

Simargl / Steve Cooke  
Somnolent Wanderer

The empty city. You've been here before. And, as easily as that, you are elsewhere. A parched land, a land of red sand and no rock and no shelter. There is no sun in the night sky. It is cold. You wrap your robe around yourself. Wind, bone-chilling, whips your cloak around you. The sky is uncharacteristically empty for this realm of dreams - barely three dozen stars haphazardly arranged like little chips of ice on a sable cloth.

It rarely does to stay in one place. You pick a direction and walk. Sand shifts and slithers under your feet, but at least the going is flat. No dunes.

After a time walking, the red-tinged sand becomes striated with black. Fine, sharp sand runs through your fingers, leaving speckles of blood in its wake. Glass, or something of that nature. Stripes of it across the darker sand, sand the colour of weltsilver ore.

Normally, the transitions in this place are at least somewhat subtle, but not this time. There is a rumbling, thunder in the earth, and the sand rises around you. The desert immediately around you, a circle barely ten feet across, stays stable but the rest heaps and hisses and churns. For a moment you cannot tell if the place where you stand is lowering into the ground or the sand rising, but the stars don't move.

Reaching fingers of red and black sand thrust up all around, like posts. Then they split and filigree, and within five heartbeats you are in a forest. Trees made of sand. The rumbling stops, there is no wind. Each leaf on each branch is a delicate construction of loose sand - touch it too roughly and it falls apart sifting down. The same with the trunks themselves - a firm touch and they begin to turn back into sand. A wonder.

Through the the sand forest, then. Picking your way between the red-and-black unliving trees. And then, ahead, as you perhaps knew there

would be, the shape of a building. A Dawnish hall, gaudy and extravagant, but marked by the passage of many years. It is grey stone, you are reasonably certain, standing out in monochrome starkness against the red-and-black sand trees.

Forlorn banners hang lifeless - there is still no wind. Windows stare, broken eyes with barely shards of glass hanging in them. The stillness is unpleasant, oppressive, heavy. Warm. There is a smell here, like old dry meat. It catches in your throat.

A portal - a double door of which only the left half remains, and that barely on its hinges. A courtyard, with high towers and more sightless windows. Bones. The courtyard is covered in skeletal remains, cracked and broken, not one intact. Broken skulls, torn ribs, shattered legs and arms. A thin layer of red sand covers everything, suggesting flecks of blood.

On the other side of the courtyard is a black arch, into the midnight interior of the hall. Scraps and tatters of banner hang to either side, torn ribbons of sickly green and blood red.

Then, a voice. A high voice, rich like chocolate and honey, that rolls out of that portal, welcoming you. Something shifts in the dark, something much bigger than you are. A bestial stink gusts out across the bone-littered courtyard, a predatory musk coupled with the rotten stench of an open grave. You barely keep your gorge in check. Eye glitter, piss-yellow with the long slit pupils of a cat, in a face you cannot see. They are big - larger than dinner plates, and hover in the dark ten feet from the ground at least.

A paw, part-way between dog and cat, treads lightly on the courtyard flags, crunching a broken skull like eggshell. Whatever beast lives here is in no hurry to reveal itself, however. It interrogates you, playfully, in that mellifluous tone, asking who you are and why you are here and would you not wish to break your tiring journey by coming into its great hall where its servants can tend to you. You can wash off the dust of the desert, luxuriate in hot water and soap. A meal, fine wines, and talk of

what you have seen on your travels.

It does not seek to trick you, not really. You sense it is simply bored, going through the motions. It cannot really harm you, you who have the license of this place, but perhaps you wonder for a moment how your companions, those who visit this place with you sometimes, would fare.

There is some banter, some back and forth, barbed witticisms, clever words. The creature does not come out into the dim starlight, and you can make out little more than its emaciated bulk beyond the black portal. It's breath stinks like an abattoir. It is not human, or orc, but there is something... perhaps this is some old Dawnish enchanter, their body warped and changed when their true self was given the chance to show itself.

It speaks of the joy of crunching bone, and chewing. Of live prey, of the moment it realises it cannot escape. Of the power of the predator - yet for all its bravado you realise this is a scavenger not a hunter. It skulks and sneaks until its victims are too tired, or injured, to strike and then it feasts. A carrion eater, for all its bulk and obvious power. A coward, perhaps, but a deadly one.

Still, it's voice is musical and entrancing and if you were less aware of the tricks of the Dreamscape you might not have noticed that as you talk, the courtyard shifts subtly and gently, shortening the distance between you and the portal and the beast beyond. The demense itself conspires to put you in harm's way. You allow it to continue until you judge that you are close enough that the thing could pounce... and the mounting glee in the voice of the creature makes it clear that it is aware that you are getting closed. And then you step away, perhaps amused to imagine the irritation of that odd beast.

**Effect:** During your talk with the odd beast, it has gently supped upon your personal mana, irritating. It has been depleted, rather than replenished by your night's sleep; you have four fewer mana than you would expect to. You can recover personal mana as normal - via a potion

or a Chamber of Secrets or similar - but it is as if you had spent all your mana in your sleep rather than resting fully.

Provided you have at least one rank of the appropriate lore, until the start of the next Profound Decisions Empire event you can perform the ritual Hunger of the Draughir (Winter/2), Ravnous Tongue of Entropy (Winter/10), Howling Despite of the Yawning Maw (Winter/50) as if you had mastered it; if you have already mastered this ritual, you may perform them as if you have one additional rank of the appropriate lore, subject to the normal rules about additional ranks. You should keep this vision and show it to a referee if you perform this ritual.

**Roleplaying effect:** When you awaken, for at least the next hour, fragments of the desert, the sand trees, and the lair of the awful beast intrude into your perception, especially broken and shattered bones and skulls, and the stink of the beast - rotten meat, predatory musk, people you are speaking to taking on a bestial aspect or yellow eyes. They are hallucinations, and will disappear as quickly as they come.

As long as the enchantment lasts you experience a roleplaying effect: you find it easy to divide others into predators and prey. You may find yourself musing how you could devour anyone you classify as prey, or making plans for destroying or evading anyone you consider to be a predator. Anyone you cannot easily place in one category or the other is fascinating, and you feel an urge to assess and evaluate them until you finally categorize them.