap is narrow, but you probably can squeeze through into the inky darkness beyond.

The door can't be opened any wider except with big levers (activity that certainly would be noticed by the gnolls) or by someone with a Strength of at least 20. Several weaker characters, even working together, can't budge it.

West Temple

1 Square - 10 feet



1. Bulette's Den

The ceiling of this chamber is roughly hemispherical, but the floor is pitted with rubble-filled craters three or four feet in diameter. Crushed bones of desert gazelles, camels, and even gnolls are scattered across the area. The chamber smells strongly of dust and rotting meat.

This chamber and the smaller one directly west of it are occasionally used by a roving **bulette** as a place to store half-eaten carcasses. It's best if the bulette isn't present when the first characters arrive, so it can burst in on them by surprise later. The bulette always tunnels into the chamber from below, so its tunnels tend to fill in behind it, for the most part. It never tunnels in through the ceiling lest that cause the chamber to collapse.

The bulette's vicious jaws leave behind nothing that isn't crushed and twisted into junk, but you can include one or two small gems or durable magic items such as rings or brooches if the characters need some bolstering with minor magic. Nothing of significant value should be here, though.

2. Empty Chamber

This chamber is empty except for clouds of pale, blue mist that roll out of the tunnel in the opposite wall. That tunnel slopes sharply upward to the east. The blue mist carries a strong smell of the sea, and it produces a distinctly heavy, unpleasant feeling in your chest when you get a lungful of it.

Characters don't need to make Constitution saving throws when they enter this chamber, but it's probably their introduction to **airy water**. Be sure they understand the fumes are unpleasant to breathe but don't liken them to drowning — yet.

3. Fume Generator

The fumes of **airy water** that allow the sahuagin desiccants to breathe in this serene environment are generated here by an alchemical machine. Because this chamber is higher than most other parts of the temple, the air here is generally clear and breathable; all the fumes flow down into **Areas 2, 4, 5, and 6**.

The machine can easily be wrecked; all it takes is characters declaring their intention to do so. Once its crystal tubes and seashell components are smashed, fumes stop drifting out of the machine. It still takes 48 hours for the **airy water** already in the temple to evaporate to the point where land creatures can breathe normally in these tunnels.

A machine of a weird and unfamiliar type sits in this room. Its construction is unlike anything you've seen, being built from seashells, shark leather, fish bones; in fact, everything in it appears to have come from the sea. The machine is clearly operating; it hisses softly, plate-sized structures open and close slowly like bellows (or gills), and turquoise mist wafts out of it.

Shelves and small tables laden with bowls, decanters, and other containers are behind the machine.

The bowls and decanters contain alchemical ingredients needed by the machine. An alchemist can identify them, and their connection to the machine should be fairly obvious to anyone. The **airy water** concoction is unique to the sahuagin, so simply examining the ingredients and the machine doesn't teach the alchemist how to make **airy water** or how to replicate the machine. That secret is known only to the sahuagin priests.

A **black pudding** lurks in the shadows around the corners of the room. It attacks when characters are distracted examining the machine and the ingredients.

Treasure. The alchemical ingredients are worth 50 gp to an alchemist.

4. Torture Chamber

Seggolak thirsts for blood, and the sahuagin have always done their best to sate their deity's worst aspects. Ages ago, when the lake and rivers brimmed with water and the Wasteland saw many travelers, that was easy. Now the travelers are gone, and the sahuagin are reluctant to kidnap sacrifices from among the gnolls lest they stir the clan to anger. Now Seggolak's altars seldom taste blood more often than once every year or two. Adventurers creeping into the sanctum aren't simply intruders; they're an opportunity.

The mist is thicker here, but through it you can see this chamber is different from any you've entered so far. The walls, ceiling, and floor are all decorated, either with mosaics of multicolored stones and shells or with deep etchings in the stone. The carvings and inlays appear to tell a story, but the artistic symbols and abstractions are so alien that interpreting it may be impossible. Two things stand out: images of humans and humanoids being savaged by fish-like creatures, and images of immense sharks that loom over every scene.

There's no mistaking, however, the shattered furniture that remains here. Aside from a few containers made from crab and lobster shell, and jars of obviously human manufacture, everything else is implements of torture.

A character with proficiency in Investigation or Nature, or a dwarf with Stonecunning, who examines the etchings in the stone recognizes that they were made with powerful acid like that of a black pudding.

The etchings and mosaics portray the history of the temple from its earliest days until a few years after the lake dried up. A character who spends at least 10 minutes studying the art and makes a successful DC 13 Intelligence (History) check learns the following:

- ◆ The lake was an important religious site to the sahuagin, who worshipped a shark-like figure with immense appetite and anger;
- ◆ Three temples were excavated from natural underwater caves around the lake;
- ◆ The sahuagin raided the surrounding territory for loot and sacrificial victims;
- ◆ When the lake dried up, most of the sahuagin retreated to the sea, but a handful of zealous temple guards remained behind;
- ◆ The guards who remained submitted to horrific, magical alterations to their bodies so they could live in the now waterless lake.

Any character with proficiency in Religion knows the sahuagins' deity is Seggolak (or Theko-a-hala), a monstrous shark that's drawn to blood and that devours any animal it can catch in the water, including sahuagin. Seggolak worshippers are known to force their victims to drink *potions of water breathing* so they won't drown before they can be slowly bled to death — or eaten alive.

Treasure. Among the clay jars and oddly shaped containers made from crustacean shells, characters can find 1d4 +1 *potions of water breathing*. The three intact crustacean containers are unusual enough to be worth 250 gp each to a collector of oddities or aquatic art. Unfortunately, they're quite fragile. Unless special steps are taken to protect them (i.e., if they're just tossed into someone's pack), roll 1d6 for each shell container at the end of the adventure; on a roll of 1–4, it's trashed.

5. Sahuagin Ambush

This chamber's original purpose no longer matters. Several sahuagin desiccants are here. They weren't aware of the characters' presence at the dried-up lake until moments ago, but they quickly prepare to ambush the intruders.

Drifting vapor is thick in this chamber; at a glance, it's difficult to see how large the area is. The walls, ceiling, and floor are rough and irregular, making movement awkward. The floor is covered in a layer of what looks like coarse salt. A smell of salt, stale water, and dried fish fills your nostrils.

The entire area is difficult terrain for movement on foot. Objects more than 15 feet away are obscured by the vapors of *airy water*. They can be glimpsed as the vapors drift and part momentarily, but the whole area should be considered no more than dimly illuminated no matter what sort of light source the characters have.

The room contains **sahuagin desiccants** equal in number to the characters. They're spread throughout the chamber, lurking in niches and around corners. They try to launch their attack when

about half the party enters the chamber, with an eye toward surrounding and overwhelming that group quickly.

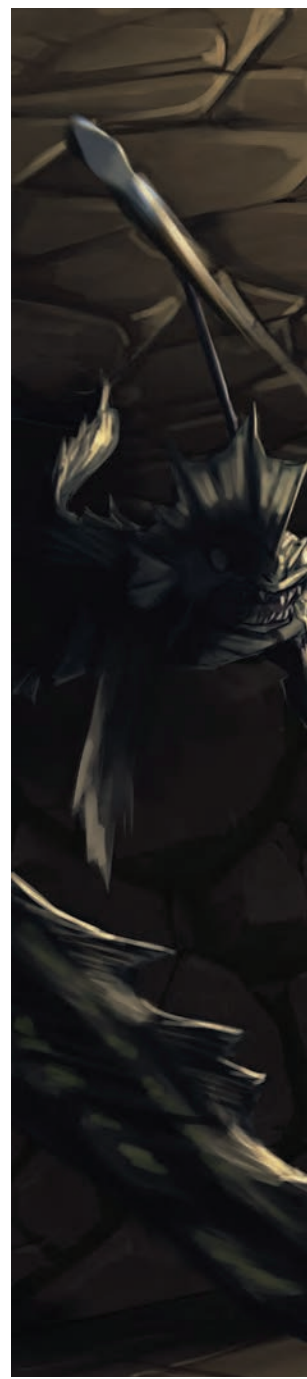
The first thing that happens when the ambush is sprung is that two sahuagin desiccants use bonus actions to smash large jugs of *airy water*. This dramatically increases the density of *airy water* in the chamber, with the following effects:

- ◆ Air-breathing creatures that are in the room when the jugs are smashed must make another DC 15 Constitution saving throw against its effect, the same as if they'd just descended into a lower room. Air-breathing creatures that enter the chamber for the first time after the jugs are smashed make this saving throw with disadvantage.
- ◆ Creatures can swim through the air. The sahuagins' swim speed gives them a distinct advantage here. Characters can also swim through the *airy water*, but those without a swim speed do so at half their normal speed.
- ◆ It effectively turns this encounter into an underwater combat (see "Underwater Combat" in the standard rules), with all the standard penalties on underwater weapon attacks.
- ◆ Breathing here is painful but characters can still do it, subject to any penalties imposed on them by failed Constitution saving throws.
- ◆ *Airy water* activates the corrosive salt previously scattered across the floor by the sahuagin. Any creature that starts its turn in contact with the floor takes 1d6 acid damage. This won't be much more than a nuisance to characters — until they're reduced to 0 hit points and sink to the floor, at which point the damage causes them to automatically fail one death saving throw at the start of each of their turns.

Potions of water breathing allow characters to avoid penalties from breathing *airy water* but don't give characters a swim speed or remove the penalties for underwater combat. If characters are already weakened by failed saving throws against *airy water*, this is a potentially lethal encounter; doubly so because the sahuagin pursue intruders all the way back to the entrance. Outside this chamber, however, swimming through the air isn't possible for anyone and standard combat rules prevail, not underwater combat.

If the battle turns decidedly against the sahuagin, the last survivors might retreat into **Area 6** and escape through the portal to the South Temple. In that case, sahuagin in the South Temple are alerted, making that area more dangerous for intruders.

Treasure. Each of the sahuagin desiccants wears a necklace made of fishbones and pearls that acts as a key for the portal in **Area 6**. The fragile articles may be damaged during the



battle. Roll any die for each sahuagin desiccant killed in the fighting; on an odd result, its necklace is destroyed. *Detect magic* reveals weak conjuration magic on the necklaces.

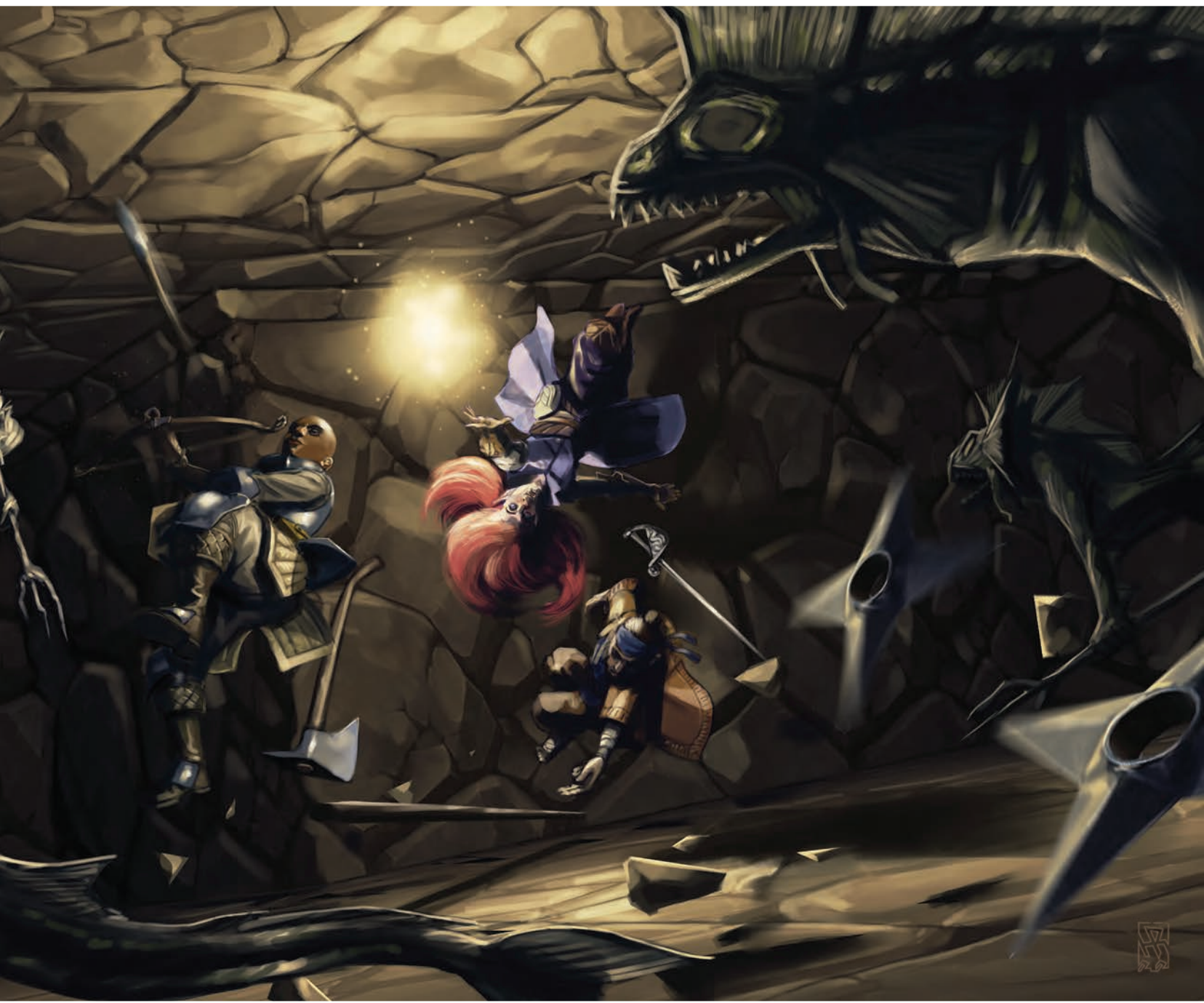
6. South Temple Portal

The only functioning portal into the South Temple is in this chamber. The circle of light is a magical portal that leads directly to **Area 1** in the South Temple. The portal works only for a creature that's wearing a fishbone necklace/portal key. Necklace/keys can be found here, in **Area 5**, and in the East Temple. A creature that touches the shimmering light while wearing a necklace/key instantly teleports to a space adjacent to the portal in **Area 1** of the South Temple. "Testing the water" by extending a hand through the portal, or only poking your head through, is impossible; touch the light in any way

The first thing to grab your attention in this irregular, natural cavern is a circle of shimmering, pearlescent light. The circle is eight feet in diameter. It floats a foot above the floor with a gap as wide as a hand between it and the southern wall. The object glows faintly in shades of ivory, soft gray, and milky white that slowly migrate and swirl across the surface without ever mingling.

Elsewhere in the chamber are a few containers made of abalone, bone, and clay, but no furniture.

and you teleport. On the other hand, to creatures without a necklace/key, the portal is nothing but a disk of shimmering luminescence. They can touch it, reach through it, or even step through it, and nothing happens at all.



The portals work in both directions. Characters in **Area 1** of the South Temple can return here by touching that portal while wearing a necklace/key.

Treasure. The containers in this chamber hold a total of 1d3 + 2 *potions of water breathing* (or enough to provide each character with

one potion, if you prefer), two fishbone-and-pearl necklaces/portal keys, a few humanoid skulls and various other trophy bones, and *the mermaid's caress* (see **Appendix A**).



South Temple

A doorway is set into the sloping ground of the old lakebed. The opening is roughly circular and about eight feet in diameter. Carvings in an obscure, unfamiliar style adorn the stone doorframe.

The door is made from a single, circular stone slab of unknown thickness. The slab is cemented into place. If it was ever meant to open, it certainly doesn't anymore.

The entrance is tightly sealed, exactly as the sahuagin shut it up when the lake dried out. Nothing has gone in or out through this doorway for centuries. A dwarf with Stonecunning or any character with a mining background can tell this doorway won't be opened without days of excavation.

Airy Water Fumes. Because this temple is the primary sanctuary and home of the sahuagin desiccants, *airy water* is denser here than in the West Temple. Its effects on breathing are the same as elsewhere, but the drifting vapor in this temple limits visibility to 15 feet. Unless noted otherwise, anything more than 15 feet from a viewer should be considered invisible. Also, any creature with a swim speed can swim through the air everywhere in this temple. Creatures that know how to swim but don't have a specified swim speed (*i.e.*, most characters) can't do this.

The Abyss. Running through the temple is a deep crevasse that cleaved it apart long ago. At any given point, the abyss is (1d6 + 7) x 10 feet deep. It's completely filled with *airy water* that makes it impossible to see the bottom (or more than the uppermost 10 feet, really). The thick *airy water* in the crevasse makes this a comfortable place for desiccated creatures. All the sahuagin desiccants in this temple are resting along the bottom of this abyss when characters enter the temple. Anything that can swim through *airy water* can travel along the crevasse from chamber to chamber; it's the sahuagins' preferred route for getting around.

The layout of this chamber is somewhat like a swimming pool. The north side where characters arrive is the shallow end. The floor slopes downward sharply toward the south end of the room. The *airy water* vapor conceals the slopes, so characters might stumble when they step off the first ramp. That alone doesn't present any danger so no saving throw is needed, but characters should realize that if they continue walking toward the south, they'll soon be completely enveloped in the turquoise mist.

You're in a chamber that resembles a natural cavern, but the dimensions are a little too regular for it to be completely natural. Pale, turquoise mist wafts through the air. The vapor is thin near you, but it becomes much thicker toward the opposite end of the chamber.

The characters aren't alone here. Swimming through the mist are 5 **desiccated reef sharks** and 1 **desiccated hunter shark**. These are identical to standard reef sharks and hunter sharks except they can swim and breathe in any amount of *airy water* the same as if they're underwater. From the top of the first ramp to the south wall, the chamber is heavily obscured by *airy water*. Creatures can see other creatures within five feet of themselves but are blind beyond that distance. In addition to hindering ranged attacks, wizards can't sculpt *fireballs* and other spells around allies they can't see.

The south end of the chamber opens into the abyss. Characters exploring this area are effectively blinded by the dense *airy water*. If the lead character probes ahead with a pole or similar tool, they find the edge automatically. Otherwise, the first character to explore along the south wall must make a successful DC 13 Dexterity saving throw or slip over the edge and fall to the bottom of the abyss. A character with passive Perception of 16 or higher makes this saving throw with advantage.

The lowest level of this chamber (adjacent to the chasm) is at the same level as **Area 7** in case anyone tries to jump across.

1. West Temple Portal

The only practical way into this temple is through the portal at **Area 6** in the West Temple. Characters who travel through that portal appear here, about five feet in front (south) of the shimmering disk in this chamber, which is identical to the one in the West Temple.

2. Fume Generator

The fumes of *airy water* flooding this temple are generated by an alchemical machine here. If characters have already seen the identical machine in the West Temple, simply tell them this one's the same and skip the first read-aloud paragraph.

South Temple

1 Square - 10 feet



A machine of a weird and unfamiliar type sits in this room. Its construction is unlike anything you've seen, being built from seashells, shark leather, fish bones; in fact, everything in it appears to have come from the sea. The machine is clearly operating; it hisses softly, plate-sized structures open and close slowly like bellows (or gills), and pale, turquoise mist wafts out of it.

Behind the machine, the back wall of the chamber has fallen away. Beyond it, the floor plunges into a mist-filled abyss.

The machine is delicate and can easily be wrecked; all it takes is characters declaring their intention to do so. Once its fragile crystal tubes and seashell components are smashed, fumes stop drifting out of the machine. It still takes 48 hours for the *airy water* already in the temple to evaporate to the point where land creatures can breathe normally in these tunnels.

3. East Temple Portal

A circle of pearlescent light shimmers near the wall. The circle is eight feet in diameter. It floats a foot above the floor with a gap as wide as a hand between it and the wall. The object glows faintly in shades of ivory, soft gray, and milky white that slowly migrate and swirl across the surface without ever mingling.

One of the desiccated fish-creatures lies on the floor. Its gills flutter irregularly, and it moans as if in pain. It is even more emaciated and sticklike than others of its kind you've seen.

The walls are decorated with murals, but they're badly faded.

The **sahuagin desiccant** is dying. If a sahuagin fled through the portal from the fight in the West Temple, this could be it. Otherwise, it's simply reached the end of its artificially drawn-out lifespan and its comrades dumped it here to await its death. In game terms, the sahuagin has 5 hit points, 5 levels of exhaustion, and it loses 1 hit point per hour until it dies. At this stage, magical healing only prolongs its suffering but does not reduce it unless characters somehow bring down its levels of exhaustion, too.

The sahuagin is conscious, but it has no reason or desire to cooperate with intruders. If characters can communicate with it, the creature only curses them between groans of pain. It is a zealot; no

matter how much mercy characters offer or agony they threaten, the sahuagin won't betray its duty to protect the temple.

Characters can still learn from this encounter if they choose to do so. The only desiccants they've encountered so far were dead by the time characters could examine them. Characters with Medicine or Nature proficiency might be able to glean useful information; reward cleverness on their part. And the creature might reveal tidbits about the temple unwillingly to characters who can read its mind or who kill it and cast *Speak with Dead* (it probably would lie in the latter case, but even that can be informative). Finally, this sort of situation can be a useful barometer for characters' true alignments. If this is an ongoing campaign, make note of anyone whose actions are unjustifiably vicious.

The portal here looks identical to those in **Area 1** and in the West Temple, but nothing happens when characters touch it. The corresponding portal in the East Temple no longer functions, so this one has no destination to connect to.

The murals are faded but some information can be gleaned from them. First, underwater painting is highly impractical, so the paintings must have been made after the lake dried out. Second, the colors are badly faded, indicating significant age. Third, the pictures are poorly drawn, as if they were done by creatures unfamiliar with the medium. Fourth, they appear to show a great eel or snake devouring tiny humanoids. With a successful DC 13 Intelligence (Nature) check, a character realizes the creature is not an eel or snake; it's meant to portray a gigantic purple worm bursting up through the dry lakebed and devouring humans or similar beings.

4. Fishbone Bridge

A 20-foot-long bridge made from fish bones, similar in construction to a rope bridge, connects **Areas 4** and **8**.

At some point in the distant past, this cavern was riven by a deep chasm. A bridge — if you can call it that — stretches across the chasm. The bridge appears to be made from fish bones loosely woven into slender ropes and lattices that look too delicate to support much weight.

You can see about 15 feet of the bridge. It's clearly longer than that, but the ever-present drifting turquoise mist conceals whatever lies beyond that distance.

The bridge looks too fragile to use, but it's stronger than it appears. It can support one creature at a time. As each creature crosses, the creature must make a DC 12 Dexterity (Acrobatics) check. Nothing happens if the check succeeds. If the check fails, however, pieces

of the bridge break loose and fall into the crevasse, and the DC increases by 2 for subsequent crossings. If the DC reaches 16 and another creature fails after that, the bridge and the creature on it fall into the crevasse.

If more than one creature tries to cross at once, the bridge collapses automatically and dumps everyone on it into the crevasse.

The floor of **Area 8** is about six feet lower than the floor of **Area 3**. The bridge sags and stretches alarmingly if a character steps onto the northern half; moving on that portion is more like using a rope ladder than a bridge.

Jumping across a 20-foot crevasse is normally impossible for all but superhumanly strong characters (Strength 20+), but the height difference makes this leap doable from north to south for characters with Strength 16 or higher. Jumping from south to north requires Strength 25+. The far ledge can't be seen from either side, however, because of *airy water* fumes filling the cavern. No one knows where the bridge leads until someone crosses it or risks the choking corridor to the west.

5. Choking Corridor

This narrow corridor descends sharply, and the low point is thick with *airy water*. Three DC 15 Constitution saving throws against *airy water* must be made to traverse this corridor; that alone makes it dangerous.

Once someone explores the corridor, characters following behind might decide to hold their breath and dash through. This is actually a good plan; it eliminates two of the three saving throws. One must be made regardless because **Area 6** is lower than **Area 3**.

Creatures under the effect of a *potion of water breathing* don't need to worry about any of this, as usual.

6. Skull Pyramids

These two chambers are the sahuagin desiccants' "fishing grounds." They survive by eating the creatures that live here.

The only features of interest here are piles of skulls. The smallest is only three feet high, but the largest rises seven feet. The skulls are of many types: human, dwarf, and elf, but also gnoll, goblin, bugbear, sahuagin, and stranger creatures you can't identify.

The skull pyramids are infested with **swarms of desiccated quippers**. These are identical to standard quipper swarms, but they can breathe and swim in any amount of *airy water* the same as if they're underwater. The quippers attack if characters try to demolish a skull pyramid or knock it apart, or if characters use the winch in **Area 7** to raise the reliquary from the pit.

One swarm per character is a relatively easy encounter. Two swarms per character is potentially deadly. A good approach is to start small and feed another swarm into the fight every round until characters are near breaking. Stage the fight in a manner suitable to your group and their situation.

7. Winch Room

The sole purpose of this room is to house the mechanism that raises and lowers the reliquary from the pit.

This room is empty except for a large wheel mounted against the wall. A black, corroded chain hangs down from the ceiling, loops around the wheel's axle, and runs back up into the ceiling.

The wheel is protected by a *glyph of warding* placed on it by the desiccant priestess. It can be spotted with a successful DC 13 Intelligence (Investigation) check. The glyph detonates when the wheel is turned unless the creature first intones the phrase "Praise to Thly-ta" in Sahuagin. If the glyph detonates, every creature within 20 feet of the wheel takes 22 (5d8) cold damage, or half as much damage with a successful DC 13 Dexterity saving throw.

Turning the wheel in either direction raises the reliquary from the pit. No special amount of strength is needed to turn the wheel, but it takes many rotations — at least a minute of turning — to lift the reliquary clear of the pit.

A few moments after someone turns the wheel (and after the *glyph* detonates), a tremor shakes the entire temple. Dust and gravel fall from the ceiling. No matter how stealthy characters were up to this point, everything in the temple knows intruders are inside the winch room. What's worse, the purple worm awakens. Its movement underground causes continuing tremors every minute or two until characters leave the temple and face it.

8. Reliquary

This sanctum was the reason why the sahuagin chose to maintain the temple after the lake dried out.

If characters enter here before visiting **Area 7**, read the paragraph labeled “A.” If characters enter here after operating the winch in **Area 7**, read the paragraph labeled “B.”

This chamber forms a natural dome. You can see the apex 60 feet overhead where the drifting fumes are thin.

At the center of the chamber, the floor falls into a 40-foot-diameter pit. Inside it, you see only fumes and oily blackness.

A. A heavy, blackened chain extends from the pit to a pulley mechanism mounted to the ceiling. From there, the chain crosses the ceiling and disappears through a hole in the cavern wall. The chain is taut, as if a heavy weight hangs from its bottom.

B. A heavy, blackened chain hangs down from the ceiling. An iron casket is secured at its end. Thick, black, glistening liquid drips from the box into the pit.

If the casket was raised from the pit or if characters have done anything else to alert the sahuagin desiccants, they swarm up from the crevasse and attack while characters are here. From the crevasse, they can reach any part of the temple and attack from any direction. The attackers consist of 1 **sahuagin desiccant baron**, 1 **sahuagin desiccant priestess**, and 1 or 2 **sahuagin desiccants** per character (see **Appendix A** for creatures stats). Against a small party, fewer sahuagin desiccants are needed. Against a large party (five or more characters), add a few extra desiccants to keep the fight challenging.

The sahuagin make good use of their ability to swim through the air during this battle. They don’t “land” to fight on foot unless they’re forced to do so.

A monstrous **black pudding** dwells in the pit. It uses the standard black pudding stat block but with the following changes.

- ◆ Its size is Gargantuan.
- ◆ It has 135 (10d20 + 30) hit points.
- ◆ Its corrosive form does 6 (1d12) acid damage.
- ◆ Its pseudopod attack is +7 to hit, reach 10 feet. A hit does 8 (1d10 + 3) bludgeoning damage plus 18 (4d8) acid damage. Its corrosive effect against nonmagical armor is unchanged.
- ◆ It is Challenge 6 (2,300 XP).



The black pudding is dormant until it's disturbed. It awakens when the casket is winched out of it, but that isn't enough to make it angry. It gets angry enough to attack if anything falls or is dropped into the pit (including dead sahuagins) or if the lightning glyph on the casket is triggered.

The iron casket suspended from the chain is four feet long, three feet wide, and two feet deep. It's decorated with carvings that resemble those around the entrances to the three temples, although that won't be immediately obvious because of the thick layer of black pudding ooze covering it. Getting the casket to the edge of the pit is a challenge. Characters might manage to swing the casket to the edge of the pit while they lower it carefully (using the winch in **Area 7**). Until the ooze is cleared off, anyone or anything touching it takes 4 (1d8) acid damage per round. A normal rope has just 2 hit points, so characters need to get creative to retrieve the iron box. Note that the casket and chain are protected against the black pudding's acid by ancient sahuagin magic.

Besides the coating of black pudding, the casket is also protected by a *glyph of warding* (DC 14) etched inside the lid (one of the large sides), making it impossible to spot from the outside. The glyph triggers when the casket is opened, doing 22 (5d8) lightning damage to every creature within 20 feet of the box. If a character is hanging onto the box over the pit when the glyph is triggered, that character must make a successful DC 13 Strength saving throw or lose their grip and fall into the pit (and into the black ooze, if it's still there).

Treasure. The casket is an ossuary for a long-dead sahuagin herobaron called Thly-ta and a reliquary for Thly-ta's mythic treasure.

Inside are the disarticulated bones of a Large, four-armed sahuagin and two bundles wrapped in layers of sharkskin.

Inside one bundle are 130 pp +1,900 gp; a *potion of diminution* and a *bead of force*; and a gold bracelet, a mother-of-pearl brooch, a disturbing statuette of a hideous shark-like creature carved from a massive shark's tooth, and a knife made from multicolored volcanic glass (250 gp each). Substitute your own Level 5 treasure hoard if you prefer.

Inside the other bundle are a bronze trident and a breastplate made of scaly leather. Both items are magical. The trident was made to be used by a Large creature (the dead sahuagin baron), so it's heavier than a standard trident, but the handle is shorter than usual, being only about three feet long. The trident is *Thly-ta's talon* and the girdle is a *kraken scale cincture* (see **Appendix A**). For the final confrontation against the purple worm, characters have the best chance to survive if one character is outfitted with both items, but it's up to you whether to drop hints in that direction (or even to tell players outright).

As characters work toward opening the casket and/or fighting the black pudding, don't forget to remind them occasionally about the ground tremors they feel. They won't know what's causing the tremors (unless you're so cruel that you've thrown a purple worm at them before), but they do know the tremors started when they winched the casket up from the pit.

The only way to leave the temple, other than by spending a few days tunnelling through the sealed doorway, is to return to the West Temple via the portal in **Area 1**.

Purple Worm

When Thly-ta's casket is winched up from the black pudding-filled pit, the ultimate guardian of Thly-ta's bones awakens: a purple worm that's slumbered beneath the sand and gravel of the lakebed since the sahuagin desiccants ensorcelled it long ago. It's what causes the tremors character feel, and it's likely to be the deadliest threat they've faced so far — or will face for some time to come.

As soon as the worm awakes and starts moving underground, the gnolls know something is horribly wrong. If characters interacted with the clan or if the gnolls found signs of intruders sneaking around, then [growl-howl] whips the clan into a homicidal frenzy toward the outsiders who've obviously stirred up some ancient evil against the clan.

Exactly how you stage this final encounter is up to you. Several options are outlined below.

Mega-Battle

This is a great choice if someone has already elected to don the *kraken scale cincture* and to wield *Thly-ta's talon*.

The characters emerge straight into a ferocious battle between the purple worm and the entire gnoll clan. The fight is happening right outside the entrance to the West Temple, so there's no easy way to avoid it.

To actually defeat the purple worm, the characters' only chance lies in equipping their best fighter with Thly-ta's relics so that hero can be voluntarily swallowed by the purple worm and kill the monstrosity from the inside. It's risky but about as heroic as heroic can be. If characters try to hang back from the fight or skirt around the edges and escape, the purple worm homes in on whoever has Thly-ta's armor and trident. Even if all the sahuagin desiccants are dead, the worm is still under an enchantment to prevent anyone from carrying off those sacred treasures. A character doesn't need to wear the armor or wield the trident to be the worm's target; simply having them among their possessions is enough. But using those items against the worm is about the characters' only hope in this situation.

See "Gnolls vs. the Purple Worm" for advice on how to handle this battle mechanically.

If characters jump into the fight and the worm is defeated thanks to their intervention, then any transgressions against the clan by

the characters, real or imagined, are forgiven and forgotten. They become heroes to the gnolls and are welcomed into the clan (as honorary members; they don't have full rights, such as the right to challenge for leadership). Note that honorary membership in one gnoll clan doesn't necessarily give them a pass with any other clan. Gnolls hate rival clans only slightly less than they hate outsiders. But it does let characters live in the gnoll camp "rent free" and be treated like real members of the clan. This has pros and cons; as clan members, characters are also subject to all the bullying, bloody practical jokes, and tremendously hard work and difficult living conditions gnolls endure without questioning. If characters go down this path, they could even accompany a gnoll raiding party or a war band out to settle a score with a rival clan!

Delay

If characters are confident they've killed all the threats inside the South Temple, they might decide to take a short rest there, or even a long rest. After dealing with the sahuagin desiccants, a black pudding, and the *glyph of warding*, they're likely to need a rest, and they probably think they've already fought the climactic battle of the adventure.

If characters take a short rest, the tremors become more frequent and more intense as the hour goes by. When characters finally emerge from the temple, you can stage the final battle the same as if they'd come out immediately. Just assume the purple worm needed most of that time to fully awaken from centuries of slumber and to recover its strength and its wits.

Trying to take a long rest, however, is a whole 'nother kettle of fish. The purple worm won't wait that long to pursue the defilers of the temple. In that case, the tremors grow in strength and frequency until an hour into the characters' rest. Then the purple worm homes in on whoever has the breastplate or the trident. A sealed entrance is no obstacle to the worm; it can tunnel directly into the temple as easily as it tunnels anywhere else. If anything, characters facing the worm in the South Temple are even worse off than they'd be out on the dry lakebed, where at least they'd have some help from the gnolls.

If you're feeling benevolent, you can allow the characters to convert their one-hour rest into a short rest just before the worm attacks so they're not caught completely with their pants around their ankles. On the other hand, they were warned that a purple worm was in the neighborhood. If you run a game where characters ignore such warnings at their peril, this may be the time to impose some consequences for lackadaisical adventuring.

Evade

The purple worm is magically drawn to *Thly-ta's talon* and the *kraken scale cincture*. Characters can't escape the worm as long as they have either of those items in their possession.

The only way to escape on foot without battling the purple worm is to abandon both magical treasures. The worm quickly zeroes in on them and swallows both, then tunnels deep into the earth. Unless

characters do something recklessly foolish at that point, the worm doesn't bother them again.

If the gnolls battling the worm don't see the characters discard the items before the worm devours them, then the creatures decide the monster fled because it was frightened of the characters. They're grateful, and any offenses the characters committed earlier are forgiven.

If the gnolls see the characters discard the items and the worm's reaction, they realize the characters triggered the problem in the first place. This causes a rift in the clan. Some gnolls led by [growl-howl] and [growl-growl-pant] want to kill the characters immediately. Others, led by [growl-yip] and [howl-yip-yip-yip], realize that while the characters caused this problem, they also solved it by making a significant sacrifice. This argument quickly escalates into vicious fighting between the two groups. Characters won't be safe until [growl-howl's] faction (including [low growl]) is defeated. See "Gnolls vs. the Purple Worm" for advice on how to handle this battle mechanically.

If characters somehow manage to get away from the lake with the magic items and without killing the purple worm — by using a *teleport* scroll, for example — the worm still follows them. It tracks the items wherever they go, leaving destruction and terror in its wake, until it's killed or it reclaims the stolen treasures.

Gnolls vs. the Purple Worm

When characters emerge from the temple, they're likely to wade into a three-way battle between themselves, the gnolls, and the purple worm. You can fight it out using standard combat rules if you want, but it'll be a slog. Consider using these simplified rules to speed things up.

Don't bother with initiative. Every round follows this sequence.

- ◆ The purple worm takes its turn.
- ◆ Characters all take their turns.
- ◆ Gnolls take their turn.

All attacks against characters and by characters are resolved as normal. Keep the focus on the characters.

If the purple worm attacks the gnolls, it kills any two of your choosing per round. On many of its turns, the purple worm should be able to burst through the ground, kill one or two gnolls, and immediately disappear again underground to avoid counterattacks. The sandy, gravelly lake bottom quickly collapses into the worm's tunnels and refills them so nothing can follow it down. This same tactic works against characters, too, although the worm might suffer an opportunity attack from a target it doesn't swallow.

For every gnoll that attacks the purple worm, the worm takes 2 points of damage automatically. A pack lord does 6 damage, and a fang does 9 damage (per round; that's a total for all their attacks). Exactly how many gnolls can attack the purple worm depends on how much of it you decide to leave aboveground.

If fighting breaks out between factions within the clan, here's how to resolve it without tracking individual gnolls' hit points. Roll 1d20 with no modifiers for each attack and consult the Quick Gnoll Combat table. If a roll equals or exceeds the listed number, the target gnoll is killed. Pack lords and fangs get two and three attacks respectively, so they have the potential to kill multiple targets in a single turn. A lone gnoll can't kill a fang by itself; only when two gnolls team up to make a single attack do they have a chance to kill a fang. The same numbers apply to both melee and ranged attacks. (These numbers don't represent "one-shot kills." They assume gnolls accumulate damage throughout the fight. When one is killed, the attacker just landed the final blow.)

For speed of play, you should roll many attacks at once. For example, if the camp breaks into 25 gnolls battling 15 gnolls, grab five d20s and roll them five times for the larger group and three times for the smaller group. Every 18, 19, and 20 kills one of the opposing gnolls. All fighting within the gnolls' turn is simultaneous, so casualties aren't removed until the end of the turn. Doing it this way, you can resolve the effect of 40 battling gnolls in just a few seconds.

If characters ally with one of the factions, you can let players roll the dice for that side's attacks. Don't let them drag things out by rolling one at a time! A large battle like this is best handled with fistfuls of dice.

Quick Gnoll Combat

| Target | | | | |
|-------------|--------------|-------|-------------|------|
| Attacker | # of attacks | Gnoll | Pack leader | Fang |
| Gnoll | 1 | 18 | 20 | 20* |
| Pack leader | 2 | 17 | 18 | 19 |
| Fang | 3 | 16 | 18 | 20 |

* Make one roll per two attacking gnolls.

Alternative Approach. If you're willing to roll more dice and do more math during gnoll-vs.-gnoll fighting, you can instead roll the gnolls' attacks and damage normally. Roll multiple attacks at once as above and tally all the damage against each side in a single total. For every 22 points accumulated, one gnoll is killed. Pack lords are the last to go down unless the characters or the purple worm take them out before then. This method is noticeably slower than the abstract approach because it involves arithmetic and much more dice rolling, but that's an acceptable tradeoff for certain types of detail-oriented players.

Wrapping Up

How things end in the dried lakebed depends on how characters deal with the situation. It's entirely possible it could end with all the characters dead if they blunder unprepared into a battle against the purple worm. It could just as easily end with the purple worm dead, the characters in possession of the sahuagins' treasure, and with a sizable clan of gnolls grateful to them.

If the battle goes sideways and a TPK (total party kill) seems inevitable, remember that characters always have a sure-fire way to save themselves: All they need to do is toss Thly-ta's two magical relics to the purple worm, and that problem disappears. If they greedily insist on keeping everything, then if the worm swallows the character(s) with the items and they die in the worm's gut, the worm leaves and the problem is again solved with at least most of the party surviving. Greed will kill the characters more assuredly than anything else in this final confrontation. **If characters supported the winning faction** in the interclan rivalry, then whoever now controls the clan owes a debt of gratitude to the outsiders. The gnolls' gratitude is notoriously short-lived, so characters should take the opportunity to leave while the gnolls still have generous feelings toward them. In a day or two, the characters will look like just another potential meal again.

If characters backed the losing faction, then they need to get away as fast as possible. The victorious gnolls pursue them into the Wasteland. This chase can be as long and as desperate as you care to make it (and think the characters can endure), but the gnolls

are likely to lose interest once it becomes apparent that they aren't going to catch their prey quickly. They see the characters off with a few parting bow shots at their backs and many insults and howls of laughter.

If characters managed to avoid the gnolls' notice until now, then you might be able to introduce the clan's politics at this point, assuming enough gnolls survive to make it worthwhile. Being as Chaotic as they are, gnolls don't mind someone who switches sides in the midst of a fight. All they really care about is which side you're on at the end and whether you're covered in blood and gore from your enemies. If characters fight well and help defeat the purple worm, surviving gnolls should welcome them into the clan for a few days (but see the preceding note about the fleeting nature of the gnolls' gratitude).

If only a handful of gnolls survive, then the clan is effectively wiped out. The few remaining are slaughtered in their first run-in with a rival clan. With resigned fatalism, they quickly gather up the bare necessities for survival in the Wasteland and start trekking toward the nearest maze of canyons, where they hope to evade their enemies until longer winter nights improve their chances. The characters might be tempted to feel sorry for them, but remember that these are gnolls, some of the cruelest, bloodthirstiest, most merciless humanoid in the world. Whether they deserve this fate is not for mortals to judge; they've inflicted far worse on countless others.

Appendix A: Creatures and Items

New creatures and magic items appearing in *Lake of Dust* are detailed in this appendix.

Ancestor Skulls

Although [growl-howl] is not a spellcaster, he learned the secret of animating skulls by torturing a necromancer who was captured from a caravan. These undead creations are fierce guardians and little else.

Ancestor Skull

Tiny undead, neutral evil

Armor Class 12

Hit Points 24 (7d4 + 7)

Speed 0 ft., fly 40 ft. (hover)

| STR | DEX | CON | INT | WIS | CHA |
|--------|---------|---------|--------|---------|--------|
| 1 (-5) | 14 (+2) | 12 (+1) | 3 (-4) | 10 (+0) | 7 (-2) |

Skills Perception +2, Stealth +4

Damage Resistances necrotic, piercing

Damage Immunities cold, fire, poison

Condition Immunities charmed, frightened, paralyzed, poisoned, prone

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 12

Languages Gnoll

Challenge 1 (200 XP)

Illumination. The ancestor skull sheds dim light in a five-foot radius.

Magic Resistance. The ancestor skull has advantage on saving throws against spells and other magical effects.

Rampage. When the ancestor skull reduces a creature to 0 hit points on its turn, the skull can take a bonus action to move up to half its speed and make a bite attack.

Actions

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 4 (1d4 + 2) piercing damage.

Sapping Ray. *Ranged Spell Attack:* +4 to hit, range 30 ft., one target. *Hit:* 9 (2d8) cold damage.



Sahuagin Desiccants

All descendants of the sahuagin still living in the temple complex are vastly different from their aquatic ancestors. They transformed themselves into creatures that can survive in the arid conditions of the Wasteland by magically melding attributes from captured dust mephits into their own bodies. The largest of the desiccants — the four-armed baron — is so magically infused with the essence of dust mephits that its bite and claws turn a creature's blood to dust.

Characters are unlikely to ever have seen creatures like desiccants before, so they shouldn't realize what they're fighting until they puzzle it out for themselves. The desiccants' origin as descendants of sahuagin can be figured out by someone who studies one for at least five minutes and makes a successful DC 15 Wisdom (Medicine) check. This study is likely to be done on a corpse, as no living desiccant will cooperate with intruders in the temples. If characters do study a live, incapacitated desiccant (such as the one in the South Temple), they have advantage on the Medicine check.

Desiccant

Medium humanoid (sahuagin), lawful evil

Armor Class 14 (natural armor)

Hit Points 32 (5d8 + 10)

Speed 30 ft., swim 40 ft.

| STR | DEX | CON | INT | WIS | CHA |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------|
| 10 (+0) | 14 (+2) | 15 (+2) | 12 (+1) | 11 (+0) | 7 (-2) |

Skills Perception +4, Stealth +4

Damage Immunities poison

Condition Immunities poisoned

Senses darkvision 120 ft., passive Perception 14

Languages Sahuagin, telepathy 60 ft.

(with desiccants only)

Challenge 1 (200 XP)

Aquatic. Breathes air and water.

Blood Frenzy. The desiccant has advantage on melee attack rolls against any creature that doesn't have all its hit points.

Actions

Multiattack. The desiccant makes one Bite attack and one Claws attack.

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 4 (1d4 + 2) piercing damage.

Claws. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 4 (1d4 + 2) slashing damage.

Blinding Breath (recharge 6). The desiccant exhales a 15-foot cone of blinding dust. Each creature in that area must make a successful DC 12 Dexterity saving throw or be blinded for one minute. A blinded creature repeats the saving throw at the end of its turn, ending the effect on itself with a success.

Desiccant Priestess

Medium humanoid (sahuagin), lawful evil

Armor Class 13 (natural armor)

Hit Points 45 (7d8 + 14)

Speed 30 ft., swim 40 ft.

| STR | DEX | CON | INT | WIS | CHA |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| 10 (+0) | 14 (+2) | 15 (+2) | 12 (+1) | 16 (+3) | 11 (+0) |

Skills Perception +5, Religion +3

Damage Immunities poison

Condition Immunities poisoned

Senses darkvision 120 ft., passive Perception 14

Languages Sahuagin, telepathy 60 ft.

(with desiccants only)

Challenge 2 (450 XP)

Aquatic. Breathes air and water.

Blood Frenzy. The desiccant priestess has advantage on melee attack rolls against any creature that doesn't have all its hit points.

Spellcasting. The desiccant priestess is a 6th-level spellcaster. Her spellcasting ability is Wisdom (spell save 13, +5 to hit with spells). She has the following cleric spells prepared:

Cantrips (at will): *sacred flame*, *thaumaturgy*

1st level (4 slots): *bane*, *inflict wounds*, *sanctuary*

2nd level (3 slots): *hold person*, *silence*

3rd level (3 slots): *dispel magic*, *glyph of warding*

Actions

Multiattack. The desiccant makes one Bite attack and one Claws attack.

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 4 (1d4 + 2) piercing damage.

Claws. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 4 (1d4 + 2) slashing damage.

Blinding Breath (recharge 6). The desiccant priestess exhales a 15-foot cone of blinding dust. Each creature in that area must make a successful DC 12 Dexterity saving throw or be blinded for one minute. A blinded creature repeats the saving throw at the end of its turn, ending the effect on itself with a success.

Desiccant Baron

Large humanoid (sahuagin), lawful evil

Armor Class 16 (natural armor)

Hit Points 104 (11d10 + 44)

Speed 30 ft., swim 50 ft.

| STR | DEX | CON | INT | WIS | CHA |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| 20 (+5) | 16 (+3) | 18 (+4) | 13 (+1) | 12 (+1) | 15 (+2) |

Saving Throws Dex +6, Con +7, Wis +4, Cha +5

Skills Perception +5

Damage Immunities poison

Condition Immunities poisoned

Senses darkvision 120 ft., passive Perception 15

Languages Sahuagin, telepathy 60 ft.

(with desiccants only)

Challenge 6 (2,300 XP)

Aquatic. Breathes air and water.

Blood Frenzy. The desiccant baron has advantage on melee attack rolls against any creature that doesn't have all its hit points.

Actions

Multiattack. The desiccant baron makes one Bite attack and two Claws or Trident attacks.

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +8 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 7 (1d4 + 5) piercing damage plus 7 (2d6) necrotic damage.

Claws. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +8 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 7 (1d4 + 5) slashing damage plus 7 (2d6) necrotic damage.

Trident. *Melee or Ranged Weapon Attack:* +8 to hit, reach 5 ft. or range 20/60 ft., one target. *Hit:* 12 (2d6 + 5) piercing damage, or 14 (2d8 + 5) piercing damage if used with two hands to make a melee attack.

Choking Breath (recharge 6). The desiccant baron exhales a 30-foot cone of lung-clogging dust. Each creature in that area must make a successful DC 14 Constitution saving throw or be incapacitated by coughing and choking. An incapacitated creature repeats the saving throw at the end of its turn, ending the effect on itself with a success. If a creature is incapacitated for a number of rounds equal to its Constitution modifier (minimum of 1), at the start of its next turn it drops to 0 hit points and is dying, and it can't regain hit points or be stabilized until it can breathe again.

Magical and Mundane Items

The Howling Skull

The skull resembles that of a dire wolf but it's actually from an unusually large and savage gnoll. It serves as a battle totem to the Wasteland gnolls. It's not magical and it has no sacred significance; it's a symbol of rank. Such a totem is carried at the forefront of a party by a gnoll — the skullbearer — who's recognized as a great warrior and an exceptionally bloodthirsty raider. Any group of Wasteland gnolls treat a skullbearer with a mix of deference and fear, regardless of its clan.

When a creature other than a gnoll brandishes the howling skull before a group of hostile gnolls (and gnolls are always hostile to non-gnolls), it instantly gets their attention. They remain hostile but they pause in their attack, and they'll listen to what the skullbearer has to say — for a minute or so anyway.

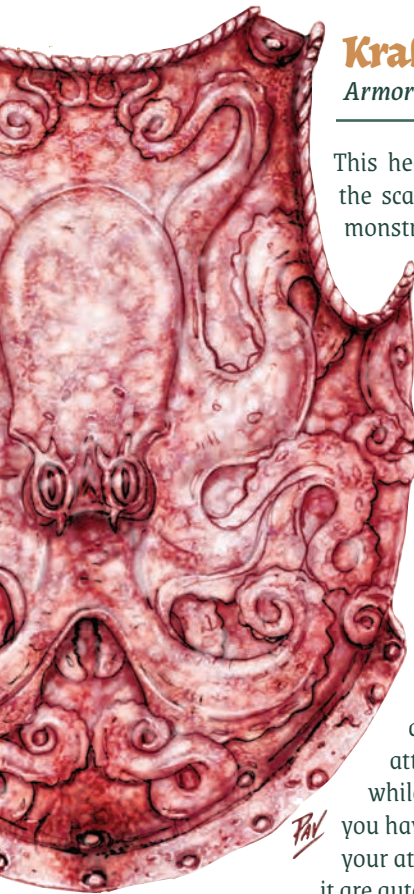
The gnolls are concerned only with the creature who first displayed the howling skull. Others in the party who were not the first to brandish the skull get no special heed. Furthermore, if the creature who first revealed the skull hands it off to someone else, its benefit is wiped out; honor can't be passed around like a snack tray, and no real skullbearer would ever relinquish the honor.

An NPC member of the Collegium Aetheria understands all these customs, explains them to the characters, and won't violate them. If no NPC accompanies the party, these guidelines are explained to whoever the howling skull is given to, along with an admonition that the skull may be the key to the success of the expedition. The characters must take it seriously (because the gnolls do!) and remember to use it when the time is right.

Unless your characters are able to slaughter their way through an entire gnoll raiding party and pack, then it's vital they have the howling skull when they encounter gnolls. If they aren't working for the Collegium Aetheria, here are a few alternatives:

- ◆ Characters could find a dying adventurer in the wasteland. Before the NPC dies, he or she bequeaths them the skull and tells them how to use it.
- ◆ Instead of a dying adventurer, characters could find an adventurer's corpse — or even just the remnants of a campsite looted by creatures other than gnolls — along with the skull and a journal that explains its use.
- ◆ During the early part of the trek, characters could link up with a caravan where they meet a scarred veteran of many gnoll battles or a member of the Collegium Aetheria. This NPC either hears or guesses where they're headed and gives or sells them the skull out of a sense of moral duty.





Kraken Scale Cincture

Armor (breastplate), legendary

This heavy, broad breastplate is made from the scaly hide of a legendary kraken. These monstrosities never surrender their scales or hides willingly, so this armor is exceedingly rare. Only the sea elves and their mortal enemies the sahuagin know the secrets behind constructing this armor.

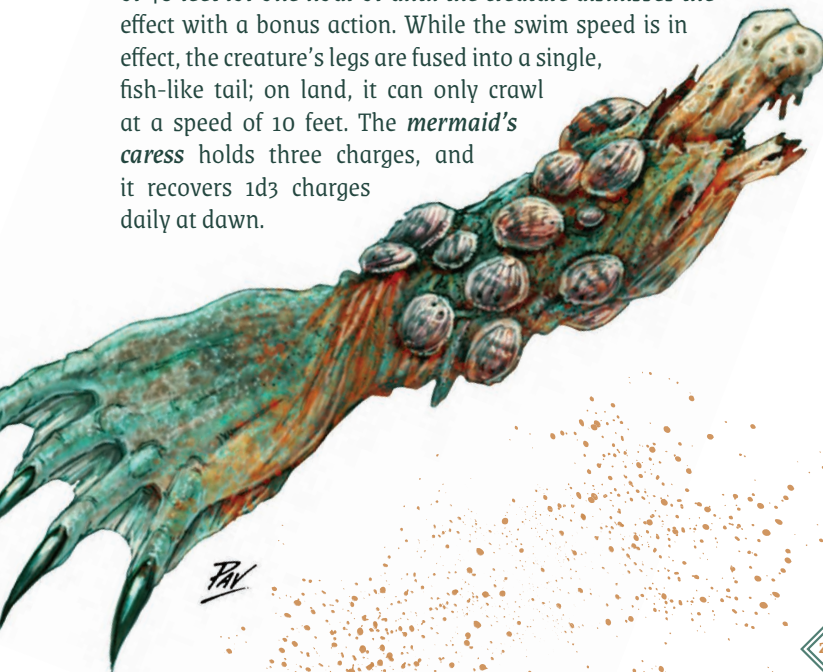
While wearing this armor, you gain a +1 bonus to AC, you have resistance to lightning damage, and you have advantage on saving throws against being swallowed whole. Additionally, when you are called upon to make a saving throw to avoid being swallowed, you can choose to fail and be swallowed automatically. If you choose to be swallowed (but not if you attempt the saving throw and fail), then while you are swallowed by that creature, you have resistance to acid damage and all of your attacks against that creature from inside it are automatic critical hits.

The Mermaid's Caress

Wondrous item, rare (requires attunement)

At first glance, the *mermaid's caress* appears to be a desiccated or mummified human or elvish hand. Only close inspection reveals that the fingers are webbed and that the skin is covered with a beautiful pattern of tremendously fine scales. The stump of the wrist usually is covered by a cap of silver, abalone, or shark skin.

A creature that's attuned to the *mermaid's caress* can use an action to touch a willing creature with the desiccated hand and expend one charge from it. Doing so gives the touched creature a swim speed of 40 feet for one hour or until the creature dismisses the effect with a bonus action. While the swim speed is in effect, the creature's legs are fused into a single, fish-like tail; on land, it can only crawl at a speed of 10 feet. The *mermaid's caress* holds three charges, and it recovers 1d3 charges daily at dawn.



Thly-ta's Talon

Weapon (trident), unique

This short, heavy trident was fashioned centuries ago for the sahuagin baron Thly-ta in preparation for his legendary face-off against the kraken Nokhiihsvo. The duel between these two mighty opponents rivals any legendary confrontation between mortals and dragons, but it's almost unknown on land. In fact, Thly-ta and Nokhiihsvo faced one another seven times and both received grievous wounds in each battle. In the final contest, Thly-ta was swallowed whole but, barely clinging to life, he cut his way free from the kraken's gullet. Dreadfully wounded, Nokhiihsvo fled back to its abyssal lair and was never seen again. Sahuagin believe the creature died from its wounds (although sea elves tell a different story), and the legend of Thly-ta is retold to this day.

You gain a +1 bonus to attack and damage rolls made with this weapon. When you hit a Huge or Gargantuan monstrosity with *Thly-ta's talon*, the attack does an extra 3d6 piercing damage.

Thly-ta's talon is shorter than a typical trident — the handle is only three feet long — and its bronze head is much larger and heavier than a standard trident's. If your Strength is 19 or less, you can't throw *Thly-ta's talon* and you must use it two-handed. If your Strength is 20 or higher, you can use this weapon the same as a normal trident.

Appendix B: Collegium Aetheria

The Collegium Aetheria is similar in many ways to England's "Invisible College," a precursor to the more organized Royal Society of London that still exists to this day. The collegium is a loose society of wizards, learned scholars, and natural philosophers who are interested in exploring the world and unravelling the mysterious laws of nature and magic.

Despite its name, the collegium is not a college but rather is an informal group of likeminded investigators who share information about their common interest. To join, one needs only to find another member and demonstrate that they'd be a valuable addition to the team. A character with Intelligence 17 or higher has no difficulty getting in. A character with Intelligence 16 has a 50/50 chance, and everyone else has a 1-in-4 chance after they've performed an important service to the collegium without offending or upsetting any members.

The only real perk of "membership" is access to the network of other members. Collegium members are highly intelligent, well-educated, influential people, so the benefits of knowing them shouldn't be underrated. At the same time, the collegium has no militia, no fortified headquarters, no treasury, no museum, not even a central library. Some members of the collegium are wealthy enough and powerful enough to have those things on their own, making them extremely valuable as patrons and contacts.

The collegium makes frequent use of adventurers and freelance explorers as hired escorts for its expeditions and as sources of information about regions and lore. That's what brings the characters to the collegium's attention in this adventure.

NPCs

Following is a list of Collegium Aetheria members the characters might encounter. Use them here or elsewhere as you like. Races and genders are suggestions only and can be changed freely. Just remember what you switch them to.

Westmont Gormyr (female human **mage**) is strongly opposed to imbibing alcohol and distrusts anyone who drinks openly.

Jopus the Virtuous (male dwarven **knight**) is knowledgeable on a wide range of subjects but can be antagonistic toward anyone who argues with him over the finer points of lore.

Ennib Kurrell (female halfling **priest**) keeps a close watch on her finances and everyone else's and is subject to bouts of deep gloom.

Erbellus (male human **noble**) has little patience or empathy for others. His sense of humor is amusing at first but quickly becomes overbearing and crass.

"Kestrel" Narbek (female half-orc **veteran**) spends money lavishly, drinks copiously, and insists on keeping to a tight schedule.

Green Garant (male elven **druid**) is taciturn, even shy. He trusts anyone who shares his interest in nature, but he won't be fooled on that score by faked interest. He has only contempt for deceivers and manipulators.

Agents of the Collegium

Characters can be approached by someone who represents the Collegium Aetheria literally anywhere. You can use any of the collegium members described above. If they accompany the expedition as NPCs (not a bad idea), select one or two who supplement the party without duplicating any character's abilities and who won't steal the limelight from characters. Remember that the collegium is primarily an academic and intellectual group. Its members may have been reckless adventurers in earlier days, but now they hire mercenaries like the characters specifically to take all the risks for them while they do research and collect relics and lore.

The proposition put to the players is below; paraphrase as you see fit to match the voice of whatever NPC hires the characters.

"The goal of our expedition is simple — we know the location of an ancient temple complex in the Wasteland. What sets this one apart is that it was built and used by sea creatures. That's right, don't look at me like that. The Wasteland used to have flowing rivers and large lakes, as anyone can see from the deep channels they carved across the landscape. Our research indicates the sahuagin had a religious colony in one such lake, and that they left something of great power behind when they retreated from the growing desert. We intend to find it."

"Here's the catch. Some of this information was confirmed by a gnoll whose clan camps in the dry lake. We can't explore the temples until we've dealt with the gnolls, one way or another. Fortunately, we have an angle."

With that, [s]he smiles wryly and holds up a dire wolf's skull covered in gnaw marks mingled with barbaric symbols carved deep into the bone.

The skull is a gnoll relic called a howling skull. It can aid the characters when they confront gnolls of the Wasteland. For full details, see **The Howling Skull** item entry, p. 28.

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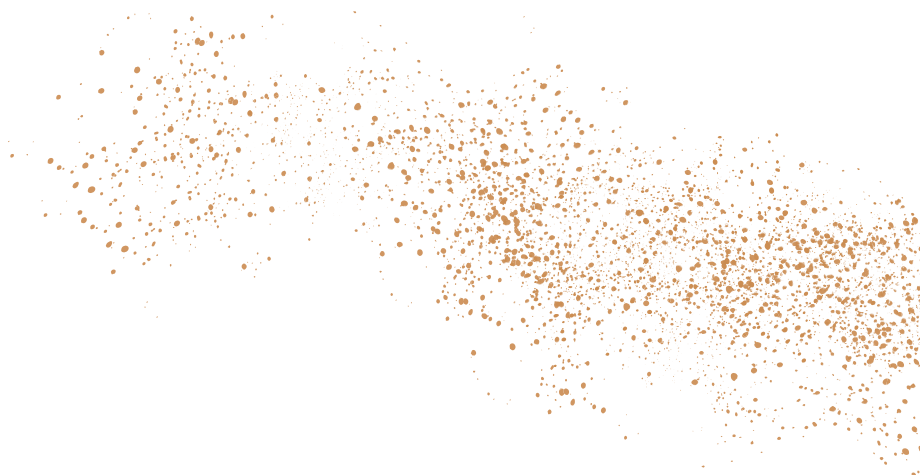
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Ancient Desert Secrets

Deep in the trackless wastes of an arid desert lies the dusty bed of an ancient, dried-up lake. It's home to a clan of feisty gnolls who don't exactly lay out the welcome mat for outsiders. But the adventurers are on a mission — the dead lake also hides the ruins of strange, forgotten temples, places that even the ferocious gnolls fear to tread.

Who built these labyrinthine passages and dusty chambers, and what secrets do they hide? Once the adventurers have won the gnolls' respect (or at least their tolerance), the ruins lie open for exploration. Inside are the answers to the mysteries of the temples' origins, and the fate of their builders, but even armed with this knowledge, can the heroes survive the challenges that lie beneath the Lake of Dust?

Written by the prolific and talented Steve Winter (*Complete Psionics Handbook*, *Horde of the Dragon Queen*, *The Scarlet Citadel*, *The City that Dripped Blood*, *Orcus in a Winter Wonderland*, and much more), with cover art by Martina Scafa, and interior illustrations by Hector Rodriguez and Terry Pavlet, *Lake of Dust* is an adventure for a party of 5th level characters. Good luck! You'll need it.

