

ADVENTURE: VERTIGO

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OUTLINE

The characters are traveling in their Drilling Machine when they run into a huge cavern deep in the earth. There in the darkness they discover an ancient lost city.

SET UP

This adventure assumes that the player characters are traveling through the earth on their way to the Hollow Earth, either on foot or by Drilling Machine. It could also be used for a party traveling the other way but it might lose some of its impact.

It is also assumed that the Drilling Machine is at its full capacity of twelve or so passengers. Any empty positions should be made up with NPCs. (Red shirts are optional).

THE START

Who ever said that a Drilling Machine would be the easiest way of getting through to the Hollow Earth had obviously never traveled in one. Passengers and crew are packed in tight, combining the worse aspects of submarines and military tanks. The trip to the Hollow Earth is supposed to take two weeks yet after two days the stink of unwashed bodies competes with the fumes of the powerful engine. Sleep become a precious commodity as passengers are assailed by the roar of the engine, the screaming drill bit, the clanking treads, rocks and debris crashing into the armored exterior.

This is an opportunity for players to describe how their characters are coping with the stress of boredom and consignment. Points should be given to players who can relate their character's flaws to the situation.

A BREAK

Late on the third day the Drilling Machine gives a final lurch before stopping. The only sound is the gentle winding down of the drill head. The pilot (this can be a PC with the required skill or an NPC), reports that they have encountered a large cave. As it is late in the day he suggests that they stop for a break. It will also be an opportunity to do maintenance on the drill bit.

Characters should describe what they are doing. Some passengers are stretching their legs; others are cooking a hot meal on a portable stove. The heat inside the Drilling Machine has made cooking impossible. Others are setting up camp beds looking forward to a peaceful night sleep.

The intimidating darkness encourages most of the NPCs to stick close to the lights of the Machine.

THE CAVE

The cave is a massive opening about five miles below the surface. The wall the Machine has emerged from stretches off for hundreds of yards in both directions before vanishing out of sight. The uneven floor slopes away down to the north. The ceiling is about eight feet overhead, rising up towards the north, although this is difficult to see with the forest of stalactites. The walls are damp and the floor is a little muddy.

If GMs know anything about cave systems they should feel free to elaborate.

Geographical Note

In 2004 National Geographic reported that the world's deepest explored cave was the Cheve Cave, which lies deep in Mexico's Sierra de Juárez region, has a main system that may have tunnels deeper than 6,500 feet. This works out to be a bit over one mile down.

EXPLORING

Our characters are probably going to have a look around. The only really important thing to note is what light sources they are bringing. After the warmth of the Machine the cave feels very cool.

Characters can explore any direction they wish but north is the obvious way to go. This floor is uneven with a four or five foot step down every fifty or so feet. After a few hundred yards the lights of the Machine disappear behind the curve of the cave. Players can estimate they have descended about a hundred feet while the ceiling has risen to be about three hundred feet overhead.

Then characters make their find.

THE CITY

In the far northern corner of the cavern, where the walls are about sixty feet apart, is an incredible sight. At the very edge of characters torch lights can be seen a city carved deep into the stone. The whole complex is very reminiscent of Anasazi cliff dwellings.

The ledge is fifty feet above the floor of the cave. It is about two hundred feet long and about fifty feet deep. On the ledge are a large number of buildings.

At the very edge of the characters torch light, about thirty feet above the ledge, can be seen a second ledge with yet another city.

Amongst the rocks, at the base of the cliff can be found a large collection of old bones. These are easily identified as human remains hundreds of years old, the skulls are cracked, the long bones broken open, and the ends rounded off. Some of the broken rocks are some that have obviously been carved. These could probably be assembled to form a carved boulder about nine feet tall.

As characters examine the bones and look for ways up have them make perception rolls to notice the sound of pebbles moving behind them. If they make four successes they may even hear something that sounds like footsteps, but it just might be their imagination.

BACK AT THE CAMP

If the character party has split up it might be a good time to regroup before exploring the city although this scene is optional.

Back at the camp people have eaten their first hot meal of the trip and are settling down for the night. At some point in the night some one will head off to relieve themselves. As he or she squat behind a convenient column there is a distinct feeling for being watched. As the character heads back towards the welcoming lights of the Drilling Machine, they can hear footsteps closing in behind them. Nothing can be seen in the darkness.

THE FIRST LEDGE (50 FEET UP)

Getting up should be a little tricky but not difficult or dangerous. There are a large number of buildings on the ledge. Basically square about 15 feet on each side, made of plain stone, each is between one to three stories tall. As there is only a few feet gap between each building the level is a maze of twisting alleyways. Each building is empty, showing signs of an orderly departure. It is typical of construction by Anasazi with layered bricks and rocks, the gaps being filled with twigs and clay. Fitted wooden beams form the ceiling. They are strongly built, obviously intended for defense.

Characters can easily see that there is another level above this one and yet another one above that. There are four levels in this section. It is not difficult to find that at the top of the tallest building there is an old ladder that enables characters to climb up to a hole in the ceiling. The ladder is prone to breaking at dramatic moments.

The DM should play up the emptiness of the level, the strange shadows created by torches.

THE SECOND LEDGE (110 FEET UP)

This is much like the First Ledge. Allow characters to look around as they wish but there is little to be found except for some old farming tools and some broken pots. Characters with Anthropology or Archeology can work out that these levels

were probably used by farmers and other low caste people.

Characters should make Perception rolls for the DM to describe a strange fall of stones from a higher level. Characters may even hear the clink of metal against metal.

This time the ladder to the Third Level runs on the outside of the cliff. Characters will be suspended about 170 feet over the cave floor on a flimsy rope ladder. Characters should be encouraged to role play their vertigo.

THE THIRD LEDGE (170 FEET UP)

The buildings here are larger but with small alleyways. From the remains of tools this is probably a craftsman level. Leather working tools and pottery kilns can be found. At the back of the Ledge can be found a number of large rooms carved into the stone. Similar to a Kiva, these rooms where probably used to store vast amounts of grain and water. All are full of clear, cold water from natural seepage through the rock from a nearby underground river.

The most obvious thing noticeable on this level is a large rope bridge stretching from the Fourth Level above them out into the darkness. As characters look up they see a flash of movement. It's only there for an instant before it vanishes. High Perception characters get the impression that it is some kind of animal like a coyote or wolf.

Getting up to the Fourth Level is a little tricky. Like the First Level there would normally be a ladder from the top of the tallest building up to a carved hole in the ceiling. This ladder is missing. Someone is going to have to get to the ceiling and then climb up the thirty feet of smooth chimney. This is a chance for an athletic character to show his stuff.

THE FOURTH LEVEL (230 FEET UP)

From here an amazing sight can be seen. The rope bridge stretches about seventy feet out over the corner of the cavern to the other wall. There another series of Ledges rise high up into the darkness! Each crowded with silent buildings.

If someone with Tracking thinks to look, there can be found foot prints in the dust. The more successes the more information that can be determined: the footprints are years old, human in origin, made by someone wearing some sort of moccasin.

If players are getting bored an old building will collapse nearby, possibly trapping a character.

This is another craftsman level. If characters search they can find some intact pots. To an academic these are not that interesting but a millionaire or movie star might recognize them as being highly prized in Hollywood. If sold to the right person they might be worth hundreds if not thousands of dollars each. A dozen fragile pots can be found. This is a chance for Greedy characters to gain some role playing Points.

Historical Note

The Antiques Roadshow website (2003) notes that prices on Anasazi Indian pots above \$5,000 are commonplace, with some of the rarest objects selling routinely for half-a-million dollars. Unfortunately, jacked up demand for these beautiful objects has created an incentive for people to excavate them illegally.

THE ROPE BRIDGE

This is the standard fare of pulp stories and movies. Despite being hundred of years old it is a lot stronger than it looks. Never the less it should require a Willpower roll to get over as it is very unnerving. Don't forget to award Style points for good role-playing.

THE FIFTH LEVEL (230 FEET UP)

This ledge is a similar size to the others but the buildings are a little larger and a little better made. Under the dust on the walls can be painted scenes, faded with age. They show people in Indian dress tending crops, raising livestock, and engaging in trade while living underground. The gods had evidently provided the faithful citizens with a source of light to illuminate the cave. While the city is ruled by a king residing up

on the Seventh Level the true power is wielded by a terrifying caste of priests.

There is a little furniture surviving over the centuries. Successes on any relevant skills (Archeology, Anthropology or History) suggest that this level was the home of wealthy, successful merchants.

Perceptive or alert characters will be able to hear running water coming from above. Anyone with Geology will know that there is an underground river nearby.

At the far end of the level is a wide stair heading up to the Sixth Level.

THE STAIRWAY

Getting up the stair is trickier than it looks. The walls of the stairway are heavily carved with images of animals, ancient kings and gods. Where every eye or mouth should be is a circular opening about an inch across.

The steps of the first two flights of steps are covered in engraved tiles. We all know what's going to happen here. Step on the wrong tile and you get a poison dart. The darts are set to fire at odd angles so simple trial and error will be risky. There is a 25% chance of be struck for every tile tested. Stepping on a tile will be automatically stuck. The poison is particularly nasty (three successes to resist). There are many darts for each step and will fire from different direction each time. Each dart will reload after a few seconds.

A character with the appropriate skill can report that the tiles are engraved with letters from the Aztec alphabet. There are 15 steps on each flight. On the first flight the safe steps are 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, and 13. On the second flight the safe steps are 17, 19, 23, and 29.

On the third flight there are no markings at all, just plain stone tiles. The Dm should encourage players to work out the next sequence of steps without relying on their characters skill rolls. The same steps are obviously 31, 37, 41, and 43.

Acrobatic characters could get to the top of the stairway by climbing along the carved images. The steps are far too steep to run

and still avoid the darts. Coming down the steps is another matter.

Characters with Engineering or Mechanics will realize that this device is far too complex to have survived for centuries without some kind of maintenance.

The first character to reach the top of the stairs will be attacked. A barbed javelin will be thrown from deep within the shadows of the Sixth Level. That character will see something that looks like a large dog slip away between the buildings. No tracks will be found. It was as if the creature vanished into the darkness.

THE SIXTH LEVEL (290 FEET UP)

This is the level for nobility. The buildings are large, about twenty feet per side, and most are two or three stories high. There is more furniture and other belongings here. The paintings on the wall are very high quality and many carvings can be seen. They show the priests ordering the citizens to leave the surface world and come down here. The Gods did this an eon ago and it was their duty to follow them.

Over near the rim of the ledge a painting can be found that shows the light in the cave has been fading. There are scenes of food starting to run out and priests extorting the faithful. The Dm should emphasize the dizzying height of the level and the way the rim of the ledge is crumbling. Any character near the rim can see a narrow stone bridge stretching from the Seventh Level out into the darkness.

By looking through some of the buildings a small stash of Anasazi jewelry can be found. It is made from mainly gold and semiprecious stones.

At the far end of this ledge a way up can be found.

THE TUBE

The way up to the Seventh Level is not a stairway but rather a smooth tube carved from the stone that circle upwards. At various points along the tube scrape marks can be seen. The tube is nine feet wide.

There is a ten foot section of the tube near the top that serves as a trigger. If it is steps on a large boulder will drop from the ceiling and roll down the tube. The boulder fills the tube with inches to spare and weigh multiple tones. Running away is encouraged. Once clear of the tube the boulder will roll out to the edge of the ledge and tumble into the darkness. After long seconds there is a crash as it hits the cave floor.

There are half a dozen boulders stacked up in the ceiling magazine style. Perceptive characters should notice that the third boulder is wet.

Jumping over the trigger is the only way past the trap. Once past a level can be found that will disable the trap. The only other way past is to climb out over the rim of the ledge and free climb up. This should be difficult but not impossible.

The first few people up on the level should make Perception Rolls. The DM should encourage paranoia.

THE SEVENTH LEVEL (350 FEET UP)

This is clearly the level of royalty residing high above their subjects. The dozen or so buildings are separated by wide streets and empty plazas lined with fitted flag stones. Every wall is decorated in a mosaic of carved and painted stone. The language of the carvings is a strange combination of Mesoamerican and Aztec.

Against the back wall there is a large painting show that as the light fades and the darkness closes in the hungry nobility are provided with meat by the priests. The painting is shows the king and his court are careful not to investigate the origin of the food.

The most interesting feature to this level is a stone bridge arcing out back to the other wall. Again another series of ledges carved into the stone wall rise up into the darkness. Looking down the wall characters can see the first few levels and the rope bridge far, far below them.

The stone bridge is two feet wide and there are no hand rails. A character with Engineering can tell that the bridge is

designed to be collapsed be removing supports at either end.

Crossing the bridge is not physically difficult, just unnerving. The DM should really hammer the dizzying height. Willpower and Balance rolls should be required to avoid freezing or slipping. Talking down a paralyzed character could be a dramatic moment for someone with diplomatic skills. For the inhabitants of the underground city crossing over to the priest's level is intended to be a test of courage, willpower and faith. Role playing should be encouraged.

While halfway across one character should realize that someone is watching them from up on the ninth level. At the edge of their torch light he gets an impression of a hunched furry humanoid figure with a face full of fangs and burning red eyes. As soon as he is spotted he turns and vanishes into the shadows.

EIGHTH LEVEL (350 FEET UP)

The architecture of this level is noticeably different to the previous seven. The buildings are made of large square stones carefully fitted together, very much in the Aztec style.

This is obviously the level for junior and middle ranking priests. The buildings are 15 feet a side and form a bewildering, almost hypnotic maze. Every corner is adorned with hideous carved figures of the gods of darkness, war, death, blood and the harvest. Where alleys naturally widen can be found altars to blood thirsty gods. Carved wooden bowels can be found with a black powder in the bottom. Some bowls are filled with dried leathery objects the size of a man's fist. Occasionally a water filled pit can be found. The paintings make it clear that these were used to down sacrifices to the god of water.

This is a nightmarish place and the dark shadows created by the character's lights only made things worse. Every black stain should be a reminder of pain and suffering.

A large number of definite tracks can be seen in the dust. Both recent and ancient the tracks are a mixture of canine and human.

Heavy stone tablets can be found along with long decayed parchments. Educated characters can piece together that a blasphemous faction of Aztec priests split away from the rest of the empire and set themselves up as the ruling caste of a peaceful farming society, using a terrifying combination of bloody sacrifices and black magic to maintain their power. Eventually they were discovered by the rest of the Empire and the priests ordered their subjects to flee with them deep underground. According to their legends there is a promised land deep beneath the earth where the gods and their chosen servants went to centuries before.

When they discovered the massive cavern with its miraculous light it was considered to be a sign from the gods and they settled down to rebuild their society. Decades later the light began to fade and the crops started to fail. The priests attempted to appease the gods with an every increasing number of sacrifices. As the food became low the sacrifices were then eaten. It was noticed by some of those people who feasted on the remains became stronger, faster along with other physical changes. The senior priests thought that this was a sign from the gods that the fittest, most ruthless were to survive. An orgy of bloodletting and gluttony then ensued.

The only thing that can be recovered is a number of very sharp obsidian knives.

Getting up to the eighth level is difficult. The outside of the cliff has to be climbed. Originally rope ladders were lowered but these have long since decayed. Even with a lowered rope Willpower rolls should still be required due to the giddy height.

NINTH LEVEL (410 FEET UP)

The ceiling of the cavern is only feet above this level with a forest of stalactites hanging past the level.

This level is forbidden to all the inhabitants of the underground city except for the most senior ranks of the priesthood. There are only a dozen single story buildings constructed in the Aztec style, previously used as living quarters and for

blasphemous rituals best left undiscovered. Every wall is covered in prayers to the dark gods. The languages can be seen to be a combination of Aztec and other South American civilizations as well as various ancient Asian and Middle Eastern tongues.

As soon as the characters are on the level they are attacked. The last surviving priest of the city, he has been kept alive through black magic and a terrible curse. He is naked except for a large furred cloak and a hideous carved wooden mask. He throws javelins and poisoned darts from a distance and always keeps moving. After centuries he knows the entire city like the back of his hand. He keeps to the shadows and will not come into the light unless trapped. If a character closes to hand to hand combat the priest will fling a strong hallucinogenic powder into the face of any opponent. Players should then feel free to role play the terrors that then ensue. He is fast, skilled and very strong but not particularly sturdy. A few hits from a firearm should put him down.

When the Aztec Empire reached this place and saw what had happened they imprisoned the bestial inhabitants in a tomb sealed for all eternity. The last high priest was cursed to remain as its guardian for all time.

In the middle of the Ninth Level there is a large open plaza. In the middle of the plaza is a large stone cartouche, (it means lid). With a bit of stage managing the DM could arrange to have the injured priest stagger here to die, his life's blood filling the grooves before draining away.

At the end of the plaza up against the stone wall is a massive idol of a terrible Aztec god. Nearly thirty feet high it scrapes the ceiling of the ledge. In the lap of the idol is a book made with metallic pages, preserved for all these centuries. The strange script is Atlantean and cannot be deciphered. The old priesthood believed this book was left for them by the gods.

At the other end of the plaza, situated on the edge of the precipice overlooking the entire city, is a massive altar. Resting on the altar is a huge ruby carved into an exact

replica of a human heart. It is warm to the touch.

If either the book or the Heart is removed the following scene will commence. If characters are fast or coordinated they might be able to get away with both of the treasures.

THE OPENING

As soon as either object is moved the ground begins the shake and there is a loud grinding sound. Stalactites start to fall from the cavern ceiling and some of the building collapse. The cartouche falls away to reveal that it was covering a cave under the ledge. As characters watch hideous ghoul like creatures crawl their way out, glaring at PC's with insatiable hunger.

These bestial creatures are all that remain of the cannibalistic citizen that were imprisoned by the Aztec's. There are dozens upon dozens of them pouring forth in a tide of unreasoning appetite.

THE CHASE

At this point discretion is the better part of valor. It is assumed that characters are going to run for the safety of the Drilling Machine.

This is intended to be a dramatic an exciting scene. My suggestions are;

- A running gun battle with pursuing ghouls.

- Dodging collapsing buildings as the earthquake shakes the city apart.

- Sprinting through deathtraps.

- A few brave heroes could hold off ghouls with gunfire while comrades attempt to collapse the stone bridge. Ghouls can still climb down but this is a lot slower.

- As the walls of the cavern weaken the underground river breaks through sending water everywhere.

- If characters are loaded down with gold or bulky pots they will have to struggle with their greed as it slows them down. Do other characters also slow down the wait for them?

- Any expendable NPCs could be torn apart by the creatures.

- Someone trapped behind the tide of ghouls could swing down on a rope to a lower level.

- Someone could slow down the ghouls by cutting the rope bridge.

- Being chased across the cavern floor by a horde of ravenous ghouls, while the cavern collapses. Falling stalactites will have to be avoided.

- Struggling to get inside the Drilling Machine. Some characters could fight with ghouls to get the hatch closed while other characters get the engine started.

THE END

As the Drilling Machine moves away into the ground, or the party flees into the passage to the hollow Earth the cavern collapses behind them destroying the remains of the cavern city and the revolting ghouls.

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