

Tabletop Adventures presents

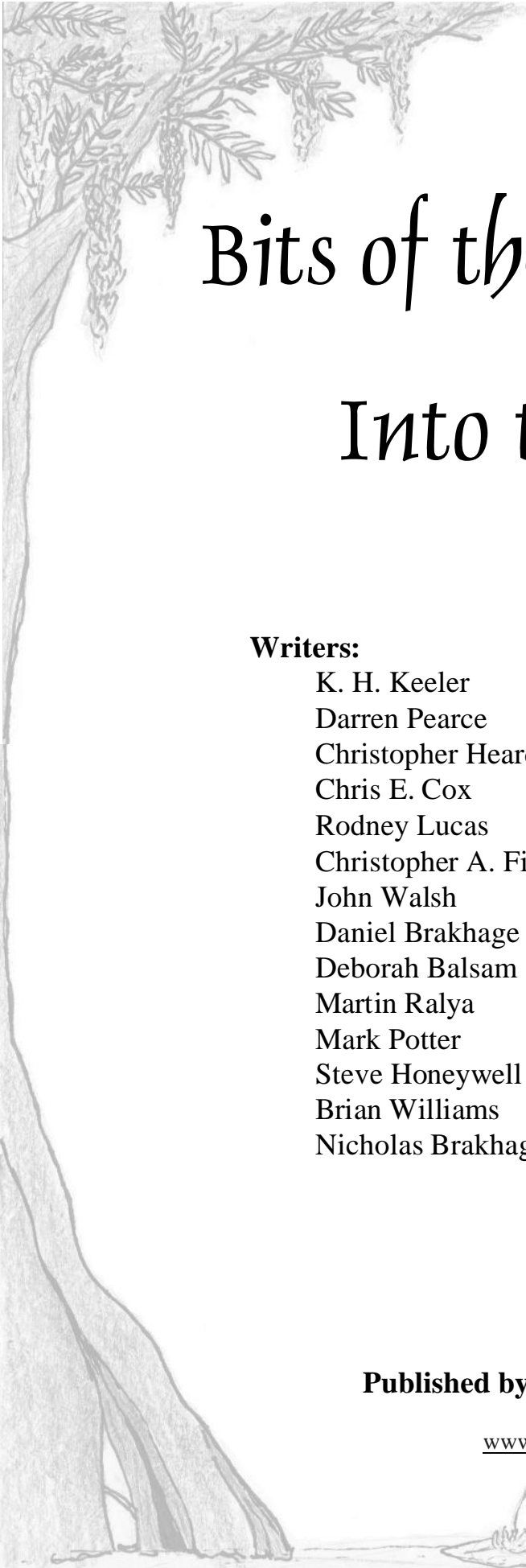
Bits of the Wilderness

INTO THE

SWAMP



Tabletop
ADVENTURES



Bits of the Wilderness™:

Into the Swamp

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Introduction

Welcome!

Welcome to “Bits of the Wilderness™: Into the Swamp,” Tabletop Adventures’ book of, believe it or not, swamp descriptions. What is there to describe about a swamp, other than that it’s wet? We hope to show you that here. Our writers, with a broad range of writing experience and gaming expertise, have provided pieces giving realistic or fantastic detail above and beyond the stereotypical idea of hot and damp.

We have taken care to provide descriptions that can be used in virtually any game that takes place in a quasi-European medieval fantasy setting without “clashing” with the feel or setting of your existing campaign. However, in those rare cases that something seems out of place, either discard the description or change it as you have need. These descriptions are for your use in your game and you are free to modify them to keep your game fun and exciting for you and your players. I hope that you can find plenty of material here to augment your players’ imaginations and to stimulate your own ideas for adventures.

Harried Game Masters, or How We Came to Write This Book

So, I hear you ask, “Why write a book like this?” Well, I’m glad you asked. We wrote it for all those Game Masters who have ever lamented not having the time that they wanted to spend on their game because those unforgiving intrusions to gaming (life, work, family, school) interfered. We wrote it for all those game masters who have come home from a hard day of work or just finished a grueling finals week and had friends call up and say, “Hey, let’s play tonight. I had a rough

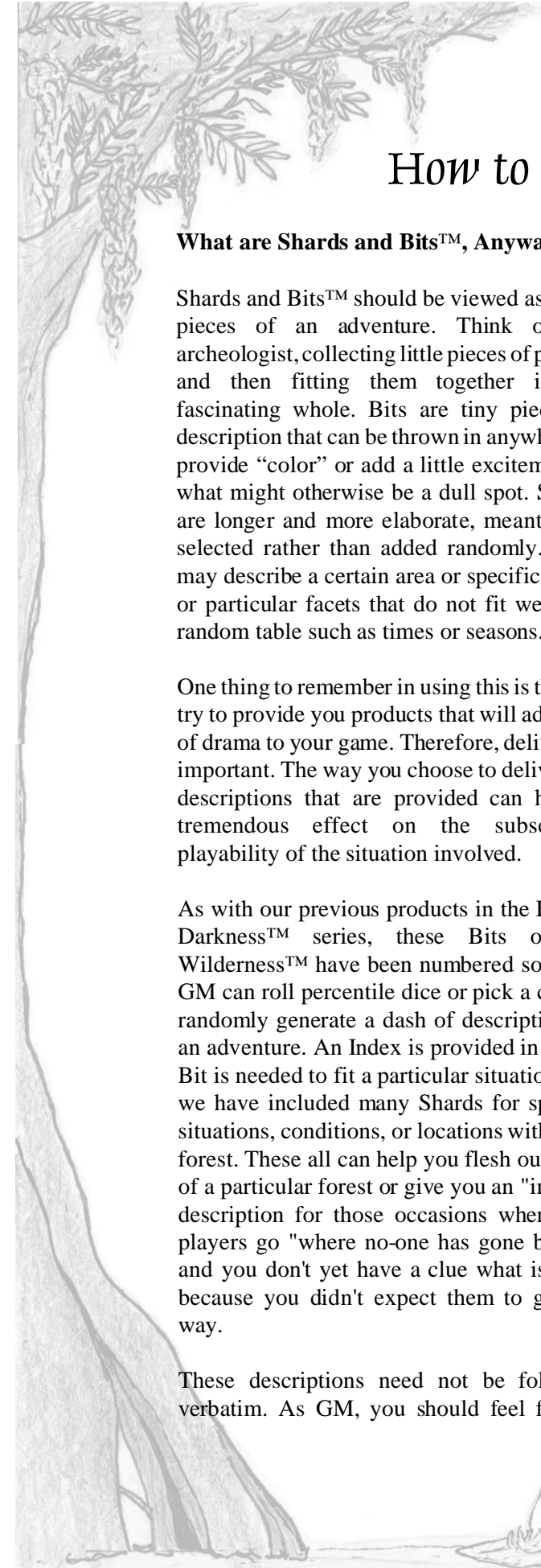
day and I want to kill something.” For all of you who need more than 24 hours in a day, welcome to Tabletop Adventures’ line of products for the Harried Game Master.

We here at TTA believe that description is a very important part of game-mastering and that vivid descriptions can make a world or an adventure come alive. However, we have noticed that the more rushed or frazzled a GM becomes, the more mechanical the game tends to be. So we have written a book that we’ve always wished to have, one that would have made our lives easier over the years. Tabletop Adventures’ “Harried Game Master” products are designed to be products that you can buy today and play tonight. We have taken care to make them flexible so they can be used in virtually any campaign without changing its feel or details. They are to help you, the Game Master, make the maximum use of the limited time you have available.

This tool provides the GM with a way to stimulate the characters’ senses and the players’ imaginations without having to use game-changing information. The descriptions can give players a “feel” for a situation, a better image of what is happening or what their characters are experiencing without all of those experiences leading directly to combat or treasure. They are intended to enhance role-playing by encouraging character building, reaction, and interaction. These Bits of the Swamp, and all the accompanying material, are made for you, to ease the life of the Harried Game Master.

Enjoy, have fun, and create fun for others!

The good people at Tabletop Adventures,
and the Overlord.



How to Use This Resource

What are Shards and Bits™, Anyway?

Shards and Bits™ should be viewed as small pieces of an adventure. Think of the archeologist, collecting little pieces of pottery and then fitting them together into a fascinating whole. Bits are tiny pieces of description that can be thrown in anywhere to provide “color” or add a little excitement to what might otherwise be a dull spot. Shards are longer and more elaborate, meant to be selected rather than added randomly. They may describe a certain area or specific thing, or particular facets that do not fit well in a random table such as times or seasons.

One thing to remember in using this is that we try to provide you products that will add a bit of drama to your game. Therefore, delivery is important. The way you choose to deliver the descriptions that are provided can have a tremendous effect on the subsequent playability of the situation involved.

As with our previous products in the Bits of Darkness™ series, these Bits of the Wilderness™ have been numbered so that a GM can roll percentile dice or pick a card to randomly generate a dash of description for an adventure. An Index is provided in case a Bit is needed to fit a particular situation, and we have included many Shards for specific situations, conditions, or locations within the forest. These all can help you flesh out areas of a particular forest or give you an “instant” description for those occasions when your players go “where no-one has gone before” and you don't yet have a clue what is there because you didn't expect them to go that way.

These descriptions need not be followed verbatim. As GM, you should feel free to

adapt them however you need in order to use them to greatest effect. In some instances they may even give you ideas for additional adventures for your players. These Bits are for whatever you want! If a piece sparks your imagination (or those of your players) and you want to build on it, then go for it.

Another thing to consider is that some of the Shards or longer Bits can be used a little at a time. Read one paragraph, let the adventurers move on a little further or ask questions, and then continue with the text.

Printing This Product

These pages can be printed out on regular paper. However, the final pages are formatted to be printed on card stock. As cards, they can be shuffled and drawn randomly during play or sorted ahead of time, with the GM selecting certain bits for use and placing them with the appropriate map or other materials. If you don't want to work with cards, you can roll randomly and read the description to the players, or write the appropriate number on the GM's map and refer to it when the characters arrive there.

Upcoming Products from TTA

As always, be watching for the next product from Tabletop Adventures™. “Bits of Darkness: Dungeons II” will bring even more mysterious and suspenseful descriptions in October 2005. Visit our website at www.tabletopadventures.com for more information. As always, if you have any comments or suggestions please send them to overlord@tabletopadventures.com. You can be sure that the Overlord is always ready to listen!



Bits of the Swamp

01. You notice your footprints begin to fill with filthy water ever so slowly with each step. Every breath you take fills your lungs with thick air that smells of stagnant water. Beads of sweat form on your exposed flesh from the amount of humidity in the area. You can feel the warm liquid trickle down your spine as you walk into what appears to be a clearing in the quagmire.

02. A pungent odor, which smells like urine, rises from the ground's surface. Water saturated-grass and earth seem to be your only foothold. Small and muddy ponds surrounded with various leafy green vegetation makes up most of the landscape here. You can see several large turtles floating adrift on the water; their shells covered in mud and gunk makes them look like little islands. Small thin cypress trees line the edges of the ponds in no real pattern. You can hear frogs bellowing their croaky calls from all around. [The urine smell is caused from a high level of ammonia and nitrates in the water and on the vegetation. This combination can be flammable if levels are high enough]

03. You can see what appears to be a clearing up ahead in this dismal swamp. Tall and thin, red maple trees are in abundance here, causing the soil to appear almost black in color due to the shade. You can hear the wind sweeping through the trees, while small shadows dance around the water-saturated terrain as the branches rustle in the musty-smelling breeze. The cool air hits your sweat-covered flesh, and gives you a chill. You begin to get an uneasy feeling from the clearing ahead. Or is it just the wind? [The uneasy feeling could be a lack of oxygen getting to the brain from exertion. It could be a feeling of something unholy or perhaps a form of ESP hinting at a possible encounter.]

04. A plump, insolent-looking rat sits on the matted moss and licks its lips suggestively. It waits there, daring anyone to throw a stone, which it might well ignore. The water bubbles around the rat and a burst of foul-smelling gas suddenly fills the air. The rat looks like it is smirking. Long white whiskers stand out against its grey, well-groomed fur. Green eyes gleam in what remains of the daylight and they have a look of intelligence far greater than you had thought any rat should have.

05. As you walk around a huge granite boulder, the size of a small mountain, you behold a colorful sight. A field full of vibrant flowers, of every shape and size, dances to the tune of the breeze. Floral scents fill your nostrils, along with the tickle of pollen. The soft trickling sound of a stream nearby makes this an almost serene place. It appears that you have exited the swamp; however another step proves this wrong, as your foot submerges into the cold and inundated soil. [A rare find indeed, as normally flowers like the ones mentioned above do not abide in swamps. There may, however there may be a special reason behind this, like a possible domicile of a swamp druid or ranger, or perhaps the soil here is just perfect for this type of plant life.]

06. The river runs cold and clean, so clear you can see the mossy stones under foot, and catch sight of the tiny yellow fish darting between your feet. As you follow the gentle curve of the water as a stream flows through the swamp, all you can hear is the clicking of claws and teeth and the lapping of water against logs. A family of russet-furred beavers works busily constructing a dam at the headwater. A pair of young beavers float on their backs across the water, paddling past you, unconcerned.

07. Stepping out of the tree line, you emerge into a cackling, pink universe. The sunken glade is home to hundreds of flamingos; the air is filled with their low caws, and it stinks of shrimp and rotting plants. As you step into the glade, the nearest birds take notice and then a second later, take wing. The air erupts into a storm of pink feathers and panicked calls as the creatures climb past the tree line.

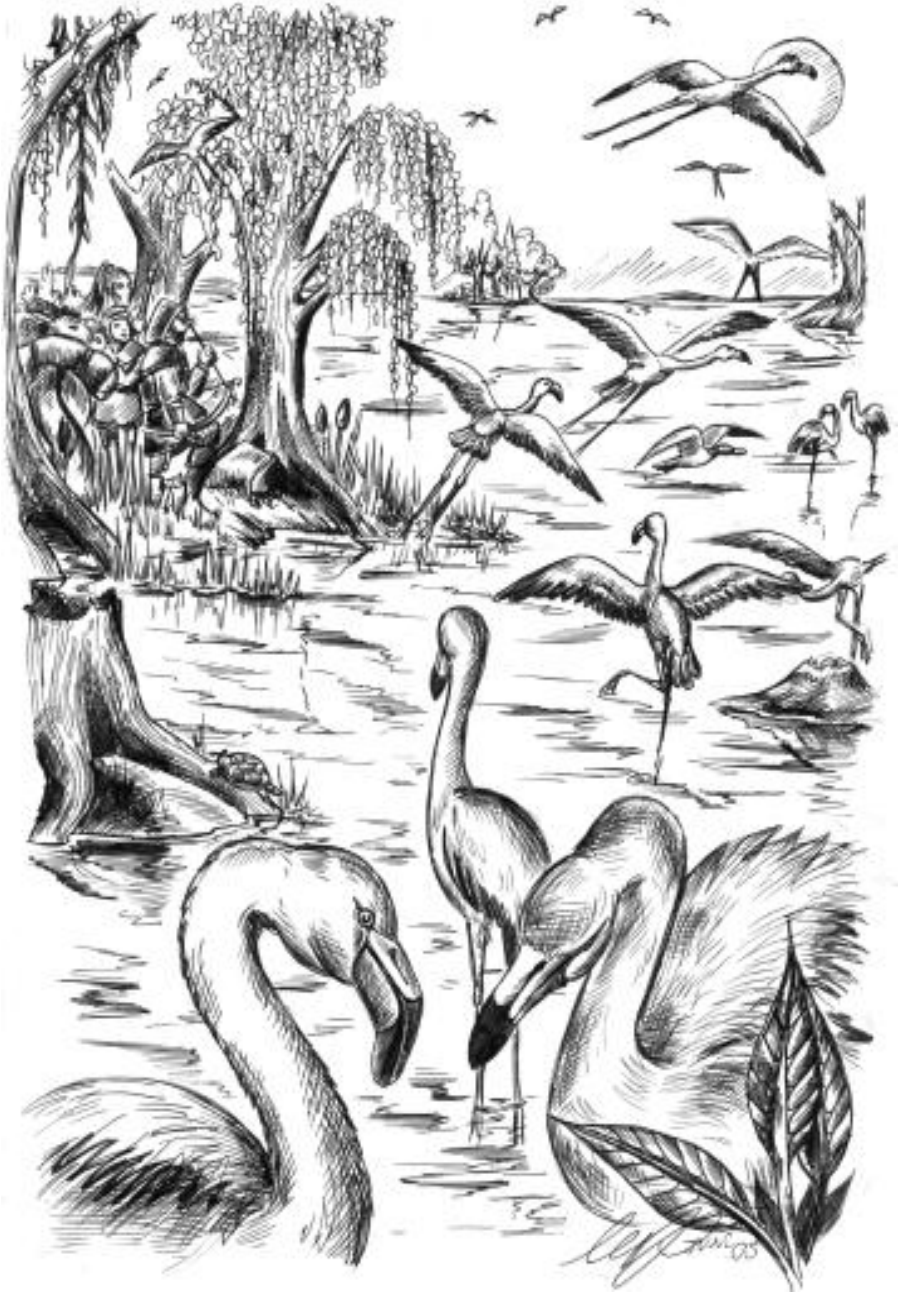
08. The swamp bubbles and spits, methane deposits just under the water exploding rhythmically. The air is so humid and close that it's hard to breathe; sweat beads on your forehead, dripping onto your armor with tiny musical notes. Across the bog a crocodile watches impassively, only its yellow eyes visible above the waterline.

09. A dead body floats face down in the stagnant water, the flesh so bloated that its clothes are drum tight around the swollen limbs. Small dark fish dart in to peck at the tattered flesh at the end of the unfortunate creature's nose.

From the poor dress, this man was a farmer. A rotting wooden shovel floats on the water's surface, near his sausage-like hands. An old clay cask floats nearby; a lizard rests on its upturned lip. [The farmer died here of a snakebite after wandering drunkenly into the swamp. There are about a dozen copper coins in one of his slime-coated pockets, but getting them would be quite a chore. The corpse is so rotted that it will explode into a mass of putrid flesh and maggot-filled guts if disturbed. A lacquered wooden bracelet, (carved with the names of

his wife and children), adorns one bloated wrist; it was the fellow's most prized possession.]

10. The gentle, irregular croaking of frogs suddenly crescendos into a virtual roar. It sounds as if all the nearby frogs are trying to outdo each other for the loudest croak. Just under this noise, you can hear a rapid series of "plops," as if hundreds of frogs have chased one another into the water. Then as suddenly as the noise began, it drops back to a croak or two.



11. Gnarled, pungent vines grow out of deep cracks in the head of an ancient statue. Taller than a grown man, it lies upside down in the oily muck, only the base of its nose and its snarling lips visible above the scum of dead leaves and still water. The statue must have once been painted striking greens and yellows and reds, but age has reduced its brilliant colors to pastels. The roots of a twisted river oak grow in thick tangles around the severed head. Some distance away lies an enormous hand, missing half its fingers, which is now home to a nest of water moccasins. Of the rest of the forgotten statue, there is no sign.

12. Ducks quack and splash among a stand of cattail willows. One flips under the water quickly, and erupts back out of the brackish liquid with a flapping trout in its beak. The green mallard swallows the trout in two big gulps, and, one by one, the other members of the flock follow the bird's lead.



13. There is a cavern above the level of the murky water, formed from the gnarled roots of a massive willow so enormous that its peak vanishes above the canopy. [If the party enters:] Passing through the root cavern, the air is cool and dark, but so humid it is almost stifling. White slicks of bat guano float like oil-slicks on the water. Above you, the gentle rustle of leather wings announces the presence of the sleeping bats that have made the hanging vines of the root cavern their home.

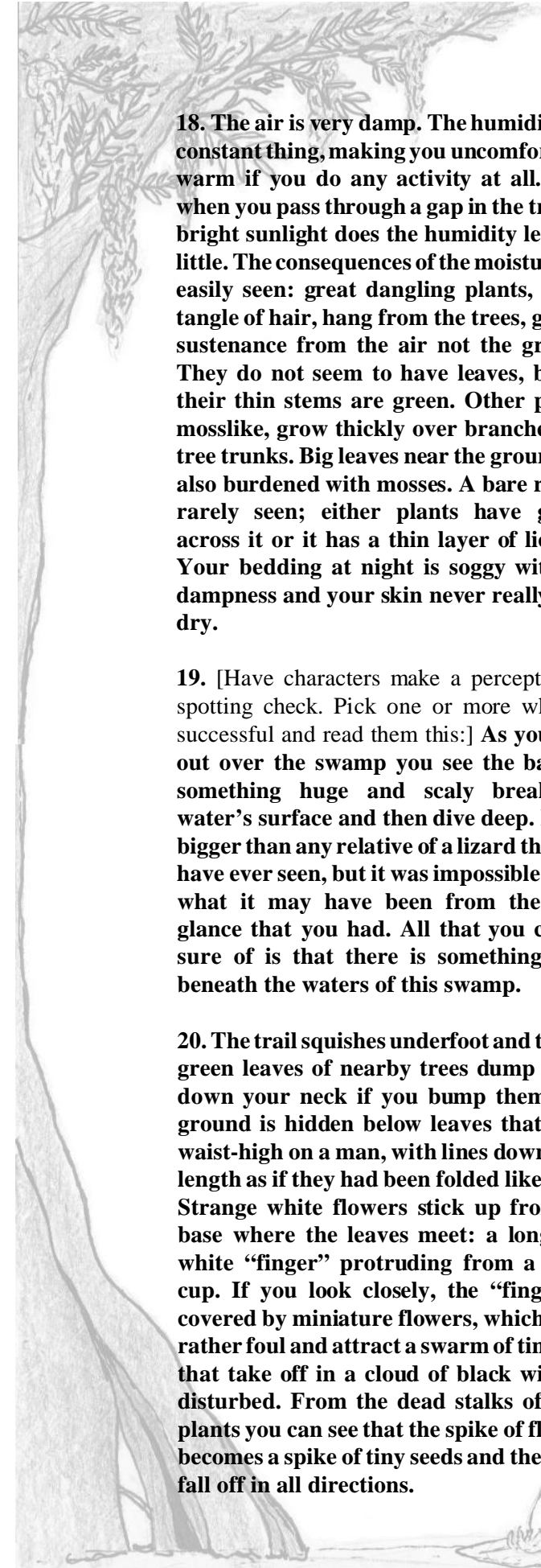
14. Your step causes a sucking sound from the bottom of your boots as they release from the muck. Just then you spy an

unusually large tree ahead of you. It is vacant of all its leaves, and its branches reach out like arms in your direction. The dark gray lines that run vertically through its pasty white trunk seem somehow to form a face. A large knot protruding from the center of the tree resembles a nose, while a hollowed opening under the knot reminds you of a mouth. A slowly pulsating, yellowish light escapes this hole, reminiscent of a firefly in the distance. [The light may be foxfire, from some type of phosphorescent moss. The pulsating appearance could be caused by insects, or the light could show an opening to the land of Faery, or be the glow from a magical weapon. Another idea might be to use the light as a lure for a hidden predator.]

15. Your eyes water as you pass under some vines dangling from a tree branch, each heavily laden with onion-like fruit. Flies buzz around the milk white, pungent fruit, eating their fill. Fallen pieces, mushy yellow with age and rot drift gently in the water's molasses-slow current.

16. A wagon's muck-encrusted wheel spins slowly in the breeze. The wagon lies upended in the swamp mud, mushrooms growing from shattered wine casks. The red paint that once adorned the wagon has flaked away into a blotchy maroon rash. A horse's skeleton, its legs shattered, lies half-buried in the swamp and a frog stares at you from its perch on the cracked and yellowed skull.

17. Blasted black stumps protrude from the water, the only trace of the logging camp that stood here decades ago, before the river was dammed and the forest flooded. As far as the eye can see, the swamp is flat, only stumps protruding over the placid water's surface. Tiny green snakes dart through the water, slipping out of sight under tangles of choked weeds and roots. Herons swoop down to catch the garter snakes, each pulling back towards the sky with a wriggling serpent in its beak.



18. The air is very damp. The humidity is a constant thing, making you uncomfortably warm if you do any activity at all. Only when you pass through a gap in the trees in bright sunlight does the humidity lessen a little. The consequences of the moisture are easily seen: great dangling plants, like a tangle of hair, hang from the trees, getting sustenance from the air not the ground. They do not seem to have leaves, but all their thin stems are green. Other plants, mosslike, grow thickly over branches and tree trunks. Big leaves near the ground are also burdened with mosses. A bare rock is rarely seen; either plants have grown across it or it has a thin layer of lichens. Your bedding at night is soggy with the dampness and your skin never really feels dry.

19. [Have characters make a perception or spotting check. Pick one or more who are successful and read them this:] As you look out over the swamp you see the back of something huge and scaly break the water's surface and then dive deep. It was bigger than any relative of a lizard that you have ever seen, but it was impossible to tell what it may have been from the brief glance that you had. All that you can be sure of is that there is something huge beneath the waters of this swamp.

20. The trail squishes underfoot and the big green leaves of nearby trees dump water down your neck if you bump them. The ground is hidden below leaves that grow waist-high on a man, with lines down their length as if they had been folded like a fan. Strange white flowers stick up from the base where the leaves meet: a long thin white "finger" protruding from a white cup. If you look closely, the "finger" is covered by miniature flowers, which smell rather foul and attract a swarm of tiny flies that take off in a cloud of black wings if disturbed. From the dead stalks of these plants you can see that the spike of flowers becomes a spike of tiny seeds and then they fall off in all directions.

21. Great pools of water stretch away from you on both sides of the reinforced trail. Someone has worked hard to maintain this path against the forces of nature; it has wood and stone supporting the sides and a lot of dirt has been pounded down in the center. Nevertheless, in places it is soggy and your [your horses'] feet sink rather alarmingly into soft muck. On either side the water is greenish, with algae or other small plants covering the surface. Huge logs float in the water with only one end visible. At intervals there are hummocks, and several trees seem to huddle together on the slightly higher ground.



22. Big frogs leap into the water with noisy splashes as you approach. Sometimes you can see them; they're bigger than your hand and sleekly green with dark splotches. Most of the time, though, you simply hear or see some motion, and then there is a splash and you can see rings enlarging in the murky green water. Floating dead leaves bob up and down in response to the disturbance. Perhaps it is these frogs that make the deep booming "burr-aahp" sounds that surround you in the night.

23. A simple wooden [bamboo] blow pipe lies half buried in the mud. A handful of broken darts, so old their fletching has rotted away, can be found beside the cracked pipe. A brown and gold millipede has made a little nest inside the pipe and scurries away when it is disturbed.

24. The ground is soggy and when your [your horses'] feet disturb it, it releases the sour reed of rotting vegetation. The rotting smell is ever present, interrupted only by areas of worse smells: when you enter an area where wild boars have turned over the soil releasing its stench, or when you pass the rotting carcass of a deer. The shrubs and trees along the path have big dark leaves, many laden with moss. The humidity is very high: anything that gets wet is very difficult to dry. Thus, you can also smell wet leather, damp hair and soggy fur. The air is warm but it is dim here under the trees. Only occasionally does a beam of sunlight penetrate the thick canopy, a blinding brightness in contrast to the general semi-darkness. Insects and dust motes float in the bright sunbeam. After you pass it, the dimness seems oppressive.

25. A big gray bird strides through the water. It has a long thin neck and a longer narrow bill. With each step it raises one leg high out of the water and steps neatly down again without a splash. It is walking near the far edge of the open water, about twenty yards away, where the water seems to be just less than knee high on the bird. Its ashy gray head is held alert, cocked slightly to the side, watching the dark water. It paces silently past without seeming to notice you.



26. The land beside the road looks like an ordinary forest. Big trees, their trunks wider than you can reach around, support a high leafy canopy a hundred feet above you. Lesser trees of the same kind can be seen as well. There are shorter trees and shrubs among under the towering canopy, some with clusters and spikes of white or

yellow flowers. Below them, the ground is hidden under coarse grasses and big-leaved plants. [None of this reveals that the ground is so soft that it is impassable. Just off the trail, a stick would sink down as far as you would care to push it without finding a secure bottom.]

27. The normally waist-deep water splashes hard against your face. Wiping the slime from your eyes, you catch sight of a small brown and gold blur dashing across the stagnant water. The frilled lizard runs upright, its huge, flat feet making rapid sucking sounds as it dashes across the water.

28. A big tree has fallen over. Its base is so huge that, although now fallen and lying on its side, it towers over your heads. The base is covered with thick mud, now caked and dry from exposure to the air. A dozen plants are growing on the top of the broken roots and a vine tangles it all together. The great tree stretches along the path for yards and then the path turns slightly but the tree goes on straight, out into the swamp and then down, so that most of it is covered by pea-green turbid water. Both thick and thin branches still stick out above the water, the leaves on them mostly gone, the ones remaining brown, dry and twisted. Small branches and dead leaves have caught in the fallen canopy and at least one vine is growing there.

29. A tree-fall has made an opening in the canopy! You walk [ride] for a few moments through bright mid-morning [afternoon] sunlight. The air is warm but less humid. Overhead is blue sky and a few fluffy white clouds. Small bright birds flit among the big-leaved plants growing in the lighted gap. Big showy flowers can be seen emerging from knee-high leaves: one a spike of creamy white tubes longer than your hand, another a large cluster of two-toned yellow and orange flowers, attended by a constantly changing flutter of blue, white and yellow butterflies.

30. A fallen tree lies across the trail. Its trunk, lying on its side, is higher than a tall man. The lower end of the tree lies out in the swamp: the broken roots and base are surrounded by opaque green water. The other end extends across bushes and shrubs and then out over muddy swampland, thinly occupied by grasses and young trees. The leafy branches of the great tree are still green. Other travelers have apparently climbed over the tree trunk: you can see scuff marks and scrapes on the dense red-gray bark. But the easiest way [the only way for horses] is a detour on soft mucky ground almost thirty feet along the trunk, to a spot where the fallen tree lies low enough that men [leading horses] can pick their way across without much trouble.

31. The mosquitoes are not dense but they are persistent. When you are moving, you do not generally notice them, but if you stop, one soon lands. They are tall for mosquitos, with long legs and an impressively long proboscis to stab into their prey. Their bodies are gray, but the wings have an iridescent blue sheen. And they are quick: a casual slap misses. Even waiting for one, they are hard to hit, but they provide ample opportunity. Just a moment of stillness and you have one on your sleeve, or an exposed wrist, or on your face. In a few minutes there are a dozen of them, hovering and then landing, looking for a spot to jab you. Their bite is painful and untreated, leaves an itchy welt. [Two or more layers of clothing effectively deter them, but keep the wearer too warm.]



32. For a bit, you tromp [ride] through shallow muck, the plants around you growing on hummocks. The hummock

tops, are dry and firm. Between hummocks there is shallow, muddy green water. The ground under the water is sometimes solid, but often your feet [horses' hooves] slip down and down. Stepping from the top of one hummock to the top of the next is not easy: they are rounded and if you step on the edge it collapses and your [horse's] foot slides downward. The grasses on the hummocks are very coarse, with fine teeth on the leaf edges which tear at you as you pass. Shrubs also grow on the hummocks, with long sharp thorns. The twigs on the shrubs poke at you, not sharp as the thorns but uncomfortable nonetheless.

33. The trail takes you through a section of the swamp where the water level is down. There is no obvious explanation: presumably somewhere the water was diverted from this area. Whatever the cause, here, as you ride [walk] along the twisting path between various point of high ground, beside you the water had left behind a stinking green mess. Big logs and a few dead fish can be seen, draped in damp green gunk. Frogs hop out into the mess as you pass, making subdued plunks and remaining quite visible a few feet out. The stench of it is strong: plants and fish and other things are rotting there.

34. With a jump, you realize that the curiously-shaped white stone bobbing just beneath the surface of the water is in fact an elongated skull. The skin has withered away and a few tendons have been exposed, as has the bone. The jaw bone is particularly prominent, much more so than any other skull you have seen in a life of adventuring. A few wisps of hair cling to its pate. A coin appears to have been pushed into its empty mouth. [The coin is very old and unidentifiable, while the skull has in fact been mummified by the effects produced by the swamp. Extensive digging would ultimately reveal the rest of the skeleton but would also cause a significant cave-in of the submerged branches and vegetable matter on which the adventurers walk.]

35. The path widens to a slightly higher area that would make a good campsite. Trampling, horse droppings and charcoal show that travelers frequently stop here. Small trash litters the ground: bits of wood, fruit rinds, egg shells. Everything is trampled flat. Weeds with thick leaves grow on battered stems, their nondescript flowers in damaged spikes. There is no firewood; everything that could be cut has been. Two great trees rising high out of the muddy swampland shade the area but neither tree has any branches within reach. Shrubs have been gathered so those that remain are all several very risky steps out into the swamp. The only stand of shrubs remaining screens a fallen log, the obvious campsite privy. Ahead or back along the trail, though, there is plenty of wood that can be reached within about 100 yards.

36. A flock of yellow and white birds can be seen and heard overhead [or: when you pause for lunch/a break]. Fifty or more, squawking and fluttering are feeding in a lofty tree whose canopy is bright with tiny orange-colored fruit. The tree is so tall that it is difficult to make out details, but you sit in a steady rain of dropped fruit. They are the size of a fingertip and bitter but flavorful. The birds call raucously and jump around in the leafy branches. With large bills, they pull off fruits and eat them eagerly. Many drop. Also frequently falling from the high canopy are small white globs of bird droppings. Birds squawk and displace each other in a flutter of wings, making continual noise and motion. An occasional yellow feather drifts down to lie on the ground among squashed orange fruit and white splatters.

37. Beside you, grasses with long thin leaves grow in little hillocks. The gray-green grasses form clumps, filling and building on tiny higher, more secure spots in the sodden land. Between areas stabilized by the grasses, the ground is muddy and covered with tiny, fast-growing plants that do nothing to stabilize it. The

mud is a slimy olive green with occasional odd holes where a bubble emerged. When touched, it sticks to anything. It has a foul smell of rotting plants and it stains anything light-colored that it contacts. When it dries, it forms a clay-like consistency that is hard to scrape [out of horses hooves or] off boots.



38. Ahead of you, a large branch overhangs your route, just barely higher than your heads. A large brown snake is twisted around the branch and seems to be sunning itself. As you move forward, the snake lifts its head and tastes the air with its tongue. The closer you draw, the more agitated it becomes, writhing on its branch. Just before you pass under the branch, the snake makes a mighty lurch and in a startling move, throws itself off the branch and directly into your path [into your boat]. The snake is almost as startled as you are at the proximity, but recovers quickly and slithers off into the brush [the water]. [Brown water snakes often bask in trees. If one is disturbed it drops to the water and tries to hide under the surface. If its timing is bad, it may fall into the boat of the people it was trying to avoid.]

39. [Pick one character and read:] **You hear a quiet but distinct cracking sound from the stand of grass and leaves beneath your left foot.** [When the character lifts his or her foot:] **When you lift your foot, you find it covered with light-colored goo. Strands of the goo dangle from your foot, and some of those strands lead to shards of a light, slightly speckled shell.** [Some adventurer has stepped on a large bird or reptile egg, or a cluster of small eggs. If desired, the GM could give the party a very slim chance to spot the nest before stepping in it. If they try to reconstruct the size of the eggs, the GM will need to determine the species that laid the eggs (possibly changing the eggshell color if necessary), and provide the characters with corresponding information. This event could lead to trouble if the mother is an angry carnivore.]



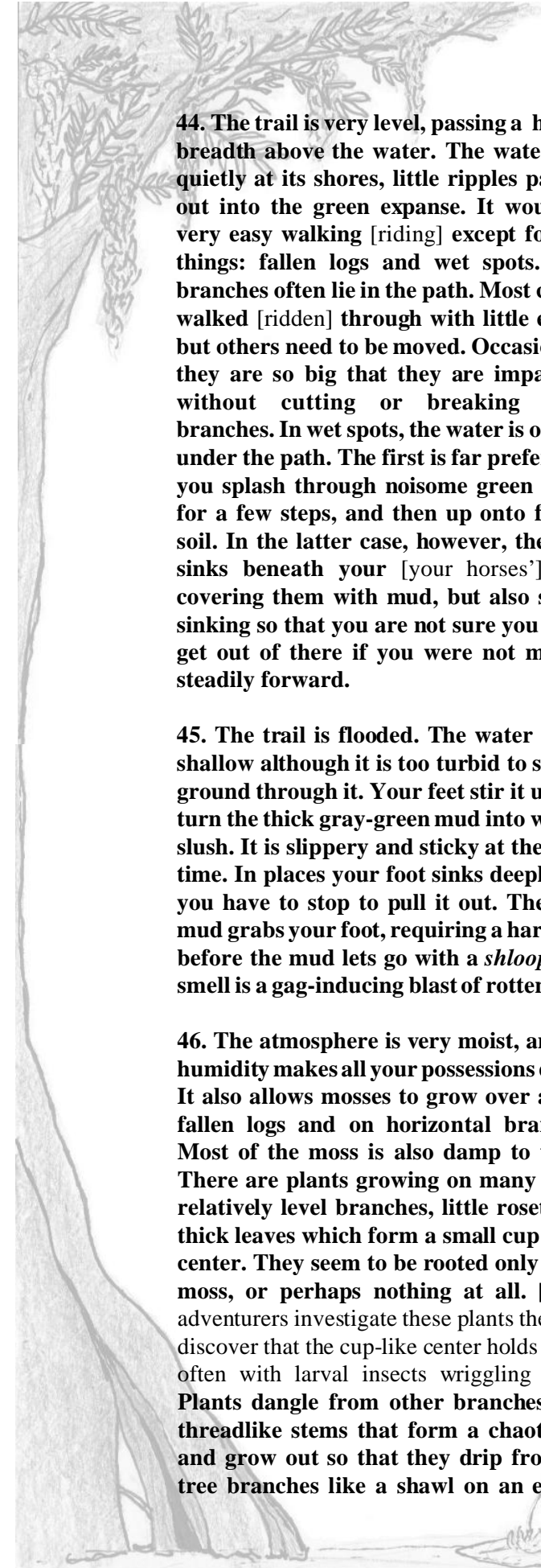
40. **You approach a clearing; as you peer into the open area, you observe the ground bubbling as if it were water boiling in a pot on a hearth. A dirty, fishy smell is evident here and your feet sink slowly in the inundated earth. Over the sound of the bubbling ground you can hear a creaking sound, which seems to come from outside of the clearing, across from you.**

41. **Coming through a dense copse of moss-covered trees, you find yourselves surrounded by scattered stone ruins. The air smells of sun-baked rock, and the twittering of birds comes from all sides. The stones themselves are granite, roughly carved into blocks and columns. A series of blocks arranged in a large square suggests that there was once a stone building here. Although the ground may at one time have been firm enough to support a structure, now your every footstep brings water**

squelching up around the soles of your boots. Time and weather have worn away any adornments that were present on the ruins, and scavengers – humanoid or otherwise – have long since made off with anything of value. Now the only inhabitants of the area are birds, which have made nests in the crooks of old walls and atop the columns.

42. **Huge trees stand in the dark water. Vast trunks rise up and up, spreading out far overhead. The trunks are smooth and brown with deep furrows. Any branches are far above, so you only guess that the delicate leaves on the ground fell from these swamp giants. They rise up directly out of the water, with no indication of an island supporting them. The murky water is still and featureless except for the trunks of these great trees, a few broken stumps and brown lumps. When you can investigate the brown lumps, you see that they are smooth pieces of wood, broad as a fighter's thigh. They remind you of the little volcanic mountains that gradually build into large islands, but of course trees do not grow like that. Nevertheless, they are eerily similar to the great swamp trees.** [The lumps are called cypress knees: the big cypress trees send up "knees" that help them take in air.]

43. **You ride [walk] into an area with innumerable small trees growing out of the muddy ground beside the trail. Their thin trunks fill the area so there is little space between them. Someone has cut them so that the trail is passable. A few feet above your heads the leaves form a solid canopy that blocks the view in all directions. The leaves of the little trees extend over the trail only sometimes so you can see that a taller canopy of great swamp trees grows many feet above this dwarf jungle, but it certainly hems you in. There's a distinct and not unpleasant odor to these trees that for a while masks the stench of the rest of the swamp.**



44. The trail is very level, passing a hands-breadth above the water. The water laps quietly at its shores, little ripples passing out into the green expanse. It would be very easy walking [riding] except for two things: fallen logs and wet spots. Tree branches often lie in the path. Most can be walked [ridden] through with little effort, but others need to be moved. Occasionally they are so big that they are impassible without cutting or breaking many branches. In wet spots, the water is over or under the path. The first is far preferable: you splash through noisome green water for a few steps, and then up onto firmer soil. In the latter case, however, the path sinks beneath your [your horses'] feet, covering them with mud, but also slowly sinking so that you are not sure you could get out of there if you were not moving steadily forward.

45. The trail is flooded. The water seems shallow although it is too turbid to see the ground through it. Your feet stir it up and turn the thick gray-green mud into watery slush. It is slippery and sticky at the same time. In places your foot sinks deeply and you have to stop to pull it out. The deep mud grabs your foot, requiring a hard jerk before the mud lets go with a *shloop*. The smell is a gag-inducing blast of rotten eggs.

46. The atmosphere is very moist, and the humidity makes all your possessions damp. It also allows mosses to grow over all the fallen logs and on horizontal branches. Most of the moss is also damp to touch. There are plants growing on many of the relatively level branches, little rosettes of thick leaves which form a small cup in the center. They seem to be rooted only in the moss, or perhaps nothing at all. [If the adventurers investigate these plants they will discover that the cup-like center holds water, often with larval insects wriggling in it.] Plants dangle from other branches, thin threadlike stems that form a chaotic net and grow out so that they drip from the tree branches like a shawl on an elderly

aunt. [These plants are epiphytes (air plants), which take water out of the air to grow.]

47. A tall tree leans from a base close to the trail over the soggy, partly flooded ground. A small animal dashes up the shaggy gray trunk as you near, chattering noisily. You get a fleeting impression of gray fur, a round face and a bushy tail. It disturbs the broad triangular emerald-green leaves of a huge vine that twists around the tree trunk. The leaves continue to flutter after the animal has moved past them, higher up the trunk. It disappears, first under the vine and then into the tree's canopy. Its noise is audible long after you can no longer see it or even guess its actual position, warning all of your presence.



48. The regular splashing of the water is broken by a sudden explosion of noise and a flurry of flying, brownish feathers. A duck bursts across the route ahead and veers wildly into the sky. Its

quacks echo across the swamp and attract the attentions of rats and other small creatures, which dive into the water with a succession of splashes. [A mother duck has left her nest undefended to try to distract the adventurers. Anyone who looks carefully at the place where the duck emerged should be able to find the nest and some tasty duck eggs inside.]

49. The air thickens and darkens as the weather changes and the temperature drops. It is difficult to tell whether it is raining or not because of the intense humidity in the air. It makes everything from clothes to weapons to torches feels slimy and unclean. An owl hoots disconsolately somewhere in the grey, sunless landscape and, with no clear landmarks to be seen, it is almost impossible to be sure which direction is which.

50. A rock the size of a horse lies half-beached in the water, as if it has pushed the branches and twigs out of the way – or had been hurled there by some titanic force. The rock is covered with moss of at least two kinds. One is furry and blue and the other black and sleek. Looking at the rock, from a certain angle, the mosses together seem to spell out the word ‘Intolerable’ in the Common script.



51. A huge fallen log looms ahead, rising out of the ferns and thick tree trunks. Twisted roots—some of which are now rotted—could provide a means to climb atop the log. As you get closer you can see that someone, or maybe something, has pushed many logs together end to end, forming a slippery, moss-covered footpath through the swamp.

52. A black beetle the size of a hand span buzzes slowly but surely across the fetid water. On the surface, water boatmen – the flat-bodied insects that skip across the top of the water on their many feet – leave no indication of where they tread. From time to time, the beetle darts suddenly and violently towards the water and seizes one of the many water boatmen as they dart across the oily flows. Then the buzzer drones off into the distance.

53. The water is a little cleaner and faster moving here. The tree trunks are covered with a thick, fibrous, almost colorless kind of plant that you have seen only in a very wispy form elsewhere. In some places, it looks almost as if someone has draped heaps of the stuff over the lower branches. Here and there, exotic purple blooms peep forth from the pallid mass. [This is a form

of sphagnum moss, which can be a good medium for growing orchids.]

54. Seven white fish float belly up on the water. This patch of water is brackish and scarcely moves. The fish are scattered around an area about as long as the span of a tall man’s arms. Their eyes are glassy and unseeing and their mouths move reflexively in unison in the slow current. Tiny red worms are wriggling among the gills and eyes of one of the fish. [These fish have sickened and died and are not good to eat, although they would not cause serious health problems.]

55. Nearby you see a willow tree, a dark hole in the trunk just above the water shows it’s largely hollow within. Like all the other willow trees in this part of the swamp, its long branches hang down into the water as if they are seeking to drink the water. Its few stringy leaves lie against the branches, as if lacking the energy to stand up on their own. The fingers of the tree’s branches rustle in the water and the tree itself groans as the water and the dank wind pass through the hollow trunk. At any moment, it looks like it could collapse.

56. Ahead the landscape flows like a green, velvet carpet of leaves and algae. Your footsteps make ripples in the surface of the swamp water, and it eddies out from you to slap lightly upon the wide, black bases of the trees that rise out of the gloom. Hoary beards of moss drip from the boughs of the trees, filtering the sunlight and casting an amber glow on the water through which you wade.

57. You notice a basket of woven reeds lying nearby. Its edge is broken and it is filled with dead leaves and other detritus. As you watch, the contents rustle as if something unseen was stirring them. Suddenly five bright green snakes slither out of the leaves, they drop to the water, making quiet splashes, and swim out of sight.

58. The surface of the water here is choked with millions of tiny, bright green, leafy plants. Their hardy stems are rooted in the muck under your feet and make passage a little more difficult than it has been. Every now and then you see much larger versions of these plants: great, bowl-shaped leaves where rainwater has gathered.

59. All around you are golden rushes and parched, straw-colored grass, rising out of the swamp to make it look like a waterlogged prairie. Dragonflies hover and swoop around you. Some are tiny - mere slivers of silver sparkling in the light. Others are almost a foot long, colored bright red or vibrant black and gold with wings that reflect the sun.

60. A half-wrecked canoe lies across the path. It appears to have been carved from a single log. The canoe is approximately ten paces in length and when sound might have carried three or four people. There is a notch amidships where a mast might have been fitted and slots for oars. However, mast and oars are nowhere to be seen. Some of the wooden hull is rotten but there are sections that could be salvaged. [GM Note: The wood is quite light in weight and there is enough to make a small raft.]

61. A long-legged bird with a brown neck and black wings wades through the water. With its head cocked at an angle towards the water, the bird seems to be inspecting the swamp for food possibly insects. Slowly, the bird bends its neck so that its head is dipped into the water. There is a momentary pause and then a slow, low booming sound fills the air: Boom. Boom. Boom. [GM Note: This is a



bittern, specifically the Great or European Bittern which is famous for making this noise.]

62. You realize that the birds have been silent for a few minutes. Even the insects have stopped squeaking and creaking. Suddenly there is a distant rustle of leaves and the water ripples and breaks across the fallen branches and twigs. The birds fly into the air in a swift rush. The ground shakes for several seconds; horses shy and small items rattle. Then the moment has passed, and you find that you have been holding your breath. [GM Note: It is easier to detect minor earthquakes like this in otherwise silent and still areas. Animals are said to behave strangely in their presence. Small animals might seem to attack PCs as they flee wildly.]

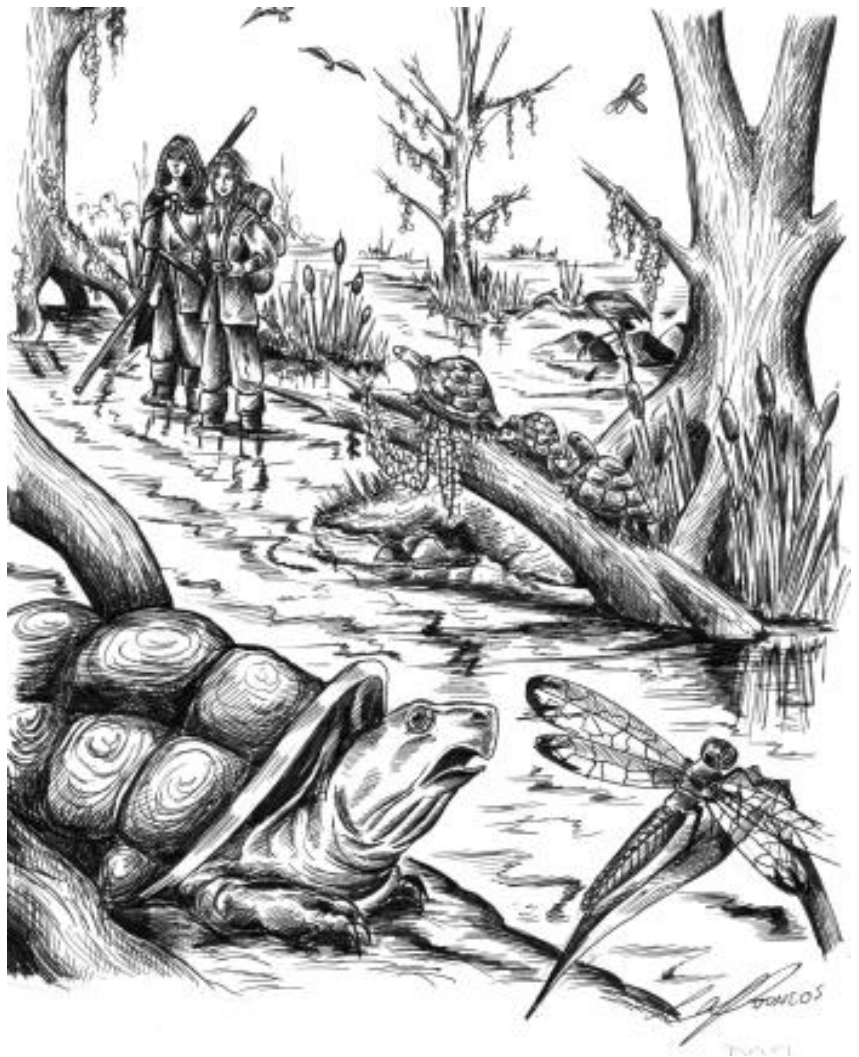
63. A small patch of the water just to the side of the path is bubbling gently. Wisps of steam rise into the air, as if they were the steam from a pot of morning oat porridge. Smaller bubbles are rising to the surface of the water slowly but in a constant stream. These small bubbles do not burst, but a particularly large one does rise to the surface and then lazily breaks apart as a great stench of rotting eggs fills the air. [GM Note: the decay of some vegetable matter naturally produces hydrogen sulfide, which is what gives the rotten eggs smell.]

64. The mist covers the waters of the swamp, concealing its secrets and dangers. Wisps of vapor reach like fingers through the leaves of the undergrowth and around the trees. The branches of willows and other trees droop like canopies down to the water's surface and the naked roots snake through the mud and the waters. There is a thickness to the air and it feels damp upon your skin. The fabric of your clothing clings to you uncomfortably. The smell of decaying foliage is mixed with a sweetness that may come from the odd flowers that dot the landscape.

65. Many animals avoid you by going into the water. Turtles, mostly a handspan across but sometimes larger or smaller, slide into the water with barely a splash. You cannot get close to them on land, but you can see them scrunched together on a log a dozen yards out in the swamp. They bask in a strange posture in the occasional beam of sunlight, their heads and legs all sticking stiffly out from the shell. Once, you spot a soft-shelled turtle swimming in the water near to shore, its upturned nose just barely breaking the surface, flattened shell and big webbed feet moving with ease through the water. You have been warned about the big snapping turtles: the size of a saddle, their bite can cut off a hand with a single snap.

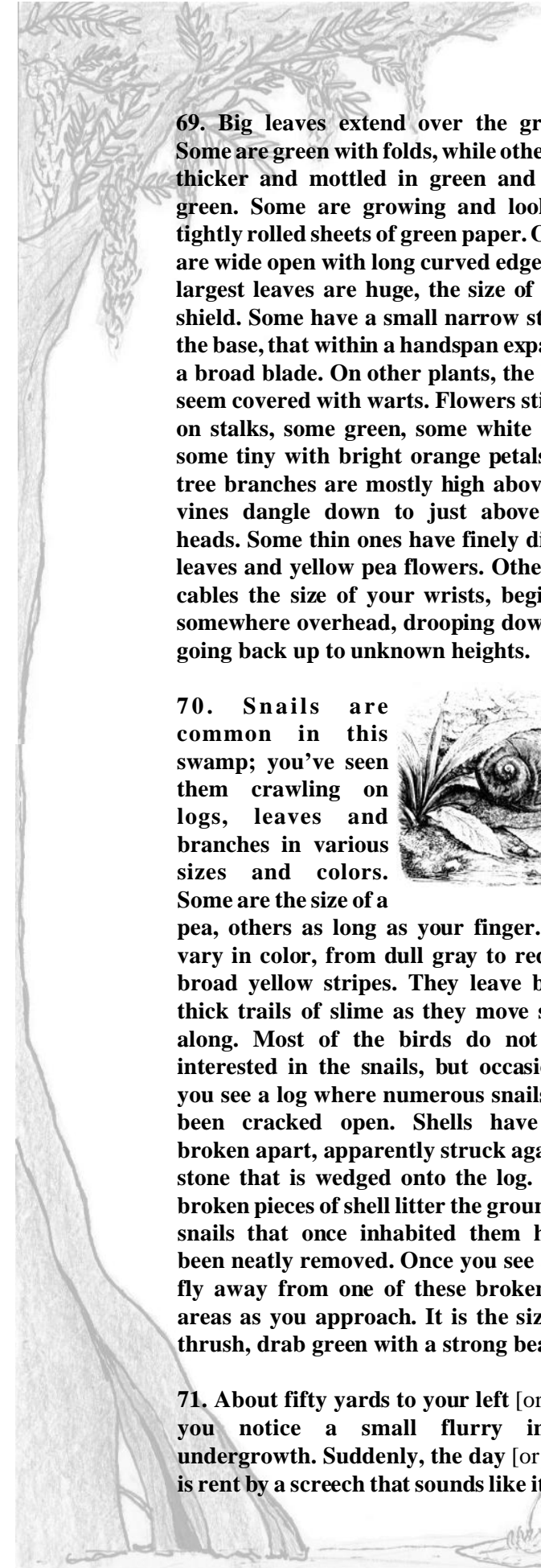
66. The pools lie still in the dimness of the swamp. Great logs can be seen in the water, half submerged. On the nearest log, a plant with broad dark green leaves at the end of thin stalks grows amid thick mosses. A dozen turtles lie along the top of the log, waiting for a beam of sunlight, perhaps. The trunk of the log is red-brown and looks saturated with water. In the water at the base of the log, your eye is drawn to an irregularity in the green water. It is an eye, no two of them. There is an alligator there, longer than a horse. Only its eyes are out of the water. It glides by slowly, silently, on the far side of the fallen tree, its passage raising barely a ripple.

67. An improbably colored shape seems to hang in the crook of a tree's branches several dozen yards ahead. [As the party nears that tree:] Strangely enough, the shape appears to be a small humanoid dressed in a bright red and blue cloak. [Upon closer inspection:] The "creature" turns out to be



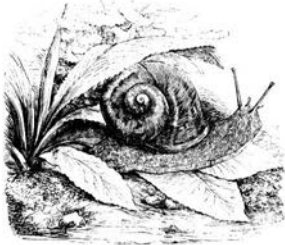
a crude doll wearing a bright red and blue dress. A smiling face and eyes adorn the doll's head, under a tangle of brown yarn that serves for its hair. The colors are still relatively bright, though it looks a little weatherworn. It must not have been here very long.

68. Mosquitoes sting your neck and exposed skin as you walk through the damp, warm swamp. You stop for a moment to arrange your gear and notice that you can hear a low humming sound. At first you're not sure what it is, but as you look around in the low light of this thickly forested swampland you notice just how many mosquitoes are swarming about, and you realize that the hum is coming from the thousands of wings beating all around you.



69. Big leaves extend over the ground. Some are green with folds, while others are thicker and mottled in green and gray-green. Some are growing and look like tightly rolled sheets of green paper. Others are wide open with long curved edges. The largest leaves are huge, the size of a kite shield. Some have a small narrow stem at the base, that within a handspan expand to a broad blade. On other plants, the leaves seem covered with warts. Flowers stick up on stalks, some green, some white tubes, some tiny with bright orange petals. The tree branches are mostly high above, but vines dangle down to just above your heads. Some thin ones have finely divided leaves and yellow pea flowers. Others are cables the size of your wrists, beginning somewhere overhead, drooping down and going back up to unknown heights.

70. Snails are common in this swamp; you've seen them crawling on logs, leaves and branches in various sizes and colors. Some are the size of a



pea, others as long as your finger. They vary in color, from dull gray to red with broad yellow stripes. They leave behind thick trails of slime as they move slowly along. Most of the birds do not seem interested in the snails, but occasionally you see a log where numerous snails have been cracked open. Shells have been broken apart, apparently struck against a stone that is wedged onto the log. Large broken pieces of shell litter the ground, the snails that once inhabited them having been neatly removed. Once you see a bird fly away from one of these broken-shell areas as you approach. It is the size of a thrush, drab green with a strong beak.

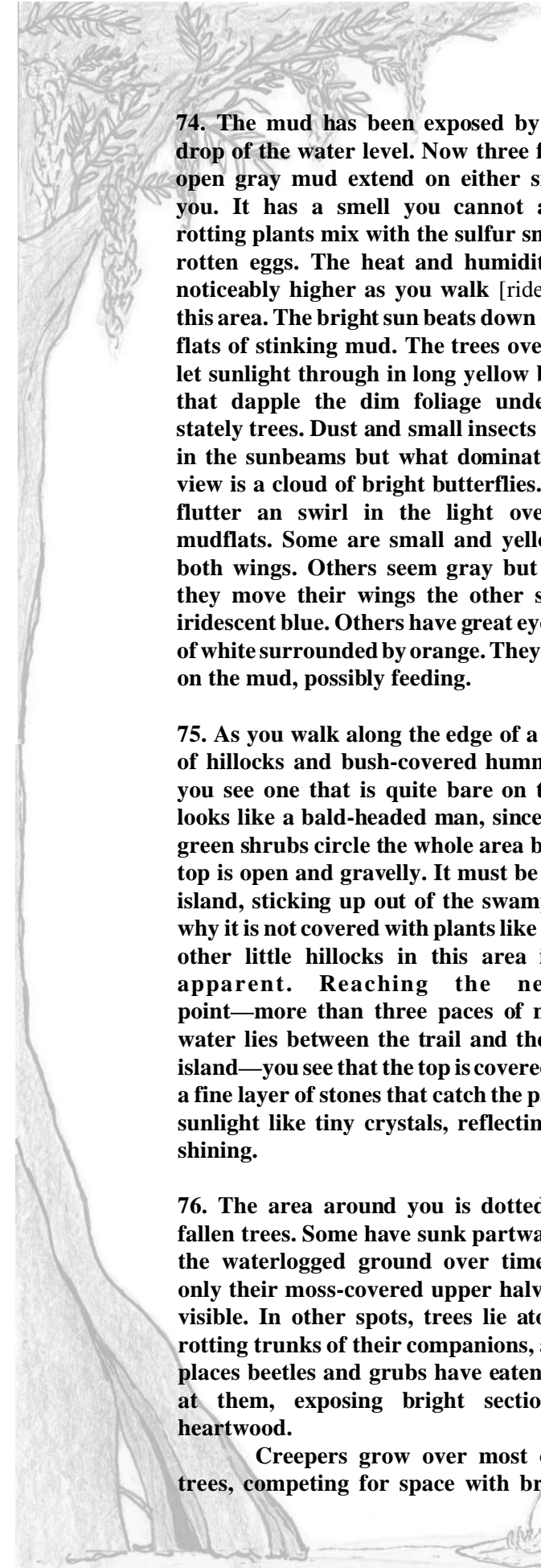
71. About fifty yards to your left [or right] you notice a small flurry in the undergrowth. Suddenly, the day [or night] is rent by a screech that sounds like it came

from a wild cat, and the air is filled with a foul stench. Swaying fronds of grass trace the path of the screeching animal as it bounds into the distance, while more gentle vibrations suggest that a smaller creature is heading your direction. [It's a frightened skunk, of course, that was just threatened by some cougar-like creature.]

72. The trail crosses the swamp on a couple of fallen logs that have been propped up to make a poorly constructed bridge. As you cross, the movement causes water to splash and the logs to jump. The logs are still firm but it is clear that they are rapidly rotting: parts are soggy and flatten and squash under your feet. The ends, although on firmer ground, have been stamped down deep into the mud and are slippery. Branches from the logs were roughly hacked off and tossed into the water beside the far end of the bridge. The leaves have long since died but vines grew up over them so they form a peculiar green shrub. A large brownish frog sits on the log ahead of you, and leaps off as you approach. There's a sudden movement and an alligator, lying under the vine-draped dead branches, swallows it whole.

73. Wood that's dry enough to catch alight is hard to come by in the swamp – the damp air and plentiful groundwater tend to keep fires from spreading, if they start at all. This makes your surroundings all the more of a surprise, as this was clearly the site of a major blaze in the not-too-distant past.

Most of the trees around you are dead, or slowly dying, and many of them are little more than charred, black stumps. Underneath the inescapable odor of mold and damp, you can pick up the acrid scent of the fire. The ground under your feet has been scorched bare, and from the scattered green shoots and tiny patches of moss, it has only recently begun to recover. Perhaps most unsettling is the complete absence of insects, in fact, this part of the swamp is unusually quiet.



74. The mud has been exposed by some drop of the water level. Now three feet of open gray mud extend on either side of you. It has a smell you cannot avoid: rotting plants mix with the sulfur smell of rotten eggs. The heat and humidity are noticeably higher as you walk [ride] into this area. The bright sun beats down on the flats of stinking mud. The trees overhead let sunlight through in long yellow beams that dapple the dim foliage under the stately trees. Dust and small insects dance in the sunbeams but what dominates the view is a cloud of bright butterflies. They flutter an swirl in the light over the mudflats. Some are small and yellow on both wings. Others seem gray but when they move their wings the other side is iridescent blue. Others have great eyespots of white surrounded by orange. They alight on the mud, possibly feeding.

75. As you walk along the edge of a series of hillocks and bush-covered hummocks, you see one that is quite bare on top. It looks like a bald-headed man, since thick green shrubs circle the whole area but the top is open and gravelly. It must be a tiny island, sticking up out of the swamp, but why it is not covered with plants like all the other little hillocks in this area is not apparent. Reaching the nearest point—more than three paces of murky water lies between the trail and the little island—you see that the top is covered with a fine layer of stones that catch the passing sunlight like tiny crystals, reflecting and shining.

76. The area around you is dotted with fallen trees. Some have sunk partway into the waterlogged ground over time, and only their moss-covered upper halves are visible. In other spots, trees lie atop the rotting trunks of their companions, and in places beetles and grubs have eaten away at them, exposing bright sections of heartwood.

Creepers grow over most of the trees, competing for space with brilliant

green patches of lichen and large, shelf-like mushrooms. All around is the smell of rot and age, overlaid with the fresh scent of new plants that have taken root in the fallen trees. The air is still and heavy, and the silence is broken only by the muted buzzing of small clouds of flies flitting from place to place.

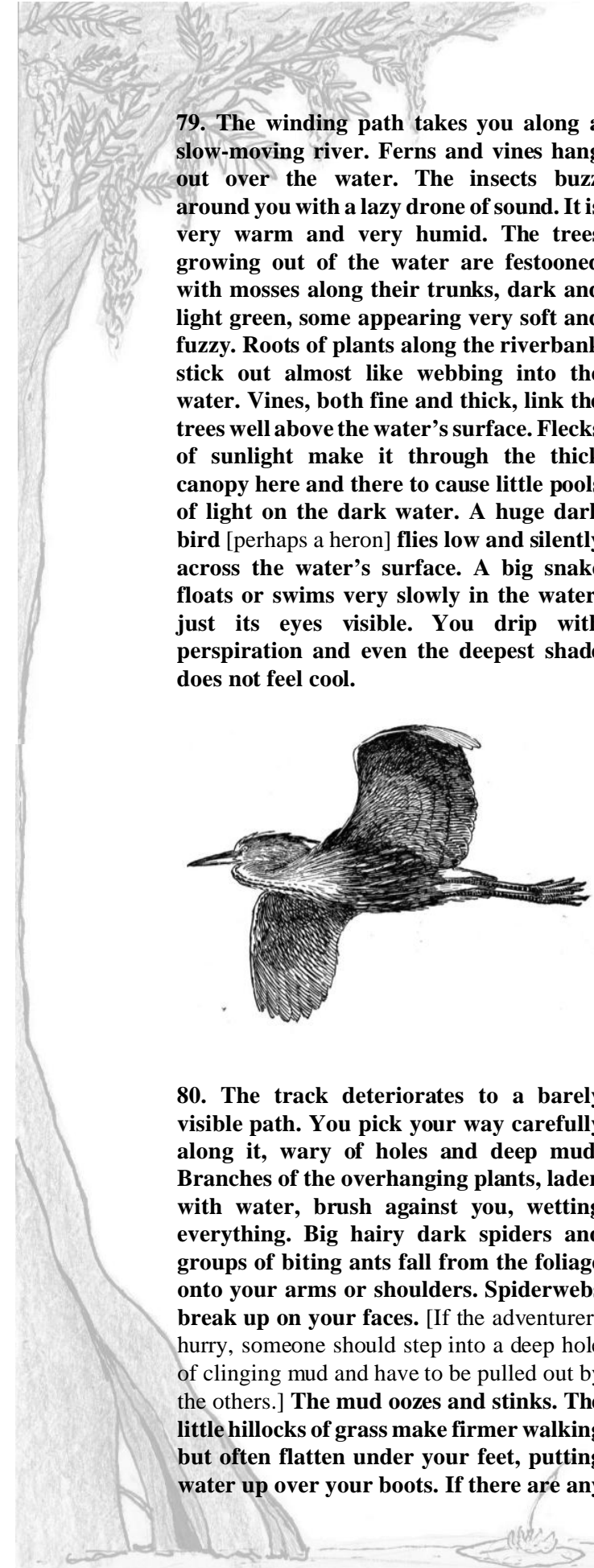


77. The air here is thick and heavy, and it seems every surface—the moist ground, trees, rotting logs and stumps alike—is covered in fungi. There are large, flat mushrooms sprouting from the

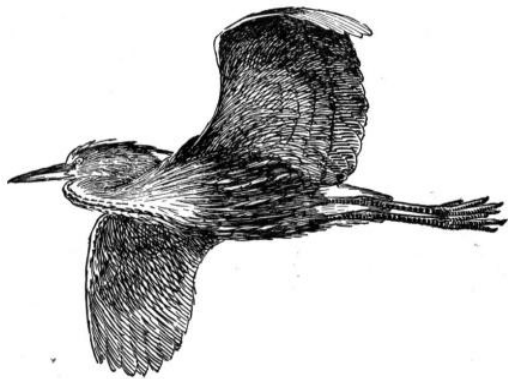
sides of the trees like tiny tables, clusters of brightly-colored mushrooms with slender stalks that cover wide swaths of ground, and bulbous, knobby growths smothering the pieces of rotten wood that anchor them. Someone—or something—else has been this way fairly recently, as a number of mushrooms that once grew on the trees have been torn off, and lie in chunks on the damp ground.

78. On one of the swamp's rare patches of high ground, you come across the remnants of an old campsite. Rotten logs have been placed in a square, at the center of which is a crude fire pit – now little more than a pile of sodden ash and charred wood. There is room around the logs for four or five bedrolls, and a large tree grows out of one side of the low hill, providing a spot to tether horses for the night.

An old rope, green with lichen, is wrapped around the tree; its frayed end hangs limply, suggesting that no one has been here for some time. Even though it's only a few feet above the surrounding swamp, the air up here is a bit clearer and smells less damp. Visibility is good all around, and you can see why this spot would make a good campsite.



79. The winding path takes you along a slow-moving river. Ferns and vines hang out over the water. The insects buzz around you with a lazy drone of sound. It is very warm and very humid. The trees growing out of the water are festooned with mosses along their trunks, dark and light green, some appearing very soft and fuzzy. Roots of plants along the riverbank stick out almost like webbing into the water. Vines, both fine and thick, link the trees well above the water's surface. Flecks of sunlight make it through the thick canopy here and there to cause little pools of light on the dark water. A huge dark bird [perhaps a heron] flies low and silently across the water's surface. A big snake floats or swims very slowly in the water, just its eyes visible. You drip with perspiration and even the deepest shade does not feel cool.



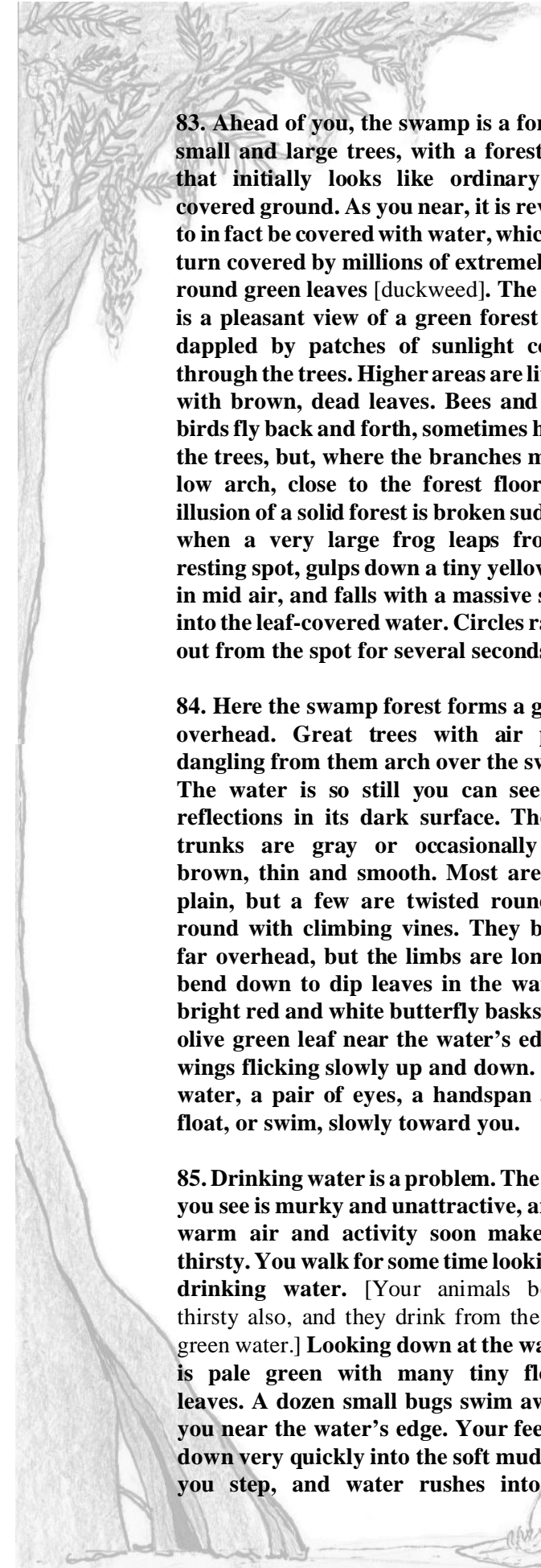
80. The track deteriorates to a barely visible path. You pick your way carefully along it, wary of holes and deep mud. Branches of the overhanging plants, laden with water, brush against you, wetting everything. Big hairy dark spiders and groups of biting ants fall from the foliage onto your arms or shoulders. Spiderwebs break up on your faces. [If the adventurers hurry, someone should step into a deep hole of clinging mud and have to be pulled out by the others.] The mud oozes and stinks. The little hillocks of grass make firmer walking but often flatten under your feet, putting water up over your boots. If there are any

openings in your boots, you have wet feet. If your boots are short, the muddy water sometimes pours in over them. [Consider: leeches, diseases, foot rot.] The sun beats down, making the air steam with uncomfortable heat.

81. From the relative dryness of the packed earth trail, you look out over dark, thick-leaved plants growing on the edge of the swamp into a brightly-lit open area. The trees surround the open area but do not grow there. It is filled with knee- or waist-high leaves of varied widths and colors, some browns and beiges but mostly rich greens. Many are thin and grass-like but others are as long as your forearm and half that across. Some plants have very attractive yellow cup-like flowers. A crow flies slowly across the open area, wings moving silently. You watch a big bee fly to the various yellow flowers, stop, feed and move on. Its black and white stripes contrast strongly with the yellow flowers. It alights on a leaf near the flowers and there is a sudden odd movement. The leaf has snapped closed to imprison the bee and consume it.

82. Up ahead, the carpet of moss beneath your feet gives way to an expanse of standing water, dotted in places with muddy islands. The bases of the trees here are all submerged in the stagnant water, and little shoals of moss and lilies cluster around many of the trunks. The irritating hum of countless mosquitoes is all around, and clouds of them swarm across the surface of the water.

Creepers and hanging moss connect many of the trees, dragging down their branches until some of them dangle into the water. It smells like rotting flesh – as if some swamp creature recently died in the area, and its corpse is slowly sloughing away into the murky pond. There are enough patches of spongy ground to allow you to make your way through the area, although the smell makes the prospect somewhat unappealing.



83. Ahead of you, the swamp is a forest of small and large trees, with a forest floor that initially looks like ordinary leaf-covered ground. As you near, it is revealed to in fact be covered with water, which is in turn covered by millions of extremely tiny round green leaves [duckweed]. The result is a pleasant view of a green forest floor, dappled by patches of sunlight coming through the trees. Higher areas are littered with brown, dead leaves. Bees and small birds fly back and forth, sometimes high in the trees, but, where the branches make a low arch, close to the forest floor. The illusion of a solid forest is broken suddenly when a very large frog leaps from its resting spot, gulps down a tiny yellow bird in mid air, and falls with a massive splash into the leaf-covered water. Circles radiate out from the spot for several seconds.

84. Here the swamp forest forms a gallery overhead. Great trees with air plants dangling from them arch over the swamp. The water is so still you can see their reflections in its dark surface. The tree trunks are gray or occasionally light brown, thin and smooth. Most are quite plain, but a few are twisted round and round with climbing vines. They branch far overhead, but the limbs are long and bend down to dip leaves in the water. A bright red and white butterfly basks on an olive green leaf near the water's edge, its wings flicking slowly up and down. In the water, a pair of eyes, a handspan apart, float, or swim, slowly toward you.

85. Drinking water is a problem. The water you see is murky and unattractive, and the warm air and activity soon makes you thirsty. You walk for some time looking for drinking water. [Your animals become thirsty also, and they drink from the slimy green water.] Looking down at the water, it is pale green with many tiny floating leaves. A dozen small bugs swim away as you near the water's edge. Your feet sink down very quickly into the soft mud when you step, and water rushes into your

footprints when you move on. The muddy water slides back out into the swamp, giving off a strong smell of decay. [There is no safe water, unless the party catches rain water.]

86. Big vines twist up the sides of the trees. In most places, even if the ground were firm, the vines would force you to stay on the trail: the vegetation is linked together in an outrageous tangle. The vines are often thin but very strong. Some are covered with spines. Flowers dangle from many of them: deep purple tubes, tiny white stars, little yellow flowers. The pale yellow flowers have a heady smell. You notice it, faintly at first, then suddenly it is very strong. The flowers are visible at quite a distance across the dim swamp. Animals are strongly attracted: white and blue butterflies flutter around the plants. Birds too are feeding on the nectar of the flowers, skimming in and out lightly.

87. Even among the towering trees in this swamp, this one is huge. Perhaps if all your party [or: a group of six] held hands you might still not reach around its base. The bark is weathered and dark, with odd cracks and crevices. In places the bark has come off and the rich red-brown wood can

be seen. On this side, along the trail, the great tree is on land, but the other side of the immense trunk is surrounded by green swamp water. The branches, bigger than many individual trees, spread far over your head. It probably has simple, oval



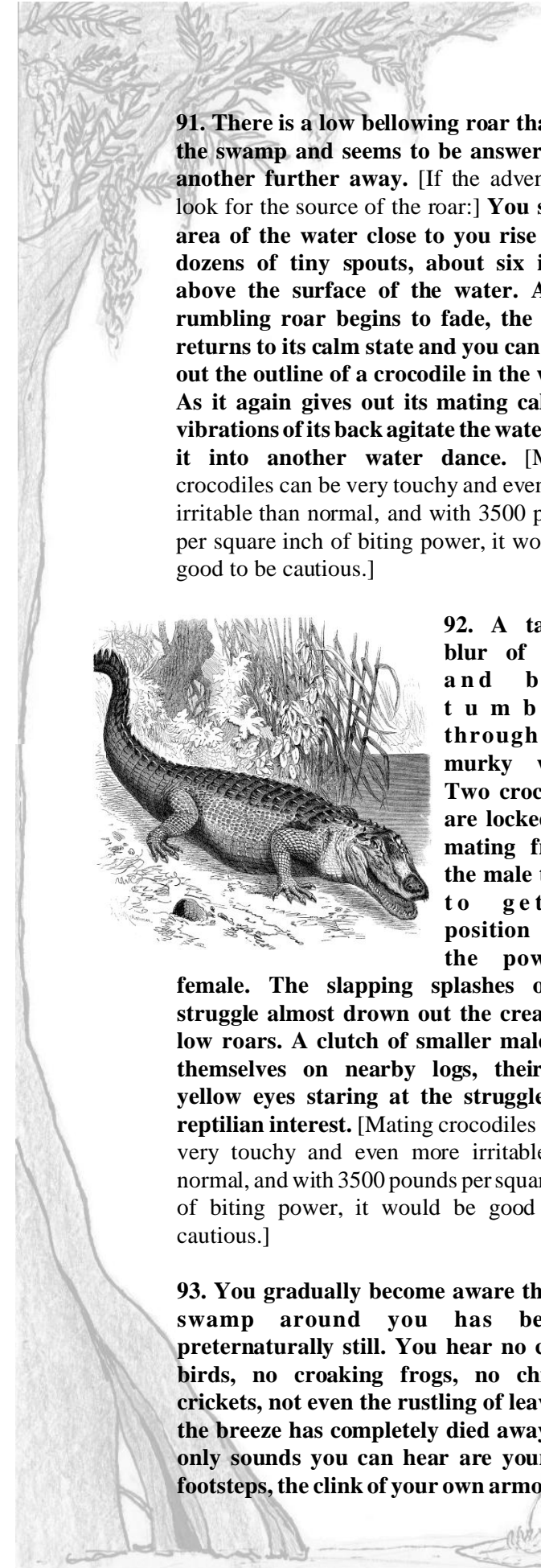
leaves, but any live ones are too high overhead to see clearly. At the tree's base is what must be a forest altar, fresh flowers are lying there, atop older dry flowers and unidentifiable items.

88. Vines stretch across the little-used trail. They are thin but strong. Some of them grab at your clothes, with tiny stinging spines; others simply dangle solidly in the trail so that the first person sets them swinging and the others have to dodge or get a face full of odd-smelling leaves, sometimes laden with small crawling insects. Others are high enough that you can duck or avoid them, but are connected by spider webs that are difficult not to bump. The nicest are festooned with bright flowers and dangle in the air overhead like pennants. The flowers are usually large and are an intense red or brilliant yellow or shocking pink. Now and then you see a tiny fast-flying bird with iridescent wings [hummingbird] visit the bright flowers, swooping past you in a buzz of wings and a puff of moving air.

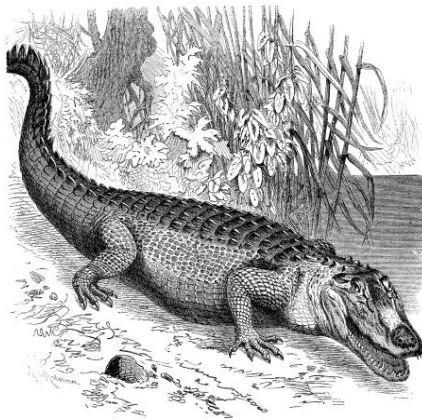
89. The trail has a deep pool of slowly-moving water on your left side and climbs up and down between barely stabilized grassy hummocks and packed dirt. To your right are more flooded hillocks and groups of dense shrubs. As you approach an area of many shrubs, you hear, over the chirp of insects and twitter of birds, a distinct crack of wood or bone breaking. It came from under the shrubs. Looking ahead, you see a spot where the mud is all slick and wet. A “drag mark” goes from the water on your left, across the trail and under the low-lying leaves of the shrubs. You smell the sudden odor of blood and intestines and hear two more clear crunches. [An alligator, cougar or other predator is feeding under the brush. The prey (deer, pig, etc.) is dead. If the predator is not disturbed it will not leave its meal.]

90. A flurry of black dots appears without warning just a few inches from your face and an almost imperceptible buzzing fills the air. The tiny insects flutter and dart about you, occasionally alighting on your exposed flesh and then taking to flight again almost immediately. They seem particularly attracted to your eyes, ears, noses, and mouths. You must inhale carefully to avoid them. [The GM could also describe the insects getting into people’s clothing, as appropriate. The gnats could be especially annoying should they find their way inside a character’s plate armor and—being, of course, mere insects—have a hard time finding their way out again.]





91. There is a low bellowing roar that fills the swamp and seems to be answered by another further away. [If the adventurers look for the source of the roar:] **You see an area of the water close to you rise up in dozens of tiny spouts, about six inches above the surface of the water. As the rumbling roar begins to fade, the water returns to its calm state and you can make out the outline of a crocodile in the water. As it again gives out its mating call, the vibrations of its back agitate the water over it into another water dance.** [Mating crocodiles can be very touchy and even more irritable than normal, and with 3500 pounds per square inch of biting power, it would be good to be cautious.]



92. A tangled blur of green and black tumbles through the murky water. Two crocodiles are locked in a mating frenzy, the male trying to get in position atop the powerful female. The slapping splashes of the struggle almost drown out the creatures' low roars. A clutch of smaller males sun themselves on nearby logs, their cold yellow eyes staring at the struggle with reptilian interest. [Mating crocodiles can be very touchy and even more irritable than normal, and with 3500 pounds per square inch of biting power, it would be good to be cautious.]

93. You gradually become aware that the swamp around you has become preternaturally still. You hear no calling birds, no croaking frogs, no chirping crickets, not even the rustling of leaves, as the breeze has completely died away. The only sounds you can hear are your own footsteps, the clink of your own armor, and

the rustle of your robes. [This silence might be merely a momentary fluke of the local weather conditions, or it could presage some ominous encounter.]

94. The muck [or water] through which you are wading seems to be almost lumpy. You soon realize that a tangle of thick, gnarled roots lies just below its surface. [The GM will need to determine whether this tangle of roots extends a few feet or many yards. The thick roots reduce characters' speed by half (that is, half of the speed they are able to go through the muck or water, which is probably already reduced from their normal speed). Characters of average dexterity who try to move through the roots faster than that will almost certainly trip and fall, or perhaps slip and have an ankle pinned by the twisted roots.]

95. Heavy with leaves, the limbs of the large trees all around you droop earthward. The branches are thin, sporting small green oval-shaped leaves. As you pass beneath the canopy of trees, the breeze stirs the branches and the leaves brush your face.

96. Small black shapes dangle from ropes drooping from a nearby tree. [Upon closer inspection:] **The shapes turn out to be large crows or ravens, suspended by small hangman's nooses.**

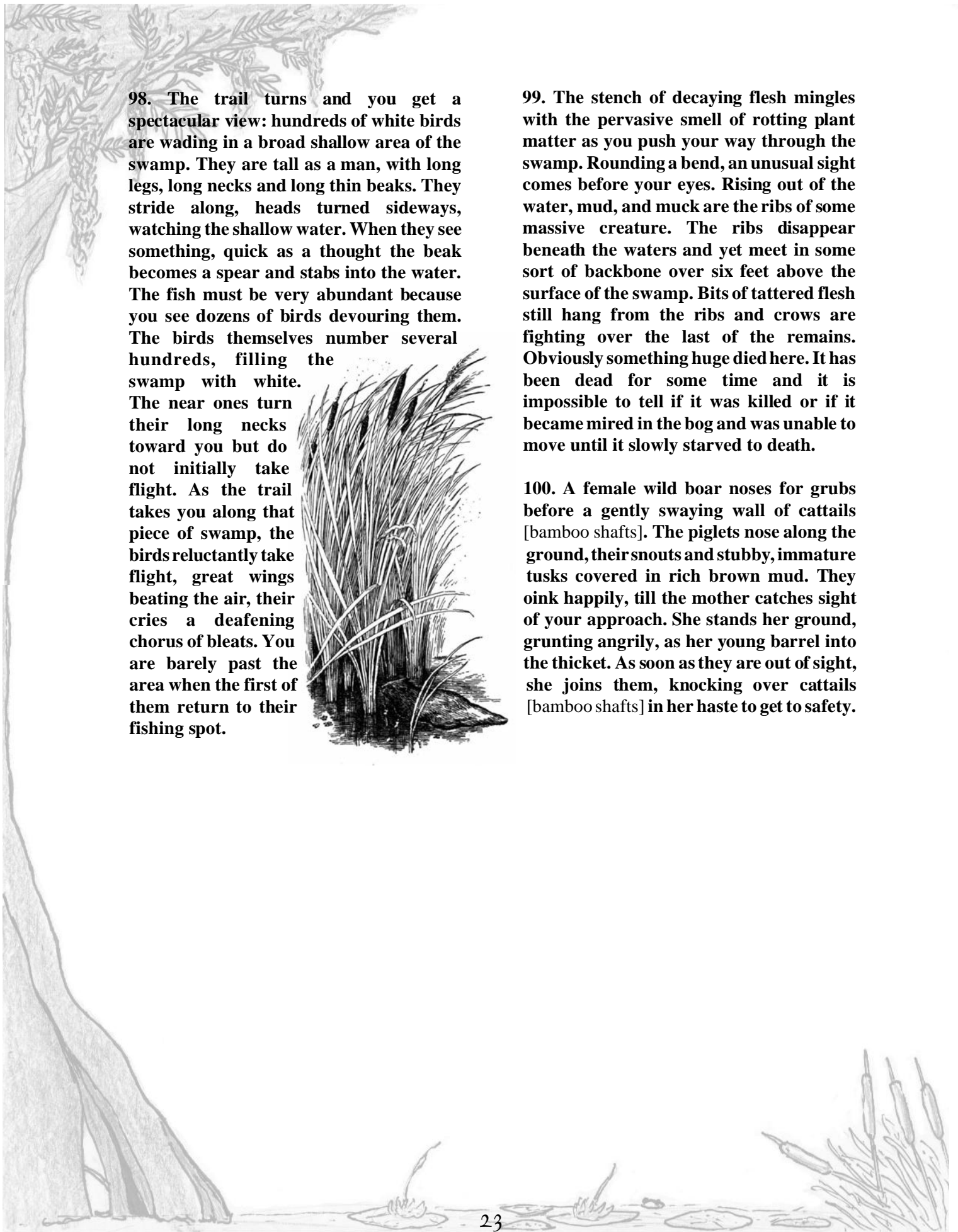
97. From time to time, you notice large bubbles forming on the surface of the mud. Each bubble expands for fifteen seconds or so to the size of an orange or apple, then pops. [The bubbles are formed by pockets of rising methane gas. An open flame or spark can ignite a methane bubble and cause a small amount of damage to a character close enough to be singed by the explosion. Naturally occurring methane is odorless; if you want to give the players more clues as to the nature of the gas, you could allow the methane to have mixed naturally with hydrogen sulfide, producing a "rotten egg" smell accompanying the popping of the bubbles.]

98. The trail turns and you get a spectacular view: hundreds of white birds are wading in a broad shallow area of the swamp. They are tall as a man, with long legs, long necks and long thin beaks. They stride along, heads turned sideways, watching the shallow water. When they see something, quick as a thought the beak becomes a spear and stabs into the water. The fish must be very abundant because you see dozens of birds devouring them. The birds themselves number several hundreds, filling the swamp with white. The near ones turn their long necks toward you but do not initially take flight. As the trail takes you along that piece of swamp, the birds reluctantly take flight, great wings beating the air, their cries a deafening chorus of bleats. You are barely past the area when the first of them return to their fishing spot.



99. The stench of decaying flesh mingles with the pervasive smell of rotting plant matter as you push your way through the swamp. Rounding a bend, an unusual sight comes before your eyes. Rising out of the water, mud, and muck are the ribs of some massive creature. The ribs disappear beneath the waters and yet meet in some sort of backbone over six feet above the surface of the swamp. Bits of tattered flesh still hang from the ribs and crows are fighting over the last of the remains. Obviously something huge died here. It has been dead for some time and it is impossible to tell if it was killed or if it became mired in the bog and was unable to move until it slowly starved to death.

100. A female wild boar noses for grubs before a gently swaying wall of cattails [bamboo shafts]. The piglets nose along the ground, their snouts and stubby, immature tusks covered in rich brown mud. They oink happily, till the mother catches sight of your approach. She stands her ground, grunting angrily, as her young barrel into the thicket. As soon as they are out of sight, she joins them, knocking over cattails [bamboo shafts] in her haste to get to safety.



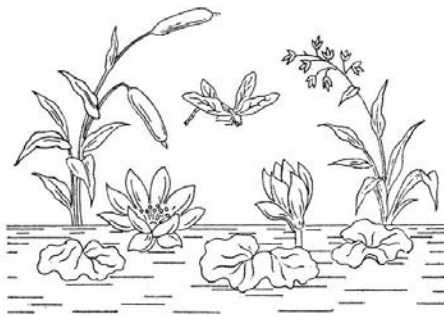
Shards of the Swamp

Common Features

1. Flooded Forest

You stand at the edge of a thickly forested territory; with spring in full sway your senses are overflowing. As you marvel at the new plant life all around, you feel water begin to creep into your boots. You look down and notice that the forest floor ahead seems to be flooded.

The swamp ahead of you is alive with new growth. [Read the following if the party has any knowledge of trees and plants:] You spot yellow birch trees with new catkins [flowers] hanging from the branches, and the dark green scale-like leaves of white cedar trees. But you also notice the intense smells all around you. Some enticing aromas come from new flowers blooming above the water, but others are not so appealing, like the smell of fetid leaves still decaying from last year's fall season. You are unable to see very far ahead into the swamp due to the overgrowth of the trees.



2. Enter the Quagmire

The sun is warm and pleasant as you make your way down the dirt road. You can see that the path ahead ventures into a thick, green forest. [As the party approaches the forest area:] The road becomes muddy as you near the entrance to the woods, and as you come even closer you can see that the way ahead appears to be flooded with water. You look around and see that the path leads right into a quagmire. The trees

seem to grow together over the road so that little sunlight can make its way through. [If the group continues on the flooded, swampy road:] Your feet sink slightly with every step and you can feel the temperature drop as you make your way forward. You hear the sound of frogs a bit off in the distance. It sounds like thousands of them singing out of sync, and their din makes it hard to listen for any other sounds in this swampy, forested land.

3. Entrance - Fall Journey

The cold chill of fall bites at your back as you come to the edge of what appears to be a swampland. The trees here have lost all their leaves and stand stark and barren, making this marshland seem a bit foreboding. Knowing that your path must endure this swamp, you ready your gear and prepare for the march. You are amazed at how quickly the ground can change from solid, to soft and wet as you begin your trek through this mire. With the foliage already thin and lifeless you can take solace in the thought that at least visibility will be good as you travel.

4. Drowned Path

The path you are following descends into the dark waters of the swamp. You see grasses growing up in the shallows where the path should be, so you can tell that the road has been underwater for a while. The murky waters swirl sluggishly before you and ripples indicate something large swimming across the road just below the surface. Ahead you see that the path rises out of the water and continues on. [If the adventurers follow the path they will find that the water covering it is waist deep. Anyone who misses a dexterity check could slip and fall. The GM should decide if there is a risk of an encounter. Also, if the adventurers move to the right or left of the road the water quickly rises to neck deep.]

5. *Mud Everywhere*

As you travel, mud starts collecting on your boots [horses' hooves] and soon it seems to be climbing up your [your horses'] legs. Everything around you seems to be coated with mud. When you steady yourself against a branch, or allow leaves to brush against you, there is mud. Touching your equipment spreads the mud to it. You can clean your hands with some of your drinking water, but they are muddy again in a matter of minutes, so it seems to be a waste of good water. The mud stinks of the swamp and seems to resist drying in the moist swamp air, even on your hands and clothes. It has become increasingly difficult to maintain a good grip on any item you handle because of the slickness of the mud.



6. *Clinging Mud*

The trail is mucky. Your feet [horses' hooves] sink in at every step. It must be a well-made trail: nowhere is the mud deeper than a couple inches. The mud is sticky and clings to your feet [horses hooves], building up so that it is soon quite heavy. The mud is a red-orange color, which leaves permanent stains on cloth and leather. It has a metallic sheen to its stains and smells of rot tinged with iron. [Gradually this accumulation will slow the rate of travel. The GM should begin to describe this before it has a game effect. Read the following as appropriate.] Getting the mud off of anything is surprisingly hard. If you use your hands, it smears all over them without coming completely off your boots [horses' hooves]. It is generally tougher than the leaves you can find to use to pull on it: they rip without removing the mud. Many of the leaves also have irritating hairs that sting your bare hands. [Sticks work.] It takes some looking to find sound sticks in this swamp, but with a stick you can finally scrape the mud off.

Times and Seasons

7. *Evening Chorus*

The evening chorus begins before it is fully dark. Small frogs call from the trees with high chirping voices. Their numerous voices come together in a series of staccato sounds so rapid that they blend together. Bigger frogs start their song later in the evening. There are at least two calls: a mellow sound that is a very traditional "ribbit, ribbit" and a deep bell-like tone in a very low pitch. The first is nearby. There seem to be several of them not far away along the edge of the water. They call, wait, and then call again. The deeper tone makes an eerie echo through the swamp. You hear one that is very faint and far away, and two much nearer. It is a deep earthy sound that seems to reverberate through the ground. It seems from its pitch and intensity to be made by a frog six feet long, although that scarcely seems possible.

8. *Swamp Sunset*

Sunset is drawn in green and tarnished gold in the swamp. The last rays of the sun seep through the damp canopy. Mosquitoes flit through the darkening sky in noisy swarms. Bullfrogs croak rhythmically, tongues snapping prey out of the air.

9. *Night Sounds*

As night begins to descend, a chorus of sounds starts up all around you. Frogs croak rhythmically, punctuating the steady drone of thousands of insects buzzing over the top of the stagnant water. You can hear small splashes as fish leap out to grab a passing bug and land back into the water. Darkness falls quickly, leaving only the unbroken drone of millions of wings.

10. *Summer Night*

The light of the day has gone and the white clouds of the summer sky have fled. They are replaced by the sparkle and twinkle of a thousand stars seen through the branches of the softly swaying trees, each one appearing like a tiny gemstone against the blackness above. The night insects sing in a soft chorus, and you see the silhouette of an owl glide across the stars.



11. *Moonrise*

The moon rises into the gap between the tree tops, high over the swamp. It casts pools of light on the still waters. Fluffy white clouds can be seen faintly against the indigo sky, lit by the bright moon. Below, moths flutter their dark wings across the water. A great, swift bat drops out of the dark trees overhead, sweeping up unlucky moths and then is gone. A frog trills from the edge of the water and another answers from across the swamp. Lightning bugs flash yellow and white above the shrubby grasses of the swamp's higher ground. The

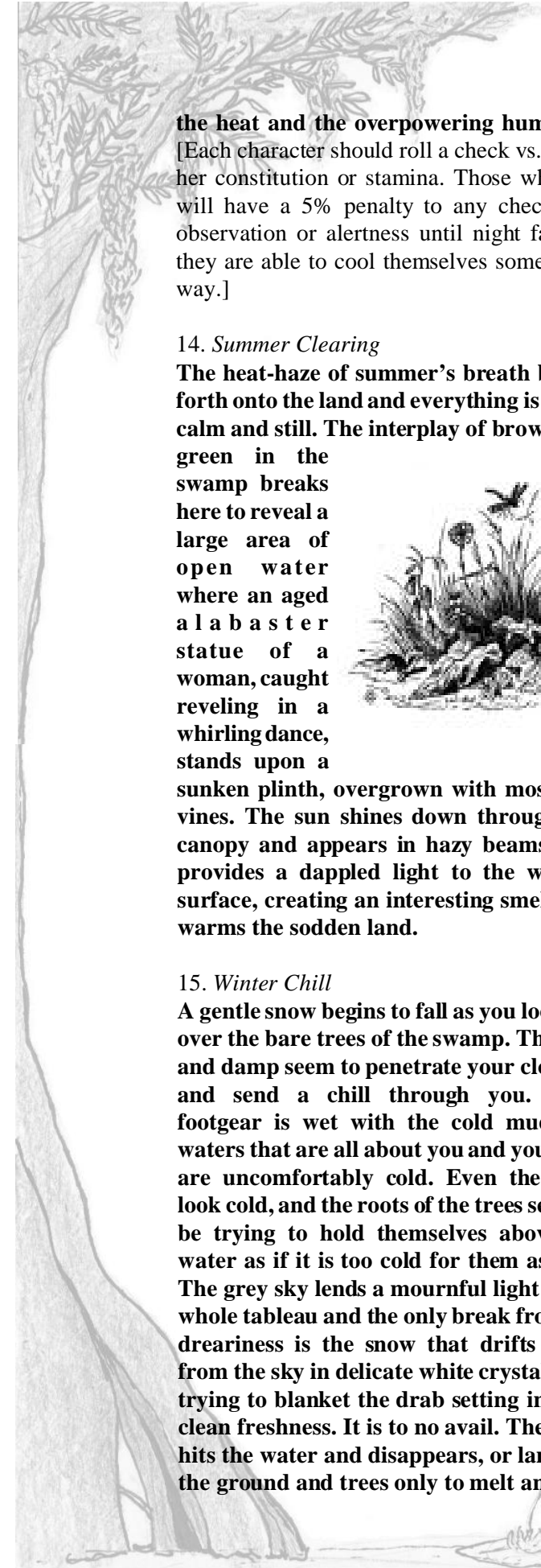
throaty call of a bird echoes through the night as the little lights dance over the dark waters.

12. *Night Creatures*

The bird sounds of the night are much less regular than the frog calls. A low whistle nearby by repeats several times and is answered from a distance. An owl's "hoo" cries out plaintively in the trees overhead. A rattling shriek from somewhere above marks the presence of another species. The bats do not call but you can hear the high-pitched sounds they make as they dip and dive over the swamp chasing insects. Most are small, fast-flying bats, dark gray against the darker foliage. A few are much bigger, whipping quickly into view and then vanishing again on broad wings. And, more noticeable than all the other night sounds, the bellowing of alligators is deep and resonant...and answered a dozen times in all directions.

13. *Steamy Summer Day*

The heat and humidity are stifling and as you breathe, the air itself seems heavy in your lungs. Clouds of insects are so thick in places that they look like clouds of smoke swirling in the air. You feel the sweat trickle down your forehead and sting as it bypasses your already-soaked eyebrows and runs into your eyes. Your clothes are so soaked in sweat that they cling to you like a second skin. The hair of those without helmets is damp while those wearing helmets feel as if they are being slowly steamed. A turtle sits on a log not far from you but he is unmoving, as if it is too hot even to slip back into the water. The swamp, usually filled with life and activity, is now uncannily silent as even the birds have fallen silent and the living creatures of the swamp seek shade or the coolness of the waters. Looking out over one open expanse of water you see two large herons flying lazily across the swamp. Everywhere you look there is a thick haze of moisture; it feels as though you have been in the rain but it is only the effect of



the heat and the overpowering humidity. [Each character should roll a check vs. his or her constitution or stamina. Those who fail will have a 5% penalty to any checks for observation or alertness until night falls or they are able to cool themselves some other way.]

14. *Summer Clearing*

The heat-haze of summer's breath bursts forth onto the land and everything is quiet, calm and still. The interplay of brown and green in the swamp breaks here to reveal a large area of open water where an aged alabaster statue of a woman, caught reveling in a whirling dance, stands upon a sunken plinth, overgrown with moss and vines. The sun shines down through the canopy and appears in hazy beams as it provides a dappled light to the water's surface, creating an interesting smell as it warms the sodden land.



15. *Winter Chill*

A gentle snow begins to fall as you look out over the bare trees of the swamp. The cold and damp seem to penetrate your clothing and send a chill through you. Your footgear is wet with the cold mud and waters that are all about you and your toes are uncomfortably cold. Even the trees look cold, and the roots of the trees seem to be trying to hold themselves above the water as if it is too cold for them as well. The grey sky lends a mournful light to the whole tableau and the only break from the dreariness is the snow that drifts down from the sky in delicate white crystals as if trying to blanket the drab setting in their clean freshness. It is to no avail. The snow hits the water and disappears, or lands on the ground and trees only to melt and add

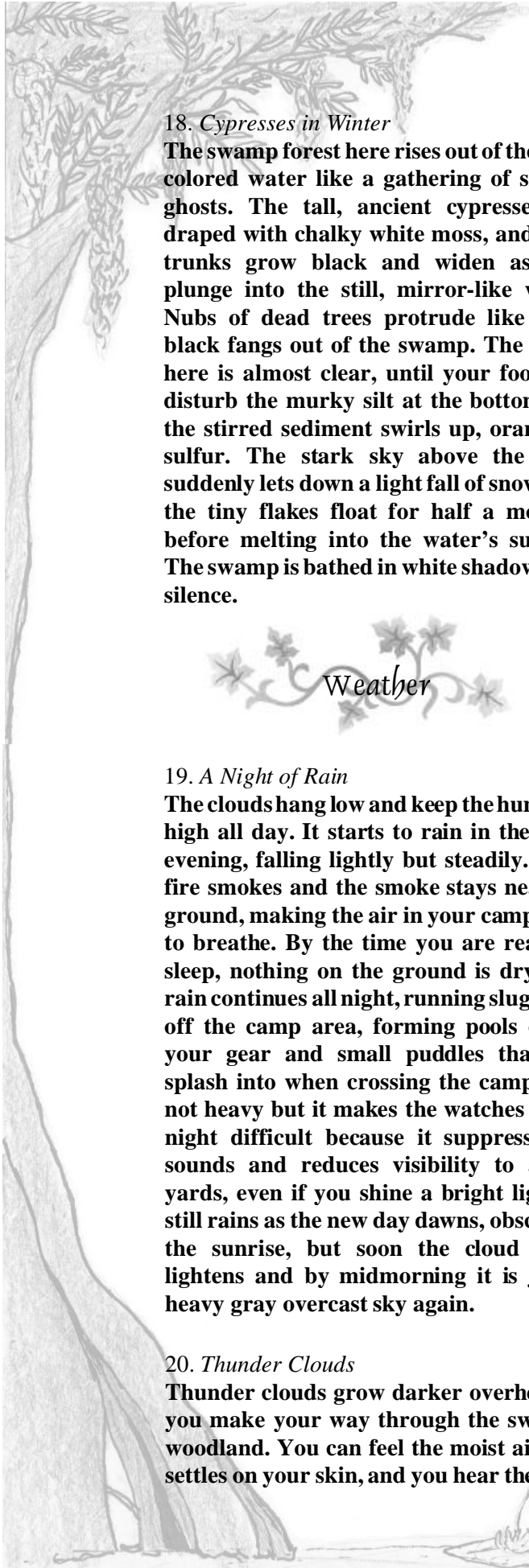
to the wetness that is everywhere. [Each character should roll a check vs. his or her constitution or stamina. Those who fail will have a 5% penalty to any checks for observation or alertness. Read the following:] **You feel an involuntary shiver run through you from the cold and damp that permeate your clothes and gear. Your mind repeatedly drifts to how uncomfortable you are, which is going to be a distraction to observing things or detecting danger.** [This will last until the characters are able to make a fire and shelter and get out of the cold. If the party chooses not to make a fire or shelter for the night, each person must make another check. Any who miss this have an additional 5% penalty the next day and so on. A successful check (after missing a previous one) does not mean that the character has improved, but rather that a further penalty is avoided at that time. Good role players, of course, will begin grumbling about the cold and wet environment.]

16. *Winter Sunset*

All around the landscape is covered in white as the sun dips below the horizon, a pale orb now descending and leaving the sky a bloody red hue. Patches of red light remain like blood-spots on the pristine ivory. The wind drives the snow at some speed, whirling it with a playful hand into tiny shimmering eddies, but it brings a chill that can be felt through gloves and boots regardless. The silvery-white of the snow has transformed even the dankness of the swamp: cloudy, cracked ice now covers the surface of the murky green water.

17. *Frozen Swamp*

The water is half-frozen here, topped with a thin crust of dark gray ice. Small drifts of snow gather around each black tree trunk and clog tiny holes in the ice where something has broken through to get to the water. Dead leaves skate across the cold surface. The ice gradually thins, and eventually breaks, plunging any heavy footsteps into the shallow, frigid water beneath.



18. *Cypresses in Winter*

The swamp forest here rises out of the dun-colored water like a gathering of shaggy ghosts. The tall, ancient cypresses are draped with chalky white moss, and their trunks grow black and widen as they plunge into the still, mirror-like water. Nubs of dead trees protrude like giant black fangs out of the swamp. The water here is almost clear, until your footsteps disturb the murky silt at the bottom and the stirred sediment swirls up, orange as sulfur. The stark sky above the trees suddenly lets down a light fall of snow, and the tiny flakes float for half a moment before melting into the water's surface. The swamp is bathed in white shadows and silence.



Weather

19. *A Night of Rain*

The clouds hang low and keep the humidity high all day. It starts to rain in the early evening, falling lightly but steadily. Your fire smokes and the smoke stays near the ground, making the air in your camp hard to breathe. By the time you are ready to sleep, nothing on the ground is dry. The rain continues all night, running sluggishly off the camp area, forming pools on all your gear and small puddles that you splash into when crossing the camp. It is not heavy but it makes the watches of the night difficult because it suppresses all sounds and reduces visibility to a few yards, even if you shine a bright light. It still rains as the new day dawns, obscuring the sunrise, but soon the cloud cover lightens and by midmorning it is just a heavy gray overcast sky again.

20. *Thunder Clouds*

Thunder clouds grow darker overhead as you make your way through the swampy woodland. You can feel the moist air as it settles on your skin, and you hear the slosh


of your boots as you continue forward. In places the water and mud become so thick that you are forced to alter your course in order to circumvent the deeper, more dangerous path that you were following. Without warning rain suddenly begins to fall hard and you are quickly soaked from head to toe. This diminishes your ability to see more than a few yards ahead of you as you travel onward.

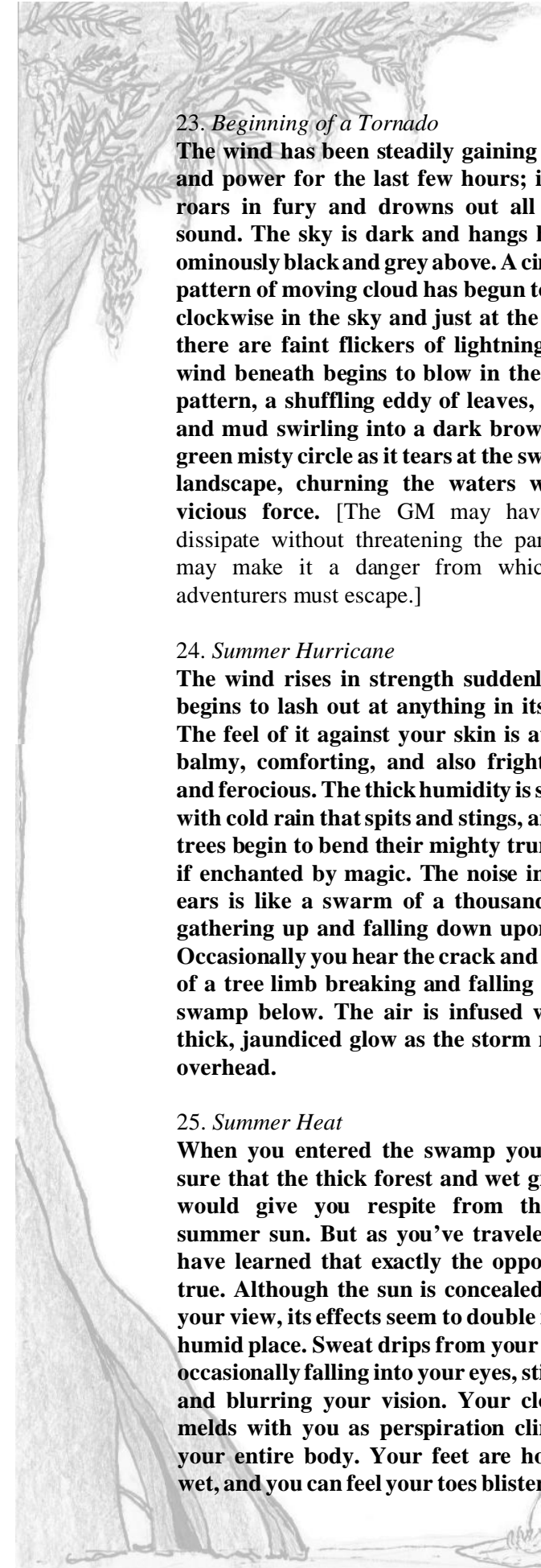
21. *Thunderstorm*

A thunderstorm can be heard in the distance. The sky darkens quickly until the trees are great gray shapes around you. The wind picks up and over your heads whips the leaves around. Thunder rumbles and the forest is briefly lit by brilliant white light. The rain begins gently but soon it is pelting down. It hits the leaves, making a pitter-patter sound and then splashing off. You can see little eruptions where the raindrops hit the murky water. Fish rise to the surface to investigate the disturbance. Some of them are very large, more than four feet long. Then the rain gets so intense that you cannot see to the water. The rain falls in sheets for a few minutes then it eases. The thunder is distant as the rain stops. Water drips off plants and runs down the tree trunks, puddling everywhere. The humidity is nearly unbearable.

22. *Summer Storm*

The crash of the thunder booms in the heavens above and shakes the earth and sky with a furious sound. Flashes of actinic white lightning slash across the dark clouds like sword blows against armor. The rain lashes down from the sky, driven by the stormy winds into a stinging torrential downpour, roiling the waters of the swamp and churning any solid ground into mud. All around the weeping willows and thin reedy trees sway in the fierce gusts and bend almost to the breaking point; the creaking of the bark under the pressure is an ominous sign.





23. *Beginning of a Tornado*

The wind has been steadily gaining speed and power for the last few hours; it now roars in fury and drowns out all other sound. The sky is dark and hangs heavy, ominously black and grey above. A circular pattern of moving cloud has begun to turn clockwise in the sky and just at the edges there are faint flickers of lightning. The wind beneath begins to blow in the same pattern, a shuffling eddy of leaves, water and mud swirling into a dark brown and green misty circle as it tears at the swampy landscape, churning the waters with a vicious force. [The GM may have this dissipate without threatening the party, or may make it a danger from which the adventurers must escape.]

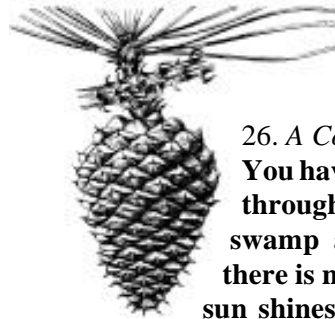
24. *Summer Hurricane*

The wind rises in strength suddenly and begins to lash out at anything in its way. The feel of it against your skin is at once balmy, comforting, and also frightening and ferocious. The thick humidity is spiked with cold rain that spits and stings, and the trees begin to bend their mighty trunks as if enchanted by magic. The noise in your ears is like a swarm of a thousand bees gathering up and falling down upon you. Occasionally you hear the crack and groan of a tree limb breaking and falling to the swamp below. The air is infused with a thick, jaundiced glow as the storm moves overhead.

25. *Summer Heat*

When you entered the swamp you were sure that the thick forest and wet ground would give you respite from the hot summer sun. But as you've traveled you have learned that exactly the opposite is true. Although the sun is concealed from your view, its effects seem to double in this humid place. Sweat drips from your brow, occasionally falling into your eyes, stinging and blurring your vision. Your clothing melds with you as perspiration clings to your entire body. Your feet are hot and wet, and you can feel your toes blistering as

you walk. You stop often to try to catch your breath because the air is so thick in this area that you feel as if your lungs struggle to get enough oxygen. Beautiful, rare flowers are abundant here, and unusual, stunning birds nest in the trees all around you, but all of the beauty the swamp has to offer means little to you as you struggle to make your way to the end of this bog.



26. *A Cold Walk*

You have walked for miles through this wet, cold swamp and it looks as if there is no end in sight. The sun shines through the trees and warms your back, giving you some relief from the numbing dark water through which you trudge. The smell of decay is all around you, obviously from the leaves, fallen branches, and bracken (ferns) that lay in this still mire. It is almost impossible to hear anything but the sloshing of your boots as you continue forward, but you occasionally take notice of sounds off in the distance when you rest for a moment. Howls and strange bird calls can be heard now and again, and you know that whatever lies ahead can surely hear you coming.

27. *Icy Swamp*

A blue-white shimmering crackle of ice and snow lies upon the mud and water here and stretches as far as the eye can see. There are small peaks in the ice that appear like dark teeth against the backdrop of the snow, which the wind whips into tiny whorls of activity that resemble small white moths. Crystalline frost covers the tree leaves and brown reeds. Winter's breath has somehow managed to transform the swampy landscape into an almost pleasant one, but reminders such as the twisted trunks of trees and frosty green pools of dank liquid remain.

28. *Night Blizzard*

A harsh and cruel wind drives snow at stinging and blinding speeds across the icy landscape, turned dark grey by the coming of the night. The howling cry of the furious blizzard echoes like a wolf's mournful song across the air, competing with the hissing whisper of the flying white flakes and the sound, almost like light rain, as the frozen bits fall into the remaining open water.

29. *Dreary Day*

A darkly overcast sky matches the gray murkiness of the wetlands through which you trudge. Sickly tendrils of mist hang over stagnant pools of blurry water. The monotonous buzzing of countless insects fills your ears, broken only by the occasional rumble of a croaking frog. For a few minutes a gap in the clouds allows some sunlight to slice through the dreariness and reveal the brighter colors: Tiny red and purple bursts of wildflowers. The vibrant green of dew-covered moss. An amazing rainbow of different little newts and lizards darting out of sight. Unfortunately, soon the overhanging clouds close in, enfolding the sun and returning the swamp to its drab and muted appearance.

30. *Early Morning Fog*

A white fog has rolled in almost lazily before dawn, and covers the ground as the world wakes up. The sun rises, casting a slow spread of light that filters through the cloud and turns it to a red-gold as time passes. The mist recoils as if it was alive and remains as a stubborn thin blanket across the ground while the sounds of birds and animals begin to filter through the cool crisp air. The fog creeps and crawls, following the edges of twisted trees and stagnant water.

31. *Evening Fog*

As the evening settles over the swamp, a cool layer of air begins to descend and wisps of fog can be seen developing over the pools and streams. Soon the fog is thick

over the water and spreading out to fill the swamp. Shortly a heavy fog has risen over your heads, bringing with it intensified smells and sounds of the swamp. The fog is soon so thick that it will be difficult to travel at any but the slowest of rates, and it becomes much more difficult to find a good dry campsite for the evening. Visibility has dropped to only about twenty feet.

32. *Night Fog*

Fog has settled in during the night. Being on watch consists of straining to see further than twenty feet in any direction. It seems the croak of frogs and the swish of passing crocodiles and snakes are just outside of your visible range. A sudden flurry of wings erupts a short distance from the camp, quickly followed by the frustrated cry of a swamp cougar. The swamp's nightlife seems to be happening all around you, but you cannot see any of it.

Sights, Sounds and Smells

33. *Cypress and Skunk Cabbage*

You notice the horrifying odor of decaying flesh. The stench becomes stronger as you continue your trek. You hear the clicking of crickets as you come across a large body of murky moss covered water. Four identical cypress trees, knees and all, make a perfectly straight line from your left to right, directly in the center of the pond. They stand tall and wide at the canopy,

providing much shade for the several small, brown cottonmouth snakes swimming across the surface of the pond. The smell seems to be coming from an enormous swamp-side grouping of large leafed cabbage-like plants. [Cypress trees have "knees." They are actually parts of the root system that protrude out of the water and look like tree



stumps. The plants are skunk cabbage, which smells like decaying flesh. Many insects frequent these plants due to the smell. The characters will more than likely search around the plants because of the smell. You can hide something there if you like or perhaps have an encounter with a giant bug that comes bursting out of the water.]

34. *Swamp Description*

The ground is extremely moist here and mud squishes out from under your feet with every step. The air is rather humid and stagnant. Numerous cypress trees, with large bases that taper to the top, surround you with low hanging branches and vines, causing the area to be rather dim. Various light-green and yellow shrubs fill in the gaps among the trees, and the tiny pale-green leaves of duckweed covers the countless pools of water. Small ripples appear here and there in the pools as water drips from the rain sodden vegetation. You hear different types of birds whistling and chirping their colorful tunes. Several frogs can be heard belching in the distance, while a number of large swarms of mosquitoes, dragonflies, and other flying insects buzz around your head loudly. A large alligator splashes into the water several yards in front of you, as it realizes your presence. [There are many types of cypress trees; the ones described here are cypress vine trees, which in summertime sprout pretty red flowers with yellow stamen. Duckweeds are the smallest of flowering plants, and the little flowers are a light yellow in color and are hard to see unless you look intently. These plants grow while floating in still or slow-moving fresh water, except in the coldest regions. The alligator may be used as an encounter if desired.]



35. *Forgotten Shrine*

The hanging moss and drooping tree branches part to reveal a small clearing next to a moving stream of clear water. You can actually hear the sound of the water moving as it swirls past a small statue of a man. Fashioned from dark marble, the figure is carved with an ornate suit of armor, sword and shield. Lichen and moss cling to its base, swayed by the motion of the water rippling past. Even a few golden fish dance beneath the sunlight-dappled surface as the birds sing a cheerful song above. This seems to be the only place in the swamp-land where the choking torrents of green slime and brackish water do not touch, as if it's protected by magic or another force – even the air smells fresher.

36. *Mangrove Trees*

The mangrove trees arch to form a tunnel-like passage through the murk. The watery path twists and turns beneath their gnarled limbs, and the sounds of insects rises around you like the rattle of a sistrum. Suddenly the air is filled with mosquitos, and they hum loudly in your ears no matter how you try to wave them away. The air is thick with them and for several minutes clouds of them encase you. [A sistrum was an ancient percussion instrument slightly similar to a tambourine, with a less musical sound.]



37. *Mangrove Swamp*

The mangrove trees of this swamp are filled with little flashes of movement. Tiny gray crabs scuttle sideways along the outstretched branches and the widespread roots of the trees. As you pass each mangrove, the crabs which call it home dart to branches behind the trunk or disappear into the arching dome of elevated roots. The still air is occasionally punctuated by a “splish” sound when one of the little crustaceans falls from its branch and into the murky water between the trees.

38. *Exposed Mud*

You come to an area where the water has receded. The land is exposed, and your boots sink in nearly to the ankles with each step. All around you are waist-high

mangrove saplings. Suddenly a flock of vivid white egrets takes flight, seemingly inches in front of you, their long necks stretched out in fear.

39. *Broken Tower*

A watery grove of bent and misshapen trees pays homage like silent guardians to a broken and cracked circular tower. Its foundations stand in water, fractures giving evidence to how it has settled over time. Draping moss, creepers and vines curl through the stonework and in some places have sheared rock away from the wall, causing the tower to collapse. A foul smell lingers in the air, as if something dead is close at hand.

40. *A Break in the Swamp*

You have traveled through this swampy land for what seems like an eternity. The thick growth of trees has hidden the sun from you and the wet, soft ground has made your journey more difficult than you would like. Mosquitoes and other biting insects have left their mark on almost every bit of your exposed skin, and your feet are soaked and sore beyond measure. You have to watch every step to insure that you don't fall or sink into a deep hole. Ahead of you, the radiance of the sun is peeking through an open spot beyond the trees.

Your spirits lift as you draw nearer to what you assume is the end of this muck and mire you've had to endure for so long. [As the group approaches the edge of the tree line where the sun is shining through:] Coming to the edge of the tree line, you step onto dry ground. You've come to some sort of mound built up in the middle of the swamp. It looks as if something has cleared the trees here [in about a 40 foot radius] and used them, along with mud to create a den of sorts. [Who or whatever built the mound is no longer in the area and left no clues as to its identity.] All around you the swamp goes on for possibly miles, but at least you may be able to rest and dry yourself and your gear here before continuing on your journey.

41. *Aqueducts*

Ancient crumbling aqueducts, their worn surfaces once covered with elaborate frescoes of dolphins at play, wind alongside you for miles. Occasionally, the ruined structure disappears out of sight behind a stand of mangrove trees, or crumbles away completely; piles of overgrown rubble dot the swamp-land. The aqueduct always reappears, keeping pace with you as you travel through the sweltering swamp.

42. *Old Mooring Docks*

The undergrowth opens out into a wide clearing, and the marshy ground ends at a large pond of still water. The croaking of toads and the buzzing of insects is all around you, and a faint breeze carries a heavy, fruity scent with it reminiscent of rotting apples.

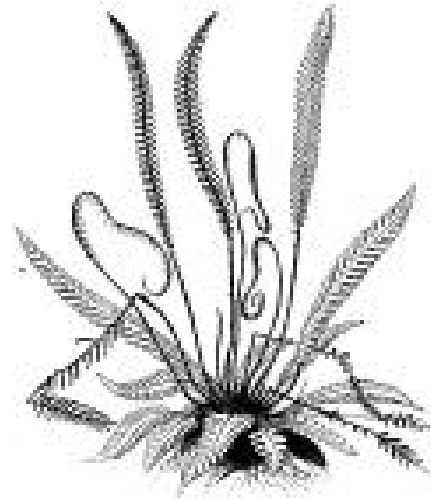
Three small docks extend out into the water, built of thick branches cut in half lengthwise and lashed together to form a relatively flat walking surface. The water laps softly against their supports, and old mooring lines—some relatively new, others little more than dank tendrils—move gently in the breeze.

Next to the docks are the remains of several flat-bottomed swamp skiffs, all of which look to have been scuttled some time ago. Skiff poles stick out of the water at odd angles, and the partially submerged hulls are thick with tadpoles.

43. *Ants, Ants, Ants*

Ants are everywhere that it is not flooded. If you find a place to stay dry, they have already beaten you there. Some ants are small and furtive; when you disturb them they run and hide. Other ants tend small bugs [aphids] that cover the aerial parts of herbaceous plants and shrubs. The little bugs make the twigs and leaves sticky. The ants stand protectively over the bugs when they sense your presence, attacking only if you disturb their wards. In other spots, the ants are violently aggressive: they pour out of small holes to bite and sting everything they can reach. The bites just scrape your

skin and the stings only last a few hours, but they are unpleasant nevertheless. This type of ant has very large nests, with hundreds of workers responding to a disturbance. No matter where you camp, the ants find any food exposed at all overnight.



44. *Ferns and Fungus*

Large patches of ferns and horsetails grow thickly at the edge of the swamp where you now stand. As a cool wind blows, the horsetails sway back and forth. You can see no discernable path to follow into this wet land, but you know your course must weave through this swamp in order to make it to your destination. [As the group enters the swamp and walks for a while:] The ferns grow thicker as you make your way deeper into this swampy land, and you can smell them as you walk, a scent that is hard to describe but yet somehow familiar. All around you yellow and green fungus grows on the fallen branches of trees and rocks. [If the group has any knowledge of nature, specifically fungi:] Just ahead, you spot a growth of Wood Ear clinging to a fallen tree. These short-stemmed mushrooms are edible and you consider picking them as you pass by. [Wood ear is also known to be an anticoagulant, which may make it a prized item at market, or possibly used to create certain potions.]

45. *Aftermath of a Battle (winter)*

The winter's touch on this swamp-land is apparent from the leafless trees that stand like crooked old men, hunched and spindly in their bare branches. A light dusting of white covers every surface and the temperature is enough to turn a person's breath to mist with each exhalation. Half-drowned in the mud and water are the remains of a battle, the time indeterminate as the shells of armor and the shards of weapons lie scattered about, now being covered by snow. Tendrils of frost-browned weeds wrap thickly around a partially sunken skeleton of a humanoid, hands still clutching desperately at the air.

46. *Swamp Shelter, Autumn*

You come to an open area where the swamp's waters are thick with pale green algae and detritus. Brightly colored leaves from the changing trees beyond float upon the shallow water, and cosses of rushes and



cattails rise up every two feet. Up ahead a fallen tree is half-sunk in the muck. Nearly the only part of it

still above water is the massive, soil-choked root system. As you get closer you realize someone has made a shelter in the roots – a filthy hammock is tied amid the cobweb-shrouded gloom, and pots and pans are hung from higher roots. A wooden mask, carved in the likeness of a serpent, rests upon a tuft of grass growing next to the root structure. A dead rat, bloated and half-eaten by insects, floats in the water nearby.

47. *Razed Boat*

You come across a desperate sight indeed. Where a broad river flows sluggishly through the swamp, a forlorn dock stands silent, the remains of a blackened ferryboat thrusting haphazardly up from the water. The deep red of the late-afternoon sun

colors the surface of the water like rust while birds dabble off to one side, using a broken rib of the boat as an impromptu perch for their fishing exploits. Trails of dark green weeds hang from the burned wood, dipping into the languid waters.

48. *Wooden Plank Road*

Up ahead you see a road rising above the swamp, built upon wooden planks and set upon dead tree trunk pillars. Scraps of rope hang down into the murky water from the planks. Tied to the end of one of the ropes is a bottle, floating in the muck, its short thick neck the only thing visible above the vibrant green algae. [Inside the bottle are four silver pieces and a scrap of paper, black with mold.] You can hear the scrabbling of lizards' nails as they scurry across the boards of the road. [The road, while usable in this area, may be ruined at both ends and ultimately go nowhere.]

49. *Abandoned Cabin*

Through the twisting vines you see an unusual shape; it appears to be the roof of a small building. As you get closer, you can better see the structure through the undergrowth. It is a single-room cabin, obviously abandoned long ago. Now the swamp has almost completely reclaimed the building. Vines grow through the windows and have split through cracks in the roof. Years in the swamp have not treated this little house well; there are large gaps in the wood planks, and what looks to be the remains of a front porch now lie almost totally under water. A large tree [cypress] has sent a pair of branches into one wall and out a gaping hole in the roof. In fact, it appears that the only reason the structure is still upright is because of the support given by the tree. [If the characters investigate, they will find that this was apparently the home of a hedge wizard or druid. Nothing of much value is left inside, but there are a couple of usable flasks and vials that are still intact. Any supplies or ingredients have long since sunk into the swamp or been removed by previous visitors.]

50. *Burned Island*

Ahead, there is a break in the swamp. A small island sits by itself, and unlike virtually everything you've seen here, it is completely bare—just exposed, naked black soil. [If the characters approach, read the following:] **Something is definitely amiss with this piece of land. The soil is too black and piled in strange ways on this little island. The closer you come to it, the more it looks as if something went terribly wrong here.** [Should they actually come next to the island or walk onto it, continue:] **Finally, you can see exactly what is wrong here. The black soil isn't soil at all, but charcoal. Someone or something burned every bit of plants on this island, scorching it completely and turning it to ash. The vines and plants that grew here are still evident, perfectly formed, but made of charcoal, as if someone caused a terrible conflagration that burned so hot that the plants were left with their forms intact.** [If someone steps on or touches a plant, read:] **The plant crumbles away to ash in your hand from the slightest touch.** [Essentially, a very hot, intense fire burned here some time ago. This is more than a simple magical fire; something much more powerful caused this destruction.]

51. *Bone Arch*

You walk slowly across the squishy, olive-green grass. Various kinds of tree saplings, no bigger around than your thumb, grow wildly all around. Lush leafy green vegetation dots the landscape with its presence. You notice a large green patch of water ahead. As you approach the pool of greenish muddy water; you notice a large grey rat scuttle quickly across your path. You watch it intently for a few moments, until it stops suddenly on a large white arching structure, protruding out of the water-sodden grass. The rodent seems to pay you no mind and proceeds to clean its face. [Should the adventurers investigate further:] **Upon further investigation you realize that this structure is a large bone of some long-dead animal, now resting firmly**

in the muck. Its large size makes you a little uneasy as you walk closer. The rat finally notices your advancement and disappears into an overgrown thicket. The hefty bone protrudes upward like an archway and eventually reaches back to the ground where the end disappears into the muddy grass before you. Many years of decay have bleached the bone nearly white. The earth beneath the large bone seems undisturbed and barren. [This barren spot could be cursed, or hold secrets of the bone. An unholy treasure could be buried here. The bone is of a creature as large as a mastodon or even something larger. The bone arch could be an altar for a swamp god or a place of worship for the area's druidical people. If the rat comes into play, it is a common swamp rat; however it may hold a secret of its own if you are so inclined.]



52. *Damaged Bridge*

Following along the damp path, you notice an old wooden bridge just up ahead. You approach the structure cautiously, watching all around. The bridge arches over a huge mass of mud, several man-lengths across, and takes up just where the path would disappear into the morass. [The air, cooling as day moves toward night, brings chills to you as your torch flickers in the breeze.] **Various types of frogs are belching their [evening] tunes all around you, as you hear what seems to be a lonely stream trickling underfoot. As you step onto the soggy pinewood bridge, the water-swollen boards creak loudly and tremble nervously under your mass. The soft muddy ground beneath you bubbles from the extra weight being placed upon the bridge. Slowly you walk, making steady every step. At what looks to be the apex of the bridge you realize that several of the boards are missing.** [The bridge is very weak due to

water rot, but man-sized creatures on foot can cross it with care. Horses may or may not be too heavy, at the GM's discretion. From the middle of the span, the adventurers may notice something under the bridge though the missing section; perhaps a body of a previous victim of the bridge.]

53. Mushroom Grove

This portion of the bog smells of rot, decay, and fermenting wood. Every place where the ground rises up out of the ankle-deep water is speckled with tiny white and tan mushrooms. Fallen logs lay soaked and decomposing all around, most of them covered with broader, slimy looking fungus and moss. The trees which are still standing are ringed with brown shelf-like fungi in tiers around their trunks. The mushrooms are getting larger the further into the swamp you travel, until you reach a small area where they seem to have replaced the trees entirely. About a half-dozen of the fungi are tall enough that the caps are spread above your heads and there's a fine mist of yellowish green spores sprinkling down from each. The earthy, fungal smell here is almost overpowering. Beyond these few large ones, the mushrooms gradually get smaller again. [Apart from their size there is nothing unusual about the mushrooms. A person with knowledge of the wilderness has a base 75% chance of determining that some of the medium-sized mushrooms are edible.]

54. Hidden Door

As you step forward, the sound beneath your boots suddenly modulates from the "squishy" sound of the peat to something much more solid. It takes just a moment before you realize that you have stepped onto a piece of wood. [If the adventurers clear away the ground cover that is obscuring



the wood:] **When you peel back the layers of grass, moss, and vines, you see that several short planks of wood have been nailed together to form a set of double doors, each about three feet square, hinged to a wooden frame. Each of the doors bears a simple wooden handle. The entire frame has been set at a slight angle into the gently sloping sod.** [If someone listens at the doors, make an appropriate check or die roll, then offer:] **You hear the faintest sounds of scraping or scrabbling, but under these conditions you cannot be sure whether those sounds are coming from beyond the door or from somewhere behind or around you in the swamp.** [If the adventurers open the door:] **A musty smell of dead flesh and decaying plants wafts up at you from the hole beyond the door. A set of rotting wooden stairs [or substitute a ladder] leads down into the darkness.** [This room probably used to be some sort of storm cellar for the swamp folk, but now could be used for smuggling or moonshining, or could be the entrance to a larger dungeon.]



55. *Floating Lights*

[This Shard is best used while most of the adventurers are sleeping, with one or two on watch.] **The night is alive with the sounds of nature: the chirping of crickets, the croaking of bullfrogs, the gentle swishing of trees and lapping of water, and the**



occasional splash of a jumping toad or fish. Yet among all of these expected noises, you hear a most unexpected sound, something between a

melodic hum and a low moan. [The character hearing the noise should have a 50% chance to determine the direction from which the noise is coming just by listening; if the person looks around as well, he or she should have a 75% chance to spot the phenomena described next.] **Off to your right** [left; or substitute a compass direction], **through the tangle of trees, you can just see a trio of floating yellow lights.** As soon as you see them, however, they seem to drift farther into the trees. [The lights might be the manifestation of some sort of swamp monster, or they might be a ghostly lure into some diabolical trap.]

56. *Bridge to Nowhere*

Through the mist, you see a dark shape arcing upward from the surface of the slimy swamp water, resembling a long, thick neck ending abruptly in a short snout. [If the party watches for movement:] **The dark shadow remains perfectly still.** [If the adventurers get close enough to see more clearly, or the sun burns off the fog, or whenever you wish to reveal the shape more clearly:] **The sight is so unexpected in the middle of a swamp that it takes you just a moment to realize what you are seeing.** Looming before you is one end of an incomplete, dilapidated bridge. The bridge's knotty vertical joists look ancient, and are spotted with holes produced, one might think, by termites, boring beetles, or woodpeckers. The horizontal bridge slats, made of thick wood, seem to be in very

poor repair; no fewer than a fourth of them have evident cracks or large holes, and two or three slats seem to be missing altogether. Above the slats, on either side of the bridge, small, evenly-spaced wooden poles topped by wooden rings imply that the bridge once sported a rope handrail, though no rope is now in evidence. But the strangest thing of all is the bridge's inexplicable incompleteness. There is a point of egress onto the bridge several yards off to your right [left], but the bridge does not seem to actually go anywhere. It arcs above the water to a height of about ten feet, and then merely stops in midair. [The rest of the bridge may have collapsed into the swamp, or the "bridge" may be a ramp leading up to a dimensional or planar portal.]

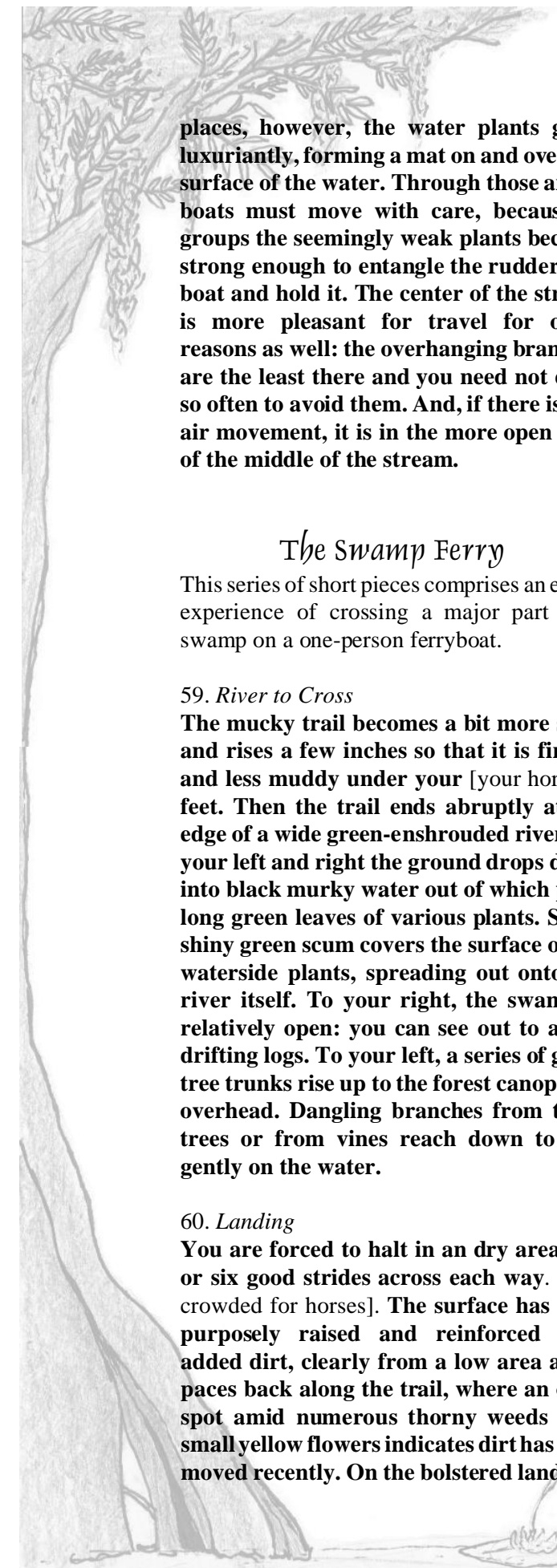
Boats

57. *Boat Travel*

The floor of the boat is rough and uncomfortable as you take turns poling the boat through the swamp. The murky water's depth is identifiable only by the length of dry wood on the twelve-foot stick in your hands. The thin trees rise up around you, not sheltering but menacing in their constant gaze upon you. It seems the trees intentionally swipe at you as another branch catches a comrade in the face. Above you the sky darkens, prophesying a wet night, and you can already taste the rain on its way. The weeds and deadfall gathered on the surface of the water hide what lies beneath, but every now and then you see an assumed stick abruptly slither underwater.

58. *Merrily Down the Stream*

A stream meanders through the swamp, between tree trunks of all kinds—large and small, smooth and moss-covered. In some places there is an open passage free of logs and entangling aquatic vegetation where the stream and boats can easily pass. Most



places, however, the water plants grow luxuriantly, forming a mat on and over the surface of the water. Through those areas, boats must move with care, because in groups the seemingly weak plants become strong enough to entangle the rudder of a boat and hold it. The center of the stream is more pleasant for travel for other reasons as well: the overhanging branches are the least there and you need not duck so often to avoid them. And, if there is any air movement, it is in the more open area of the middle of the stream.

The Swamp Ferry

This series of short pieces comprises an entire experience of crossing a major part of a swamp on a one-person ferryboat.

59. River to Cross

The mucky trail becomes a bit more solid and rises a few inches so that it is firmer and less muddy under your [your horses'] feet. Then the trail ends abruptly at the edge of a wide green-enshrouded river. To your left and right the ground drops down into black murky water out of which poke long green leaves of various plants. Slick, shiny green scum covers the surface of the waterside plants, spreading out onto the river itself. To your right, the swamp is relatively open: you can see out to a few drifting logs. To your left, a series of great tree trunks rise up to the forest canopy far overhead. Dangling branches from these trees or from vines reach down to rest gently on the water.

60. Landing

You are forced to halt in an dry area five or six good strides across each way. [It is crowded for horses]. The surface has been purposely raised and reinforced with added dirt, clearly from a low area a few paces back along the trail, where an open spot amid numerous thorny weeds with small yellow flowers indicates dirt has been moved recently. On the bolstered land, the

ground is packed so hard that no plants are growing on it. It is not even, however: deep hoofprints and ruts have dried into the brick-like mud. The path, arriving at this area, seems to continue straight ahead into the river. Drag marks lead to the scummy water.

61. Across the River

Looking out across the broad murky river, you see a small hut amid the shrubs and



small trees of the far shore. It seems barely large enough to have a single comfortable room. From here, it is impossible to tell whether the weathered gray-brown building is of wood or stone. The roof is darker, nearly black, with many splotches of green splashed

across it. A thin column of smoke rises into the air above the hut. To your right, a long but sturdy-looking rope sags across the river, a handspan above the water. It is tied to the closest of the great trees to your right and continues to some point near the hut. You estimate the distance to be greater than a normal bowshot.

62. Attention

Not long after you arrive on the shore you see a small figure [a man] appear by the hut. From this distance, you can barely make out a stocky shape and a large hat. The figure waves both arms and yells something. The tone is of a greeting, but the distance makes the words unintelligible. As you watch, the man loads some items onto what appears to be a raft tethered to the bank. He pushes off into the slow-moving river and moves unhurriedly but efficiently along the now-taut rope.

63. *Waiting in the Rain*

It takes the man on the raft a considerable period of time to cross the river. The biting insects arrive much sooner. They land on your faces and hands, and buzz frantically around your heads. Their bites draw blood. In the meantime, the gray overcast sky gets steadily darker and the air cools. A breeze stirs the leaves. The raft is still some distance out when the rain begins, light but steady. It drives off the insects. The rain is not particularly chilly and simply runs off your head gear [hats and helms] and clothes, easily ignored.



64. *The Ferryman*

The man on the boat is now close enough that you can see that he is short and broad with a long beard [a dwarf]. A battered black hat protects his head from the drizzle. He has a sturdy worn leather jerkin and pants, blackened with use and on his feet are heavily wrinkled high gray leather boots rubbed shiny with use. His gloved hands move the raft steadily along the rope. A long sheathed knife is tucked in his belt. A long sturdy pole and a strung bow are supported upright on the raft near him, and a quiver of arrows is by his feet. A battleaxe—its blade sharp and bright, also lies in the raft close at hand. He scans the river constantly and warily pulls the raft towards you.

65. *Price to Cross*

The raft comes to a stop before reaching the shore. It's close, but no normal person could safely jump across. The ferryman plants his pole to stop the ferry and shouts to you, his voice deep and resonant: "Two coppers each to cross [a half-silver each horse; a silver for the cart]." The accent is

strange and thick but the words are clear enough. The raft is square and just long enough that a human could lie down on it and touch both ends. Both it and the rope look to be in good repair.

66. *Pay in Advance*

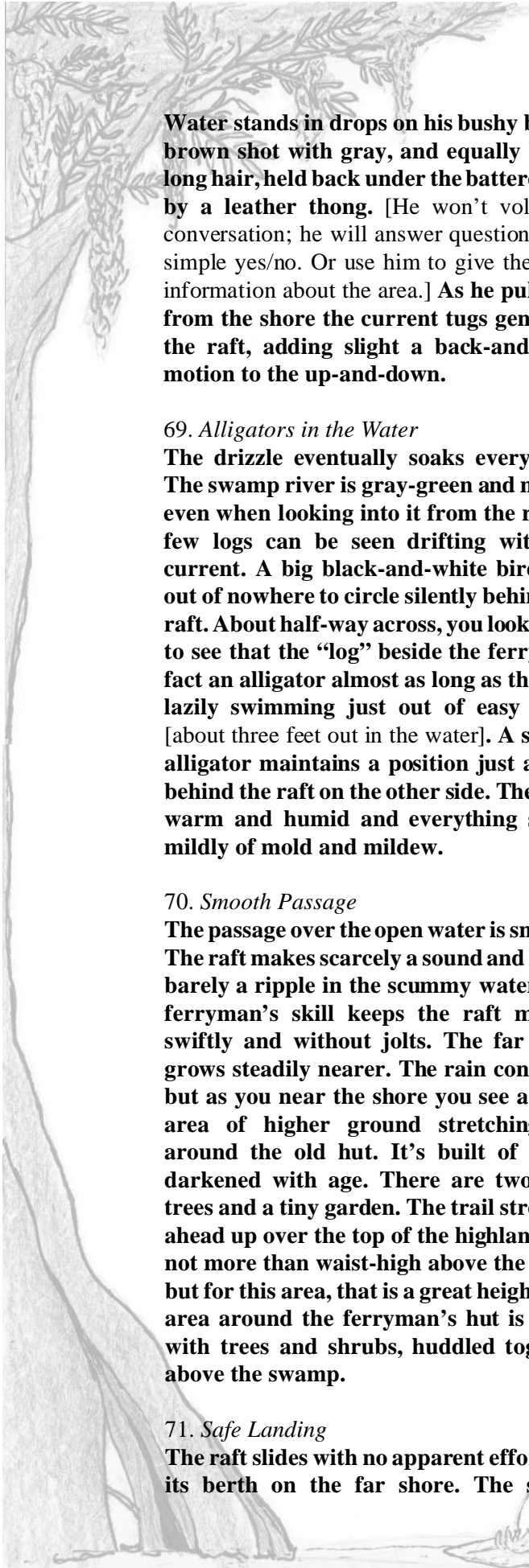
[He will wait. He will certainly go back without the party if they don't agree to his terms. There are alligators and huge predatory fish in the water. Assuming they agree to the terms:] The ferryman hauls the raft to the shore, alternately pulling on the rope and pushing with the pole. He puts out his hand for payment before letting the first of you aboard [but will accept half now and half at the other side without an argument].

67. *Onto the Raft*

You step [lead your horses] from the muddy shore onto the raft. It is well used and weathered but solid. It tips very little as others step on, and does not sink very much for all the added weight of your party. A layer of rainwater soaks everything, making the wood slightly slick. As the water puddles, it runs down and out through the cracks between the buoyant logs. The ferryman herds you out onto the center of the square raft. A tall human could hang both arms and feet over the side if he lay down. [That is, 7 feet by 7 feet; six people with horses will probably have to go in at least two groups at about 45 minutes to cross one way.] The edge of the raft is only very slightly raised. In most places the logs are tied tightly together but there are small gaps. Only in the very center is it solid: a layer of rainwater fills the bottom of the raft.

68. *On the Move*

The raindrops disturb the surface of the swamp and make it even more turbid. The far shores are well obscured by the rain and despite the hour, it's dark and gray. The movement of the river causes the raft to bob gently. When all [that can fit] are aboard, the ferryman pushes off, handily steering the craft back along the rope.



Water stands in drops on his bushy beard, brown shot with gray, and equally bushy long hair, held back under the battered hat by a leather thong. [He won't volunteer conversation; he will answer questions with simple yes/no. Or use him to give the party information about the area.] As he pulls out from the shore the current tugs gently on the raft, adding slight a back-and-forth motion to the up-and-down.

69. *Alligators in the Water*

The drizzle eventually soaks everything. The swamp river is gray-green and murky even when looking into it from the raft. A few logs can be seen drifting with the current. A big black-and-white bird flies out of nowhere to circle silently behind the raft. About half-way across, you look down to see that the "log" beside the ferry is in fact an alligator almost as long as the raft, lazily swimming just out of easy reach [about three feet out in the water]. A second alligator maintains a position just a little behind the raft on the other side. The air is warm and humid and everything smells mildly of mold and mildew.

70. *Smooth Passage*

The passage over the open water is smooth. The raft makes scarcely a sound and leaves barely a ripple in the scummy water. The ferryman's skill keeps the raft moving swiftly and without jolts. The far shore grows steadily nearer. The rain continues but as you near the shore you see a small area of higher ground stretching out around the old hut. It's built of wood, darkened with age. There are two fruit trees and a tiny garden. The trail stretches ahead up over the top of the highland. It's not more than waist-high above the water but for this area, that is a great height. The area around the ferryman's hut is dense with trees and shrubs, huddled together above the swamp.

71. *Safe Landing*

The raft slides with no apparent effort into its berth on the far shore. The stocky

ferryman wraps the dripping rope around a worn stump and pulls it tight to secure it. Turning, he steps aside and indicates you should go ashore. If anyone slips, he's there to lend a hand. [He collects the rest of his fee.] He wishes you well on your journey with a minimum of words. He gathers up his weapons and stands by his raft as you head out along the trail. If you turn to look back, he is no longer in sight.

Northern Swamp

This swamp is a low, flooded area in an otherwise dry northern forest.

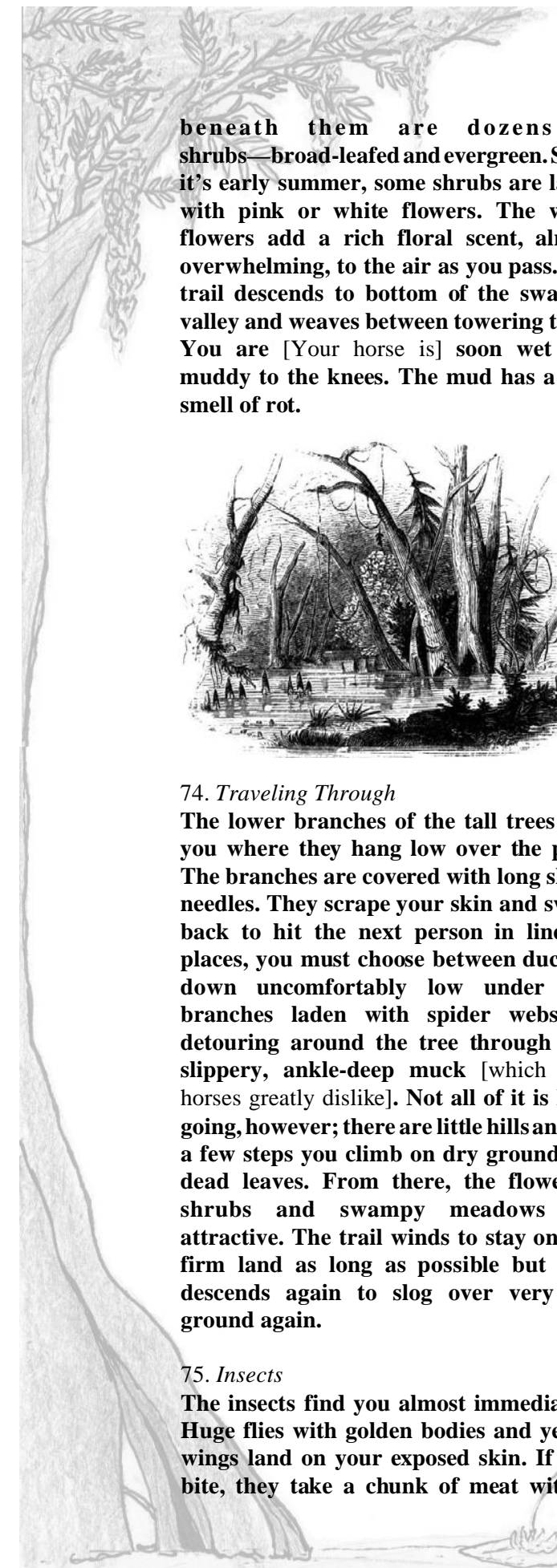
72. *Discovering the Swamp*

The swamp is not very large: from above, you can see across it to the other side. It is a spot of rich light greens in a darker green forest. The trail leads right down into it and it is obvious why: the eroding hills in this area in this area are steep, sheer, and crumbling. Other routes are more difficult or impassible. The trail descends quickly into the swamp. Tall trees obscure your view of the surrounding country. The swamp forest closes in. The trees shade you and the air is cooler and moister. The path underfoot becomes soggy and soft. A rich odor of pines and decay fills the air. The ground compresses under your feet and water fills your footprints.



73. *Scented Air*

The air is fragrant with the resins of pines and pungent oils from other plants. You splash through spots of shallow open water on the trail. Some of these areas are muddy with sticky brown mud. However, in most places the water lies over un-decayed plant litter, especially pine and spruce needles, so it is only wet, not muddy. The trees crowd together and



beneath them are dozens of shrubs—broad-leaved and evergreen. Since it's early summer, some shrubs are laden with pink or white flowers. The white flowers add a rich floral scent, almost overwhelming, to the air as you pass. The trail descends to bottom of the swampy valley and weaves between towering trees. You are [Your horse is] soon wet and muddy to the knees. The mud has a rich smell of rot.



74. Traveling Through

The lower branches of the tall trees slap you where they hang low over the path. The branches are covered with long sharp needles. They scrape your skin and sweep back to hit the next person in line. In places, you must choose between ducking down uncomfortably low under tree branches laden with spider webs, or detouring around the tree through wet, slippery, ankle-deep muck [which your horses greatly dislike]. Not all of it is hard going, however; there are little hills and for a few steps you climb on dry ground and dead leaves. From there, the flowering shrubs and swampy meadows are attractive. The trail winds to stay on this firm land as long as possible but soon descends again to slog over very wet ground again.

75. Insects

The insects find you almost immediately. Huge flies with golden bodies and yellow wings land on your exposed skin. If they bite, they take a chunk of meat with it.

[They bite through the hides of the horses. It clearly hurts and the horses become irritable.] They are not numerous but persistent. Smaller insects fly around you, hovering in the sunlight over the path so you disturb them as you walk [ride]. Some of the insects are mosquitoes, which land to feed on you, but most of the insects simply flap tiny wings in your face and fly at your eyes or into your nose or ears.

76. Flooded Meadow

Ducking under a great fir, you straighten up to find yourselves in a more open area. Ahead is a flooded meadow is filled with bright green rushes and reeds putting on a spurt of new growth. Among the rushes and reeds, bright irises are in full bloom. There are two colors, deepest purple and a strong yellow. Each occurs in patches of several to a dozen blooms, bright against the green reeds. The sun is bright and the air slightly warm. Big black and yellow bees fly to the irises, their buzzes mingling into a consistent humming sound. Birds whistle from the trees. A trail splashes along the edge of the flowery meadow. There is standing water under the rushes. The trail turns under a big oak tree and leaves the meadow behind.

77. End in Sight

Despite the slow progress of tramping through muck and mud, you presently reach the edge of the swamp and head up the path out of it. The trail turns gravelly and the land seems solid, no longer water-logged. The smells are much less intense and the humidity drops noticeably. Overhead the trees thin and the sun beats on you. Bird songs are fewer and more distant. Now the flowers are small and hidden on the ground amid thin, pale green leaves. A few of the biting flies follow you for several dozen paces, but then they too are gone. Only the mud remains, drying out to a hard cake on your legs and everywhere it splattered. [Of course, someone might find a leech sucking on their leg later in the day.]

Midges

These Shards describe the experience of a day or two of travel while beset by clouds of tiny insects.

78. *Encountering Insects*

The path curves and you detect a faint odd smell. It's musty and a bit sour. Here, the trail is edged by shrubs only slightly taller than a man, with green leaves as broad as a hand. They have an attractive smooth gray bark. Under them, there is mud with a few herbaceous plants growing between you and the water. A few insects can be seen flying or crawling on and under the leaves of the shrubs. The shrub-edged trail continues and small insects become more common. They land on you [and your horses] and fly around you. They have small black bodies and nearly transparent black-edged wings. They are the source of that slight unpleasant smell you noted. They seem to cause no harm, simply flying around, landing, and taking flight again without reacting to your presence.

79. *Plenty of Midges*

A few of the insects were interesting. Your curiosity was more than satisfied by a hundred or so. The trail steadily leads along a corridor between expanses of green swamp water and now the area over the water is dancing with small black bugs. They are barely visible at that distance and yet the chaotic motion is obvious. They also fly over the path, where they tangle in your hair [beard, mustache, and your horse's mane]. You walk [ride] into them, so they get into your eyes, ears, nose, mouth—or just miss, brushing your face. They fall down your neck, climb up your sleeves, get under your pants, and crawl up your legs. They don't bite: they tickle. They are bitter with a persistent nasty aftertaste. If they get into an eye, it will water copiously, although the risk of injury is from rubbing too vigorously, not from the insects.



80. *Millions of Midges*

There is no escape. The air seems practically solid with the small dark insects. There must be millions. As far as the eye can see in all directions, they drift in great numbers above the green waters, so many that at times they block the view of the far shore. Many fall into the water and can be seen struggling on the surface until a fish surfaces and swallows them. This is frequent, but the fish appear pretty well sated and are feeding lazily. Numerous small green or yellow lizards appear, eat a few insects and disappear. Unfamiliar birds are feeding steadily on the insect hordes too, picking off insect after insect from the vegetation. Fast flying little birds swoop across the open water, mouths open, taking in hundreds of insects.



81. *Ground Cover*

The little insects lie in writhing masses on the ground: you cannot sit without squishing them or walk without stepping on them. They make a subdued crunch when crushed. The intense musty sour smell of their bodies clenches the stomach and ruins the appetite. You pull them out of everything, even your food and drink, but despite your efforts they find their way to your mouth anyway.

82. *Midges Everywhere*

As you travel for miles in the swamp, the air teems with the small flying insects. The numbers are difficult to estimate or imagine. And still the trail ahead is gray with swirling insects. When you stop for the night, they get into everything you open or use—cooking gear, the water, your bowl, your food, blankets, tents. The horses are tired of them and consequently irritable, standing head to tail and slapping vigorously with their tails to clear them away from each others' eyes and nose.

83. *Persistent Sound*

Collectively there is a hum of their wings. Each insect is nearly silent, but there are so many of them that the sound adds up and you can hear the steady buzzing of millions upon millions of moving insects. It is soon obvious that they are emerging from some immature stage in the water and by evening are mating, hooked together in flying pairs. As the darkness settles, their numbers and activity intensify. They fly upward over land and water, twisting, turning, finding mates. The sound is irritating, the smell nauseating.

84. *Mating Dance*

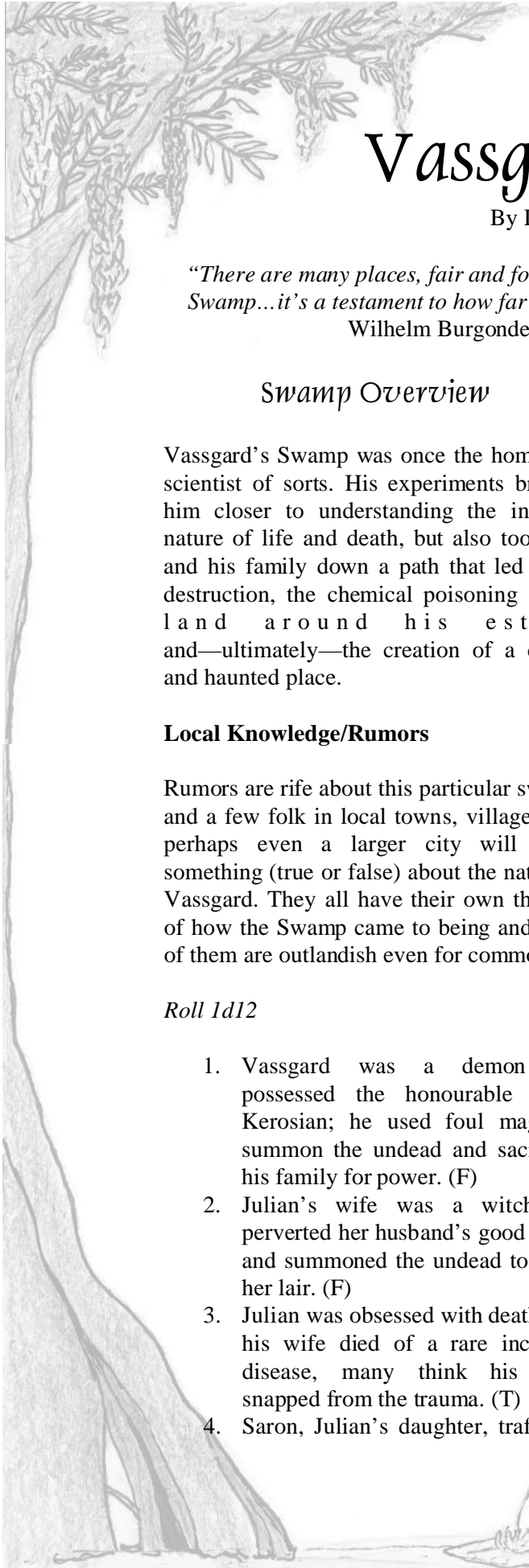
The mating dance of the insects goes on until after midnight. They rise like smoke off the water, twisting and turning. In the dark they are invisible except against the sky or where you provide light, but it's clear from the sound that the swarm continues. In the depths of the night, the sound lessens, although insects lie several layers deep over everything, twitching still but sluggish.

85. *Insects at Dawn*

In the early dawn, when you can first see clearly, the insects lie everywhere on the ground. The foliage is covered in a thick tangle of little wings and legs and dark bodies. But they are not in the air. You can still smell them faintly but taking a breath is no longer a test to see how few you can breathe in. The air is clear and the view of the whole swamp unimpeded by moving insect clouds. They crunch underfoot but can be brushed off bedding and gear [and saddles].

86. *Start All Over Again*

You have not been moving very long when the morning warmth animates the insects. In pairs and then in groups, they take wing, climbing off the foliage and ground. At first each individual hovers a little and then, gaining momentum, flies actively up over land and water. The cycle begins again—and soon the numbers resemble the previous day, with clouds and clouds of insects circling and mating all around you, getting into everything.



Vassgard's Swamp

By Darren 'the Wolf' Pearce

"There are many places, fair and foul, in this old world, but none more foul than Vassgard's Swamp...it's a testament to how far the mighty can fall and who they can take with them!" ~ Wilhelm Burgonden (Taverner, the Trusty Thirsty Tavern)

Swamp Overview

Vassgard's Swamp was once the home to a scientist of sorts. His experiments brought him closer to understanding the intrinsic nature of life and death, but also took him and his family down a path that led to his destruction, the chemical poisoning of the land around his estate, and—ultimately—the creation of a cursed and haunted place.

Local Knowledge/Rumors

Rumors are rife about this particular swamp, and a few folk in local towns, villages, and perhaps even a larger city will know something (true or false) about the nature of Vassgard. They all have their own theories of how the Swamp came to being and some of them are outlandish even for commoners.

Roll 1d12

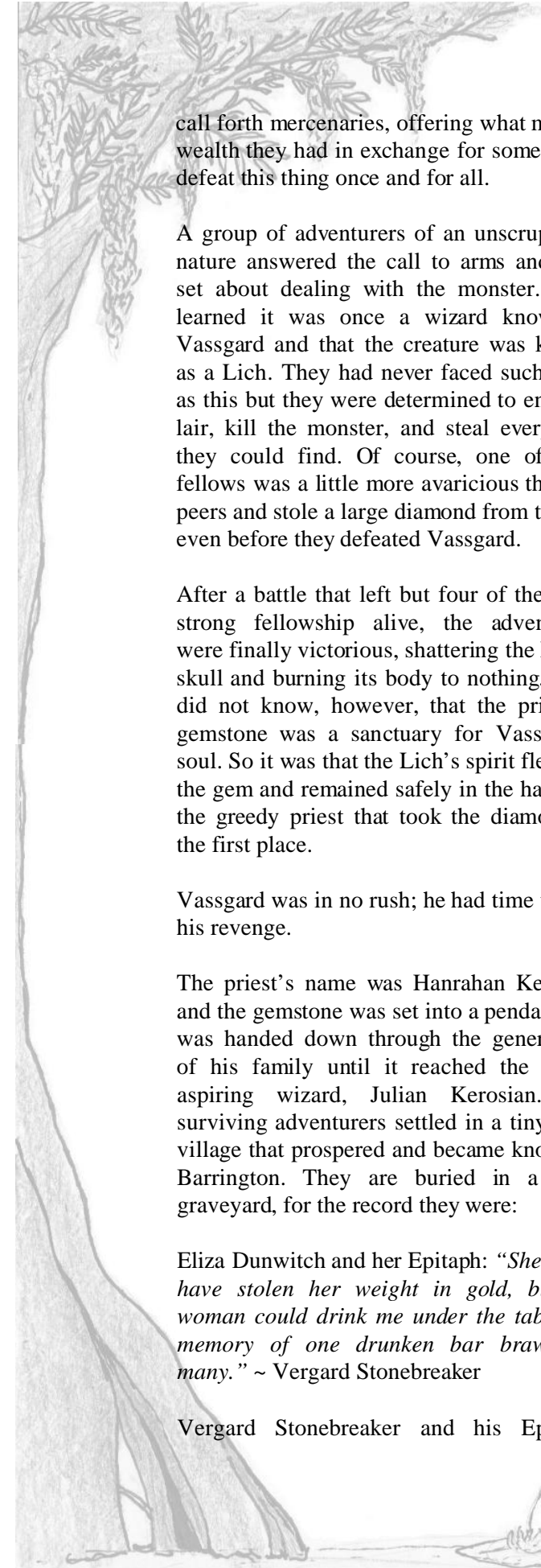
1. Vassgard was a demon that possessed the honourable Julian Kerosian; he used foul magic to summon the undead and sacrificed his family for power. (F)
2. Julian's wife was a witch that perverted her husband's good works and summoned the undead to guard her lair. (F)
3. Julian was obsessed with death after his wife died of a rare incurable disease, many think his mind snapped from the trauma. (T)
4. Saron, Julian's daughter, trafficked

with dark magic and it was her that created the Swamp when her mother died. (F)

5. Julian was a Vampire and he killed his family, drinking their blood and turning them all into Vampires. (F)
6. Julian had a hidden lab in an old crumbling riverboat along the edge of a marsh where his mansion was. (T)
7. Julian's daughter was murdered by adventurers when they stormed his mansion over fifty years ago. (F)
8. Julian was burned to death and his daughter decapitated, the fire ignited some of his volatile chemicals he stored and blew his mansion to splinters. (T)
9. There's a huge dog monster that guards the Swamp, it comes out of a big broken tree and kills anyone that passes. (F)
10. The Swamp water is dangerous and kills anyone that even touches it. (F)
11. There are many types of Undead within Vassgard's Swamp now. (T)
12. Vassgard was the spirit of a Lich slain over five hundred years ago that took control of Julian and forced him to learn darker secrets and submit to its terrible power. (T)

The Truth

Five hundred years ago there was a terrible monster that terrorised the surrounding areas and anyone who stumbled into this creature's lair never returned. Eventually the people of the land sent forth messengers to



call forth mercenaries, offering what meager wealth they had in exchange for someone to defeat this thing once and for all.

A group of adventurers of an unscrupulous nature answered the call to arms and they set about dealing with the monster. They learned it was once a wizard known as Vassgard and that the creature was known as a Lich. They had never faced such a foe as this but they were determined to enter its lair, kill the monster, and steal everything they could find. Of course, one of their fellows was a little more avaricious than his peers and stole a large diamond from the lair even before they defeated Vassgard.

After a battle that left but four of their six-strong fellowship alive, the adventurers were finally victorious, shattering the Lich's skull and burning its body to nothing. They did not know, however, that the priceless gemstone was a sanctuary for Vassgard's soul. So it was that the Lich's spirit fled into the gem and remained safely in the hands of the greedy priest that took the diamond in the first place.

Vassgard was in no rush; he had time to plot his revenge.

The priest's name was Hanrahan Kerosian and the gemstone was set into a pendant that was handed down through the generations of his family until it reached the young aspiring wizard, Julian Kerosian. The surviving adventurers settled in a tiny local village that prospered and became known as Barrington. They are buried in a local graveyard, for the record they were:

Eliza Dunwitch and her Epitaph: *"She might have stolen her weight in gold, but the woman could drink me under the table—in memory of one drunken bar brawl too many."* ~ Vergard Stonebreaker

Vergard Stonebreaker and his Epitaph:

"Died in the dark, his body was never found, only his axe." [Stonebreaker's axe is actually missing should a PC attempt to recover it.]

Falenianen Silverstroke and her Epitaph: *"Her love for battle seemed unending, but it was her love for one man that saw her dead—killed by poison in her sleep. A priest's soul will rot in the hells for this."*

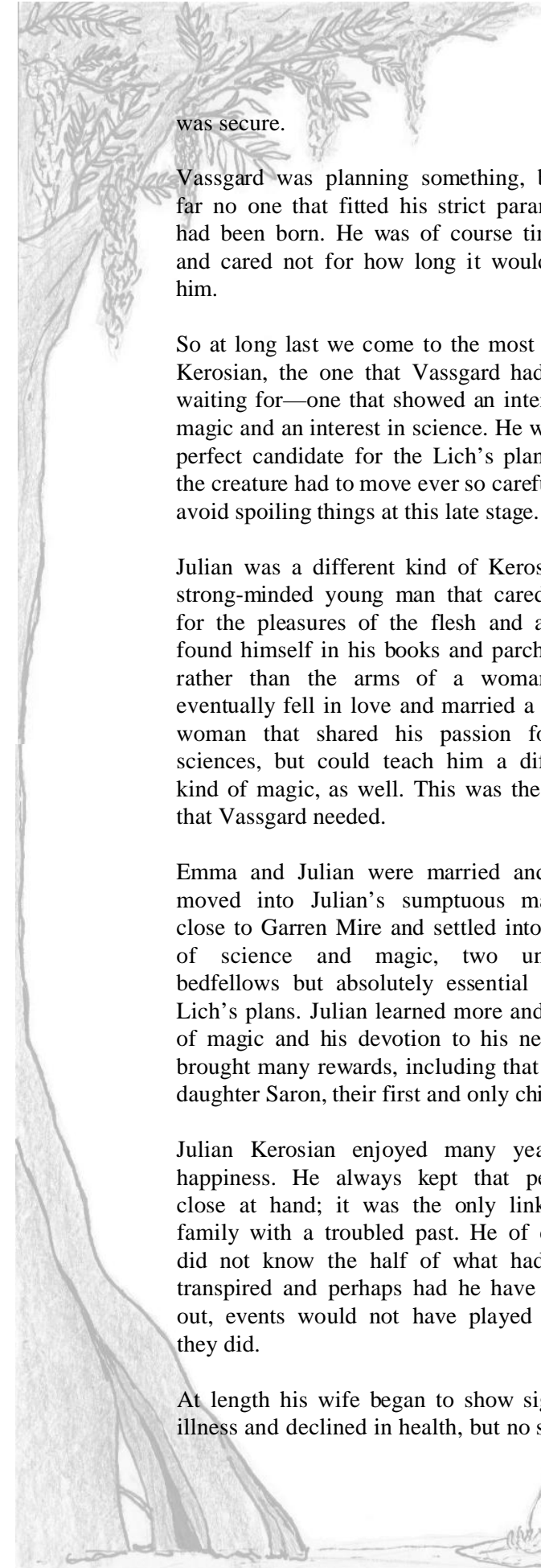
Hanrahan Kerosian and his Epitaph: *"He claimed to be a godly man, yet resorted to ungodly ways to possess a fair elf maiden—he was hung by the neck until dead and justice served."*

When examined, these graves all tell of some kind of misfortune that befell the person that lies buried here. The deaths are all the work of a dark power indeed; Vassgard's influence acting upon each and every one of them. The adventurers perished a short time after each other until only Hanrahan's heir, an illegitimate child called Karlsten, survived. Fleeing any possible reprisal he took the amulet and vanished.

Eliza was slain in a barroom brawl that escalated into a full-on fight to the death. Vergard died in a cave-in; his axe was the only thing that was found and that was later on stolen by an opportunist.

Falen was poisoned Hanrahan, when she fell in love with a gypsy wanderer who stole her heart. The love-stricken Priest sneaked into her room where she lay and administered a lethal dose of poison; if he couldn't have her, no one could. He was caught and quickly tried, convicted, and hung.

Before his belongings could be searched, the pendant was stolen. Hanrahan had sired Karlsten and forgot about him; such was the nature of this supposed pious man. Karlsten fled with the amulet and eventually he too died, but not before the Kerosian bloodline



was secure.

Vassgard was planning something, but so far no one that fitted his strict parameters had been born. He was of course timeless and cared not for how long it would take him.

So at long last we come to the most recent Kerosian, the one that Vassgard had been waiting for—one that showed an interest in magic and an interest in science. He was the perfect candidate for the Lich's plans, but the creature had to move ever so carefully to avoid spoiling things at this late stage.

Julian was a different kind of Kerosian, a strong-minded young man that cared little for the pleasures of the flesh and always found himself in his books and parchments rather than the arms of a woman. He eventually fell in love and married a young woman that shared his passion for the sciences, but could teach him a different kind of magic, as well. This was the break that Vassgard needed.

Emma and Julian were married and they moved into Julian's sumptuous mansion close to Garren Mire and settled into a life of science and magic, two unlikely bedfellows but absolutely essential to the Lich's plans. Julian learned more and more of magic and his devotion to his new life brought many rewards, including that of his daughter Saron, their first and only child.

Julian Kerosian enjoyed many years of happiness. He always kept that pendant close at hand; it was the only link to a family with a troubled past. He of course did not know the half of what had truly transpired and perhaps had he have found out, events would not have played on as they did.

At length his wife began to show signs of illness and declined in health, but no sign of

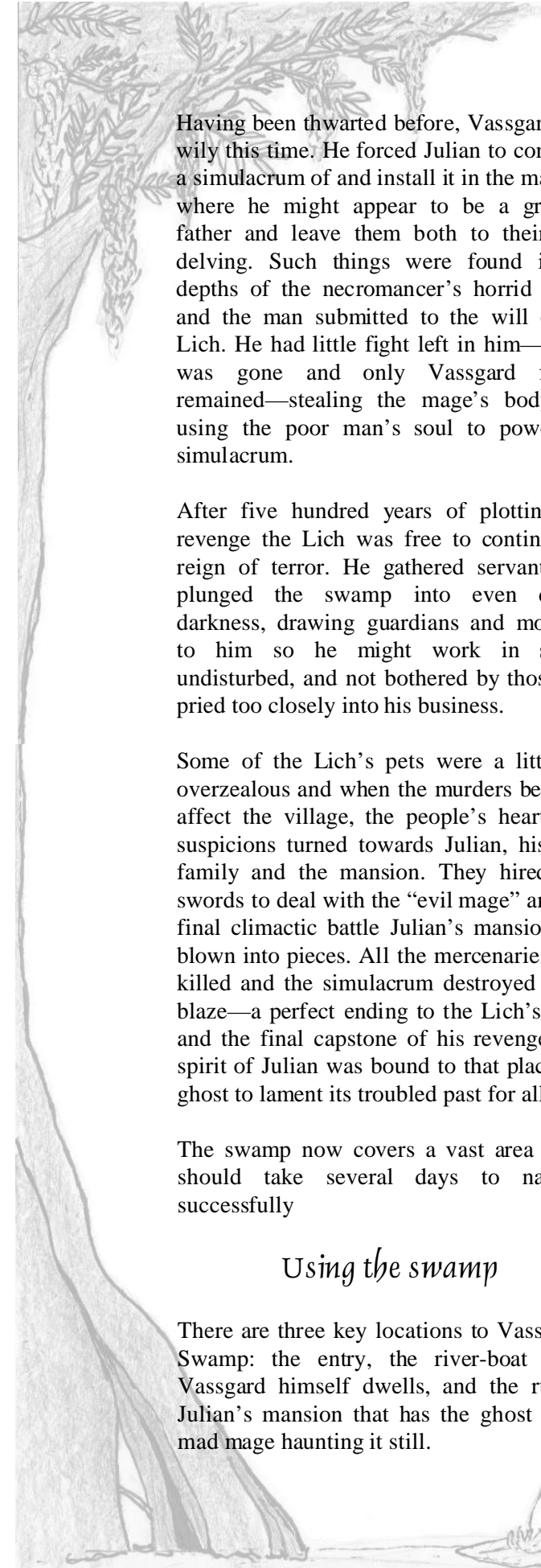
sickness or disease was found. She just seemed to be wasting away, even after he gave her the pendant as a gift to ease her troubled spirit.

She passed away after years of this incurable wasting malady, leaving Julian alone with his daughter and edging his mind into melancholy. Despair and madness, it is said, often walk hand in hand and with the Lich's gentle persuasion it was not too long before he found books of Necromancy and studied the un-life as a way to bring back his wife.

His daughter eventually stumbled upon the forbidden library of her father, and the tomes contained within left her sanity scarred and blasted. She fled the mansion and this was the last and final straw—the fulcrum for the Lich's carefully planned revenge. He whispered to the young mage and forced him to abandon his daughter to pursue one goal—Lichdom—and with that power Julian was assured in his dreams that he could bring back everything he ever loved.

Saron wandered, lost in a daze and was eventually killed when some folk mistook her wandering and wailing for that of a Banshee and struck her head from her body. It was a truly sad and tragic end for such a beautiful creature.

Julian moved from his mansion into an old abandoned river-boat, where he built a necromantic laboratory and began to experiment. He changed from the good-looking man he was to a hideously scarred and death-like figure. He poisoned the land around him with noxious chemicals and over a number of years those experiments turned the mire into something more. It grew stronger and stronger until the mansion and boat were lost within the thick slime of a fetid swamp.



Having been thwarted before, Vassgard was wily this time. He forced Julian to construct a simulacrum of and install it in the mansion where he might appear to be a grieving father and leave them both to their dark delving. Such things were found in the depths of the necromancer's horrid tomes and the man submitted to the will of the Lich. He had little fight left in him—Julian was gone and only Vassgard finally remained—stealing the mage's body and using the poor man's soul to power the simulacrum.

After five hundred years of plotting and revenge the Lich was free to continue his reign of terror. He gathered servants and plunged the swamp into even deeper darkness, drawing guardians and monsters to him so he might work in secret, undisturbed, and not bothered by those that pried too closely into his business.

Some of the Lich's pets were a little too overzealous and when the murders began to affect the village, the people's hearts and suspicions turned towards Julian, his dead family and the mansion. They hired sellswords to deal with the "evil mage" and in a final climactic battle Julian's mansion was blown into pieces. All the mercenaries were killed and the simulacrum destroyed in the blaze—a perfect ending to the Lich's game and the final capstone of his revenge. The spirit of Julian was bound to that place as a ghost to lament its troubled past for all time.

The swamp now covers a vast area and it should take several days to navigate successfully

Using the swamp

There are three key locations to Vassgard's Swamp: the entry, the river-boat where Vassgard himself dwells, and the ruin of Julian's mansion that has the ghost of the mad mage haunting it still.

Adventurers can be drawn to the swamp for many things and for many reasons:

1. There might be surviving diaries from any one of the adventurers that encountered Vassgard. They might have been following the odd circumstances that surrounded the fellowship's final days.
2. A mysterious old book that contains the last few words of the immoral priest may come to light—it's full of ranting and ravings, as if he were a man conflicted or possessed of two minds. It speaks of a desire to reclaim his lost kingdom.
3. A map from one of the adventurers that died could have been lost, recovered, and found by a player character. It clearly marks out the Lich's former domain and the tiny hovel that was once there.
4. A elf who was a friend of Falenianen Silverstroke many years ago could meet the PCs and let slip some of the story, or even offer to accompany them and find out what is truly going on.
5. Any number of rumors listed earlier can be used to spark an adventure in the Swamp and give the characters conflicted information, some false and some true.
6. The adventurers could camp close to the Swamp, and odd lights and sounds could be heard coming from within.

Swamp entry

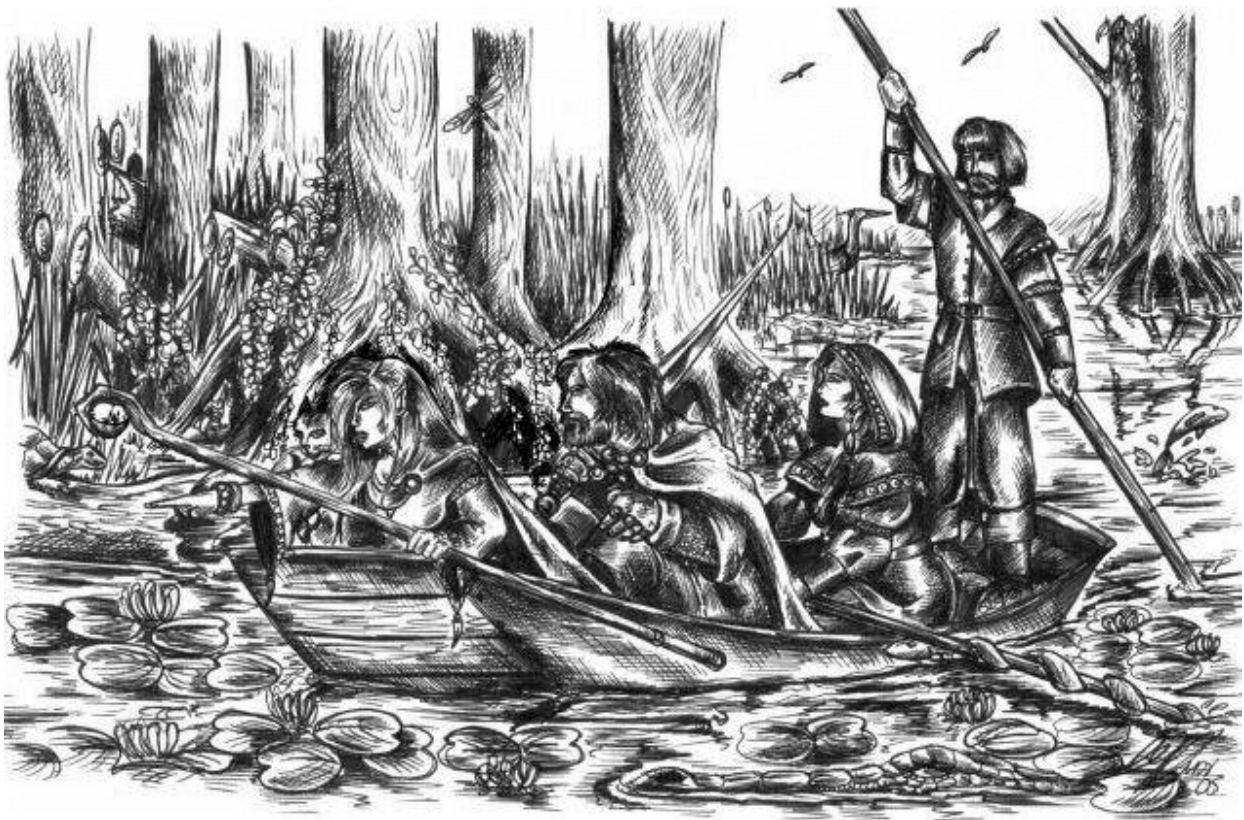
Lying before you, with stinking masses of clogged vegetation and sinewy vines, is a loathsome swamp indeed. It seems to take all the light from around and suck it into the depths beyond. The liquid is stagnant and putrid, with a thick layer of scum on the surface. The stench from within is strong enough to almost choke the breath from your lungs. [Characters must make

a DC 20 Con check to even enter the swamp— three consecutive failures will cause a temporary loss of a point of Con and the PC will become nauseous, vomiting for a short while.]

The old trees have long since given up the ghost of life and now they remain as stoic black-barked guardians, keeping watch on the sickly lime-green surface that bubbles and burbles just before your feet. The last vestiges of dry land are behind you now and you are a few steps away from waterlogged boots and a maze of treacherous mud and soggy earth.

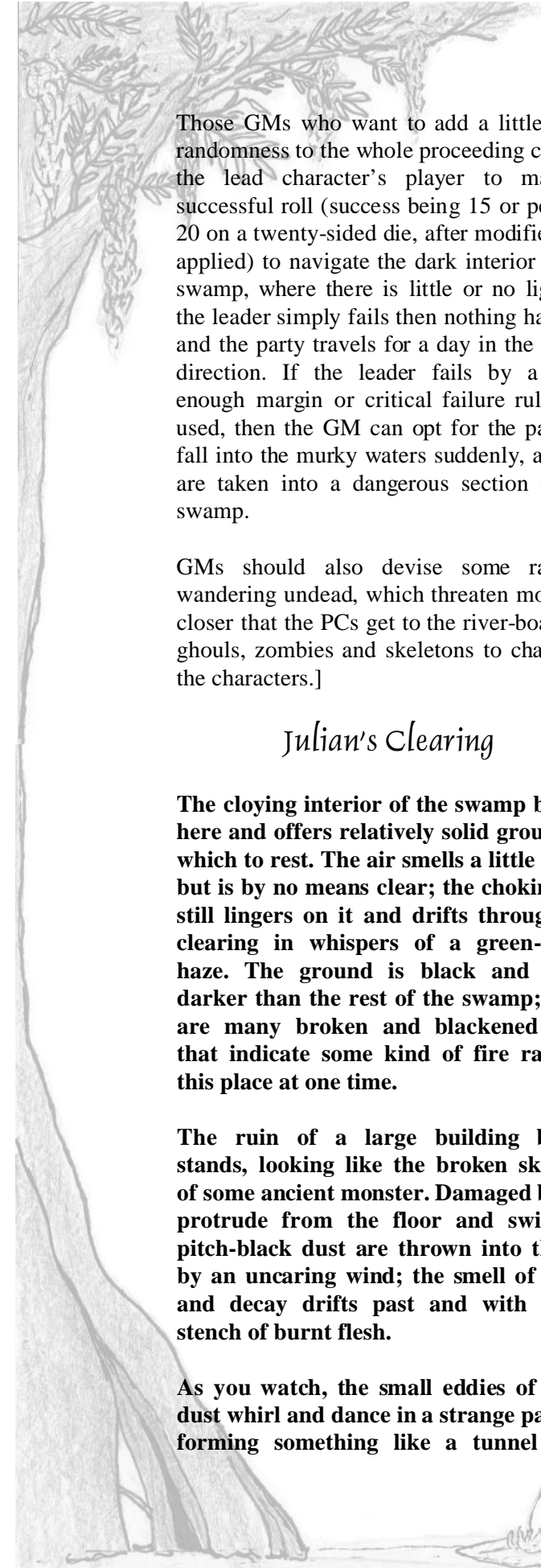
Due to the chemical gases being let off by the swamp, fire spells and open sources of flame should be used with caution or else heroes may find themselves at the center of a ball of fire doing 4-24 points of damage.

Travel in the swamp is also particularly dangerous. At the whim of the GM, the characters may have to make random tests or their reflexes or dexterity to escape being sucked into pools of fetid water or evade places with seemingly solid ground that gives way under their feet to crumble into the mud below it.



[The swamp is a dire place; it's a sticky and treacherous mass of twisted vegetation. Any creature that has an inkling of nature or a connection to the natural world will not need any check to determine something is horribly wrong here. There is a poison that flows through the whole swamp, not only chemical but spiritual as well.

Try not to kill the adventurers outright, but use the natural dangers of the swamp to frighten and inconvenience them. Henchmen and pack animals can vanish, never to be seen again. Particularly troublesome PCs could also be taken care of here, although this line of thinking isn't encouraged.



Those GMs who want to add a little more randomness to the whole proceeding can ask the lead character's player to make a successful roll (success being 15 or perhaps 20 on a twenty-sided die, after modifiers are applied) to navigate the dark interior of the swamp, where there is little or no light. If the leader simply fails then nothing happens and the party travels for a day in the wrong direction. If the leader fails by a large enough margin or critical failure rules are used, then the GM can opt for the party to fall into the murky waters suddenly, as they are taken into a dangerous section of the swamp.

GMs should also devise some random wandering undead, which threaten more the closer that the PCs get to the river-boat; use ghouls, zombies and skeletons to challenge the characters.]

Julian's Clearing

The cloying interior of the swamp breaks here and offers relatively solid ground on which to rest. The air smells a little better but is by no means clear; the choking gas still lingers on it and drifts through the clearing in whispers of a green-tinted haze. The ground is black and much darker than the rest of the swamp; there are many broken and blackened trees that indicate some kind of fire ravaged this place at one time.

The ruin of a large building barely stands, looking like the broken skeleton of some ancient monster. Damaged beams protrude from the floor and swirls of pitch-black dust are thrown into the air by an uncaring wind; the smell of death and decay drifts past and with it the stench of burnt flesh.

As you watch, the small eddies of black dust whirl and dance in a strange pattern, forming something like a tunnel or a

vortex—a miniature tornado whispering across the ruin of the building until a scream claws into your ears and a lamenting wail rips out of nowhere.

An apparition, bound by dark blood-red chains, forms suddenly and resembles a young man dressed in fine clothes and a lustrous waterfall of ebony hair. Once handsome, his eyes are vacant and he stares off into the distance, as if searching for something—as if waiting for someone.

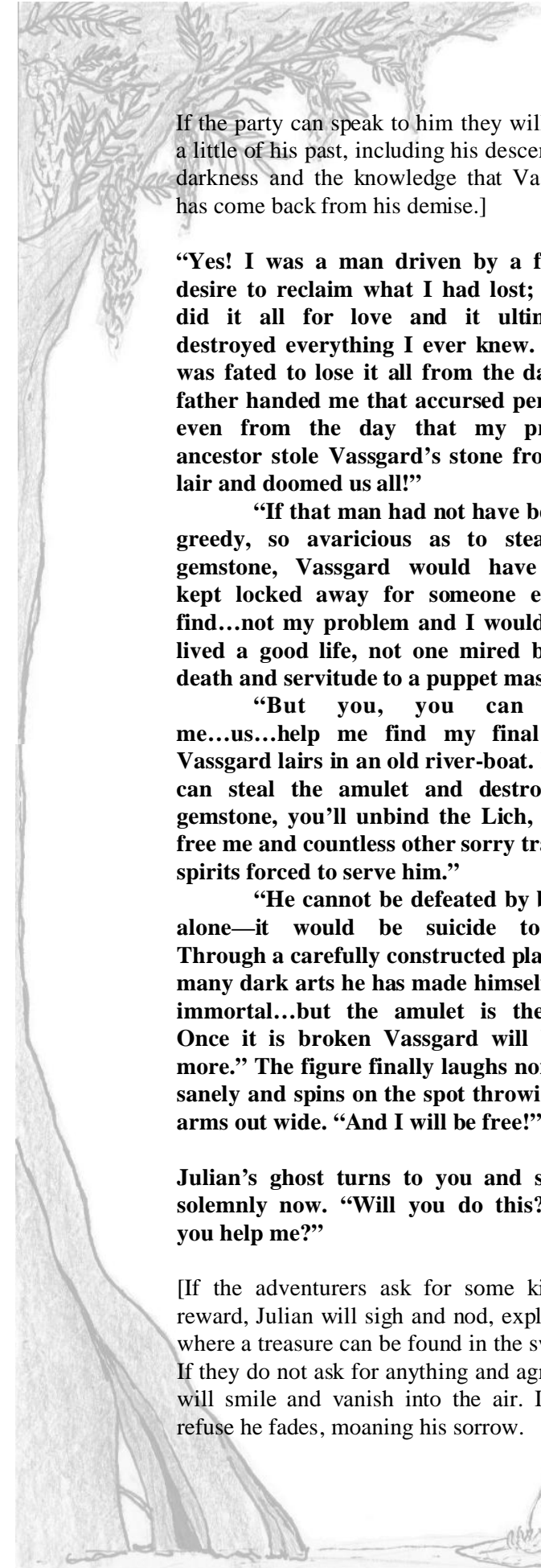
“Why won't you come?” he asks the air, sighing as there is no answer. “It is because I wronged you, isn't it? I should have never neglected you, daughter, but I only wanted your mother back...my wife...why won't you come back to me?”

[This is the ghost of Julian, the ill-fated mage that was betrayed here years ago. He will not at the moment interact with the characters since he does not see them. He is bound to the site of his demise, unable to leave, and quite mad with grief. He cannot be sent away or otherwise removed from this place and his punishment. Only destroying the pendant will free him.]

“So shiny, so beautiful, so treacherous, and so vain.” The voice continues to lament for a while longer before suddenly the eyes turn upon you all.

“Who...who are you? Are you servants of his...have you come to claim me as well now?”

[Quick-thinking or -talking characters will be able to reason with Julian, even though he's been driven mad with grief. Something has allowed him a slender segment of clarity compared to what he normally knows, as if a benefactor has sent the group. If the adventurers attack him, he vanishes and they will lose their chance to earn a reward for helping him find a final rest.



If the party can speak to him they will learn a little of his past, including his descent into darkness and the knowledge that Vassgard has come back from his demise.]

“Yes! I was a man driven by a foolish desire to reclaim what I had lost; yes, I did it all for love and it ultimately destroyed everything I ever knew. But I was fated to lose it all from the day my father handed me that accursed pendant, even from the day that my priestly ancestor stole Vassgard’s stone from his lair and doomed us all!”

“If that man had not have been so greedy, so avaricious as to steal the gemstone, Vassgard would have been kept locked away for someone else to find...not my problem and I would have lived a good life, not one mired by un-death and servitude to a puppet master.”

“But you, you can help me...us...help me find my final rest. Vassgard lairs in an old river-boat. If you can steal the amulet and destroy the gemstone, you’ll unbind the Lich, you’ll free me and countless other sorry trapped spirits forced to serve him.”

“He cannot be defeated by blades alone—it would be suicide to try. Through a carefully constructed plan and many dark arts he has made himself near immortal...but the amulet is the key. Once it is broken Vassgard will be no more.” The figure finally laughs none too sanely and spins on the spot throwing his arms out wide. **“And I will be free!”**

Julian’s ghost turns to you and speaks solemnly now. “Will you do this? Will you help me?”

[If the adventurers ask for some kind of reward, Julian will sigh and nod, explaining where a treasure can be found in the swamp. If they do not ask for anything and agree, he will smile and vanish into the air. If they refuse he fades, moaning his sorrow.

If asked about the amulet he will describe it as a beautiful disc of gold with a diamond at the center. He now knows it’s trapped, so he will—if the characters have been reasonable to him—let them know there are three traps. He isn’t sure of all of them, but he knows to disable one of them, they must speak the name “Saron,” before they take the amulet from the room.

Finally, if asked how to destroy the amulet he will explain that a good solid blow will shatter the gem and put an end to Vassgard once and for all.]

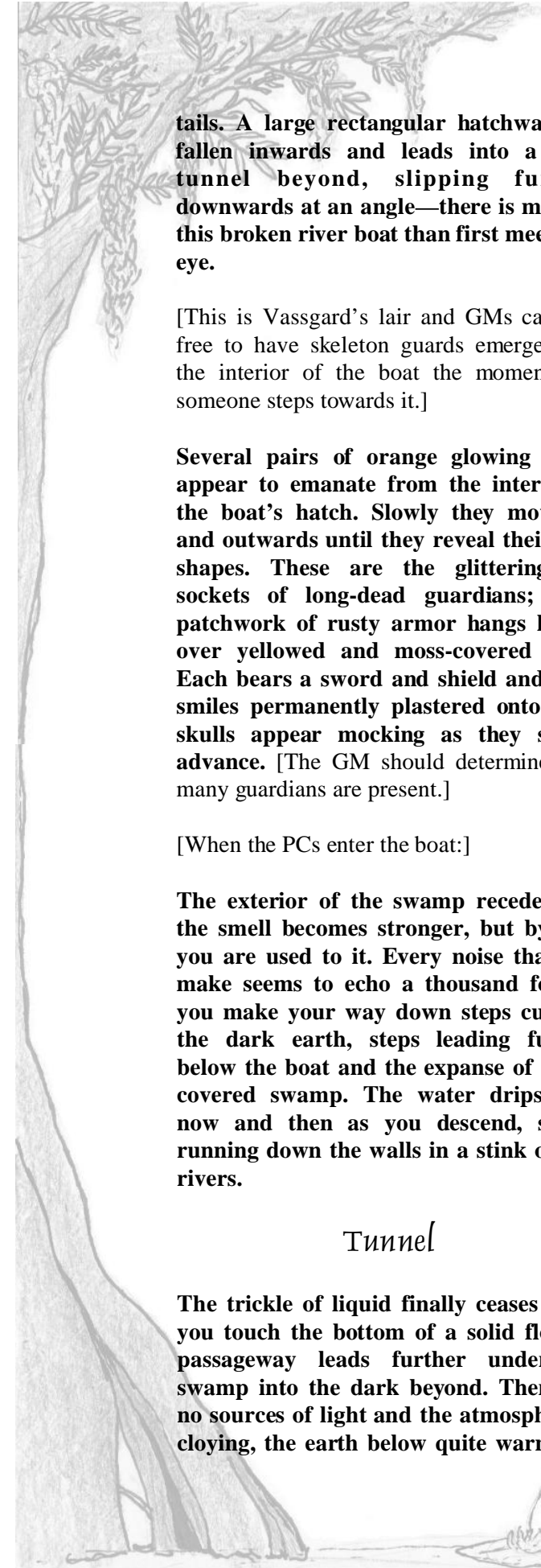
The air is still now as the apparition vanishes. Only the smell of Vassgard’s filth-strewn domain remains to remind you all of the nature of this swamp.

The River Boat

After what seems like a lifetime of trawling through sickening grungy swampland, you put your boots upon dry land once again. A small bank of dark muddy ground abuts the leering trees and vegetation of the swamp’s interior. A horrid slime runs over the dark wood of a treacherous-looking shape as tendrils of green hang limply into the gurgling morass.

A large river boat is moored here, broken over the ages and utterly useless as anything but a haven for other things now. Its shape against the luminous gases and dancing marsh lights reminds you of a hunched-over fiend—a craggy head with spines of rotten wood lurches out of the muck at an odd angle and the rest of the boat forms the body of this frightening image.

The rear section has broken away and sunk down into the mire, where only a jagged few pieces of wood can be seen now. They almost look like a fan of five



tails. A large rectangular hatchway has fallen inwards and leads into a dark tunnel beyond, slipping further downwards at an angle—there is more to this broken river boat than first meets the eye.

[This is Vassgard's lair and GMs can feel free to have skeleton guards emerge from the interior of the boat the moment that someone steps towards it.]

Several pairs of orange glowing lights appear to emanate from the interior of the boat's hatch. Slowly they move up and outwards until they reveal their true shapes. These are the glittering eye sockets of long-dead guardians; their patchwork of rusty armor hangs limply over yellowed and moss-covered bone. Each bears a sword and shield and their smiles permanently plastered onto their skulls appear mocking as they slowly advance. [The GM should determine how many guardians are present.]

[When the PCs enter the boat:]

The exterior of the swamp recedes and the smell becomes stronger, but by now you are used to it. Every noise that you make seems to echo a thousand fold as you make your way down steps cut into the dark earth, steps leading further below the boat and the expanse of slime-covered swamp. The water drips here now and then as you descend, slowly running down the walls in a stink of tiny rivers.

Tunnel

The trickle of liquid finally ceases when you touch the bottom of a solid floor, a passageway leads further under the swamp into the dark beyond. There are no sources of light and the atmosphere is cloying, the earth below quite warm and

the air stale and thin.

Room of the Amulet

Off to one side of the tunnel through a cut in the wall that passes for a door, reinforced with wood supports, is a medium-sized room. There is enough space here for six people to stand comfortably. There is very little in the way of decoration, apart from a plinth upon which rests a disc of gold. At the center of the disc is a glittering clear gemstone, perhaps a diamond of some kind. [The diamond itself is worth 15,000 gp; the amulet as a whole would be worth 16,500 gp.] The plinth is covered with angular rune-like writing and stands as tall as the middle of an average-sized humanoid.

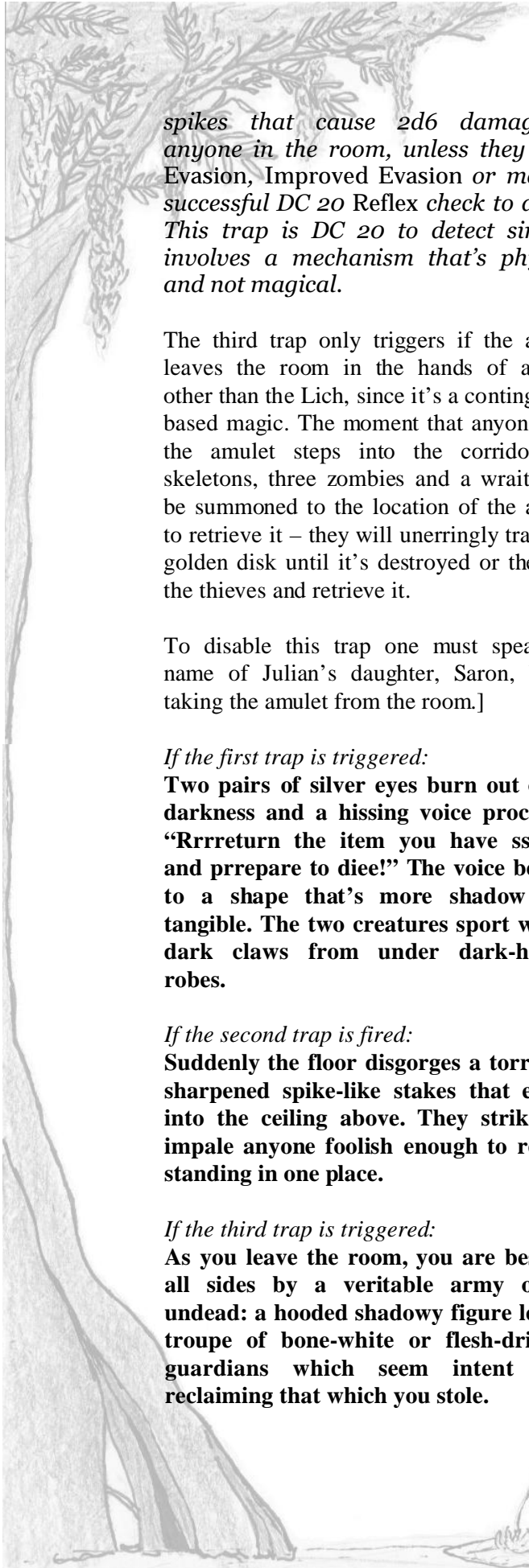
[While Vassgard really doesn't think anyone would be foolish enough to take his amulet, being a rather vain and arrogant Lich, he does know that his life is linked to it, akin to a phylactery. So he has set up a three-tiered trap system to protect the pendant from being taken.]

[If the PCs decide to break the amulet on the plinth:]

As you try to strike out at the amulet the air around it seems to grow thicker, stronger, and your weapon [your spell] bounces off it harmlessly. A slight shimmer passes over the air around it and all is normal again.

The first trap is a silent alarm spell that will trigger unless detected. It summons two Wraiths to attack the party. A detect traps spell or similar will show this up as a haze that rests over the amulet; there is a hole in the haze that allows safe passage for the amulet.

The second triggers a set of damaging



spikes that cause 2d6 damage to anyone in the room, unless they have Evasion, Improved Evasion or make a successful DC 20 Reflex check to avoid. This trap is DC 20 to detect since it involves a mechanism that's physical and not magical.

The third trap only triggers if the amulet leaves the room in the hands of anyone other than the Lich, since it's a contingency-based magic. The moment that anyone with the amulet steps into the corridor, six skeletons, three zombies and a wraith will be summoned to the location of the amulet to retrieve it – they will unerringly track the golden disk until it's destroyed or they kill the thieves and retrieve it.

To disable this trap one must speak the name of Julian's daughter, Saron, before taking the amulet from the room.]

If the first trap is triggered:

Two pairs of silver eyes burn out of the darkness and a hissing voice proclaims, "Rrrrreturn the item you have sstolen and prprepare to diee!" The voice belongs to a shape that's more shadow than tangible. The two creatures sport wicked dark claws from under dark-hooded robes.

If the second trap is fired:

Suddenly the floor disgorges a torrent of sharpened spike-like stakes that embed into the ceiling above. They strike and impale anyone foolish enough to remain standing in one place.

If the third trap is triggered:

As you leave the room, you are beset on all sides by a veritable army of the undead: a hooded shadowy figure leads a troupe of bone-white or flesh-dripping guardians which seem intent upon reclaiming that which you stole.

[When the PCs break the amulet:]

There is a sound like a hundred screaming souls that emanates from within the shattered gem, the golden disk bends and twists under the force of a sudden expulsion of magic until the whole thing pulls itself inwards. It leaves nothing except a smoking whisper of memory behind.

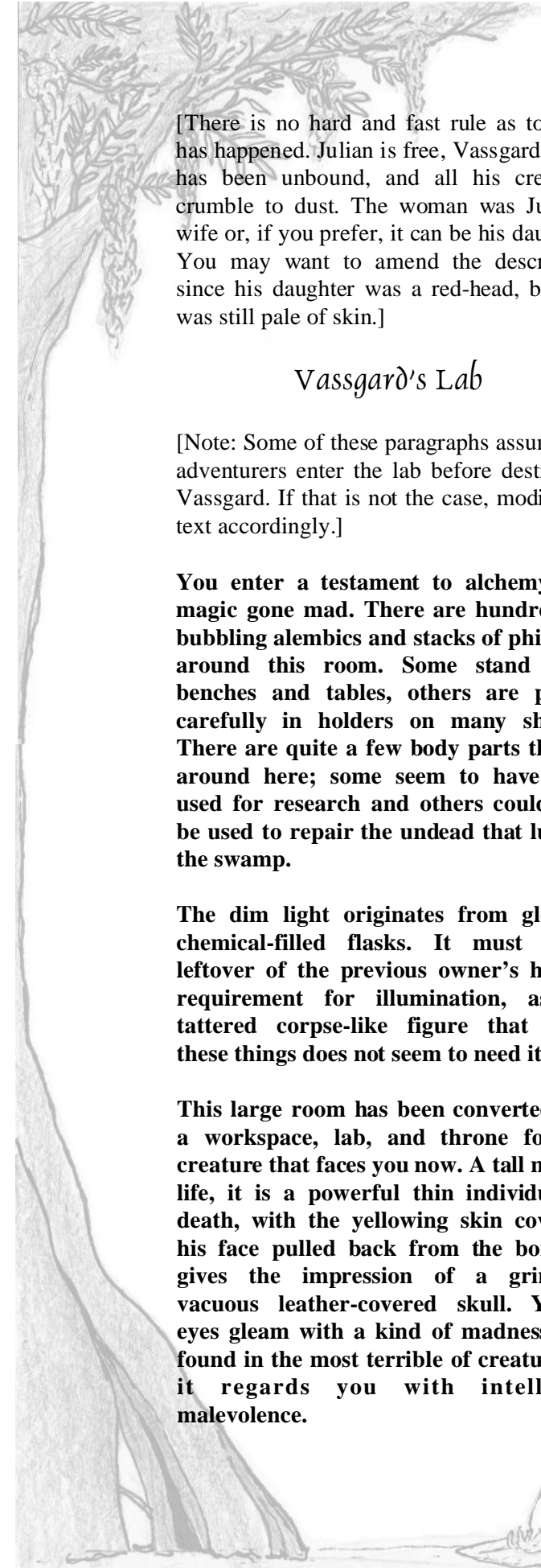
A wail bursts forth with a wicked cry of elation; it sounds like a young man's terrified voice then it softens and becomes a torrent of pleased laughter. "Thank you, thank you, whoever and wherever you are...at long last...I am free, free to move on and free to finally be at peace."

A wicked wind rips through the area and shakes everything in sight, nearly knocking you flat and a growl snarls over the top of the young man's voice.

"What have you done? I was so close, so near!" But before the angry voice can continue it is torn away and all falls silent, then the shimmer of a slender figure appears before you and bows just once. She is a woman of pale skin; her hair is long and bronze akin to an early morn or dusky sunset. She is dressed in a ghostly shroud of pure white, glittering with silver around her neck and wrists.

"He is gone; you have done well. You will not know me and you will not learn my name, but you might guess it. I shall leave you with a mystery yet to unravel. Thank you, brave souls—without your aid none of us would have ever found peace again."

This mysterious figure vanishes after the last word and time seems to stand still for a moment, then all is finally normal.



[There is no hard and fast rule as to what has happened. Julian is free, Vassgard's evil has been unbound, and all his creations crumble to dust. The woman was Julian's wife or, if you prefer, it can be his daughter. You may want to amend the description since his daughter was a red-head, but she was still pale of skin.]

Vassgard's Lab

[Note: Some of these paragraphs assume the adventurers enter the lab before destroying Vassgard. If that is not the case, modify the text accordingly.]

You enter a testament to alchemy and magic gone mad. There are hundreds of bubbling alembics and stacks of phials all around this room. Some stand upon benches and tables, others are placed carefully in holders on many shelves. There are quite a few body parts that lie around here; some seem to have been used for research and others could well be used to repair the undead that lurk in the swamp.

The dim light originates from glowing chemical-filled flasks. It must be a leftover of the previous owner's human requirement for illumination, as the tattered corpse-like figure that tends these things does not seem to need it.

This large room has been converted into a workspace, lab, and throne for the creature that faces you now. A tall man in life, it is a powerful thin individual in death, with the yellowing skin covering his face pulled back from the bone—it gives the impression of a grinning, vacuous leather-covered skull. Yellow eyes gleam with a kind of madness only found in the most terrible of creatures as it regards you with intelligent malevolence.

“Welcome, humble creatures of flesh and bone, welcome to my circus of freakish delights...you realize that I cannot now let you leave.”

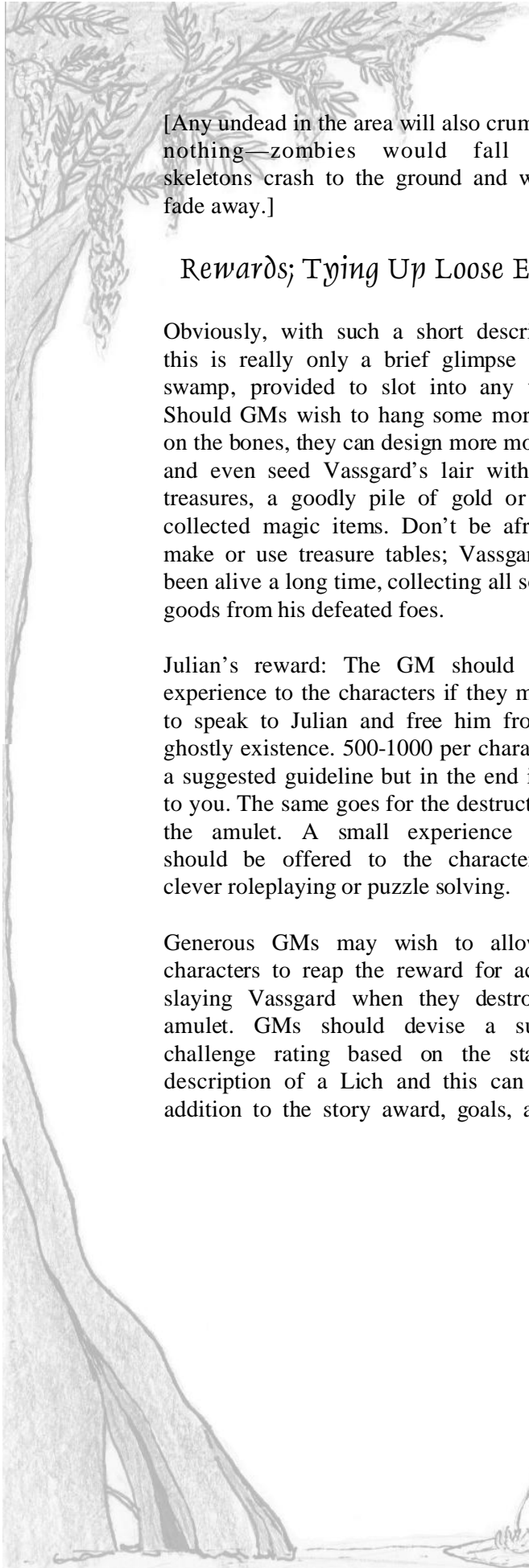
As the voice speaks a cold feeling runs through your blood and this black-garbed monster sweeps an arm across the room, indicating the walls, which disgorge large numbers of skeletons.

[Note: all should appear lost at this point. This creature cannot be fought in the normal way and therefore no statistics have been provided for it. GMs wanting to make Vassgard an enemy should think carefully about cheapening the power of such a diabolical figure. He should be like Count Dracula or Professor Moriarty and provide a suitable “fear” moment for the PCs—then in typical villain fashion he orders a small army of skeletons (numbers determined by the GM) to attack the characters and they rip from the earthen walls to do so. Vassgard himself will vanish; he has gone to cause trouble elsewhere and should not appear again. Don't be afraid to ham it up if you want, and extend the verbal confrontation with Vassgard.]

As the skeletal shapes move to attack, the creature turns and fades into the shadows, leaving a mocking laugh upon the air.

[If the heros destroy the amulet in the Lich's presence before he gets a chance to leave, embellish his demise a little more:]

The tall gaunt figure looks on with something akin to horror passing over his features. “What have you done? I was so close, so near!” He starts to burn from within, fire shooting through skin and bone, leaving a horrid smell upon the air. His black cloak catches alight and he falls to the floor in a pile of ashes. These are soon consumed as well leaving no traces of the monster.



[Any undead in the area will also crumble to nothing—zombies would fall over, skeletons crash to the ground and wraiths fade away.]

Rewards; Tying Up Loose Ends

Obviously, with such a short description, this is really only a brief glimpse at the swamp, provided to slot into any world. Should GMs wish to hang some more skin on the bones, they can design more monsters and even seed Vassgard's lair with extra treasures, a goodly pile of gold or some collected magic items. Don't be afraid to make or use treasure tables; Vassgard has been alive a long time, collecting all sorts of goods from his defeated foes.

Julian's reward: The GM should award experience to the characters if they manage to speak to Julian and free him from his ghostly existence. 500-1000 per character is a suggested guideline but in the end it's up to you. The same goes for the destruction of the amulet. A small experience award should be offered to the characters for clever roleplaying or puzzle solving.

Generous GMs may wish to allow the characters to reap the reward for actually slaying Vassgard when they destroy the amulet. GMs should devise a suitable challenge rating based on the standard description of a Lich and this can be in addition to the story award, goals, and so

forth, or it can replace them entirely.

With the Lich destroyed, the swamp may recover from its chemical and spiritual poisoning. Any elves or creatures of the forest may want to remain close at hand to monitor the situation and ensure that all the remaining undead have been wiped out.

There is one ghost left to lay to rest: Saron, Julian's daughter. This can be used as a further plot hook to springboard adventures or this lonely spirit might take a maddening liking to one of the player characters, involving him in some plot or luring him to his near-demise to be close to him.

She might do the same to an NPC who lives near the village, who goes missing a month or so after the PCs think they're done with the swamp...lured into the very murky depths to become her ghostly lover—can they save him or will it be too late?

Now that the Lich has gone, will other monsters take up residence in the murk, like lizardmen or worse? What will the implications to the village be in this case?

These are only a few ideas and GMs are encouraged to play with it as much as they like, altering factors as they see fit and even making up a whole new story. The world is really your oyster and this is but one view of a swamp where a myriad of possibilities lurk in the fetid depths.

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An Overview of Swamps

By K. H. Keeler

Swamps are flooded forests. A swamp can be a great environment for your adventures. Swamps have high productivity due to the presence of water that almost always makes them home to more animals and plants than the surrounding area. Thus, encounters are more frequent. In addition the tall, dense vegetation conceals all sorts of surprises. Furthermore, swamps are hard to move through, so they often form little-known areas in the middle of otherwise well-explored lands. Rare plants might grow in the swamp, strange animals may live there, or perhaps mysterious monsters lurk there. A whole race of undiscovered elves may dwell in a swamp within sight of a castle's towers. There are a multitude of options for swamp adventures.

Temperate and Subtropical Swamps

The scenes provided here occur where there is standing water under a canopy of trees or shrubs. Our real world has many kinds of wetlands. In this book, we are not describing flooded grasslands (marshes), acid wetlands with poor decay (bogs and fens) or coastal wetlands (estuaries or salt marshes). The areas described here may lie close to other wetlands, but they are swamps.

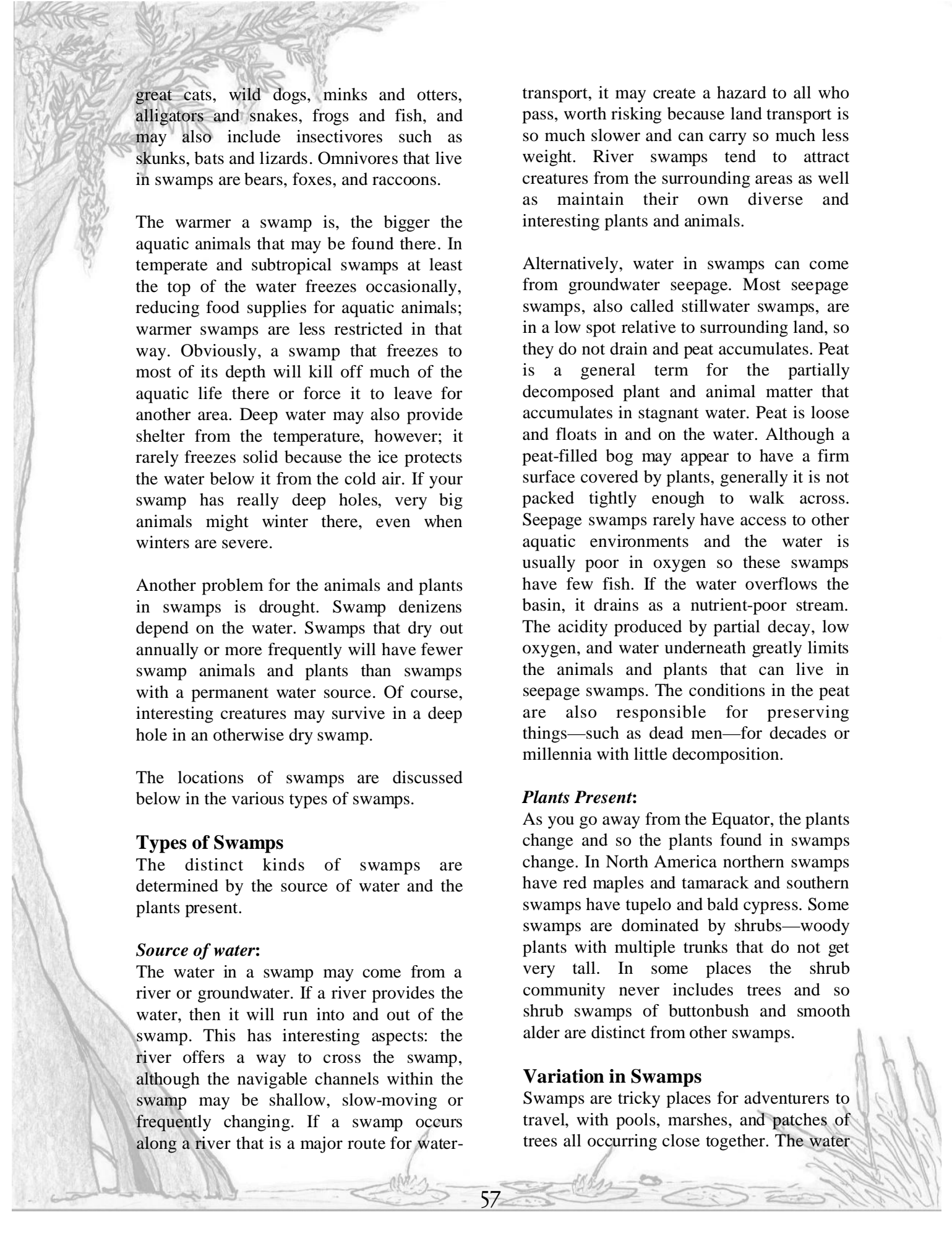
The swamps in this book are also temperate and subtropical swamps. Freezing is the most important limit to plants and animals on earth. Frost turns water from a liquid to a solid and in doing so causes it to expand: only a minority of the earth's creatures can survive that. A quick definition of a temperate area is one with a well-defined winter (a season with the temperature dropping below freezing). Subtropical zones have occasional killing frosts—one or two a year, or every few years. In tropical regions the temperature never drops below freezing.

Periodically, the swamps described here freeze. Consequently, the conditions at different times of year can be dramatically different.

After frost, water is usually the most critical limiting factor on land but in aquatic environments, oxygen is an important component. The water in a swamp provides abundantly for its forest plants and animals, and so usually a swamp is green and productive, especially compared to areas around it. The underwater areas are frequently oxygen-deprived, however, and may be filled with partly decayed material, because without oxygen, normal decay stops.

Many swamps support a variety of species because water is plentiful and there are also diverse habitats: on land, in trees, in the water. Species-poor swamps occur where something limits the ability of plants and animals to survive there, such as acid or alkaline water in seepage swamps. Other swamps may have few species of animals or plants because a toxin (like arsenic) is present in high quantities.

Food chains in ecosystems begin with plants, which are eaten by herbivorous (plant-eating) animals, which are eaten by carnivores which are eaten by other carnivores. Scavengers live off the kills of carnivores. Other animals, fungi, and microorganisms get their food from breaking down dead creatures even further. Omnivores eat a mixed diet: from plants to hunting to scavenging. In a swamp, food chains can begin with trees, shrubs, or herbs, or with plants floating in or on the water. The herbivores can be squirrels, wild pigs, fish, nutria or muskrats, or many other creatures. The carnivores include eagles,



great cats, wild dogs, minks and otters, alligators and snakes, frogs and fish, and may also include insectivores such as skunks, bats and lizards. Omnivores that live in swamps are bears, foxes, and raccoons.

The warmer a swamp is, the bigger the aquatic animals that may be found there. In temperate and subtropical swamps at least the top of the water freezes occasionally, reducing food supplies for aquatic animals; warmer swamps are less restricted in that way. Obviously, a swamp that freezes to most of its depth will kill off much of the aquatic life there or force it to leave for another area. Deep water may also provide shelter from the temperature, however; it rarely freezes solid because the ice protects the water below it from the cold air. If your swamp has really deep holes, very big animals might winter there, even when winters are severe.

Another problem for the animals and plants in swamps is drought. Swamp denizens depend on the water. Swamps that dry out annually or more frequently will have fewer swamp animals and plants than swamps with a permanent water source. Of course, interesting creatures may survive in a deep hole in an otherwise dry swamp.

The locations of swamps are discussed below in the various types of swamps.

Types of Swamps

The distinct kinds of swamps are determined by the source of water and the plants present.

Source of water:

The water in a swamp may come from a river or groundwater. If a river provides the water, then it will run into and out of the swamp. This has interesting aspects: the river offers a way to cross the swamp, although the navigable channels within the swamp may be shallow, slow-moving or frequently changing. If a swamp occurs along a river that is a major route for water-

transport, it may create a hazard to all who pass, worth risking because land transport is so much slower and can carry so much less weight. River swamps tend to attract creatures from the surrounding areas as well as maintain their own diverse and interesting plants and animals.


Alternatively, water in swamps can come from groundwater seepage. Most seepage swamps, also called stillwater swamps, are in a low spot relative to surrounding land, so they do not drain and peat accumulates. Peat is a general term for the partially decomposed plant and animal matter that accumulates in stagnant water. Peat is loose and floats in and on the water. Although a peat-filled bog may appear to have a firm surface covered by plants, generally it is not packed tightly enough to walk across. Seepage swamps rarely have access to other aquatic environments and the water is usually poor in oxygen so these swamps have few fish. If the water overflows the basin, it drains as a nutrient-poor stream. The acidity produced by partial decay, low oxygen, and water underneath greatly limits the animals and plants that can live in seepage swamps. The conditions in the peat are also responsible for preserving things—such as dead men—for decades or millennia with little decomposition.

Plants Present:

As you go away from the Equator, the plants change and so the plants found in swamps change. In North America northern swamps have red maples and tamarack and southern swamps have tupelo and bald cypress. Some swamps are dominated by shrubs—woody plants with multiple trunks that do not get very tall. In some places the shrub community never includes trees and so shrub swamps of buttonbush and smooth alder are distinct from other swamps.

Variation in Swamps

Swamps are tricky places for adventurers to travel, with pools, marshes, and patches of trees all occurring close together. The water



spreads out over the land and into the deep spots, making pools. It saturates the soil so that even where there is no standing water, the soil is very soft (muddy or peaty). On high spots, trees, shrubs and herbs grow. Some of the high spots are rocky, but often high spots are the result of plants growing over other plants, so the footing is treacherous.

The area around a river swamp is likely to be irregular and varied. As rivers flood and retreat, they rearrange the land. Natural levees (ridges formed as floods retreat) are created along the riverbanks. Farther back, sloughs and braided channels may occur. Loops in a river link to form oxbow lakes which, depending on the water level, may contain swamps.

Some areas are forests most of the year and swamps during periods of high water, such as in spring when the rivers are high. This is especially true of floodplains and bottomlands along rivers, but also applies to seepage swamps when the water table rises during spring thaws. Some coastal forests regularly become swamps at high tide. Where rivers enter the sea, high tide pushes the freshwater back and inland, flooding forests there frequently if not daily. Intermediate situations occur as well.

Characteristics of Swamp Organisms

The names of plants and animals used here are mainly taken from eastern North American swamps, but other regions have similar patterns of habitats and animals, though the exact species are different.

Swamp plants:

Trees and shrubs dominate swamps, creating shade and arboreal habitats. Plants that can endure having their roots in water continuously are rare. Roots secure plants to the ground but they also take up nutrients and water. Most plant cells need air (oxygen) to live. Underwater, the oxygen soon runs out, toxic acids build up, root cells die and ultimately the plant dies. Trees,

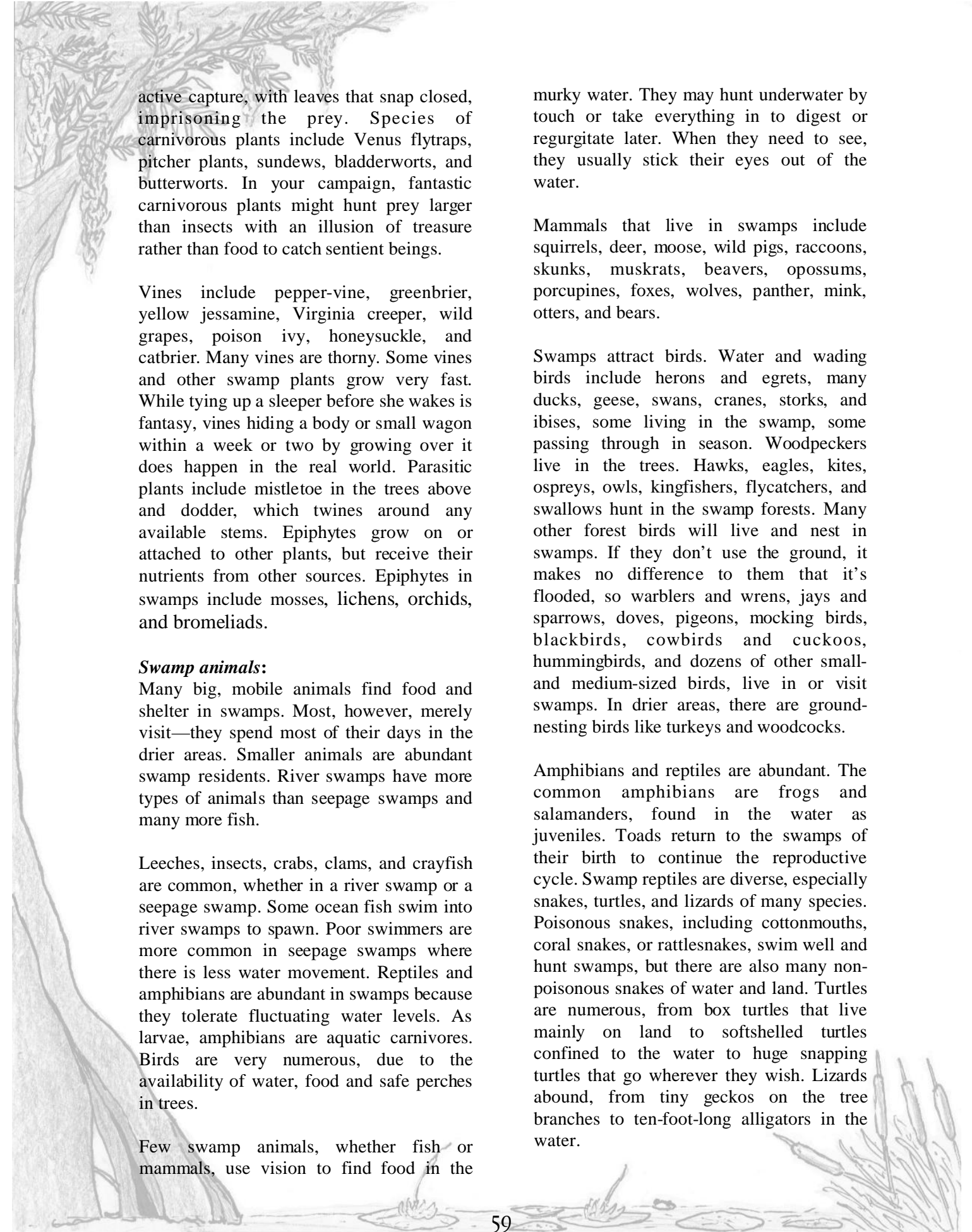
shrubs, and aquatic herbs (for example cattails and reeds) that live in swamps have specialized roots that hold oxygen and release toxins. Among the most complicated adaptations to flooding are the knees of bald cypress trees; these woody knobs project out of the water to collect air for the trees, like snorkels.

While few trees can tolerate growing with their roots underwater, those that can are diverse. They include conifers such as tamarack and bald cypress, hardwoods such as red maple, black ash, swamp oak and tupelo, some hardy palms and shrubs like buttonbush or alder.

A variety of other trees grow in swamps, especially on islands and ridges. They include black gum, water ash, pin oak, willow, and water elm. Shrubs include bays, magnolias, and dogwood.

Where the canopy is dense overhead and the soil flooded there are few plants on the ground, but more open and higher spots have flood-tolerant forest species, like false nettle, stickseed, irises, ground orchids, knotweeds, sedges, reeds, cattails, and swamp grasses. Duckweed is a miniature plant that floats on the surface of standing water in many swamps. Rooted aquatic plants are common and may entangle passing boats. Algae of various kinds grow in the water, often appearing as green slimes.

Insectivorous plants are common (or, more common than they are in any other environment) because the low decomposition means that nutrients are in short supply. Insectivorous plants compensate for the poor nutrition in the soil by capturing animals and digesting them. Insectivorous plants range from passive ones, that capture prey when it touches their sticky leaves; to traps, where the prey falls into a hollow leaf or stem (sometimes lured in with the illusion of food) whose exit is blocked by downward-pointing hairs; to



active capture, with leaves that snap closed, imprisoning the prey. Species of carnivorous plants include Venus flytraps, pitcher plants, sundews, bladderworts, and butterworts. In your campaign, fantastic carnivorous plants might hunt prey larger than insects with an illusion of treasure rather than food to catch sentient beings.

Vines include pepper-vine, greenbrier, yellow jessamine, Virginia creeper, wild grapes, poison ivy, honeysuckle, and catbrier. Many vines are thorny. Some vines and other swamp plants grow very fast. While tying up a sleeper before she wakes is fantasy, vines hiding a body or small wagon within a week or two by growing over it does happen in the real world. Parasitic plants include mistletoe in the trees above and dodder, which twines around any available stems. Epiphytes grow on or attached to other plants, but receive their nutrients from other sources. Epiphytes in swamps include mosses, lichens, orchids, and bromeliads.

Swamp animals:

Many big, mobile animals find food and shelter in swamps. Most, however, merely visit—they spend most of their days in the drier areas. Smaller animals are abundant swamp residents. River swamps have more types of animals than seepage swamps and many more fish.

Leeches, insects, crabs, clams, and crayfish are common, whether in a river swamp or a seepage swamp. Some ocean fish swim into river swamps to spawn. Poor swimmers are more common in seepage swamps where there is less water movement. Reptiles and amphibians are abundant in swamps because they tolerate fluctuating water levels. As larvae, amphibians are aquatic carnivores. Birds are very numerous, due to the availability of water, food and safe perches in trees.

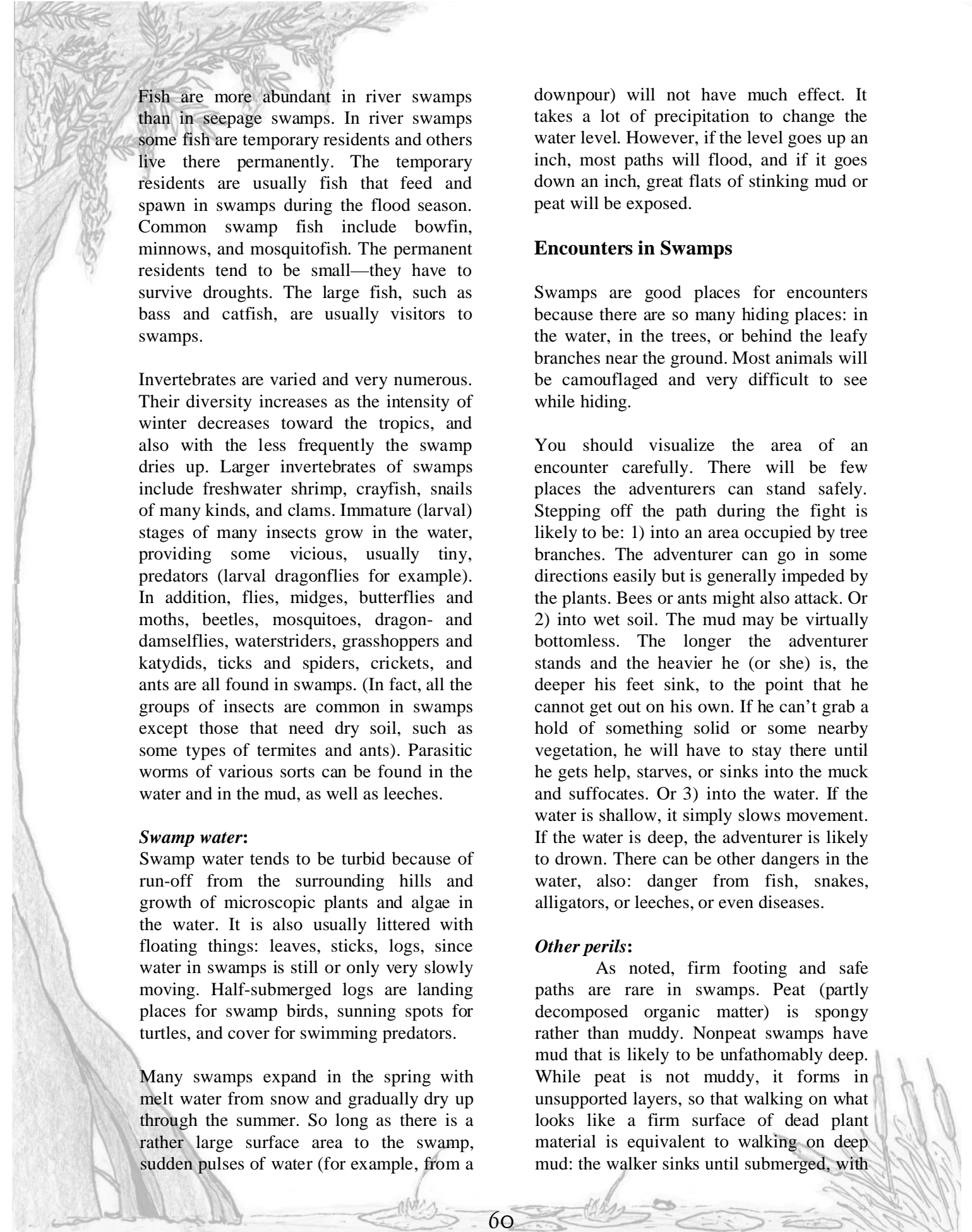
Few swamp animals, whether fish or mammals, use vision to find food in the

murky water. They may hunt underwater by touch or take everything in to digest or regurgitate later. When they need to see, they usually stick their eyes out of the water.

Mammals that live in swamps include squirrels, deer, moose, wild pigs, raccoons, skunks, muskrats, beavers, opossums, porcupines, foxes, wolves, panther, mink, otters, and bears.

Swamps attract birds. Water and wading birds include herons and egrets, many ducks, geese, swans, cranes, storks, and ibises, some living in the swamp, some passing through in season. Woodpeckers live in the trees. Hawks, eagles, kites, ospreys, owls, kingfishers, flycatchers, and swallows hunt in the swamp forests. Many other forest birds will live and nest in swamps. If they don't use the ground, it makes no difference to them that it's flooded, so warblers and wrens, jays and sparrows, doves, pigeons, mocking birds, blackbirds, cowbirds and cuckoos, hummingbirds, and dozens of other small- and medium-sized birds, live in or visit swamps. In drier areas, there are ground-nesting birds like turkeys and woodcocks.

Amphibians and reptiles are abundant. The common amphibians are frogs and salamanders, found in the water as juveniles. Toads return to the swamps of their birth to continue the reproductive cycle. Swamp reptiles are diverse, especially snakes, turtles, and lizards of many species. Poisonous snakes, including cottonmouths, coral snakes, or rattlesnakes, swim well and hunt swamps, but there are also many non-poisonous snakes of water and land. Turtles are numerous, from box turtles that live mainly on land to softshelled turtles confined to the water to huge snapping turtles that go wherever they wish. Lizards abound, from tiny geckos on the tree branches to ten-foot-long alligators in the water.



Fish are more abundant in river swamps than in seepage swamps. In river swamps some fish are temporary residents and others live there permanently. The temporary residents are usually fish that feed and spawn in swamps during the flood season. Common swamp fish include bowfin, minnows, and mosquitofish. The permanent residents tend to be small—they have to survive droughts. The large fish, such as bass and catfish, are usually visitors to swamps.

Invertebrates are varied and very numerous. Their diversity increases as the intensity of winter decreases toward the tropics, and also with the less frequently the swamp dries up. Larger invertebrates of swamps include freshwater shrimp, crayfish, snails of many kinds, and clams. Immature (larval) stages of many insects grow in the water, providing some vicious, usually tiny, predators (larval dragonflies for example). In addition, flies, midges, butterflies and moths, beetles, mosquitoes, dragon- and damselflies, waterstriders, grasshoppers and katydids, ticks and spiders, crickets, and ants are all found in swamps. (In fact, all the groups of insects are common in swamps except those that need dry soil, such as some types of termites and ants). Parasitic worms of various sorts can be found in the water and in the mud, as well as leeches.

Swamp water:

Swamp water tends to be turbid because of run-off from the surrounding hills and growth of microscopic plants and algae in the water. It is also usually littered with floating things: leaves, sticks, logs, since water in swamps is still or only very slowly moving. Half-submerged logs are landing places for swamp birds, sunning spots for turtles, and cover for swimming predators.

Many swamps expand in the spring with melt water from snow and gradually dry up through the summer. So long as there is a rather large surface area to the swamp, sudden pulses of water (for example, from a

downpour) will not have much effect. It takes a lot of precipitation to change the water level. However, if the level goes up an inch, most paths will flood, and if it goes down an inch, great flats of stinking mud or peat will be exposed.

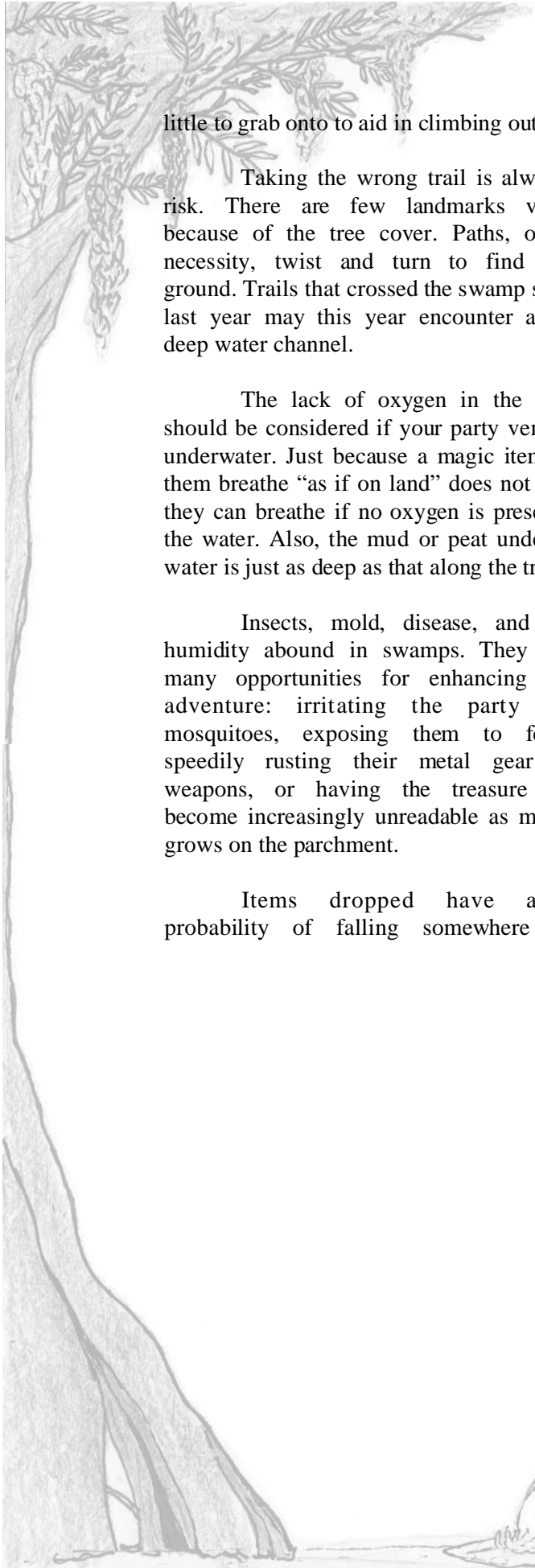
Encounters in Swamps

Swamps are good places for encounters because there are so many hiding places: in the water, in the trees, or behind the leafy branches near the ground. Most animals will be camouflaged and very difficult to see while hiding.

You should visualize the area of an encounter carefully. There will be few places the adventurers can stand safely. Stepping off the path during the fight is likely to be: 1) into an area occupied by tree branches. The adventurer can go in some directions easily but is generally impeded by the plants. Bees or ants might also attack. Or 2) into wet soil. The mud may be virtually bottomless. The longer the adventurer stands and the heavier he (or she) is, the deeper his feet sink, to the point that he cannot get out on his own. If he can't grab a hold of something solid or some nearby vegetation, he will have to stay there until he gets help, starves, or sinks into the muck and suffocates. Or 3) into the water. If the water is shallow, it simply slows movement. If the water is deep, the adventurer is likely to drown. There can be other dangers in the water, also: danger from fish, snakes, alligators, or leeches, or even diseases.

Other perils:

As noted, firm footing and safe paths are rare in swamps. Peat (partly decomposed organic matter) is spongy rather than muddy. Nonpeat swamps have mud that is likely to be unfathomably deep. While peat is not muddy, it forms in unsupported layers, so that walking on what looks like a firm surface of dead plant material is equivalent to walking on deep mud: the walker sinks until submerged, with



little to grab onto to aid in climbing out.

Taking the wrong trail is always a risk. There are few landmarks visible because of the tree cover. Paths, out of necessity, twist and turn to find solid ground. Trails that crossed the swamp safely last year may this year encounter a new deep water channel.

The lack of oxygen in the water should be considered if your party ventures underwater. Just because a magic item lets them breathe “as if on land” does not mean they can breathe if no oxygen is present in the water. Also, the mud or peat under the water is just as deep as that along the trail.

Insects, mold, disease, and high humidity abound in swamps. They offer many opportunities for enhancing your adventure: irritating the party with mosquitoes, exposing them to fevers, speedily rusting their metal gear and weapons, or having the treasure map become increasingly unreadable as mildew grows on the parchment.

Items dropped have a high probability of falling somewhere that

creates a problem, for example into or just beyond deep water or bottomless mud or peat. Arrows that miss are likely to be irretrievable. Your party might have as much fun figuring out how to retrieve the longsword lying just out of reach on soft, deep mud as they had in the fight during which the sword was dropped.

The point is that the very environment is a challenge and things that would be simple in other terrain become problematic in a swamp. The swamp provides limitless opportunities for complications and for interesting roleplaying, both of which can add to the enjoyment of your game.

About the author: K. H. Keeler combines 20 years roleplaying experience as both player and game master with thirty years as a professor of biology (specializing in ecology). Writing for *Tabletop Adventures* has provided an exciting and unexpected opportunity to combine those skills.



APPENDIX: SWAMP KITS—

Here are brief descriptions of particular swamps that you can use to easily provide detail about the swamp in your adventure.

Cool Region River Swamp

The climate is cool in a region of coniferous (pines, spruces, firs) or mixed (conifers and deciduous trees like oak and maple) forest. The swamp is formed where the river flows over level ground. The area floods in the spring and often stays inundated until late summer. Usually, the ground is several feet deep in very slowly moving water.

Common tree species are flood-tolerant conifers and hardwoods: tamarack, hemlock, maple, and ash. Dead trees are common. Alders and small willows grow underneath. The trees and shrubs grow densely and are difficult—in places impossible—to walk through. There is little open ground but where it occurs, smartweeds, sedges, and coarse grasses grow knee-high. The water is dark-colored and in most places covered by a layer of duckweed (tiny plants each with only two leaves, the leaves the size of this “o”), turning it pea-green. The soil is saturated with water and the mud is very deep. Paths from last year were wiped out in this spring’s floods; the party may have to retreat several times to find a useable path.

Mammals: deer, moose, elk, muskrat, beaver, squirrels, foxes, otter, raccoons, opossum, skunk, lemmings, rats and mice, porcupine, mink, wolves, bears, and panthers. Any animals of the surrounding forest may feed or hunt here at times.

Birds: swans, geese, storks, cranes, and ducks breed here. Herons, kingfishers, swallows, owls, hawks and eagles hunt their prey in the swamp. Woodpeckers can be heard knocking on dead trees. There are numerous sparrows, wrens, nuthatches, jays, grackles and blackbirds, ravens and crows, and, in high summer, a few hummingbirds.

Other animals: The river swamp is host to frogs, small turtles, snapping turtles in deep water, and poisonous and non-poisonous snakes, all of which swim well. There are many small and large fish in the water, most good to eat. Crayfish are present but secretive. The insects are dense and persistent: mosquitoes, black flies, dragon- and damselflies, butterflies, house flies, midges...all sorts of insects. And spiders to eat them.

In very dry years the river swamp dries up dramatically, with only a small shallow lake at its center. This area is the only shallow water for miles, attracting hundreds of ducks and geese, but also otters, muskrats, and water snakes. The river continues to move very slowly through the swamp.



Cool Region Seepage Swamp

This is a peatland swamp. The water seeps out of the ground and fills a basin between the hills. Plants died but do not decompose much in the short cool summers and so peat is formed. In some places the peat is more than 20 feet deep. Winters are long and cold. Trees grow scattered through the wet basin wherever they can. The trees benefit from the water, which is in short supply in the surrounding upland forest, but are always at risk of drowning. Most of the trees are flood-tolerant species such as tamarack, red maple, white cedar, and swamp ash, but there are numerous dead trees nevertheless. Water is present year-round and does not fluctuate much. The water has many organic acids, making it look dark and smell odd (like citric acid or vinegar).

Around the swamp are open peat-filled fens (no trees, just peat) and, on higher points, pine and birch forest.

The flora includes many plants considered rare because they do not grow in the drier forest surrounding the swamp: orchids, insect-eating plants, and water lilies, but also rushes, buttercups, and irises. The vines are few and small but nasty, supplied with thorns or toxins (greenbrier, poison ivy).

Mammals: deer, moose, elk, muskrat, beaver, squirrels, foxes, otter, raccoons, opossum, skunk, shrews, lemmings, rats and mice, mink, porcupine, wolves, bears, and panthers. Any animals of the surrounding forest may feed or hunt here occasionally.

Birds: swans, geese, storks, cranes and ducks breed here. Herons, kingfishers, swallows owls, hawks and eagles hunt their prey in the swamp. Woodpeckers can be heard knocking on dead trees. There are numerous sparrows, wrens, nuthatches, jays, grackles and blackbirds, ravens and crows, and, briefly in midsummer, hummingbirds.

Other animals: This swamp has a couple types of frogs, small turtles, perhaps a snapping turtle, and several snakes. There are a few small clams and snails. The only fish in the swamp are tiny minnows. The insects are numerous and can be very dense: mosquitoes, blackflies, midges, houseflies, and horseflies attack visitors. Dragon- and damselflies, butterflies and moths are also numerous. Spiders link the vegetation with webs to catch the abundant prey. Ticks, parasitic worms like tapeworms, and leeches lie in wait of animals (or people) to parasitize.



Cool Region Thicket Swamp

This swamp sits in a low spot where the surrounding hills drain into it. (However, the whole system could be high in the mountains.) The soil is so shallow that trees cannot survive. It has a dense stand of low-growing, very thick evergreen and deciduous shrubs such as alder, willow, and privet. Peat fills the swamp, making it unstable. A few dead trees are the only tall things; the shrubs are no more than fifteen feet high, but form a virtually impenetrable thicket of branches. In the winter you can see into the thicket for some distance because many of the shrubs drop their leaves, but in summer you can get close to a big predator, such as a bear feeding berries to its cub, without knowing it is there. The herbs are few and sparse because the shrubs are so dense: some reeds, cattails, and stickseed fill in where there are gaps in the shrubs. The flooded soils favor insectivorous plants. There are not a lot of vines, but those that occur are obnoxious: covered with thorns like greenbrier or toxic like poison ivy. The peat fills the shallower areas and in between are deeper spots of open water. The water is an odd dark color and smells organic from acids released by the peat. Plants grow at the edge of the swamp but none float on the water.

Mammals: deer, moose, elk, muskrat, beaver, squirrels, foxes, otter, raccoons, opossum, skunk, lemmings, rats and mice, mink, porcupine, wolves, bears, and panthers. Animals of the surrounding lands feed and hunt here.

Birds: geese, storks and ducks nest here. Swans and cranes are found in the largest open areas. Herons and kingfishers live here. Owls, hawks and eagles hunt here but nest in trees elsewhere. There are numerous sparrows, wrens, nuthatches, jays, grackles and blackbirds, and ravens and crows.

Other animals: The swamp has frogs, small turtles and several types of snakes as well as clams and snails. There are a few species of fish but they are small. The insects are numerous and in some seasons very dense: mosquitoes, black flies, midges, house flies, and horseflies. Dragon and damselflies, preying mantises, grasshoppers, butterflies, and moths are also diverse. Spiders of all kinds are common. The abundance of visiting animals means that ticks, parasitic worms like tapeworms, and leeches are frequent.



Warm Region River Swamp

This swamp lies where a big river spreads out into a flat, forested area. Except in severe droughts, this forest is a swamp. The swamp forms a band two to three miles wide that extends from the river into bottomland forests along the creeks that flow into the river and continues for many miles up and down river. This is a warm productive swamp rich in animals and plants. The primary tree species are flood-adapted bald cypress and tupelo, with small willows and shrubs like dogwoods and buttonwood. Where it's a little drier, there are bays, gums, and oaks with hollies and magnolias under them. The herbs that grow where it's not completely flooded are swamp grasses, sedges, stickights, nettles and the like. Many are very coarse and some have sharp edges that will cut unprotected skin. Parasitic plants like mistletoe hang from the trees as well as some epiphytes such as moss and bromeliads. Vines are abundant and numerous—thin ones like greenbrier and morning glories as well as thick ones like trumpetvine and honeysuckles. Most of the trees drop their leaves during the short winter. Some of the shrubs, however, remain green all year, especially bays, hollies, and magnolias. Animals are drawn from the surrounding areas to feed here, but there are swamp specialists as well.

Mammals: deer, wild pigs, muskrat, beaver, squirrels, foxes, otter, raccoons, opossums, skunk, rats and mice, mink, wolves, bears, and panthers.

Birds: water birds, like herons, egrets, ibis, stork, ducks and geese. Songbirds of all sorts, from doves to jays to sparrows, wrens, parakeets, hummingbirds and warblers. Hawks, eagles, osprey, herons, woodpeckers, swallows, kingfishers, and many more. Ground-nesting birds like wild turkeys and woodcocks can be found at the edges of the swamp.

Bird and insect sounds are continuous by day; at night amphibians and alligators call as well. Other animals: Amphibians include salamanders and frogs of many sizes. The reptiles are important animals here, from small and large turtles in the water and on land, to small and large vegetarian and carnivorous lizards, to alligators and snakes of all sizes and types. These are also productive waters, with many fish. Some spots produce more than 1000 pounds of fish per acre each year. The fishes come from downstream to spawn, as well as being year-round residents. The rich fishes attract fish-eating mammals, birds, fish, and people.



Warm Region Seepage Swamp

This swamp formed in an old lake basin that receives ground water from adjacent higher terraces. The depression is several miles long, and more than a mile wide, but not very deep. The nearly constant water supply creates swamp conditions of low decomposition and poor drainage. Bald cypress and tupelo are the most common tree species. A few other trees (willow, dogwood) grow under them. Herbaceous plants such as swamp grasses, sedges and stickseeds grow on the ground as do diverse insectivorous plants. Vines climb into the canopy and loop between trees, both thin vines like greenbrier and morning glory and big woody vines like trumpet vine and honeysuckle. Typical lowland species, such as ash and oaks, dominate the forest around the swamp.

Within the swamp the soil is usually a thick muck (inches to feet deep) over an even thicker clay layer. Because the site is a bowl-shaped, the edges are only inundated for short periods while at the center, water levels remain fairly deep (about 3 feet generally, much deeper in holes) in most years. During droughts, the swamp dries up entirely.

Mammals: deer, wild pigs, muskrat, beaver, squirrels, foxes, otter, raccoons, opossum, skunk, rats and mice, mink, wolves, bears, and panthers.

Birds: water birds and wading birds, like herons, egrets, ibis, storks, geese, and ducks. Many songbirds including doves, jays, sparrows, wrens, parakeets, hummingbirds, and warblers. Hawks, eagles, osprey, herons, woodpeckers, swallows, kingfishers, and many more. Some ground-nesting birds like turkeys and woodcocks live on the edges of the swamp.

Other animals: Amphibians include salamanders and frogs of many sizes. The reptiles are important animals: small and large turtles in the water and on land, and small and large vegetarian and carnivorous lizards, alligators, and snakes of all kinds. The acidic water can sustain few types of fish and they are tiny, but they are still numerous enough to support fish-eating birds and mammals. Those hunters of the swamps eat a lot of invertebrates as well: tadpoles, crayfish, worms, freshwater shrimp, and insect larvae.



Warm Region Shrub Swamp

The shrub swamp has only low shrubby vegetation, no actual trees. It sticks out from the surrounding countryside as a dense green area, a depression in the highlands that catches the runoff from the surrounding hills. Buttonbush, swamp rose, pond pines, and fetterbush create a characteristic plant community. The trapped water does not escape and accumulating plant material turns what was probably once a shallow lake into a shrub swamp. The peat layer is many feet deep, spongy, and a treacherous surface on which to walk. The soil is usually waterlogged and continuously under one to six inches of water. All around the water, the shrubs form a dense, waist-high, almost impenetrable thicket. Insectivorous plants and big, coarse, often-sawtoothed herbs and grasses grow in any open ground. Small, often spiny vines (greenbrier, poison ivy) tangle the already thick shrubs. The shrub swamp teems with wildlife.

Mammals: deer, wild pigs, muskrat, beaver, squirrels, foxes, otter, raccoons, opossum, skunk, rats and mice, mink, wolves, bears, and panthers.

Birds: water birds and wading birds, such as egrets, ibis, storks, geese and ducks are numerous in this swamp. Songbirds including doves, jays, sparrows, wrens, parakeets, hummingbirds and warblers breed or feed here. Their presence attracts hawks, eagles, osprey, herons, swallows, kingfishers and many more. Ground nesting birds like pheasant and woodcocks can be found on the drier areas.

Other animals: Salamanders and frogs are common and diverse. The reptiles are important: small and large turtles, both in the water and on land, vegetarian and carnivorous lizards of all sizes, alligators, and snakes of all kinds. The very acidic water supports few types of fish and they are tiny, but numerous enough to attract fish-loving animals. There are also abundant insects and invertebrates to feed visiting creatures (and people).



Coastal Swamp: Tidal Hardwood Swamp

This type of swamp lies along rivers within 100 miles from the sea, where the upper reaches of the tides flood it regularly, though not daily. The regular input of salt water from the sea and of sediment off the land brought by the river make an inundated habitat that only a few species tolerate. Lunar tides cause regular flooding of up to three feet (locals predict it well) but the rivers dilute it so it is never very salty. Ash and tupelo form a rather open canopy, with maples, gums, and swamp chestnuts below. A great diversity of shrubs grow under them, including winterberry, alder, viburnums, arrow-wood, holly, and swamp rose. Common vines include poison ivy and greenbriers. Herbs are tall and varied—wetland ferns, grasses, sedges, rushes, reeds, mints, nettles, knotweeds, and many others. Where closed forest grades into open marsh wild rice grows abundantly, attracting humans and animals to gather it.

Tidal swamps are full of alternating hummocks and hollows. The raised areas are above the highest tide and nonswamp plants grow abundantly there. In the lower, more flooded areas between the hummocks, swamp plants grow. Dead and sickly trees are visible nearly everywhere. They provide nest sites for birds and food for woodpeckers. Falling branches or dead trees are always a danger. (Shifts in sea level and salinity are thought to be responsible for tree deaths).

Mammals and birds found here are generally those that live in trees or in the water.

Mammals: tree-dwellers such as raccoons and squirrels, mink and opossums. Aquatic mammals include otters, beavers, and muskrats. Deer, wild pigs, foxes, bears, panthers, and the like do not reside in these swamps but will visit to forage for food.

Birds: jays, woodpeckers, sparrows, doves and the like. Owls, eagles, and hawks hunt here and may nest in these trees. There are many aquatic birds such as herons, gulls, geese, and ducks.

Other animals: Few salamanders and frogs are present because of the salinity, but there are snakes, lots of turtles, alligators (in warmer areas), and various lizards. There are not many kinds of insects and other invertebrates that can endure the wet/dry, salty/fresh conditions of this swamp, but they make up for that in numbers. Mosquitoes, biting flies, crickets, katydids, and grasshoppers are all easily seen. Dragonflies and damselflies dart around. Spiders form complex webs. Ticks are not especially common but leeches and aquatic parasitic worms are. Fish are very numerous and diverse: both freshwater and saltwater fish swim these waters, and many fish species come here to spawn, as might eels. The swamp water is generally deep enough for even very large fish, including bowfins, gars, catfish. The abundant fish attract abundant fish-eaters, and big sea animals may also come in with the tides.



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Swamp

01

You notice your footprints begin to fill with filthy water ever so slowly with each step. Every breath you take fills your lungs with thick air that smells of stagnant water. Beads of sweat form on your exposed flesh from the amount of humidity in the area. You can feel the warm liquid trickle down your spine as you walk into what appears to be a clearing in the quagmire.

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Swamp

03

You can see what appears to be a clearing up ahead in this dismal swamp. Tall and thin, red maple trees are in abundance here, causing the soil to appear almost black in color due to the shade. You can hear the wind sweeping through the trees, while small shadows dance around the water-saturated terrain as the branches rustle in the musty-smelling breeze. The cool air hits your sweat-covered flesh, and gives you a chill. You begin to get an uneasy feeling from the clearing ahead. Or is it just the wind? [The uneasy feeling could be a lack of oxygen getting to the brain from exertion. It could be a feeling of something unholy or perhaps a form of ESP hinting at a possible encounter.]

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Swamp

05

As you walk around a huge granite boulder, the size of a small mountain, you behold a colorful sight. A field full of vibrant flowers, of every shape and size, dances to the tune of the breeze. Floral scents fill your nostrils, along with the tickle of pollen. The soft trickling sound of a stream nearby makes this an almost serene place. It appears that you have exited the swamp; however another step proves this wrong, as your foot submerges into the cold and inundated soil. [A rare find indeed, as normally flowers like the ones mentioned above do not abide in swamps. There may, however there may be a special reason behind this, like a possible domicile of a swamp druid or ranger, or perhaps the soil here is just perfect for this type of plant life.]

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Swamp

02

A pungent odor, which smells like urine, rises from the ground's surface. Water saturated-grass and earth seem to be your only foothold. Small and muddy ponds surrounded with various leafy green vegetation makes up most of the landscape here. You can see several large turtles floating adrift on the water; their shells covered in mud and gunk makes them look like little islands. Small thin cypress trees line the edges of the ponds in no real pattern. You can hear frogs bellowing their croaky calls from all around. [The urine smell is caused from a high level of ammonia and nitrates in the water and on the vegetation. This combination can be flammable if levels are high enough]

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Swamp

04

A plump, insolent-looking rat sits on the matted moss and licks its lips suggestively. It waits there, daring anyone to throw a stone, which it might well ignore. The water bubbles around the rat and a burst of foul-smelling gas suddenly fills the air. The rat looks like it is smirking. Long white whiskers stand out against its grey, well-groomed fur. Green eyes gleam in what remains of the daylight and they have a look of intelligence far greater than you had thought any rat should have.

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Swamp

06

The river runs cold and clean, so clear you can see the mossy stones under foot, and catch sight of the tiny yellow fish darting between your feet. As you follow the gentle curve of the water as a stream flows through the swamp, all you can hear is the clicking of claws and teeth and the lapping of water against logs. A family of russet-furred beavers works busily constructing a dam at the headwater. A pair of young beavers float on their backs across the water, paddling past you, unconcerned.

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Stepping out of the tree line, you emerge into a cackling, pink universe. The sunken glade is home to hundreds of flamingos; the air is filled with their low caws, and it stinks of shrimp and rotting plants. As you step into the glade, the nearest birds take notice and then a second later, take wing. The air erupts into a storm of pink feathers and panicked calls as the creatures climb past the tree line.

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A dead body floats face down in the stagnant water, the flesh so bloated that its clothes are drum tight around the swollen limbs. Small dark fish dart in to peck at the tattered flesh at the end of the unfortunate creature's nose. From the poor dress, this man was a farmer. A rotting wooden shovel floats on the water's surface, near his sausage-like hands. An old clay cask floats nearby; a lizard rests on its upturned lip. [The farmer died here of a snakebite after wandering drunkenly into the swamp. There are about a dozen copper coins in one of his slime-coated pockets, but getting them would be quite a chore. The corpse is so rotted that it will explode into a mass of putrid flesh and maggot-filled guts if disturbed. A lacquered wooden bracelet, (carved with the names of his wife and children), adorns one bloated wrist; it was the fellow's most prized possession.]

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Gnarled, pungent vines grow out of deep cracks in the head of an ancient statue. Taller than a grown man, it lies upside down in the oily muck, only the base of its nose and its snarling lips visible above the scum of dead leaves and still water. The statue must have once been painted striking greens and yellows and reds, but age has reduced its brilliant colors to pastels. The roots of a twisted river oak grow in thick tangles around the severed head. Some distance away lies an enormous hand, missing half its fingers, which is now home to a nest of water moccasins. Of the rest of the forgotten statue, there is no sign.

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The swamp bubbles and spits, methane deposits just under the water exploding rhythmically. The air is so humid and close that it's hard to breathe; sweat beads on your forehead, dripping onto your armor with tiny musical notes. Across the bog a crocodile watches impassively, only its yellow eyes visible above the waterline.

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The gentle, irregular croaking of frogs suddenly crescendos into a virtual roar. It sounds as if all the nearby frogs are trying to outdo each other for the loudest croak. Just under this noise, you can hear a rapid series of "plops," as if hundreds of frogs have chased one another into the water. Then as suddenly as the noise began, it drops back to a croak or two.

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Ducks quack and splash among a stand of cattail willows. One flips under the water quickly, and erupts back out of the brackish liquid with a flapping trout in its beak. The green mallard swallows the trout in two big gulps, and, one by one, the other members of the flock follow the bird's lead.

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Swamp

13

There is a cavern above the level of the murky water, formed from the gnarled roots of a massive willow so enormous that its peak vanishes above the canopy. [If the party enters:] Passing through the root cavern, the air is cool and dark, but so humid it is almost stifling. White slicks of bat guano float like oil-slicks on the water. Above you, the gentle rustle of leather wings announces the presence of the sleeping bats that have made the hanging vines of the root cavern their home.

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Swamp

15

Your eyes water as you pass under some vines dangling from a tree branch, each heavily laden with onion-like fruit. Flies buzz around the milk white, pungent fruit, eating their fill. Fallen pieces, mushy yellow with age and rot drift gently in the water's molasses-slow current.

Bits of the Wilderness: Into the Swamp ©2005 Tabletop Adventures, LLC

Swamp

17

Blasted black stumps protrude from the water, the only trace of the logging camp that stood here decades ago, before the river was dammed and the forest flooded. As far as the eye can see, the swamp is flat, only stumps protruding over the placid water's surface. Tiny green snakes dart through the water, slipping out of sight under tangles of choked weeds and roots. Herons swoop down to catch the garter snakes, each pulling back towards the sky with a wriggling serpent in its beak.

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Swamp

14

Your step causes a sucking sound from the bottom of your boots as they release from the muck. Just then you spy an unusually large tree ahead of you. It is vacant of all its leaves, and its branches reach out like arms in your direction. The dark gray lines that run vertically through its pasty white trunk seem somehow to form a face. A large knot protruding from the center of the tree resembles a nose, while a hollowed opening under the knot reminds you of a mouth. A slowly pulsating, yellowish light escapes this hole, reminiscent of a firefly in the distance. [The light may be foxfire, from phosphorescent moss. The pulsating appearance could be caused by insects, or the light could show an opening to the land of Faery, or be the glow from a magical weapon. Another idea is to use the light as a lure for a hidden predator.]

Bits of the Wilderness: Into the Swamp ©2005 Tabletop Adventures, LLC

Swamp

16

A wagon's muck-encrusted wheel spins slowly in the breeze. The wagon lies upended in the swamp mud, mushrooms growing from shattered wine casks. The red paint that once adorned the wagon has flaked away into a blotchy maroon rash. A horse's skeleton, its legs shattered, lies half-buried in the swamp and a frog stares at you from its perch on the cracked and yellowed skull.

Bits of the Wilderness: Into the Swamp ©2005 Tabletop Adventures, LLC

Swamp

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The air is very damp. The humidity is a constant thing, making you uncomfortably warm if you do any activity at all. Only when you pass through a gap in the trees in bright sunlight does the humidity lessen a little. The consequences of the moisture are easily seen: great dangling plants, like a tangle of hair, hang from the trees, getting sustenance from the air not the ground. They do not seem to have leaves, but all their thin stems are green. Other plants, mosslike, grow thickly over branches and tree trunks. Big leaves near the ground are also burdened with mosses. A bare rock is rarely seen; either plants have grown across it or it has a thin layer of lichens. Your bedding at night is soggy with the dampness and your skin never really feels dry.

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[Have characters make a perception or spotting check. Pick one or more who are successful and read them this:] **As you look out over the swamp you see the back of something huge and scaly break the water's surface and then dive deep. It was bigger than any relative of a lizard that you have ever seen, but it was impossible to tell what it may have been from the brief glance that you had. All that you can be sure of is that there is something huge beneath the waters of this swamp.**

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Great pools of water stretch away from you on both sides of the reinforced trail. Someone has worked hard to maintain this path against the forces of nature; it has wood and stone supporting the sides and a lot of dirt has been pounded down in the center. Nevertheless, in places it is soggy and your [your horses'] feet sink rather alarmingly into soft muck. On either side the water is greenish, with algae or other small plants covering the surface. Huge logs float in the water with only one end visible. At intervals there are hummocks, and several trees seem to huddle together on the slightly higher ground.

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A simple wooden [bamboo] blow pipe lies half buried in the mud. A handful of broken darts, so old their fletching has rotted away, can be found beside the cracked pipe. A brown and gold millipede has made a little nest inside the pipe and scurries away when it is disturbed.

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The trail squishes underfoot and the big green leaves of nearby trees dump water down your neck if you bump them. The ground is hidden below leaves that grow waist-high on a man, with lines down their length as if they had been folded like a fan. Strange white flowers stick up from the base where the leaves meet: a long thin white "finger" protruding from a white cup. If you look closely, the "finger" is covered by miniature flowers, which smell rather foul and attract a swarm of tiny flies that take off in a cloud of black wings if disturbed. From the dead stalks of these plants you can see that the spike of flowers becomes a spike of tiny seeds and then they fall off in all directions.

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Big frogs leap into the water with noisy splashes as you approach. Sometimes you can see them; they're bigger than your hand and sleekly green with dark splotches. Most of the time, though, you simply hear or see some motion, and then there is a splash and you can see rings enlarging in the murky green water. Floating dead leaves bob up and down in response to the disturbance. Perhaps it is these frogs that make the deep booming "burr-aahp" sounds that surround you in the night.

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The ground is soggy and when your [your horses'] feet disturb it, it releases the sour reed of rotting vegetation. The rotting smell is ever present, interrupted only by areas of worse smells: when you enter an area where wild boars have turned over the soil releasing its stench, or when you pass the rotting carcass of a deer. The shrubs and trees along the path have big dark leaves, many laden with moss. The humidity is very high: anything that gets wet is very difficult to dry. Thus, you can also smell wet leather, damp hair and soggy fur. The air is warm but it is dim here under the trees. Only occasionally does a beam of sunlight penetrate the thick canopy, a blinding brightness in contrast to the general semi-darkness. Insects and dust motes float in the bright sunbeam. After you pass it, the dimness seems oppressive.

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A big gray bird strides through the water. It has a long thin neck and a longer narrow bill. With each step it raises one leg high out of the water and steps neatly down again without a splash. It is walking near the far edge of the open water, about twenty yards away, where the water seems to be just less than knee high on the bird. Its ashy gray head is held alert, cocked slightly to the side, watching the dark water. It paces silently past without seeming to notice you.

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The normally waist-deep water splashes hard against your face. Wiping the slime from your eyes, you catch sight of a small brown and gold blur dashing across the stagnant water. The frilled lizard runs upright, its huge, flat feet making rapid sucking sounds as it dashes across the water.

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A tree-fall has made an opening in the canopy! You walk [ride] for a few moments through bright mid-morning [afternoon] sunlight. The air is warm but less humid. Overhead is blue sky and a few fluffy white clouds. Small bright birds flit among the big-leafed plants growing in the lighted gap. Big showy flowers can be seen emerging from knee-high leaves: one a spike of creamy white tubes longer than your hand, another a large cluster of two-toned yellow and orange flowers, attended by a constantly changing flutter of blue, white and yellow butterflies.

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The land beside the road looks like an ordinary forest. Big trees, their trunks wider than you can reach around, support a high leafy canopy a hundred feet above you. Lesser trees of the same kind can be seen as well. There are shorter trees and shrubs among under the towering canopy, some with clusters and spikes of white or yellow flowers. Below them, the ground is hidden under coarse grasses and big-leafed plants. [None of this reveals that the ground is so soft that it is impassable. Just off the trail, a stick would sink down as far as you would care to push it without finding a secure bottom.]

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A big tree has fallen over. Its base is so huge that, although now fallen and lying on its side, it towers over your heads. The base is covered with thick mud, now caked and dry from exposure to the air. A dozen plants are growing on the top of the broken roots and a vine tangles it all together. The great tree stretches along the path for yards and then the path turns slightly but the tree goes on straight, out into the swamp and then down, so that most of it is covered by pea-green turbid water. Both thick and thin branches still stick out above the water, the leaves on them mostly gone, the ones remaining brown, dry and twisted. Small branches and dead leaves have caught in the fallen canopy and at least one vine is growing there.

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A fallen tree lies across the trail. Its trunk, lying on its side, is higher than a tall man. The lower end of the tree lies out in the swamp: the broken roots and base are surrounded by opaque green water. The other end extends across bushes and shrubs and then out over muddy swampland, thinly occupied by grasses and young trees. The leafy branches of the great tree are still green. Other travelers have apparently climbed over the tree trunk: you can see scuffmarks and scrapes on the dense red-gray bark. But the easiest way [the only way for horses] is a detour on soft mucky ground almost thirty feet along the trunk, to a spot where the fallen tree lies low enough that men [leading horses] can pick their way across without much trouble.

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The mosquitoes are not dense but they are persistent. When you are moving, you do not generally notice them, but if you stop, one soon lands. They are tall for mosquitos, with long legs and an impressively long proboscis to stab into their prey. Their bodies are gray, but the wings have an iridescent blue sheen. And they are quick: a casual slap misses. Even waiting for one, they are hard to hit, but they provide ample opportunity. Just a moment of stillness and you have one on your sleeve, or an exposed wrist, or on your face, In a few minutes there are a dozen of them, hovering and then landing, looking for a spot to jab you. Their bite is painful and untreated, leaves an itchy welt. [Two or more layers of clothing effectively deter them, but keep the wearer too warm.]

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Swamp

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The trail takes you through a section of the swamp where the water level is down. There is no obvious explanation: presumably somewhere the water was diverted from this area. Whatever the cause, here, as you ride [walk] along the twisting path between various point of high ground, beside you the water had left behind a stinking green mess. Big logs and a few dead fish can be seen, draped in damp green gunk. Frogs hop out into the mess as you pass, making subdued plunks and remaining quite visible a few feet out. The stench of it is strong: plants and fish and other things are rotting there.

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Swamp

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The path widens to a slightly higher area that would make a good campsite. Trampling, horse droppings and charcoal show that travelers frequently stop here. Small trash litters the ground: bits of wood, fruit rinds, egg shells. Everything is trampled flat. Weeds with thick leaves grow on battered stems, their nondescript flowers in damaged spikes. There is no firewood; everything that could be cut has been. Two great trees rising high out of the muddy swampland shade the area but neither tree has any branches within reach. Shrubs have been gathered so those that remain are all several very risky steps out into the swamp. The only stand of shrubs remaining screens a fallen log, the obvious campsite privy. Ahead or back along the trail, though, there is plenty of wood that can be reached within about 100 yards.

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Swamp

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For a bit, you tromp [ride] through shallow muck, the plants around you growing on hummocks. The hummock tops, are dry and firm. Between hummocks there is shallow, muddy green water. The ground under the water is sometimes solid, but often your feet [horses' hooves] slip down and down. Stepping from the top of one hummock to the top of the next is not easy: they are rounded and if you step on the edge it collapses and your [horse's] foot slides downward. The grasses on the hummocks are very coarse, with fine teeth on the leaf edges which tear at you as you pass. Shrubs also grow on the hummocks, with long sharp thorns. The twigs on the shrubs poke at you, not sharp as the thorns but uncomfortable nonetheless.

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Swamp

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With a jump, you realize that the curiously-shaped white stone bobbing just beneath the surface of the water is in fact an elongated skull. The skin has withered away and a few tendons have been exposed, as has the bone. The jaw bone is particularly prominent, much more so than any other skull you have seen in a life of adventuring. A few wisps of hair cling to its pate. A coin appears to have been pushed into its empty mouth. [The coin is very old and unidentifiable, while the skull has in fact been mummified by the effects produced by the swamp. Extensive digging would ultimately reveal the rest of the skeleton but would also cause a significant cave-in of the submerged branches and vegetable matter on which the adventurers walk.]

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Swamp

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A flock of yellow and white birds can be seen and heard overhead [or: when you pause for lunch/a break]. Fifty or more, squawking and fluttering are feeding in a lofty tree whose canopy is bright with tiny orange-colored fruit. The tree is so tall that it is difficult to make out details, but you sit in a steady rain of dropped fruit. They are the size of a fingertip and bitter but flavorful. The birds call raucously and jump around in the leafy branches. With large bills, they pull off fruits and eat them eagerly. Many drop. Also frequently falling from the high canopy are small white globs of bird droppings. Birds squawk and displace each other in a flutter of wings, making continual noise and motion. An occasional yellow feather drifts down to lie on the ground among squashed orange fruit and white splatters.

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Beside you, grasses with long thin leaves grow in little hillocks. The gray-green grasses form clumps, filling and building on tiny higher, more secure spots in the sodden land. Between areas stabilized by the grasses, the ground is muddy and covered with tiny, fast-growing plants that do nothing to stabilize it. The mud is a slimy olive green with occasional odd holes where a bubble emerged. When touched, it sticks to anything. It has a foul smell of rotting plants and it stains anything light-colored that it contacts. When it dries, it forms a clay-like consistency that is hard to scrape [out of horses hooves or] off boots.

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[Pick one character and read:] **You hear a quiet but distinct cracking sound from the stand of grass and leaves beneath your left foot.** [When the character lifts his or her foot:] **When you lift your foot, you find it covered with light-colored goo. Strands of the goo dangle from your foot, and some of those strands lead to shards of a light, slightly speckled shell.** [Some adventurer has stepped on a large bird or reptile egg, or a cluster of small eggs. If desired, the GM could give the party a very slim chance to spot the nest before stepping in it. If they try to reconstruct the size of the eggs, the GM will need to determine the species that laid the eggs (possibly changing the eggshell color if necessary), and provide the characters with corresponding information. This event could lead to trouble if the mother is an angry carnivore.]

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Coming through a dense copse of moss-covered trees, you find yourselves surrounded by scattered stone ruins. The air smells of sun-baked rock, and the twittering of birds comes from all sides. The stones themselves are granite, roughly carved into blocks and columns. A series of blocks arranged in a large square suggests that there was once a stone building here. Although the ground may at one time have been firm enough to support a structure, now your every footstep brings water squelching up around the soles of your boots. Time and weather have worn away any adornments that were present on the ruins, and scavengers – humanoid or otherwise – have long since made off with anything of value. Now the only inhabitants of the area are birds, which have made nests in the crooks of old walls and atop the columns.

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Ahead of you, a large branch overhangs your route, just barely higher than your heads. A large brown snake is twisted around the branch and seems to be sunning itself. As you move forward, the snake lifts its head and tastes the air with its tongue. The closer you draw, the more agitated it becomes, writhing on its branch. Just before you pass under the branch, the snake makes a mighty lurch and in a startling move, throws itself off the branch and directly into your path [into your boat]. The snake is almost as startled as you are at the proximity, but recovers quickly and slithers off into the brush [the water]. [Brown water snakes often bask in trees. If one is disturbed it drops to the water and tries to hide under the surface. If its timing is bad, it may fall into the boat of the people it was trying to avoid.]

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You approach a clearing; as you peer into the open area, you observe the ground bubbling as if it were water boiling in a pot on a hearth. A dirty, fishy smell is evident here and your feet sink slowly in the inundated earth. Over the sound of the bubbling ground you can hear a creaking sound, which seems to come from outside of the clearing, across from you.

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Huge trees stand in the dark water. Vast trunks rise up and up, spreading out far overhead. The trunks are smooth and brown with deep furrows. Any branches are far above, so you only guess that the delicate leaves on the ground fell from these swamp giants. They rise up directly out of the water, with no indication of an island supporting them. The murky water is still and featureless except for the trunks of these great trees, a few broken stumps and brown lumps. When you can investigate the brown lumps, you see that they are smooth pieces of wood, broad as a fighter's thigh. They remind you of the little volcanic mountains that gradually build into large islands, but of course trees do not grow like that. Nevertheless, they are eerily similar to the great swamp trees.

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You ride [walk] into an area with innumerable small trees growing out of the muddy ground beside the trail. Their thin trunks fill the area so there is little space between them. Someone has cut them so that the trail is passable. A few feet above your heads the leaves form a solid canopy that blocks the view in all directions. The leaves of the little trees extend over the trail only sometimes so you can see that a taller canopy of great swamp trees grows many feet above this dwarf jungle, but it certainly hems you in. There's a distinct and not unpleasant odor to these trees that for a while masks the stench of the rest of the swamp.

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The trail is flooded. The water seems shallow although it is too turbid to see the ground through it. Your feet stir it up and turn the thick gray-green mud into watery slush. It is slippery and sticky at the same time. In places your foot sinks deeply and you have to stop to pull it out. The deep mud grabs your foot, requiring a hard jerk before the mud lets go with a *shloop*. The smell is a gag-inducing blast of rotten eggs.

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A tall tree leans from a base close to the trail over the soggy, partly flooded ground. A small animal dashes up the shaggy gray trunk as you near, chattering noisily. You get a fleeting impression of gray fur, a round face and a bushy tail. It disturbs the broad triangular emerald-green leaves of a huge vine that twists around the tree trunk. The leaves continue to flutter after the animal has moved past them, higher up the trunk. It disappears, first under the vine and then into the tree's canopy. Its noise is audible long after you can no longer see it or even guess its actual position, warning all of your presence.

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The trail is very level, passing a hands-breadth above the water. The water laps quietly at its shores, little ripples passing out into the green expanse. It would be very easy walking [riding] except for two things: fallen logs and wet spots. Tree branches often lie in the path. Most can be walked [ridden] through with little effort, but others need to be moved. Occasionally they are so big that they are impassible without cutting or breaking many branches. In wet spots, the water is over or under the path. The first is far preferable: you splash through noisome green water for a few steps, and then up onto firmer soil. In the latter case, however, the path sinks beneath your [your horses'] feet, covering them with mud, but also slowly sinking so that you are not sure you could get out of there if you were not moving steadily forward.

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The atmosphere is very moist, and the humidity makes all your possessions damp. It also allows mosses to grow over all the fallen logs and on horizontal branches. Most of the moss is also damp to touch. There are plants growing on many of the relatively level branches, little rosettes of thick leaves which form a small cup in the center. They seem to be rooted only in the moss, or perhaps nothing at all. [If the adventurers investigate these plants they will discover that the cup-like center holds water, often with larval insects wriggling in it.] Plants dangle from other branches, thin threadlike stems that form a chaotic net and grow out so that they drip from the tree branches like a shawl on an elderly aunt. [These plants are epiphytes (air plants), which take water out of the air to grow.]

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The regular splashing of the water is broken by a sudden explosion of noise and a flurry of flying, brownish feathers. A duck bursts across the route ahead and veers wildly into the sky. Its quacks echo across the swamp and attract the attentions of rats and other small creatures, which dive into the water with a succession of splashes. [A mother duck has left her nest undefended to try to distract the adventurers. Anyone who looks carefully at the place where the duck emerged should be able to find the nest and some tasty duck eggs inside.]

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The air thickens and darkens as the weather changes and the temperature drops. It is difficult to tell whether it is raining or not because of the intense humidity in the air. It makes everything from clothes to weapons to torches feels slimy and unclean. An owl hoots disconsolately somewhere in the grey, sunless landscape and, with no clear landmarks to be seen, it is almost impossible to be sure which direction is which.

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A huge fallen log looms ahead, rising out of the ferns and thick tree trunks. Twisted roots—some of which are now rotted—could provide a means to climb atop the log. As you get closer you can see that someone, or maybe something, has pushed many logs together end to end, forming a slippery, moss-covered footpath through the swamp.

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The water is a little cleaner and faster moving here. The tree trunks are covered with a thick, fibrous, almost colorless kind of plant that you have seen only in a very wispy form elsewhere. In some places, it looks almost as if someone has draped heaps of the stuff over the lower branches. Here and there, exotic purple blooms peep forth from the pallid mass. [This is a form of sphagnum moss, which can be a good medium for growing orchids.]

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A rock the size of a horse lies half-beached in the water, as if it has pushed the branches and twigs out of the way – or had been hurled there by some titanic force. The rock is covered with moss of at least two kinds. One is furry and blue and the other black and sleek. Looking at the rock, from a certain angle, the mosses together seem to spell out the word ‘Intolerable’ in the Common script.

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A black beetle the size of a hand span buzzes slowly but surely across the fetid water. On the surface, water boatmen – the flat-bodied insects that skip across the top of the water on their many feet – leave no indication of where they tread. From time to time, the beetle darts suddenly and violently towards the water and seizes one of the many water boatmen as they dart across the oily flows. Then the buzzer drones off into the distance.

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Seven white fish float belly up on the water. This patch of water is brackish and scarcely moves. The fish are scattered around an area about as long as the span of a tall man’s arms. Their eyes are glassy and unseeing and their mouths move reflexively in unison in the slow current. Tiny red worms are wriggling among the gills and eyes of one of the fish. [These fish have sickened and died and are not good to eat, although they would not cause serious health problems.]

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Nearby you see a willow tree, a dark hole in the trunk just above the water shows it's largely hollow within. Like all the other willow trees in this part of the swamp, its long branches hang down into the water as if they are seeking to drink the water. Its few stringy leaves lie against the branches, as if lacking the energy to stand up on their own. The fingers of the tree's branches rustle in the water and the tree itself groans as the water and the dank wind pass through the hollow trunk. At any moment, it looks like it could collapse.

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You notice a basket of woven reeds lying nearby. Its edge is broken and it is filled with dead leaves and other detritus. As you watch, the contents rustle as if something unseen was stirring them. Suddenly five bright green snakes slither out of the leaves, they drop to the water, making quiet splashes, and swim out of sight.

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All around you are golden rushes and parched, straw-colored grass, rising out of the swamp to make it look like a water-logged prairie. Dragonflies hover and swoop around you. Some are tiny - mere slivers of silver sparkling in the light. Others are almost a foot long, colored bright red or vibrant black and gold with wings that reflect the sun.

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Ahead the landscape flows like a green, velvet carpet of leaves and algae. Your footsteps make ripples in the surface of the swamp water, and it eddies out from you to slap lightly upon the wide, black bases of the trees that rise out of the gloom. Hoary beards of moss drip from the boughs of the trees, filtering the sunlight and casting an amber glow on the water through which you wade.

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The surface of the water here is choked with millions of tiny, bright green, leafy plants. Their hardy stems are rooted in the muck under your feet and make passage a little more difficult than it has been. Every now and then you see much larger versions of these plants: great, bowl-shaped leaves where rainwater has gathered.

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A half-wrecked canoe lies across the path. It appears to have been carved from a single log. The canoe is approximately ten paces in length and when sound might have carried three or four people. There is a notch amidships where a mast might have been fitted and slots for oars. However, mast and oars are nowhere to be seen. Some of the wooden hull is rotten but there are sections that could be salvaged. [GM Note: The wood is quite light in weight and there is enough to make a small raft.]

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A long-legged bird with a brown neck and black wings wades through the water. With its head cocked at an angle towards the water, the bird seems to be inspecting the swamp for food possibly insects. Slowly, the bird bends its neck so that its head is dipped into the water. There is a momentary pause and then a slow, low booming sound fills the air: **Boom. Boom. Boom.** [GM Note: This is a bittern, specifically the Great or European Bittern which is famous for making this noise.]

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A small patch of the water just to the side of the path is bubbling gently. Wisps of steam rise into the air, as if they were the steam from a pot of morning oat porridge. Smaller bubbles are rising to the surface of the water slowly but in a constant stream. These small bubbles do not burst, but a particularly large one does rise to the surface and then lazily breaks apart as a great stench of rotting eggs fills the air. [GM Note: the decay of some vegetable matter naturally produces hydrogen sulfide, which is what gives the rotten eggs smell.]

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Many animals avoid you by going into the water. Turtles, mostly a handspan across but sometimes larger or smaller, slide into the water with barely a splash. You cannot get close to them on land, but you can see them scrunched together on a log a dozen yards out in the swamp. They bask in a strange posture in the occasional beam of sunlight, their heads and legs all sticking stiffly out from the shell. Once, you spot a soft-shelled turtle swimming in the water near to shore, its upturned nose just barely breaking the surface, flattened shell and big webbed feet moving with ease through the water. You have been warned about the big snapping turtles: the size of a saddle, their bite can cut off a hand with a single snap.

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You realize that the birds have been silent for a few minutes. Even the insects have stopped squeaking and creaking. Suddenly there is a distant rustle of leaves and the water ripples and breaks across the fallen branches and twigs. The birds fly into the air in a swift rush. The ground shakes for several seconds; horses shy and small items rattle. Then the moment has passed, and you find that you have been holding your breath. [GM Note: It is easier to detect minor earthquakes like this in otherwise silent and still areas. Animals are said to behave strangely in their presence. Small animals might seem to attack PCs as they flee wildly.]

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The mist covers the waters of the swamp, concealing its secrets and dangers. Wisps of vapor reach like fingers through the leaves of the undergrowth and around the trees. The branches of willows and other trees droop like canopies down to the water's surface and the naked roots snake through the mud and the waters. There is a thickness to the air and it feels damp upon your skin. The fabric of your clothing clings to you uncomfortably. The smell of decaying foliage is mixed with a sweetness that may come from the odd flowers that dot the landscape.

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The pools lie still in the dimness of the swamp. Great logs can be seen in the water, half submerged. On the nearest log, a plant with broad dark green leaves at the end of thin stalks grows amid thick mosses. A dozen turtles lie along the top of of the log, waiting for a beam of sunlight, perhaps. The trunk of the log is red-brown and looks saturated with water. In the water at the base of the log, your eye is drawn to an irregularity in the green water. It is an eye, no two of them. There is an alligator there, longer than a horse. Only its eyes are out of the water. It glides by slowly, silently, on the far side of the fallen tree, its passage raising barely a ripple.

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An improbably colored shape seems to hang in the crook of a tree's branches several dozen yards ahead. [As the party nears that tree:] Strangely enough, the shape appears to be a small humanoid dressed in a bright red and blue cloak. [Upon closer inspection:] The "creature" turns out to be a crude doll wearing a bright red and blue dress. A smiling face and eyes adorn the doll's head, under a tangle of brown yarn that serves for its hair. The colors are still relatively bright, though it looks a little weatherworn. It must not have been here very long.

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Big leaves extend over the ground. Some are green with folds, while others are thicker and mottled in green and gray-green. Some are growing and look like tightly rolled sheets of green paper. Others are wide open with long curved edges. The largest leaves are huge, the size of a kite shield. Some have a small narrow stem at the base, that within a handspan expand to a broad blade. On other plants, the leaves seem covered with warts. Flowers stick up on stalks, some green, some white tubes, some tiny with bright orange petals. The tree branches are mostly high above, but vines dangle down to just above your heads. Some thin ones have finely divided leaves and yellow pea flowers. Others are cables the size of your wrists, beginning somewhere overhead, drooping down and going back up to unknown heights.

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About fifty yards to your left [or right] you notice a small flurry in the undergrowth. Suddenly, the day [or night] is rent by a screech that sounds like it came from a wild cat, and the air is filled with a foul stench. Swaying fronds of grass trace the path of the screeching animal as it bounds into the distance, while more gentle vibrations suggest that a smaller creature is heading your direction. [It's a frightened skunk, of course, that was just threatened by some cougar-like creature.]

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Mosquitoes sting your neck and exposed skin as you walk through the damp, warm swamp. You stop for a moment to arrange your gear and notice that you can hear a low humming sound. At first you're not sure what it is, but as you look around in the low light of this thickly forested swampland you notice just how many mosquitoes are swarming about, and you realize that the hum is coming from the thousands of wings beating all around you.

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Snails are common in this swamp; you've seen them crawling on logs, leaves and branches in various sizes and colors. Some are the size of a pea, others as long as your finger. They vary in color, from dull gray to red with broad yellow stripes. They leave behind thick trails of slime as they move slowly along. Most of the birds do not seem interested in the snails, but occasionally you see a log where numerous snails have been cracked open. Shells have been broken apart, apparently struck against a stone that is wedged onto the log. Large broken pieces of shell litter the ground, the snails that once inhabited them having been neatly removed. Once you see a bird fly away from one of these broken-shell areas as you approach. It is the size of a thrush, drab green with a strong beak.

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The trail crosses the swamp on a couple of fallen logs that have been propped up to make a poorly constructed bridge. As you cross, the movement causes water to splash and the logs to jump. The logs are still firm but it is clear that they are rapidly rotting: parts are soggy and flatten and squash under your feet. The ends, although on firmer ground, have been stamped down deep into the mud and are slippery. Branches from the logs were roughly hacked off and tossed into the water beside the far end of the bridge. The leaves have long since died but vines grew up over them so they form a peculiar green shrub. A large brownish frog sits on the log ahead of you, and leaps off as you approach. There's a sudden movement and an alligator, lying under the vine-draped dead branches, swallows it whole.

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Swamp

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Wood that's dry enough to catch alight is hard to come by in the swamp – the damp air and plentiful groundwater tend to keep fires from spreading, if they start at all. This makes your surroundings all the more of a surprise, as this was clearly the site of a major blaze in the not-too-distant past.

Most of the trees around you are dead, or slowly dying, and many of them are little more than charred, black stumps. Underneath the inescapable odor of mold and damp, you can pick up the acrid scent of the fire. The ground under your feet has been scorched bare, and from the scattered green shoots and tiny patches of moss, it has only recently begun to recover. Perhaps most unsettling is the complete absence of insects, in fact, this part of the swamp is unusually quiet.

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Swamp

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As you walk along the edge of a series of hillocks and bush-covered hummocks, you see one that is quite bare on top. It looks like a bald-headed man, since thick green shrubs circle the whole area but the top is open and gravelly. It must be a tiny island, sticking up out of the swamp, but why it is not covered with plants like all the other little hillocks in this area is not apparent. Reaching the nearest point—more than three paces of murky water lies between the trail and the little island—you see that the top is covered with a fine layer of stones that catch the passing sunlight like tiny crystals, reflecting and shining.

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Swamp

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The air here is thick and heavy, and it seems every surface—the moist ground, trees, rotting logs and stumps alike—is covered in fungi. There are large, flat mushrooms sprouting from the sides of the trees like tiny tables, clusters of brightly-colored mushrooms with slender stalks that cover wide swaths of ground, and bulbous, knobby growths smothering the pieces of rotten wood that anchor them. Someone—or something—else has been this way fairly recently, as a number of mushrooms that once grew on the trees have been torn off, and lie in chunks on the damp ground.

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Swamp

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The mud has been exposed by some drop of the water level. Now three feet of open gray mud extend on either side of you. It has a smell you cannot avoid: rotting plants mix with the sulfur smell of rotten eggs. The heat and humidity are noticeably higher as you walk [ride] into this area. The bright sun beats down on the flats of stinking mud. The trees overhead let sunlight through in long yellow beams that dapple the dim foliage under the stately trees. Dust and small insects dance in the sunbeams but what dominates the view is a cloud of bright butterflies. They flutter an swirl in the light over the mudflats. Some are small and yellow on both wings. Others seem gray but when they move their wings the other side is iridescent blue. Others have great eyespots of white surrounded by orange. They alight on the mud, possibly feeding.

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Swamp

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The area around you is dotted with fallen trees. Some have sunk partway into the waterlogged ground over time, and only their moss-covered upper halves are visible. In other spots, trees lie atop the rotting trunks of their companions, and in places beetles and grubs have eaten away at them, exposing bright sections of heartwood.

Creepers grow over most of the trees, competing for space with brilliant green patches of lichen and large, shelf-like mushrooms. All around is the smell of rot and age, overlaid with the fresh scent of new plants that have taken root in the fallen trees. The air is still and heavy, and the silence is broken only by the muted buzzing of small clouds of flies flitting from place to place.

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Swamp

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On one of the swamp's rare patches of high ground, you come across the remnants of an old campsite. Rotten logs have been placed in a square, at the center of which is a crude fire pit – now little more than a pile of sodden ash and charred wood. There is room around the logs for four or five bedrolls, and a large tree grows out of one side of the low hill, providing a spot to tether horses for the night.

An old rope, green with lichen, is wrapped around the tree; its frayed end hangs limply, suggesting that no one has been here for some time. Even though it's only a few feet above the surrounding swamp, the air up here is a bit clearer and smells less damp. Visibility is good all around, and you can see why this spot would make a good campsite.

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The winding path takes you along a slow-moving river. Ferns and vines hang out over the water. The insects buzz around you with a lazy drone of sound. It is very warm and very humid. The trees growing out of the water are festooned with mosses along their trunks, dark and light green, some appearing very soft and fuzzy. Roots of plants along the riverbank stick out almost like webbing into the water. Vines, both fine and thick, link the trees well above the water's surface. Flecks of sunlight make it through the thick canopy here and there to cause little pools of light on the dark water. A huge dark bird [perhaps a heron] flies low and silently across the water's surface. A big snake floats or swims very slowly in the water, just its eyes visible. You drip with perspiration and even the deepest shade does not feel cool.

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 Swamp

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From the relative dryness of the packed earth trail, you look out over dark, thick-leaved plants growing on the edge of the swamp into a brightly-lit open area. The trees surround the open area but do not grow there. It is filled with knee- or waist-high leaves of varied widths and colors, some browns and beiges but mostly rich greens. Many are thin and grass-like but others are as long as your forearm and half that across. Some plants have very attractive yellow cup-like flowers. A crow flies slowly across the open area, wings moving silently. You watch a big bee fly to the various yellow flowers, stop, feed and move on. Its black and white stripes contrast strongly with the yellow flowers. It alights on a leaf near the flowers and there is a sudden odd movement. The leaf has snapped closed to imprison the bee and consume it.

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 Swamp

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Ahead of you, the swamp is a forest of small and large trees, with a forest floor that initially looks like ordinary leaf-covered ground. As you near, it is revealed to in fact be covered with water, which is in turn covered by millions of extremely tiny round green leaves [duckweed]. The result is a pleasant view of a green forest floor, dappled by patches of sunlight coming through the trees. Higher areas are littered with brown, dead leaves. Bees and small birds fly back and forth, sometimes high in the trees, but, where the branches make a low arch, close to the forest floor. The illusion of a solid forest is broken suddenly when a very large frog leaps from its resting spot, gulps down a tiny yellow bird in mid air, and falls with a massive splash into the leaf-covered water. Circles radiate out from the spot for several seconds.

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 Swamp

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The track deteriorates to a barely visible path. You pick your way carefully along it, wary of holes and deep mud. Branches of the overhanging plants, laden with water, brush against you, wetting everything. Big hairy dark spiders and groups of biting ants fall from the foliage onto your arms or shoulders. Spiderwebs break up on your faces. [If the adventurers hurry, someone should step into a deep hole of clinging mud and have to be pulled out by the others.] The mud oozes and stinks. The little hillocks of grass make firmer walking but often flatten under your feet, putting water up over your boots. If there are any openings in your boots, you have wet feet. If your boots are short, the muddy water sometimes pours in over them. [Consider: leeches, diseases, foot rot.] The sun beats down, making the air steam with uncomfortable heat.

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 Swamp

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Up ahead, the carpet of moss beneath your feet gives way to an expanse of standing water, dotted in places with muddy islands. The bases of the trees here are all submerged in the stagnant water, and little shoals of moss and lilies cluster around many of the trunks. The irritating hum of countless mosquitoes is all around, and clouds of them swarm across the surface of the water.

Creepers and hanging moss connect many of the trees, dragging down their branches until some of them dangle into the water. It smells like rotting flesh – as if some swamp creature recently died in the area, and its corpse is slowly sloughing away into the murky pond. There are enough patches of spongy ground to allow you to make your way through the area, although the smell makes the prospect somewhat unappealing.

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 Swamp

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Here the swamp forest forms a gallery overhead. Great trees with air plants dangling from them arch over the swamp. The water is so still you can see their reflections in its dark surface. The tree trunks are gray or occasionally light brown, thin and smooth. Most are quite plain, but a few are twisted round and round with climbing vines. They branch far overhead, but the limbs are long and bend down to dip leaves in the water. A bright red and white butterfly basks on an olive green leaf near the water's edge, its wings flicking slowly up and down. In the water, a pair of eyes, a handspan apart, float, or swim, slowly toward you.

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Drinking water is a problem. The water you see is murky and unattractive, and the warm air and activity soon makes you thirsty. You walk for some time looking for drinking water. [Your animals become thirsty also, and they drink from the slimy green water.] Looking down at the water, it is pale green with many tiny floating leaves. A dozen small bugs swim away as you near the water's edge. Your feet sink down very quickly into the soft mud when you step, and water rushes into your footprints when you move on. The muddy water slides back out into the swamp, giving off a strong smell of decay. [There is no safe water, unless the party catches rain water.]

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Even among the towering trees in this swamp, this one is huge. Perhaps if all your party [or: a group of six] held hands you might still not reach around its base. The bark is weathered and dark, with odd cracks and crevices. In places the bark has come off and the rich red-brown wood can be seen. On this side, along the trail, the great tree is on land, but the other side of the immense trunk is surrounded by green swamp water. The branches, bigger than many individual trees, spread far over your head. It probably has simple, oval leaves, but any live ones are too high overhead to see clearly. At the tree's base is what must be a forest altar, fresh flowers are lying there, atop older dry flowers and unidentifiable items.

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The trail has a deep pool of slowly-moving water on your left side and climbs up and down between barely stabilized grassy hummocks and packed dirt. To your right are more flooded hillocks and groups of dense shrubs. As you approach an area of many shrubs, you hear, over the chirp of insects and twitter of birds, a distinct crack of wood or bone breaking. It came from under the shrubs. Looking ahead, you see a spot where the mud is all slick and wet. A "drag mark" goes from the water on your left, across the trail and under the low-lying leaves of the shrubs. You smell the sudden odor of blood and intestines and hear two more clear crunches. [An alligator, cougar or other predator is feeding under the brush. The prey (deer, pig, etc.) is dead. If the predator is not disturbed it will not leave its meal.]

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Big vines twist up the sides of the trees. In most places, even if the ground were firm, the vines would force you to stay on the trail: the vegetation is linked together in an outrageous tangle. The vines are often thin but very strong. Some are covered with spines. Flowers dangle from many of them: deep purple tubes, tiny white stars, little yellow flowers. The pale yellow flowers have a heady smell. You notice it, faintly at first, then suddenly it is very strong. The flowers are visible at quite a distance across the dim swamp. Animals are strongly attracted: white and blue butterflies flutter around the plants. Birds too are feeding on the nectar of the flowers, skimming in and out lightly.

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Vines stretch across the little-used trail. They are thin but strong. Some of them grab at your clothes, with tiny stinging spines; others simply dangle solidly in the trail so that the first person sets them swinging and the others have to dodge or get a face full of odd-smelling leaves, sometimes laden with small crawling insects. Others are high enough that you can duck or avoid them, but are connected by spider webs that are difficult not to bump. The nicest are festooned with bright flowers and dangle in the air overhead like pennants. The flowers are usually large and are an intense red or brilliant yellow or shocking pink. Now and then you see a tiny fast-flying bird with iridescent wings [hummingbird] visit the bright flowers, swooping past you in a buzz of wings and a puff of moving air.

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A flurry of black dots appears without warning just a few inches from your face and an almost imperceptible buzzing fills the air. The tiny insects flutter and dart about you, occasionally alighting on your exposed flesh and then taking to flight again almost immediately. They seem particularly attracted to your eyes, ears, noses, and mouths. You must inhale carefully to avoid them. [The GM could also describe the insects getting into people's clothing, as appropriate. The gnats could be especially annoying should they find their way inside a character's plate armor and—being, of course, mere insects—have a hard time finding their way out again.]

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There is a low bellowing roar that fills the swamp and seems to be answered by another further away. [If the adventurers look for the source of the roar:] You see an area of the water close to you rise up in dozens of tiny spouts, about six inches above the surface of the water. As the rumbling roar begins to fade, the water returns to its calm state and you can make out the outline of a crocodile in the water. As it again gives out its mating call, the vibrations of its back agitate the water over it into another water dance. [Mating crocodiles can be very touchy and even more irritable than normal, and with 3500 pounds per square inch of biting power, it would be good to be cautious.]

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You gradually become aware that the swamp around you has become preternaturally still. You hear no calling birds, no croaking frogs, no chirping crickets, not even the rustling of leaves, as the breeze has completely died away. The only sounds you can hear are your own footsteps, the clink of your own armor, and the rustle of your robes. [This silence might be merely a momentary fluke of the local weather conditions, or it could presage some ominous encounter.]

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Heavy with leaves, the limbs of the large trees all around you droop earthward. The branches are thin, sporting small green oval-shaped leaves. As you pass beneath the canopy of trees, the breeze stirs the branches and the leaves brush your face.

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A tangled blur of green and black tumbles through the murky water. Two crocodiles are locked in a mating frenzy, the male trying to get in position atop the powerful female. The slapping splashes of the struggle almost drown out the creatures' low roars. A clutch of smaller males sun themselves on nearby logs, their cold yellow eyes staring at the struggle with reptilian interest. [Mating crocodiles can be very touchy and even more irritable than normal, and with 3500 pounds per square inch of biting power, it would be good to be cautious.]

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The muck [or water] through which you are wading seems to be almost lumpy. You soon realize that a tangle of thick, gnarled roots lies just below its surface. [The GM will need to determine whether this tangle of roots extends a few feet or many yards. The thick roots reduce characters' speed by half (that is, half of the speed they are able to go through the muck or water, which is probably already reduced from their normal speed). Characters of average dexterity who try to move through the roots faster than that will almost certainly trip and fall, or perhaps slip and have an ankle pinned by the twisted roots.]

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Small black shapes dangle from ropes drooping from a nearby tree. [Upon closer inspection:] The shapes turn out to be large crows or ravens, suspended by small hangman's nooses.

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From time to time, you notice large bubbles forming on the surface of the mud. Each bubble expands for fifteen seconds or so to the size of an orange or apple, then pops. [The bubbles are formed by pockets of rising methane gas. An open flame or spark can ignite a methane bubble and cause a small amount of damage to a character close enough to be singed by the explosion. Naturally occurring methane is odorless; if you want to give the players more clues as to the nature of the gas, you could allow the methane to have mixed naturally with hydrogen sulfide, producing a “rotten egg” smell accompanying the popping of the bubbles.]

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The stench of decaying flesh mingles with the pervasive smell of rotting plant matter as you push your way through the swamp. Rounding a bend, an unusual sight comes before your eyes. Rising out of the water, mud, and muck are the ribs of some massive creature. The ribs disappear beneath the waters and yet meet in some sort of backbone over six feet above the surface of the swamp. Bits of tattered flesh still hang from the ribs and crows are fighting over the last of the remains. Obviously something huge died here. It has been dead for some time and it is impossible to tell if it was killed or if it became mired in the bog and was unable to move until it slowly starved to death.

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The trail turns and you get a spectacular view: hundreds of white birds are wading in a broad shallow area of the swamp. They are tall as a man, with long legs, long necks and long thin beaks. They stride along, heads turned sideways, watching the shallow water. When they see something, quick as a thought the beak becomes a spear and stabs into the water. The fish must be very abundant because you see dozens of birds devouring them. The birds themselves number several hundreds, filling the swamp with white. The near ones turn their long necks toward you but do not initially take flight. As the trail takes you along that piece of swamp, the birds reluctantly take flight, great wings beating the air, their cries a deafening chorus of bleats. You are barely past the area when the first of them return to their fishing spot.

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A female wild boar noses for grubs before a gently swaying wall of cattails [bamboo shafts]. The piglets nose along the ground, their snouts and stubby, immature tusks covered in rich brown mud. They oink happily, till the mother catches sight of your approach. She stands her ground, grunting angrily, as her young barrel into the thicket. As soon as they are out of sight, she joins them, knocking over cattails [bamboo shafts] in her haste to get to safety.

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