



a year without rain

The killings begin as the drought afflicting the town of Asylum threatens to stretch into another year. Townsfolk, dead and dry as shed snakeskins, their bodies papery and crumbling, turn up night after night. Who or what is killing the good people of Asylum is what the player characters must discover in this adventure. The characters eventually find that it's something living down in the well—which is the one remaining source of water for miles around.

A Year Without Rain is an adventure designed for starting characters. It's the fulfillment of a goal for the Shadow of the Demon Lord Kickstarter campaign, promising an adventure from me (Bruce R. Cordell), Chris Pramas, and Steven Winter. As I write this, with the crazy evil of the Shadow of the Demon Lord™ rulebook still dancing behind my eyes, I hear darkness whispering behind the faces of dead baby masks. . . No, wait, it's Rob.

Special thanks to Rob for letting me play in his sandbox.

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shadow of the demon lord

ASYLUM

Asylum is no stranger to trouble. Standing at the juncture of two roads north of Sixton, it has faced off against the restless dead, orc brigands, and monsters that have come tumbling out of the wilds. Despite its many hardships, Asylum has survived thanks to the arable farmland that spreads out for miles around, on which the locals grow wheat and other grains. The community itself is small, a place that doesn't warrant a place on any large maps, but it is an important place, at least for now.

The town consists of some twenty buildings that include a smithy, a carpenter's shop, a marketplace, a general store, a stable, a shrine dedicated to the New God, and the Weary Traveler, which is an inn with a taproom.

The community well, from which all the locals draw water, stands near the center of town, in sight of an ancient statue of a man on a horse, whose name and deeds have long since faded from Asylum's memory. That the well still produces water despite the long drought is something of a blessing to the locals, a blessing for which some give thanks to the New God.

Most residents live in the modest wooden homes that make up the rest of the community's structures. Typically, the buildings have stone foundations, wood walls, and slate-shingled roofs. The smithy, the main exception, is a forge with a roof but no walls, and with a small home, like all the others, behind it.

Humans make up almost all of Asylum's population. The sporadic traffic along the Emperor's Road makes locals familiar enough with dwarfs, orcs, goblins, and others, that they are not surprised by such creatures' strange appearance and customs.

Citizens look to **Samyra**, the owner of the Weary Traveler, for guidance and leadership. A woman in her mid-forties, she has brown hair, an easy smile, and an infectious laugh. The blacksmith, **Peter**, has her affections for now, though the lone watchman, **Saul**, has made attempts at catching her eye. **Malery** tends the community's well. A strawberry birthmark that mars the left side of her face makes her a distinctive figure in town.

THE CHARACTERS

The adventure assumes that the characters are located in Asylum, either because they were born here or they have lived here long enough to have put down roots. Characters of unusual ancestries might be recent arrivals; optionally, you can simply decide to have the characters roll into town while on a journey to somewhere else.

Give the players time to determine their characters' places in the community and establish if each character knows the other characters who will form the group.

TROUBLES IN ASYLUM

A drought has plagued Asylum for the last year, leaving the residents mystified about why it is happening. Unbeknownst to them, the cause of the strange weather is related to another, more immediate problem: Folk are starting to be discovered dead for no apparent reason.

DAY ONE: THE FIRST BODY

Saul, the watchman, finds a body on the edge of town. It is that of a cattleherd named **Braidon**. The corpse is dry as a corn husk, completely drained of moisture, and crumbles if given rough treatment. All of **Braidon's** equipment, including a pouch with 3 cp, remains on the corpse.

Braidon's home is just outside Asylum. He was a regular at the Weary Traveler, known for his ability to put down prodigious amounts of ale and for a fiery temper that grows more severe the deeper he gets into his cups. More than a few residents of Asylum—possibly even a player character or two—have gotten into brawls with “the lout,” as **Samyra** describes him. **Samyra** never barred him from the Weary Traveler, though, because his money spent just fine.

The night before his death, **Braidon** was seen heading home, stumbling, cursing, and drunk as a shithouse rat in the wee hours of the night.

The cattleherd lived alone. His simple shack, about a five-minute walk from the edge of town, contains a clue: **Braidon** was given to making crude chalk drawings on the side of his shack. Several of the drawings feature what seem to be a woman with flowing, windblown hair, her robes standing still in the midst of a sandstorm. The statue and the well in the center of Asylum are visible in the background. Characters who examine the drawing closely see lines emanating from the well that suggest it is glowing.

DAY TWO: THE SECOND BODY

As the sun inches above the horizon on the day after **Saul** found **Braidon's** corpse, **Malery** discovers a body lying near the crossroads. It belongs to a weaver named **Glyssandra**, and, as with **Braidon**, her body is dry as parchment paper.

All those in the community, as well as any characters who have lived here for a time, know that **Glyssandra** was a weaver and tailor who worked out of her home in the middle of town. She had a reputation for overcharging folks, being late on commissioned jobs, and not being particularly tolerant of children or misbehavior. She was currently working on a job for **Malery**.

Glyssandra was widowed ten years ago and has remained alone except for her flock of sheep, each of which she knew by name. Inside her cluttered home, the characters find heaps of raw wool, several half-finished garments, and tools of the trade such as shears, combs, spindles, and looms.

Characters who scour her home might discover a note on the shop counter scrawled in an unsteady hand that reads: “I pay you double if you finish the cloak extra quick. I need an offering.” It's signed “**Malery**.” The cloak was never finished, and it remains in the shop.

MALERY'S SECRET

The characters are expected to talk to Malery—she finds one of the bodies, and clues implicate her to a greater or lesser degree. When the characters speak to her, they discover that Malery is a bit simple. She makes up for that deficiency by being incredibly large and strong. Anyone who spends a little time with her begins to suspect that ogre blood might not be too many generations removed in her past.

MALERY

DIFFICULTY 5

Size 1 human

Perception 8 (-2)

Defense 11; Health 15

Strength 15 (+5), Agility 11 (+1), Intellect 8 (-2), Will 9 (-1)

Speed 10

ATTACK OPTIONS

Meaty Fist +5 with 1 boon (1d3)

Malery tends the well by keeping the rope in good repair, the axle on which the chain turns greased. She watches at night to make sure no one defiles the well by relieving themselves over the low stone wall that rings it, and sleeps during the day, when it's harder to get away with such shenanigans. She lives in a cellar connected to the carpenter's shop, a space that's too damp for the carpenter to use for storage. The carpenter, named Adan, lives above the shop with his wife Gina and their five children.

When Malery is first questioned about her knowledge of the well, she becomes ruffled. If questioning continues, she says she doesn't want to talk about it, and becomes "violent," pushing people out of the way or down so she can retreat to her cellar. She'll fight to the death against aggressive characters, but any reasonable effort to deal with her gently, perhaps offering her candy, will calm her enough to get her to tell her story. Malery feels a great deal of guilt, so she can be convinced to share what she knows by showing her just a little kindness.

If Malery doesn't get a chance to tell her story, the characters might learn the vital information from someone else in whom Malery confided. Alternatively, if Malery dies, they can discover what the woman knows from the scribbled notes she left in a journal the characters can find in her cellar.

Malery has been hearing laughter from inside the well for several months, laughter that scared her. She named the sound the "Laughter in the Well." (She is not the only one who has heard the laughter, though the others who have heard it have become the demon's first victims.)

Malery says that a week ago a glowing woman crawled out of the well and asked her for a kiss, but Malery retreated from the woman and ran away. The next day, she commissioned a cloak from Glyssandra because she hoped that the Laughter would accept a gift in lieu of a kiss if Malery was approached again.

On the night Braidon was killed, she saw the same woman come out of the well just as Braidon was stumbling

by, impaired after a night of drinking. The woman offered him a kiss, which Braidon did not refuse. After touching lips, the woman giggled and sank back into the well, leaving a befuddled Braidon to walk off . . . only to be found dead the next day.

When Braidon died, Malery felt guilty for not telling anyone else about the Laughter in the Well, but didn't say anything about what she had seen. Now, discovering now Glyssandra's body has compounded that guilt, and so she is no longer reluctant to share what she knows.

THE COST OF DOING NOTHING

The adventure assumes that the characters will take matters into their own hands after Glyssandra's murder, if not before then. If they decide that their best course of action is to do nothing, or merely to keep the well under surveillance, then Samyra asks for volunteers among the townsfolk to investigate the deaths.

If Samyra knows that the well might have something to do with the killings, she implores some of Asylum's brawniest citizens to climb down and vanquish whatever is lurking there. Anyone willing to try is not heard from again.

Meanwhile, the demon claims another victim from the community each night for seven more nights. After this time, the Inquisition will likely have been called to investigate the matter.

Since the demon doesn't have to use the well entrance to leave its lair, it can emerge from the depths anywhere it chooses, and thus characters who stake out the well do not necessarily see the fiend, though they might hear phantom female laughter echoing up from below. However, if a solitary character is ever near the well at night, the Laughter in the Well might indeed appear and ask for a kiss, which likely ends that character's life.

INTO THE WELL

The evidence the characters can collect makes it clear that the well is somehow connected with the recent deaths. If the characters decide to investigate by climbing down inside the well, the townsfolk supplement their equipment with some important gifts: Peter the blacksmith gives a suit of mail to a strong character, Adan the carpenter gives each character a torch, and Samyra gives a *seeing potion* to one character and a *healing potion* to each other character that did not receive the armor.

Descending into the well requires rope and a modicum of care. Climbing 10 yards down reveals a horizontal tunnel

just above the level of the water, a passage that punches through the well's stone lining and burrows through the raw rock and dirt beyond.

The tunnel is about 1 yard in diameter and filthy, covered in a 1-foot-thick layer of papery dust. Characters who move through the tunnel find it constricting, and the dust covering the floor kicks up, causing coughing and sneezing. At some point, it should become clear that the dust is actually the remains of dozens of bodies, all desiccated and crumbled. These remains belonged to random travelers who were taken from the road by the Laughter in the Well, which began hunting victims right around the time the drought started.

A character who sifts through the dust finds fingernails, toenails, bits of hair, and shreds of clothing, all of which makes it clear the dust must have been people's bodies. The first character to make this discovery must get a success on a Will challenge roll or gain 1 Insanity. Characters who dig through the mess find random belongings of the dead travelers that include 10 cp, a sword, a lantern with oil, and a dog collar with the name "Dragon Bait" inscribed on it.

The tunnel leads to a stone vault door adorned with a carving that resembles a demonic face. The vault door is cracked in half and beyond repair, which lets the characters move through the opening with ease. The area beyond the door opens into area 1.

LAUGHER'S SHRINE

As fate would have it, the town of Asylum stands on a shrine raised to a demon worshiped in ancient times as a deity of desire and desiccation. The shrine is associated with other nearby buried structures (most still lurking undiscovered in the earth).

The inside of the shrine is dark. A light source reveals paintings on the walls that depict an attractive woman kissing swooning men and women, interwoven with other images showing desiccated, animate corpses worshipping at her feet.

The air throughout is as dry as a desert day, making it hard to smell the faint underlying scent of rot. Characters without sufficient water risk heatstroke if they spend more than 30 minutes adventuring in the shrine (see **Exposure** in *Shadow of the Demon Lord*).

Passages are 2 yards wide and tall. Chambers are variously sized, and their ceilings are generally 3 yards high.

Only the Laughter itself is mobile in the shrine. The characters need to find the demon to put an end to the killing and, as at the same time, the drought afflicting the area. The characters can encounter the Laughter whenever you want.

1. Sacristy: From a pool of sand along one wall, dust sprays into the air like water. A **tiny demon** has burrowed into the pool, and if the sand is disturbed, the demon springs up from cover, attempting to kill the intruder by burrowing into its mouth.

2. Blade-Trapped Passage: Each character who moves along this passage must get a success on an Agility challenge roll or take 1d6 damage from sharp blades and hooks that sprout out from hidden wall crevices, then immediately snap back into place after being triggered.

3. Crypt: Thick webs heavily obscure this chamber and the sarcophagi scattered throughout it. Only one is occupied; it contains a **large spider** that hides among the webs. If the creature is undiscovered, it emerges and stalks the characters as they continue moving through the shrine, hoping to catch one of them alone or standing too far back from the others.

(A secret door in this room leads to room 10.)

4. Theater: This chamber contains a dais, on which a clutter of metallic wind instruments are scattered. Whenever another creature appears in the room, a musician (a **ghoul**) clambers up from its resting spot under the dais and begins to play a horrendous dirge. If the characters clap or otherwise express appreciation, the ghoul won't try to eat them. The ghoul is an avid worshiper of the Laughter in the Well, though he knows the demon by another (false) name: the Princess of Privation.

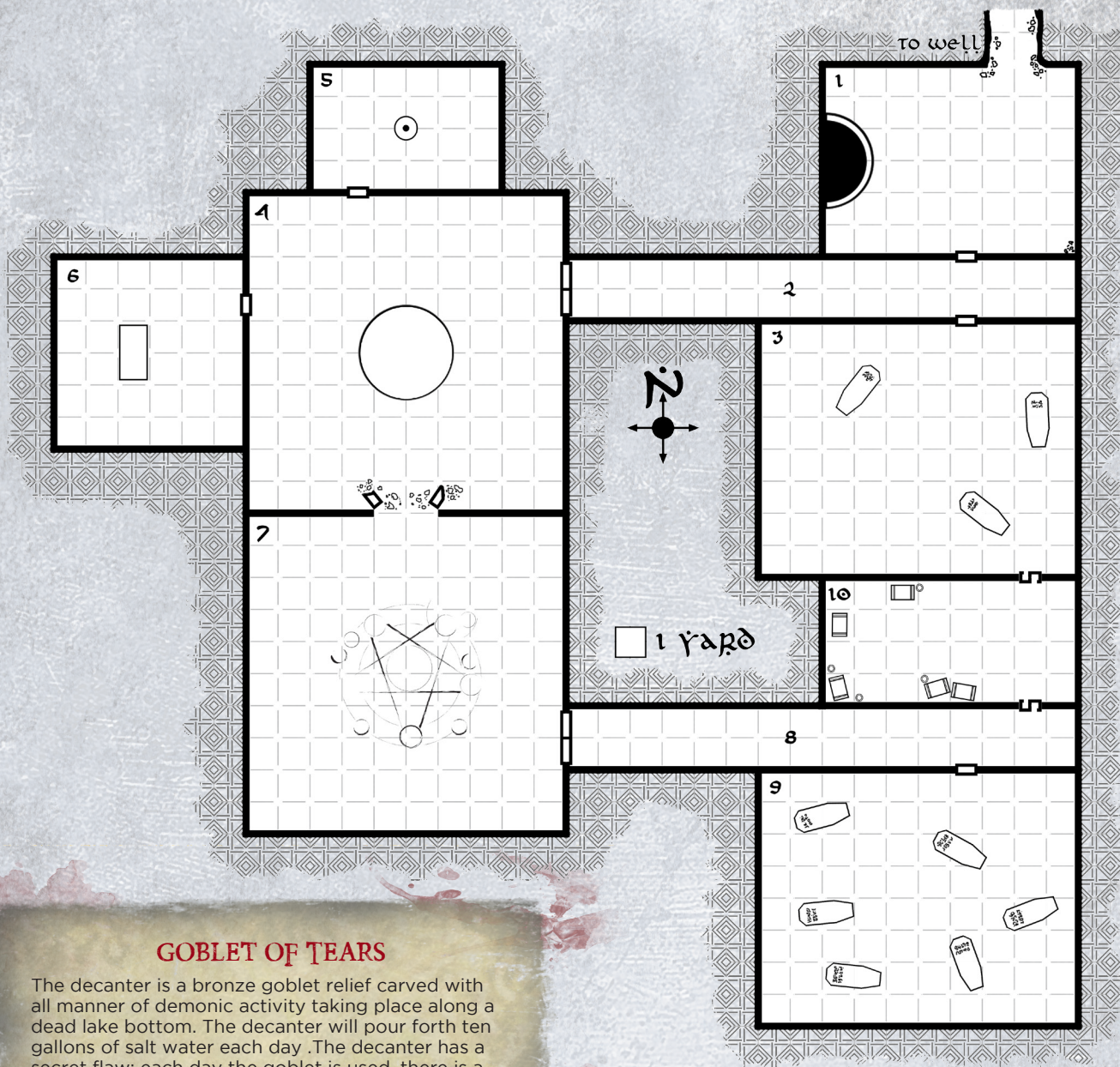
5. Deliberation: A single glass orb is set into the center of a low stone table in this room. The sickly olive light spilling from the orb illuminates a stone chair set at the table. The Laughter utilizes this chamber to concentrate its mind on the surface, looking for its next target.

A character who peers into the light of the orb gains a vision of the area around and above Asylum and learns that the Laughter in the Well is a demon that was once bound to a vile mortal cultist known as the Princess of Privation. The demon slipped free from its magical compulsion after its mistress was murdered by rivals. Now the Laughter seeks to regain its mistress's ancient standing by bringing drought and eventually death to every living creature in and around Asylum, a goal it is very close to achieving.

When the vision ends, the character must get a success on a Will challenge roll or gain 1d3 Insanity. While frightened from gaining Insanity in this way, the character experiences incredible thirst that she believes can be slaked only by drinking the blood of her allies, or, if not theirs, her own. The thirst abates if she manages to procure and drink some blood from any source (or if someone gives her water). Until the thirst is slaked, the character takes a -1d6 penalty to Health that lasts until the character completes a rest. If the character succeeds in getting some blood, she also gains 1 Corruption.

6. Boudoir: A stone slab at this room's center is where the Laughter reclines when not haunting other creatures. It is etched to illustrate a beautiful nude woman, arms stretched wide—something like the chalk drawing on the side of Braidon's shack. Anyone who climbs into the cavity created by the carving is subject to the Laughter's desiccating touch attack. (See the Laughter's statistics box below.)

A hidden compartment in the slab contains a magical item called the *Goblet of Tears*. A **tiny demon** emerges from the decanter's mouth to slay anyone who tries to use it who isn't the Princess of Privation.



GOBLET OF TEARS

The decanter is a bronze goblet relief carved with all manner of demonic activity taking place along a dead lake bottom. The decanter will pour forth ten gallons of salt water each day. The decanter has a secret flaw: each day the goblet is used, there is a 1-in-20 chance that it will not stop producing water for 1 full year at a rate of a gallon per minute.

7. Blasted Area: The rusted iron door to this chamber lies in a crumpled heap near the open entry. The room inside is blackened and cracked, as if some great explosion had occurred here long ago. Despite the great damage, a carved circle filled with blurred and broken runes is partially visible as an inscription that covers the entire floor.

Characters who muck about in the chamber wake a **medium construct** that peels itself off the floor to reveal itself as a creature with a circle inscribed in its hide, not the floor. The construct is hostile and slaps the characters about with its heavy, flexible appendages.

8. Trapped Corridor: On the floor at the center of this corridor is a section of false floor covering a pit. When a Size 1/2 or larger creature passes over the trap, it must get

a success on an Agility challenge roll with 1 bane. On a failure, the creature falls into a pit and takes 1d6 damage upon landing at the bottom, 5 yards down. The false floor tumbles down from above to land on the fallen character, dealing 1d3 extra damage.

If the spider from area 4 stalks the characters still, it sees this as the perfect opportunity to attack a single character who hasn't fallen into the pit or the lone one who has.

Likewise, the Laughter might choose this inopportune time to corner the intruders, if it hasn't done so already.

9. Crypt: Six sarcophagi lie jumbled about this chamber. Each contains a shriveled and dried **animated corpse** with Health 5. When one sarcophagus lid is pried off, the other lids also fall open.

Searching the sarcophagi reveals a sizable find: a rotting coin purse containing 12 cp and 1 gc!

(A secret door in this room leads to room 10.)

10. Laughter's Treasure Vault: As an entity that has been cast out and imprisoned, the Laughter has not amassed a particularly impressive fortune. The many treasure chests in this area are seemingly filled only with the dust of desiccated victims. Characters who decide to look anyway and sift through the dust find 10 cp, 3 ss, and 1 gc.

THE LAUGHTER IN THE WELL

The Laughter is a minor demon that has lived in the mortal world for many years, since the time when the great fey lords and ladies ruled the Northern Reach. The demon learned from its fey patrons, and that knowledge enabled it to conduct a ritual that afflicted the land with drought, and that has also allowed it to begin moving beyond the confines of its shrine (prison) recently and feed on the moisture of living creatures, one at a time. If not stopped, the demon might become a mighty fiend of great power

and stature, whereupon everyone and everything around Asylum would become its prey.

Sometimes the demon looks like an immaterial female human. When it reveals itself, the demon appears as a desiccated corpse with eyes like empty lakebeds. The demon speaks the Common Tongue, as well as Dark Speech and High Archaic.

Killing the demon or driving it off ends the killings and the drought.

LAUGHTER IN THE WELL

DIFFICULTY 25

Size 1 horrifying demon

Perception 13 (+3); truesight

Defense 17; **Health** 20

Strength 16 (+6), **Agility** 13 (+3), **Intellect** 11 (+1), **Will** 15 (+5)

Speed 18

Immune damage from disease or poison; gaining Insanity; dazed, fatigued, frightened, immobilized, impaired, poisoned, slowed, stunned

Spell Defense A demon takes half damage from spells and it makes any challenge roll to resist a spell with 1 boon. A creature attacking the demon with a spell makes its attack roll with 1 bane.

Moisture Drain Creatures out to 1 yard around the demon are stricken with thirst.

ATTACK OPTIONS

Claws (melee) +6 with 2 boons (2d6 plus desiccating kiss on attack roll 20+)

Desiccating Kiss Against a living creature of flesh and blood, the Laughter makes a Strength attack roll against the target's Strength. On a success, the target withers for 1 minute. At the end of each round, the target must get a success on a Strength challenge roll with 1 bane or take 1d6 damage. A target incapacitated by this damage dies, its corpse a withered, completely dry husk.

SPECIAL ACTIONS

Mist Step The Laughter uses an action or a triggered action on its turn to become incorporeal mist, move up to its Speed without triggering free attacks, then become corporeal again. Roll a d6. On a roll of 1-3, the Laughter cannot use Mist Step again for 1 minute.



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