THOUGH FLESH BE VAST
An adventure by Michael Prescott

THE SITUATION
Among the dradkin, prophecy holds that the under-god Inceraugh would one day lead them to the prosperous surface world, where mute beasts grow fat on endless plants. Now, though, the faith’s last known temple stands on the brink of social collapse.

GHARIAL’S PERCH (DIM)
Basthenes the gharial fell into the cavern three decades ago, and has grown massive on the plentiful fish.

He is a devoted narcissist, deeply lonely, who longs for interesting conversation and better sport than fish.

THE SUNLIT POOL (DAY)
A blinding patch of sunlight edges around the waterfall shaft; at noon, the sun touches the water and fills the cavern with blue light. Fish abound.

A small but feisty whirl drains water to the fungal cavern down a water-filled tunnel. 10-15’ deep.

ABANDONED SHRINE (DARK)
A 12’ statue of Inceraugh dominates the shrine; roughly bovine, its front is studded with hundreds of garnets (a handful are rubies) representing the promised beast flesh. Anyone meeting the idol’s gaze finds hunger.

Wall etchings show hundreds of dradkin eating the flesh of a reeling Inceraugh, vast and never-dying.

The side chamber by the idol is empty but for the husk of a dradkin flesh-priest, still gnawing on the hem of its cassock. Devotional writings on wax tablets recount the legend.

The sickly-sweet smell of rot wafts from the privy, though the law forbids this.

GORGED CAVERN (DIM)
The gorge ends in a cavern: Szimalt, a dradkin, lurks in the darkness. Bravest of the heretics, she alone dwells above ground, subsisting on mosses and gorse skinks.

She makes nightly forays along the river, looking for other habitable caves or holes, and might share details about Incerat in exchange for surface survival lore.

INCERAUGH, VAST AND NEVER-DYING
Inceraugh is unbreathable: after a brief dizziness comes a bend in the stream, where two goat carcasses lie bloating (accidentally herded over the waterfall by Dussa’s heretics). Gatherers (2-4) from the dwelling chamber come often, alert because of the strange smell.

THE PILGRIM’S STAIR
Two guardian statues (oxen with oddly batlike faces) stand at the top. They watch the stair, but will attack anyone defacing the shrine.

The side chamber is a store whose supplies have turned to dust long ago.

The stair leads half a league down to the shores of dry Ur-Menig, though twenty paces down the air is unbearable: after a brief dizziness comes a deathless sleep.

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UNCLAIMED LEGACY (DARK)
An illusory wall conceals a dry cavern, undisturbed for years. Within is an enchanted set of bone-scale armor, a kine-leather cloak of stealth, and four stone urns of good oil.

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MIST-SHROUDED CAVE (DIM)
Foggy air rolls as the pool’s humidity meets the chill of the depths, limiting sight to 20’ (given noon light, or light sources).

This area is frequented by dradkin fishing parties (2d6 individuals) entering from the Miners’ Hall.

Hiding in the mist are 15 heretics, exiles from Incerat. Led by Dussa the Squint, they refuse to wait any longer for prosperity, and have etched out a crude ladder that makes the terrifying 110’ climb up into the bat roost.

From there, they have made several forays into the courageous caverns, and might share details about Incerat in exchange for surface survival lore.

THE SALT MINE (LIT)
The mine chief, Goccan, will be (d6) 1-3: gambling with d3 pious-caste fellows, or 4-6: supervising d6 carreg mine slaves as they dig.

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THE GORGE (SKYLIT) AND BAT CAVERN (DIM)
A river gorge ends suddenly at a deep fissure - the water falls 120’ straight down before thundering into an underground pool.

A crevice to the east opens into a large bat roost, where a second fissure drops into darkness.

A narrow shaft drops 50’ to the shrine, but the bottom 6’ is plugged with lake pebbles tossed in by Basthenes.

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THE SLAVE PENS

Fleshpriests, known for their rituals of demeaning and weakness.

THE CHAMBERS OF PITY (LIT)

Here dwell the pious fighting caste: nine warriors and their families, 27 in all. Warriors wield bone and steel blades, wear bone-scale armor and chitin helm. Each is attended by a lamp-bearer.

HALLS OF THE PIous (LIT)

The dwelling place of the lowest caste Dradkin, 30 individuals in all. They will be (d6) 1-2: just starting; 3-4: in the midst of; 5-6: just finishing:
1. cooking, eating, gambling and gossiping
2. a long period of sleep and sex
3. praying as one
4. wringing oil from carefully gathered apocalypse larva
5. serving food to the other castes
6. a funeral and body gift-making

About half will fight, armed with bone or metal-tipped spears or blades.

Abscon the Filch, disgraced fleshpriest, knows rituals of demeaning and weakness.

THE SLAVE PENs

The slave warden watches over 2d6 carreg, used for the worst of Incerat’s physical labor, as well as arena sport.

In the last cell is a gnome, who has died only recently. He bears the scars of many fights in the arena.

THE PRIVY CAVERN

The communal privy from the dwelling chamber empties here. Over many years, a thread-like fungus that suffuses the vast pile of dung has become intelligent.

Anyone bearing the invisible dust of its spores will hear its will: it desires that fragments of itself be transplanted to the surface. It could also do with a decomposing body or six, which would let it grow servitors.

The Dradkin know not to leave bodies here (their law prohibits it), though not why, as the last servitor outbreak was before living memory.

THE GREAT LIBRARY (LIT)

A pool of cleansing; urns of melted wax over oil-burning braziers. In the far chamber, bone-inlaid stone shelves bear hundreds of heavy wax tablets. Most are devotional, 2d6 are inscribed spells.

d6 fleshpriests of uniform gender will be present at all times, bathing, tablet-making, praying or transcribing.

THE PRIESTLY CHAMBERS (LIT)

The pious warriors, the pitiable. Each into three castes: the fleshpriests, the pious warriors, and the pitiable.

The exclusive domain of the high priestly couple, Uth and Semorpha, and their occasional guests of the priestly caste. Observing avatar feeding from the high gallery is a coveted honor. The few servants that come here are pious.

UPPERMOST HALLS (LIT)

Founded centuries ago as a monastery, Incerat was funded by the largesse of wealthy pilgrims from the depths. Several weeks’ hard travel from the underlands, it gradually achieved self-sufficiency on fish, fungus and oil.

The flow of pilgrims ebbed centuries ago, and the community has stagnated into three castes: the fleshpriests, the pious warriors, and the pitiable.

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THROUGH THE FILCH

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THE ARENA (LIT)

Currently held are a pair of greater cave squid, and a horse-sized, three-necked hydra.

By a quirk of lineage, the avatar keeper is low born, and allows frequent visits by curious youngsters from the Chambers of Pity. He knows a cantrip that, within Inceraugh’s ‘avatars’ so that he may in turn feed his faithful.

A chute in the southern corner allows the keepers to return uncooperative avatars to the pens.

HALL OF THE AVATARS (LIT)

Equipped with cots for twelve, the barracks are now empty save for the captain and her occasional guests.

THE DIMREACH BEGINS (UNLIT)

An enormous cave system extends several leagues to the south, overhanging cavernous Ur-Menig. Apocalypse larva and fire beetles are numerous; whip scorpions and ghost bats are frequent. Cave squid are rare and feared.

It is thick with trails from the occasional Incerat hunting parties, in search of food and any abominations finding their way up from Ur-Menig.

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THE DRADKIN OF INCERAT

To surface people, dradkin look fine-boned and delicate, with jerky and unsettling movements. The majority are albino, some yellowish with ruddy features. Their eyes are small, and bright light hurts them. They are at home in darkness, but use tiny lamps or naked wicks when they can afford oil.

They have excellent hearing, which they supplement by placing their long fingers against the cavern walls.

They make no cloth, but wear skins made from their dead (a final gift), tailored with thread spun from hair, and make tools and buttons of the bones. Each of their garments is named after the giver, and precious to them.

Strange Presumptions

Among Dradkin, it is the norm to answer questions confidently. They are never evasive - rather, it is more polite to lie outrageously. Bear this in mind whenever adventurers make statements the Dradkin might not believe. Hesitation or partial answers indicate concealed weakness, which will arouse suspicion.

Dradkin will assume that surface dwellers need help surviving on the surface, but by leaving Incerat they have lost all sense of safety, and are wracked with paranoia.

WHAT'S THAT DRADKIN CARRYING? (d20)

1. Strips of editable fungus
2. d6 devotional garnets (5% one is a ruby)
3. Tin lamp half-full of beetle oil
4. Herbom kin-leather coat or breeches, lined with ghost bat fur
5. Glass vial of whip scorpion acid
6. An engraved bone prayer rod
7. A heretical prayer rod
8. A bone-handled sickle, wickedly sharp
9. A devotional medallion of underworld
10. A pouch of salt chips (to eat)
11. A flake of lodestone (held on the tongue for wayfinding)
12. Braided kin-leather cord (d6x10')
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RITUALS OF THE FLESPHIESTS

Dradkin ritual study has devolved into reformulations of stale, ancient formulae, and debate centers on irrelevant stylistic flourishes. Most pertain to masonry. Nevertheless, the library contains an arsenal of useful rituals which the fleshpriests, if roused to action, can quickly prepare.

RITUAL: SOMATIC TRAITOR

This turns d2 of the victim’s limbs against them.

RITUAL: DIMREACHER’S HUM

Ruins echolocation, and dradkin/carreg vibration sense within a 15’ radius.

RITUAL: RECLAMATION

Salt crystals form on the victim’s skin, having been drawn from their bodily fluids, causing muscle spasms, fainting, and lasting weakness.

THE CARREG OF UR-MENIG

Genderless, with skin like supple clay. When healthy, they are cool and moist.

They have small mouths, slitted nostrils and no eyes or hair: unlike dradkin are quite alien to the surface peoples. They ‘see’ by means of air currents and ground vibrations, and are unaware of light. They tolerate the air of Ur-Menig, which sends others into a deathless sleep.

THE DIMREACH CONTINUES

A league from Incerat, beyond where Dradkin venture, the floor of the dimreach becomes a maze of fissures and sinkholes. It ends in a vast, crumbling drop, a thousand yards into Ur-Menig.

APOCALYPSE LARVA

Fat white grubs (2-3’ long) cling to cavern walls, sloshing with precious lichen oils. Passive, but if poked they burst, splashing anyone near with flaming oil.

FIRE BEETLES

Tiny adult beetle (2”) stage of the larva, they fly noisily on crystalline wings. They occasionally spurt small flames, which the observant can use to survey the dimreach.

WHIP SCORPIONS

Nightmares of black chitin (5’ long), they patrol incessantly, seeking sound or movement. Seizing prey with great claws, they then spray it with a paralyzing acid from their stinger, whip-like tails.

They are perfect climbers, moving easily along walls and ceilings.

GHOST BATS

These giant bats (3-4’ bodies, 12’ wingspan) are swift and nearly silent, but delicate. A sizeable colony roosts out by the drop to Ur-Menig.

They attack climbers and larger prey near steep drops (common in the dimreach) with buffeting strikes, hoping to dislodge them so they can devour the crippled victim leisurely. Their body is greyish-white and of unrivaled softness.

CAVE SQUID

A cloud of black tentacles, hanging in the air like an inkdrop in water. They ‘swim’ through the air, frones wafting on unseen currents. Normally constricted to a mass 4-5’ across, their tentacles stretch up to 12’ if need be, and given time they can squeeze through gaps only a few inches wide. Highly resistant to crushing or piercing attacks.

Their venomous touch causes paralysis, searing pain, or control of whichever of the victim’s limbs has been seized, depending on the squid’s vile purpose.

They hunt alone, and act intelligently.

HIGH UTH AND SEMORPHA

The rulers of Incerat are rarely seen, supposedly spending most of their time in prayer in the uppermost shrine.

The lavish bedchamber next door is never used, for Inceraugh’s blessing has rendered them undead: they sleep in the moist soil of the secret chamber behind the shrine. The pair produce dradkin ritual effects at will, and may take on the form of cave squid once every 13 hours.

The shrine idol has thirty platinum claws, and among countless garnets blanketing its belly, there are twenty large rubies.

THE INVERTED PROPHECY

Uth and Semorpha harbor a dark secret learned through augury: Inceraugh’s ascension is involuntary, a terminal sentence imposed by great powers of the deep.

The weekly “avatar” feedings merely give the under-god the strength to delay the inevitable. If they stop, Inceraugh dies, his death throes manifesting as d10+10 cave squid that materialize randomly throughout Incerat.

The squid feed rapaciously (and can each digest a humanoid daily).

BEGINNINGS AND ENDS

PCs may become aware of Incerat in a number of ways:

1. Peasants discover a lone dradkin heretic
2. Heretic parties begin organized raids, stealing cattle regularly
3. Heretics find a mediocre shelter (e.g. dense wood, a crappy cave) allowing them to venture further
4. Civil war breaks out in Incerat; heretic
5. PCs may become aware of Incerat a number of ways:
6. Inicerughs is the lower gate falls, and underworld abominations enter in numbers, some making it to the surface.

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