

RATS *in the* **WALLS**

by Jeffrey Talanian

An adventure in
HYPERBOREA

designed for 4–6 characters
of 1st through 2nd level

For use with
**ASTONISHING
SWORDSMEN & SORCERERS**
OF **HYPERBOREA™**
and other traditional fantasy
role-playing games

Baggley
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RATS in *the WALLS*



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HYPERBOREA
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Credits

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Originally appearing in **Knockspell Magazine**, this revised version of *Rats in the Walls* is a system-neutral adventure compatible with most traditional fantasy role-playing games (c. 1974 to 1999) and their modern simulacra. The author suggests trying *Astonishing Swordsmen & Sorcerers of Hyperborea™* as a rules system. *AS&SH™* is inspired by the fiction of authors such as Robert E. Howard, H.P. Lovecraft, and Clark Ashton Smith. Game rules and conventions are informed by the original 1974 fantasy wargame and miniatures campaign rules as conceived by E. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson.

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INTRODUCTION

Renowned is the City-State of Khromarium, the most culturally disparate city in all of Hyperborea. In Khromarium, one can enter almost any dockside tavern and expect to encounter Vikings, Kelts, Esquimaux, Picts, Amazons, and Kimmerians drinking and mingling. Occasionally seen is a gaunt Hyperborean garbed in mail, or a dusky-skinned Ixian caped in tattered velvet. Local fishermen and longshoremen of mixed ancestry also flock to Khromarium's dockside taverns. They drink before launch and upon return—bitter ale, rancid whiskey, and sometimes an expensive bottle of pomegranate wine, if the sea proves bountiful.

Notwithstanding, the tavern called “Silvery Eel” appears vacant this evening. As your party drops its gear to the floor and seats itself at a battered table of pine, you assume the place is out of ale. The barkeep quickly stokes the fire and approaches your table. No, they are not out of ale. As he takes your order, he glances nervously at the walls and ceiling. His hands tremble and his brow glistens.

Moments later, as he returns with your order, you catch a glimpse of a scrawny young woman in the kitchen. Her eyes are hung with dark circles, and she regards you with a haunted expression. Finally, one of your party asks the barkeep, “Is there something amiss here at the Silvery Eel?”

“No, of course not,” he replies with a taut smile. But then he sighs, slumps his shoulders, and admits, “Yes. Yes, I’m afraid something is dreadfully wrong . . .”



REFEREE'S NOTES

What follows is information for the eyes of the referee alone; players should cease reading now. First included is some brief information on Hyperborea and the port city of Khromarium, followed by this adventure's *dramatis personæ*, and then the adventure itself.

Monster Statistics:

AL = Alignment	hp = Hit Points
SZ = Size	#A = Number of Attacks
MV = Movement	D = Damage
DX = Dexterity	SV = Saving Throw
FA = Fighting Ability	ML = Morale
AC = Armour Class	XP = Experience Points
HD = Hit Dice	Special = Special Abilities

Non-Player Character (NPC) Statistics:

ST = Strength
DX = Dexterity
CN = Constitution
IN = Intelligence
WS = Wisdom
CH = Charisma

These statistics are compatible with most traditional fantasy role-playing game systems, albeit interpretations of the statistics may be at variance from system to system. For instance, *Fighting Ability* represents the monster's basic combative skill as compared with the fighter class; a monster with FA 3 fights as a 3rd-level fighter.

Hyperborea: Hyperborea is the default setting for *Astonishing Swordsmen & Sorcerers of Hyperborea*. Inspired by the creative works of R.E. Howard, H.P. Lovecraft, and C.A. Smith, Hyperborea is a "flat earth" micro-campaign setting, a polar continent at the End of Time that might be reached via arctic travel, planar travel,

or even time travel. Hyperborea is a bleak world ruddily illumed by the scarlet light of a bloated, dying sun. At the rim of the world the seas spill perpetually into abysmal infinity. Several races of men populate Hyperborea, as well as humanoids (such as **ape-men** and **orcs**), weird alien beings (such as **crab-men** and **mi-go**), and all manner of horrific beasts of myth and legend. Hyperborea can be just beyond the *boreas* ("North Wind") of any campaign setting, published or home-brewed.

Khromarium: The City-State of Khromarium is a major port city, its harbour being the largest known in Hyperborea. Khromarium is a dismal, seedy place, choked by the smoke of its factories, and poverty and homelessness account for the largest segment of the city's population. Many of the destitute take sanctuary in Old Khromarium, where once dwelt the most affluent of families—that is, before the Green Death decimated the city's population a thousand years ago. Centuries later barbarians reclaimed the lifeless city and its favourably located port, but much of the old city remains a place of mystery and death. Like the setting of Hyperborea, the City-State of Khromarium is easily replaced by any port city.

Khromarium is governed by a Lord Mayor, selected by a ruling oligarchy of men comprising the city's most powerful knights, nobles, and guild masters. At present, Gill Sampatose, Master of the Mariners' Guild, serves as Lord Mayor. Khromarium's populace is largely Neutral in alignment, though leaning toward Chaos. Although the city is not without the influence of Law, justice is seldom served with any semblance of equality.

ADVENTURE NOTES

The referee should familiarize himself with the following notes before running this adventure. What follows afterwards should also be reviewed, though it is fairly straightforward and can be run by an experienced referee “on the fly”.

Xill Vuntos, Tavern Keeper of the Silvery Eel:

Xill Vuntos is a round-faced, balding man who combs over his remaining hedge of hair. A year ago he purchased the building from the city. The previous owner, an importer of spices, hung himself in the basement. He owed a substantial debt to the city, and so the property was auctioned to the highest bidder: Xill Vuntos, who had recently inherited his family fortune. Xill renovated the building as a tavern and named it the Silvery Eel.

Soon the tavern became a hot spot for local fishermen and dockworkers. The ale was good, the boiled lobster delicious, and the fish chowder fine. Then came the rat problem. Within a year it eroded Xill’s patron base, caused the deaths of his wife and youngest daughter, and now haunts both his life and that of his surviving daughter, Annesta.

Infestation: Every dockside tavern gets its share of rats; it is unavoidable. At the outset Xill’s problem seemed no worse than that of any other tavern, so he took the usual measures: cats, traps, and so forth. Nothing seemed to work. The traps were found broken; the cats dead, their throats ripped asunder.

The rats, many of unseemly size, would scurry across the floor and over his patrons’ feet, biting ankles and chewing holes in the walls. Xill would plug the holes after-hours whilst listening to the dreadful sound of scratching in the walls—claws

scrabbling up and down, up and down. Each of Xill’s three serving wenches was bit, and after two of them took ill and died, the third one quit. Xill was hard-pressed, forced to work his wife (Mordag) and eldest daughter (Annesta) long hours.

One night, whilst the three served a rowdy group of seamen, Xill’s youngest daughter (Nallesta) was left unattended for several hours in her bedroom chamber above the tavern proper. Later they discovered the child withered and listless, riddled with puncture wounds. When Nallesta died, Xill’s wife went mad of it, eventually killing herself. Now there are only Xill and Annesta, and the word is out amongst the locals: The Silvery Eel is plagued and cursed. Except for the occasional foreign arrival, no one patronizes the place anymore.

Xill’s Offer: He offers a **2,000-gp pearl necklace** to eliminate his rat problem. He also offers a magical shield (**+1 small shield**; sheds five feet of light when straps gripped). This item, he explains, belonged to a thief who recently promised to solve Xill’s rat problem. Xill found the man dead in the basement, his throat torn out, his skin withered and grey. Xill grants complete access for an exhaustive investigation of his property, but he asks the party to try not to trouble his daughter, Annesta, because she has endured so much.

Annesta: The girl is 17 years of age, tall and somewhat homely, with straw-like yellow hair and sunken features. She is a taciturn sort, but if prompted to speak she may admit that unbeknownst to her father she has been bitten five or more times in the night—on her stomach, behind her neck, at her ankles. In each instance she is in her bedroom, and she recalls a pinch of pain, but has been unable to waken from her

nightmarish slumbers, which involve a terrible woman with the visage of a swine and massive, bat-like wings. She does not wish to admit any of this to her father, because she feels he has endured enough pain with the loss of his wife and Annesta's young sibling.

Other Clues and Developments: The following may be found through investigation:

- ◆ Scratching intermittently heard in the walls; **giant rats** scurry up and down.
- ◆ Rat droppings, the size of what a small dog or large cat might deposit, many of a strange crimson colour (blood).
- ◆ Holes in the walls; chiselled tooth marks betray the rodents' large size.
- ◆ Bite victims suffer a greyish pallor of the skin and subsequent listlessness.
- ◆ Neighbouring warehouses show no sign of infestation.
- ◆ Recently an arrogant Hyperborean patron made strange allusions regarding the history of the Silvery Eel. The Hyperborean is among the crew of a galley moored at the pier; it is hard to miss him (seven feet tall, golden hair, blue mail, battle axe).

Kiloplo Vheez: Kiloplo Vheez is the Hyperborean, seven feet tall with golden hair, clad in blue mail with a battle axe strapped to his back. He is the first mate of the *Berg Breaker* and can be found at the nearby pier, overseeing the conveyance of goods to and from the galley. He will entertain questions, though he proves condescending and apathetic.

The gaunt Hyperborean may admit that he possesses special knowledge of the Silvery Eel tavern, if he is accorded proper deference. His father, a sorcerer of no little reputation, told him that in the days when the true Hyperboreans

ruled Khromarium, and the "sub-men" knew their station, there stood at that locale a sorcerer's tower overlooking the harbour. It was burnt to its foundations in the aftermath of the Green Death; the current structure, he presumes, was built atop. Kiloplo Vheez advises the seekers to search for a foundation of red sandstone blocks intended to support a much larger structure.

Vheez is a uniquely classed *AS&SH* character: a *warlock*. This is a fighter subclass that dabbles in sorcery.

Kiloplo Vheez (3rd-level warlock): AL N; SZ M; MV 30; AC 4; HD 3 (hp 24); FA 5 (battle axe) or 4 (dagger); #A 3/2 (battle axe) or 1 (dagger); D d8+2 / d10+2 (battle axe) or d4+1 (dagger); ML 10; XP 47; ST 16, DX 16, CN 10, IN 16, WS 10, CH 8.

Special: magician spells (*burning hands*, *sleep*; *web* ×2), *weapon mastery* (battle axe).

Gear: battle axe, dagger, chain mail, backpack, 50-foot rope, iron rations, wineskin, **potion of healing**, spell book (*burning hands*, *sleep*; *web*).

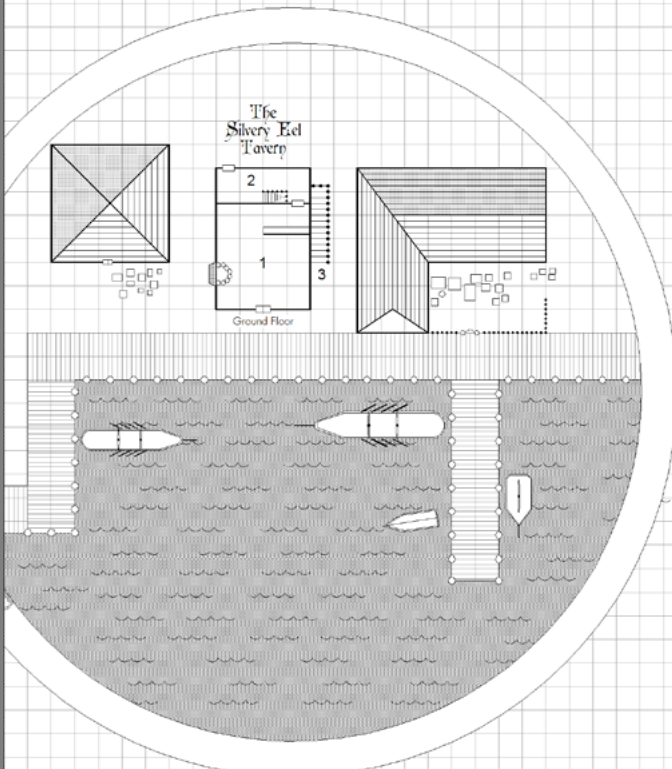
If the party begs his assistance, he might acquiesce (referee's call), though only for a substantial reward: a 50% share of any monetary treasure discovered, and, upon conclusion of the quest, a treasure item of choice, if any is won. Otherwise he is uninterested, calling the party and the barkeep a group of fools.

Rats, Rats, and More Rats: Note that since this adventure includes a fair number of **giant rats** (perhaps 100), the statistics for these foul rodents are listed in the **APPENDIX**, to avoid redundancy. Also, about every 6 turns (1 hour) there is a 1-in-6 chance of randomly encountering **1d4+2 giant rats**.

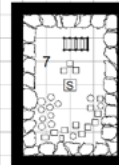
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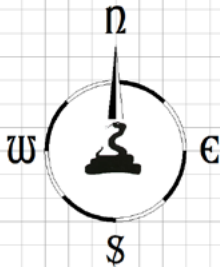
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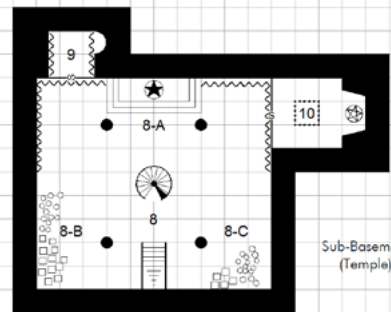
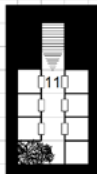
First Floor



Basement



The Dungeon



Sub-Basement
(Temple)

1 square = 10 feet

GROUND FLOOR

The exterior of the entry door is painted with silver zigzagging eels surrounding a foaming mug of ale.

1. Common Room: Typical tavern common room with fireplace, tables, benches, bar. Behind the bar is a door to the back room (see #2). Riddled whitewashed walls are patched with planks or stuffed with straw, corking holes where the rats have chewed through. Xill serves the patrons. Annesta works in the kitchen.

- ◆ Fish chowder = 3 sp per bowl (includes hot roll with butter and mug of ale)
- ◆ Gill of whiskey = 5 sp
- ◆ Pint of ale = 1 sp
- ◆ Full dinner = 1 gp (boiled lobster, sweet potato, goblet of red wine or mug of ale)

If the PCs investigate they find the chewed holes are unusually large. When all is quiet, the rats are heard scabbling up and down in the walls.

2. Kitchen: Typical kitchen. Annesta works here. Casks and crates are here, including this morning's lobster purchase, wine, and ale taps. A wash basin holds mugs and plates. More holes are present here (covered with scrap wood). Scratching may be heard in the walls. Annesta may be engaged here, as indicated in the **ADVENTURE NOTES** (q.v.), but not when her father is present; several uncomfortable glances in his direction may betray her reticence. A back door leads to the street, and stairs descend to the basement (see #7).

3. Exterior Stair to First Floor: Rickety stairs to Xill's dwellings above.

FIRST FLOOR

4. Hallway: This hallway has one window and three doors. At the east end is a stack of crates holding silverware that Xill once used. With business so poor, he intends to sell the lot (*100-gp value, individual pieces worth 1–3 gp each*). There are **5 giant rats** (hp 3; see **APPENDIX**) nesting in the largest crate. Droppings behind the crates are of a deep crimson colour.

5. Xill's Bedroom: The tavern keeper's chamber has a window, a door, a bed, and a dresser. When the sun sets the rats begin scratching at the walls and continue throughout the night, slowly driving the man mad. Sometimes he finds himself caught in a deep slumber from which he awakens only by his own screams. Xill keeps a small idol of the toad god Xathoquua in his chamber.

6. Annesta's Bedroom: This chamber has two windows, a door, a bed, a dresser, and a mirror of polished steel. The crib for Annesta's deceased little sister (Nallesta) is here. Holes are chewed through the wall behind the dresser. Under the dresser are large droppings of crimson colouration. The bed linens are spotted with blood. A **secret compartment** is under a loose floorboard.

Secret Compartment: Contains the diary of the previous owner. Early pages are dedicated to his mundane thoughts regarding his work and his admiration for a young woman in the employ of a local seamstress. Further entries complain of the rats. Later, he writes of his nightmares involving a swine-faced dæmon woman. His rat problem worsened, so he brought in cats; they howled and ran amok before they were slaughtered. His writings eventually give way to mad ravings, a conviction that he has fallen victim to an inescapable curse, no doubt bestowed by the dæmon of his nightmares.

BASEMENT

7. Basement: The basement is one large chamber cluttered with crates, boxes, and casks of various sizes. The walls are composed of massive sandstone blocks fitted together, though somewhat separated from age. It is easy to see how the rats might enter the walls of the tavern proper above. With patient observation, the party might hear a rat or two deep inside the blocks scabbling up or down. The ones that scabble down continue scratching downward until no longer heard.

The casks hold ale, wine, pickled eels, and pickled fish. The crates and boxes hold various tools and supplies, including aprons, blankets, candles, canvass, cloth, cooking herbs, knives, lamps, mugs, nails, rope, salt, sacks of lentils and rice (ripped open and nearly emptied), spoons, twine, and the like. Several crates are empty and smashed, Xill having used the wood to plug rat holes in the common room above. There are several large droppings here. Amongst the debris of the southwest corner there are **5 giant rats** (hp 3; see **APPENDIX**). They emerge to attack if the crates are disturbed. These rats have a penchant for collecting shiny coins: **57 gp** and **102 sp** in the southwest corner.

Secret Door: In the centre of the room a flagstone conceals a **secret door**. It may be discerned (upon a successful check) by its discolouration as compared with the other flags. The flag must be pried open, revealing an iron trapdoor with pull ring. The door is rusted shut. It can only be pulled open by an *extraordinary feat of strength*; however, three characters can work together and combine their percentile scores for one big pull. (If they fail, a second chance might be allowed.) A spiral stair with old, dusty cobwebs is revealed below, quite dark.

9. *Astonishing Swordsmen & Sorcerers of Hyperborea*

SUB-BASEMENT

The spiral stair descends 50 feet.

8. Temple of Aurorus, “The Shining One”:

This massive temple area was where the ancient Hyperboreans worshipped one of their favoured deities: Aurorus, “The Shining One”. The stone floor is scratched and littered with large droppings. Four stone pillars support an arched ceiling of some 40-foot height. Stone stairs descend to the south, whence a nauseating stench wafts; the stairs are littered with droppings and appear sticky with urine. Note that there are two **secret doors** in this room. The one at **#10** is easily discovered, as noted hereafter.

8-A. The Altar of Aurorus: Upon the dais stands a 12-foot statue of Aurorus, carved of green soapstone. Its indistinct lower body is swathed in robes, its head that of a three-faced woman. One face stares south, whilst the other two stare east and west. Strangely, the dais contains not one rat dropping.

Iron shackles are bolted into the floor before the dais. If a man or woman is chained here, and the correct incantations are spoken, the eyes of all the faces sparkle. Then a sparkling light manifests above the statue to descend on the victim and take him or her, body and soul.

To the left and right of the dais, old velvet curtains, rotted and mouldy with age, depend from bent iron rods. Two **secret doors** are behind them.

8-B. Boxes and Casks: These boxes and casks do not seem to fit the temple environment. Indeed, they are the spoils of pirates who hid here during the Dark Age that followed the Green Death. Centuries have passed and the

once-valuable scented woods they stored have not only rotted, but have become a nest for **6 giant rats** (hp 3; see **APPENDIX**). They attack if the crates are disturbed, followed by more rats from **#8-C** within 1–4 rounds. A **golden statuette of Kthulhu** (500-gp value) is hidden in one crate. If destroyed, the perpetrator is plagued by nightmares until at length he either submits his soul to Kthulhu or goes mad (within a year); only a *remove curse* spell can help. In another crate there is a pile of **78 gp**, **54 ep**, and **80 sp**.

8-C. More Boxes and Casks: There is nothing salvageable here, but several of the casks show that they once held wine vinted in Port Greely. There are **4 giant rats** (hp 3; see **APPENDIX**) here. If this pile is disturbed, they attack, soon joined by the rats of **#8-B** within 1–4 rounds. One crate contains **34 gp**, **15 ep**, and **29 sp**.

9. Old Vestry: This room is accessed by a **secret door** that swivels on a central pivot. The room has a bed, a dresser, and a small bookshelf. The room appears undisturbed, yet in fine shape despite the passage of centuries. Velvet curtains dyed maroon hang on the east and west walls. Behind the curtains stand **5 skeleton halberdiers**. They wear black homespun cloaks in curiously fine condition and great helms with plumes of red-dyed horsehair. Each skeleton is seven feet tall and wields a halberd. These arms are mottled with rust, save one with a silvery-shining blade; this is a **+1 halberd**.

Skeleton Halberdiers (x5): AL CE; SZ M; MV 30; DX 11; AC 7; HD 1 (hp 4); #A 1 (halberd); D 1d10; SV 16; ML 12; XP 16. *Special:* Immune to poison, paralysis, fear, and cold-based attacks. Edged and piercing weapons do half damage. *Note:* One skeleton halberdier wields a **+1 halberd**.

The bookshelf contains a leather-bound volume of prayers and rituals devoted to Aurorus, “The Shining One”. The sacrificial rites are included as described at **#8-A**. Beside the prayer book is a velvet-lined cedar box that contains a **potion of healing** (*light blue liquid*), a **potion of invisibility** (*oily clear liquid*), and a **potion of cure disease** (*pulpy green liquid*; see **APPENDIX**).

In a cubby space behind the east curtain a suspended wooden pole is racked with long, cowed gowns of purple velvet, each embroidered with gold thread and studded with tiny diamonds, sapphires, emeralds, rubies, and amethysts; these stones portray what appears to be a constellation. There are five such gown (250-gp value each).

10. Summoning Chamber: This room is accessed by a **secret door** that swivels on a central pivot. The door is slightly ajar. (Referee should increase probability of discovery, or simply allow automatic discovery if the party search well.) A rusted iron cage extends from the flagstone floor to the 12-foot ceiling. The cage has no door. The skeleton of what can only be described as a dæmon is within. It has a vaguely humanoid 9-foot-tall shape. Its skull is porcine, with ram-like horns and pointed teeth. Its shoulder blades extend, suggesting great, membranous wings. The skeleton appears to have died whilst gripping the bars of its cage.

At the east end of the room a magic circle that encloses a pentagram is engraved in the floor. Globes of melted wax are set at each point of the pentagram. Any sorcerer will recognize this as a sorcerer’s protection whilst summoning dæmonkind. In the centre of the circle rests a **+1 silver dagger**. If the magic circle is entered or if the cage is disturbed in any way, the skeleton’s eyes glow. It speaks as follows:

- ◆ If the party has yet to enter the dungeon (see #11), a female voice purrs, *“You have failed, sorcerer. In your absence I have taken a new host, and soon I will have another.”* Mocking laughter follows these words.
- ◆ If the dungeon has already been visited and the dæmon rat destroyed, the skeleton cries out, *“Fools! How dare you destroy my host? No matter, my new host will prove even more powerful! I will be free!”*

DUNGEON

11. Dungeon: The stone stairs are worn and littered with rat droppings and urine. They must be carefully negotiated or one might fall. Forty feet down, the stairs are littered with skulls and skeletons, human and semi-human. The skulls suggest the amalgamation of man and apedom as seen in the wilds of Hyperborea: the dreaded **ape-men**, creatures of primitive intelligence. They appear to have perished in attitudes of fear and panic. Many bones have been gnawed by rats.

There are eight cells in the dungeon, each once secured by a barred iron door, now corroded, warped and broken. The cells are choked with the skeletal remains of men and ape-men. Presently, **6 giant rats** (hp 3; see APPENDIX) emerge. The spine-chilling laughter of a woman erupts from the south end.

A huge, bloated **dæmon rat** (hp 30; see APPENDIX) emerges from the debris at the southwest corner. From its swollen nipples hang eight ruddy-pink pups, each of one-foot length. The enormous rat laughs, and then speaks in a mocking female voice (the same as that of the dæmon skeleton of #10). It says, *“Oh, how divine. Never do my children bring enough blood to keep me sated. Presently, I will drink of your sanguine riches, mortal pigs.”*

The scene is horrific: Dried blood covers the nipples of this bloated monstrosity and the blind faces of the pink pups that attend it. The **swine dæmon** (see #10) possessed this creature long ago, and now it controls all the rats that plague the Silvery Eel; it endeavours to possess Annesta next.

Referee’s Note: The **dæmon rat** explodes when killed. Its death effects the deaths of any remaining giant rats that served her.

In the southwest corner, behind the nest there is **185 gp, 78 ep, 92 sp**, a **gold chain** (50-gp value), a **pearl ring** (100-gp value), and a **periapt of health** (aquamarine opal set in silver and depending from a thin silver chain).

CONCLUSION

After the dæmon rat is destroyed, the curse is lifted; all remaining giant rats keel over and die. Still, there can be a last “bite” for the players, should the referee choose to add further ramifications. Annesta has sustained enough bites to suffer a curse, and this might develop into *lycanthropy*; i.e., she might become a **wererat** in the future, one with a taste for blood. She can haunt the players at some future point, reaching a point of madness in which she becomes possessed by the spirit of the **swine dæmon**.

For the time being, Xill and Annesta are thrilled that the curse is ended, and Xill will gladly provide the offered reward (**2,000-gp pearl necklace** and **+1 small shield**). Once word gets out and the place is properly repaired, perhaps business returns to what it once was, but the painful memories will never subside.



APPENDIX

Rat, Giant: Rodent of 3 to 3½ feet long and weighing up to 60 lbs. AL CE; SZ S; MV 40 (swim 20); DX 8; AC 7; HD ½ (hp 3); #A 1 (bite); D 1d4; SV 17; ML 8; XP 9. *Special:* 1-in-6 chance of infecting victim with disease, unless *death* (poison) save is made. If save fails, victim either dies in 1d6 days, or is bedridden for a month with pain and fever. Roll a d6: On a score of 1–3, the disease is terminal; otherwise the non-deadly strain is contracted.

Dæmon Rat: Bloated, 8-foot-long rodent. AL CE; SZ M; MV 30; DX 6; AC 4; HD 5 (hp 30); #A 1 (bite); D 2d4; SV 14; ML 12; XP 700. *Special:* Bite infects victim with disease, unless *death* (poison) save is made. If save fails, victim dies of fever and delirium in 1d6 days. Summon **1d6 giant rats** once per day.

Potion of Cure Disease: Cures nearly all forms of disease. The subject is alleviated of all debilitating effects within 1d6 rounds. (*XP value 300, GP value 600*)

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Special thanks to the following Knights of Next Tuesday:
Dan Berube, Jonas Carlson, and Donald Manning. I still can't believe Dan had his character drip fresh blood on the bones of the caged dæmon skeleton. Actions have consequences, gentlemen...

HYPERBOREA

RATS in the *WALLS*



Inspired by
H.P. Lovecraft

In the City-State of Khromarium, a dockside tavern called the Silvery Eel is plagued by rats of a most unusual breed. These abominable rodents have ruined the tavern keeper's business and his life. The man is desperate, and he offers a substantial reward for the elimination of his horrific problem.



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