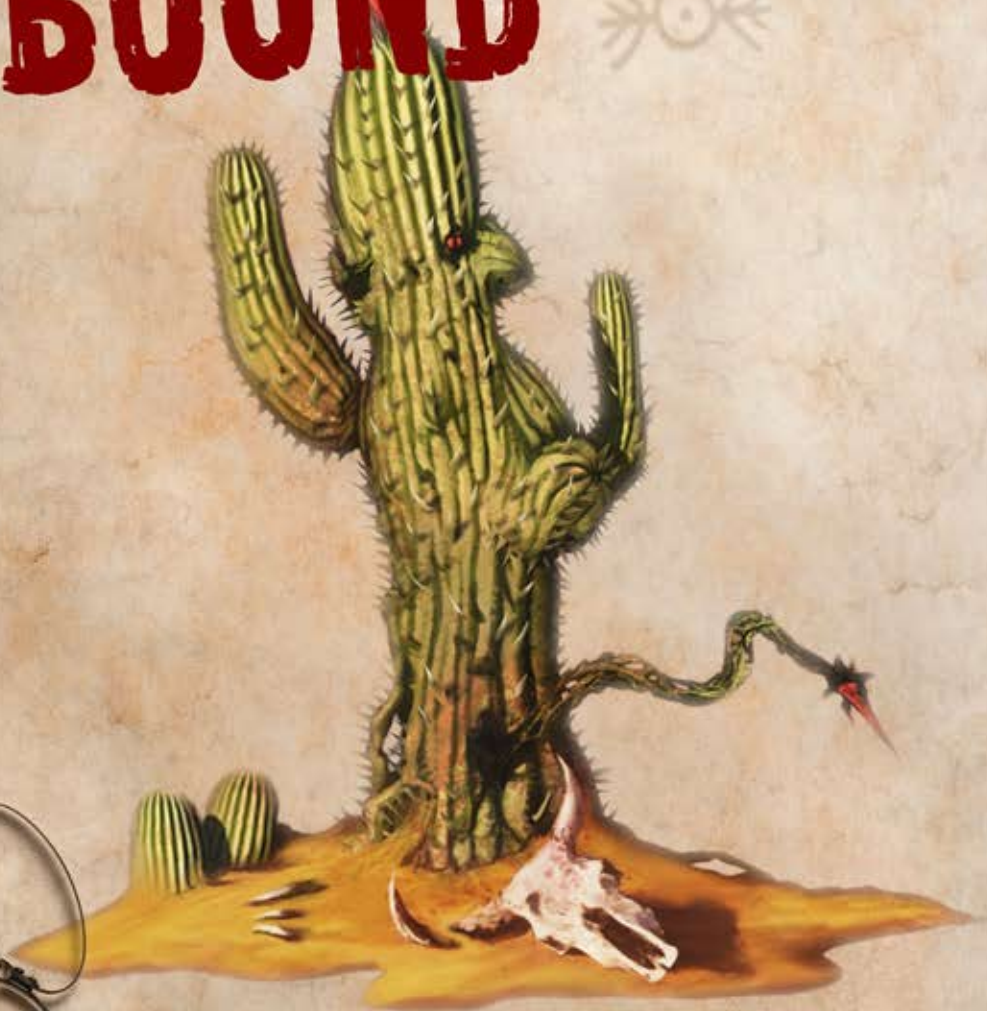


HORRORS UNBOUND



BLOOD KAKTOS

by G. Scott Swift



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BLOOD KAKTOS

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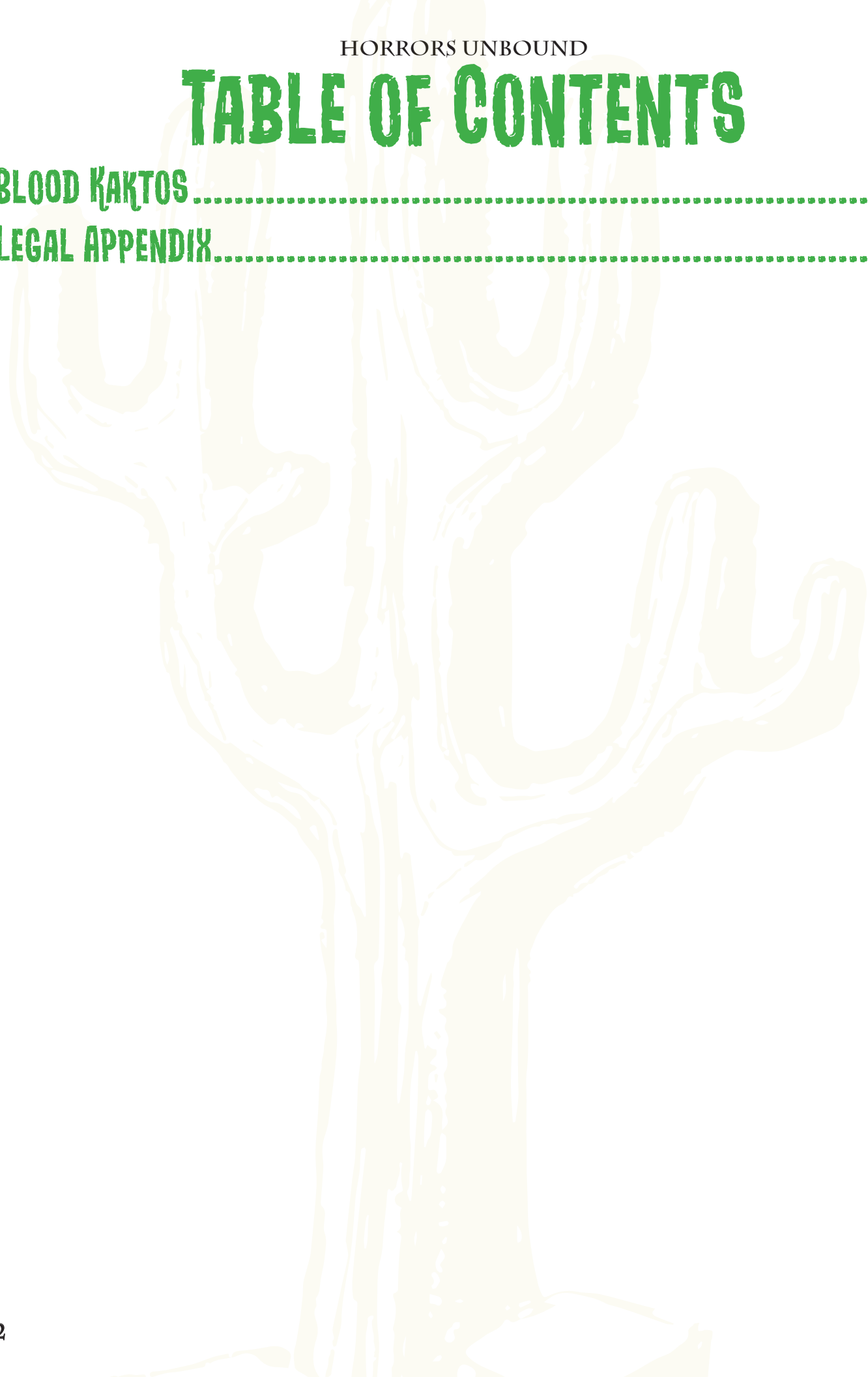
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SWYFTE'S PHYSIOLOGUS:

BLOOD KAKTOS

BY G. SCOTT SWIFT

Swyfte's Physiologus is a collection of ecologies of wondrous beasts, monstrosities, and horrors. Swyfte was a scholar hired ages ago to travel alongside the Company of the Frog to chronicle its exploits and record information about any creatures encountered.

Copies, even partial copies, of the ancient text are sought by sages and adventurers alike in order to better understand these creatures and possibly gain some advantage in combat against them.

It is rumored that a corrupted desert dryad created these creatures as companions and bodyguards, having fed ordinary cacti the blood of her victims while casting enchantments to bring about their sentience, but this has never been proven, for these creatures have been in existence for as long as we have traversed the desert.

ECOLOGY

BLOOD KAKTOS (CARNEGIEA SUCCO)

The blood kaktos, Carnegiea succo, is a motile, sentient arborescent plant that inhabits any warm, sandy environment. It is a relative of the common saguaro cactus and has leathery green flesh covered with needle-like spines, with two jointed, branch-like arms sprouting from a large trunk that grows to between 5–7 feet tall upon maturity. The top of the trunk is usually rounded and called a crown, but in rare cases, the top fans out in a cristate formation containing multiple small crowns. A slot in the lower third of the trunk allows for a proboscis to be extended and retracted. The proboscis, a large specialized spine attached to the trunk by a pulsating veiny vine, is used for anesthetizing and sucking the blood of usually unaware victims. Three eyes, each approximately two inches in diameter, appear as a darker shade of green (typically positioned in a scalene triangle formation) and are the only obvious sensory organs. The casual observer could easily perceive the eyes as ordinary scars or imperfections found on a common cactus and may not be aware they are looking at a deadly blood kaktos. During its reproductive phase, a blood kaktos will be adorned with an indigo or deep red petaled flower upon its crown, or potentially multiple flowers upon a crested top.

Blood kaktos use their shallow root systems to move to prime feeding locations to prey upon travelers and animals, often positioning themselves amongst a copse of other cacti to prevent detection. Blood kaktos usually attack at night while people or animals are sleeping. Their common tactic is to quietly sneak up on a pack animal and painlessly suck its blood before slipping off. If their presence is sensed, they will attack by swinging their prickly arms, or worse, by projecting a large number of awl-like spines from their trunks in all directions. Silent communication between themselves enables coordination of attacks or retreats as necessary.

Upon dissection, one finds a hollow trunk filled with a watery liquid and a pulpy mass towards the crown with a network of veins leading from various parts of the body to a twisted knot of fibrous material that is akin to the human brain.

Blood kaktos, capable of proficient motility only upon sandy surfaces, inhabit desert regions, or in rare cases, sabulous coastlines. Blood kaktos usually frequent oases or areas where mirages occur—places that attract travelers and animals—and can be encountered alone or in a copse of common cacti or other blood kaktos (up to ten or more). They do not have a structured civilization but tend to congregate with each other. They communicate telepathically with one another, conveying emotions and intents but lacking a complex language. Young blood kaktos are independent after sprouting from the seed but will often be found with a group of other kaktos, learning feeding locations and attack methods.

As the name implies, the blood kaktos is hematophagous: iron-rich blood helps to stimulate flower growth for reproduction. Like other members of the cactus family, the blood kaktos is succulent, capable of storing water in its trunk, allowing it to survive during times of drought; however, blood is its preferred liquid even when not in the flowering stage.

Blood kaktos reproduce by flowering, with germination provided by birds and insects. The flower will be present



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on approximately 15% of the kaktos, 50% on those that have recently phlebotomized a victim. The natural color of the kaktos flower is indigo, but if the kaktos has recently fed upon blood, the flower turns the deepest of red hues—midnight red.

GM Note: If the crown of the kaktos is crested with multiple small crowns, apply the above percentages to each crown to determine if a flower is present.

EVIDENCE OF ACTIVITY AND TRACKING INFORMATION

The shifting sands of deserts and coastlines leave little evidence to track the blood kaktos. Barring disturbances, the sand will have tracks that appear as if a mass of snakes slithered together, leaving a wake approximately three feet wide. They leave no excrement or other markings that would assist a tracker in hunting.

Desiccated corpses of warm-blooded creatures with or without severe scratches and multiple needles sticking out of them can be found where blood kaktos have fed. Some corpses might have only a single slit from the proboscis, having been drained in their sleep and too weak to survive the harsh desert environment for long.

COMBAT TACTICS

Seeking not conquest, nor glory, nor riches, the blood kaktos' only desire is for blood and survival. They generally employ stealth during the night, roots flagellating in a writhing dance, silently propelling themselves across the sand to the perceived lowest intelligence warm-blooded creature, desiring to insert an anesthetic via proboscis, feed upon the iron-rich blood, and depart as quietly as they arrived. They often go after the pack animals of an adventuring party or caravan, hopeful that an errant whinny will be ignored by the more intelligent creatures amongst what they consider a pack. If successful, they will slowly slither away, back toward the cove from whence they came, hoping to blend in with the nonsentient cacti.

GM Note: Any creature bled in such a way will have a 70% chance of being nonfunctional the next morning from loss of blood and weakness.

If detected, the blood kaktos will fight for its meal (though may retreat if the odds are stacked against it). A silent, telepathic alert will be sent to all kaktos within a 60-foot radius as it engages any who dare attack. Two articulated, spine-covered arms swing at any who approach, needles piercing deeply upon impact and ripping flesh as they are withdrawn. The kaktos can grab an enemy with both arms as well, creating an iron maiden effect, and while it has its victim subdued, it will extend its proboscis to penetrate and drink the blood of the creature, further weakening any resistance.

The kaktos is capable of short bursts of movement, closing distance when needed to pursue runners or approach attackers at range. It has its own projectiles as well: highly modified leaves known as spines that it can shoot out in all directions. The photosynthetic green flesh of the blood kaktos is highly elastic compared to its relative, the cactus. Thousands of pores allow it to inhale air into a layer between its outer flesh and inner membranes. With a powerful thrust from its inner trunk, air pressure forces dozens of spines from their areoles, creating a painful and often deadly barrage of needle-like projectiles. Though this attack lacks precision, the numerous flying needles rarely miss their mark completely.

The kaktos is just as content to dine upon the recently dead as it is the living.

PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS

With only a tattered leather map to guide us, our desert scout having abandoned us three days back after the giant scorpion attack, we continued on in search for the sand palace of the mighty djinn who had placed a curse upon our benefactor, King Pladdin the 3rd.

What we thought was a pond in the distance was a mirage. The poor desiccated camel we found near a cove of cacti must have thought the

same, collapsing with disappointment after only finding more sand and cacti with its dying efforts. Desperate, tired, and thirsty, we hobbled our pack mules and made camp for the night, with only a few sips of water allowed each of us.

The temperature went from blistering hot to chilly, and all but the watch fell right to sleep. I awoke as the whimpering of a mule turned to a whinny and then a full hee-haw as the beast of burden struggled against its hobbles. I turned to see a large cactus amidst our pack mules, on the perimeter of our camp where one had not previously been. Charles the Righteous and Finch were on watch, and Charles bellowed out for all to rouse as he approached the towering cactus, shield in hand; Finch was nowhere to be seen. In an instant, the sound of a thousand tiny whooshes was heard, along with tinging like hail upon metal, then a loud "Youch" as the thief, Finch, emerged from the shadows near the cactus, recoiling in pain as his sneak attack was foiled.

Glaze, the wizard, illuminated the area with an arcane word, and we could see two more cacti silently approaching our camp. Bill was soon up and charging the nearest foe, only to take a mighty punch from his plantlike adversary. The mighty warrior let out something betwixt a scream of agony and a battle cry and then swung his mighty greatsword, cleaving the prickly beast in half, the upper body dropping to the ground and the lower remaining erect in the sand.

Charles brandished his holy mace, bashing again and again while peeking from behind his shield as punches were thrown and needles flew in all directions from the cactus. Finch recovered and seemed to learn how to avoid the bulk of the needles through his adroit gyrations, allowing him to land stab after stab into the green, leathery flesh until the foe moved no more. The unfortunate mules were caught in the storm of needles and all but one were silenced as they fell lifelessly one by one to the ground with a thud.

Glaze extended a finger and let a stream of fire spray forth, washing over the last cactus as it approached. Though the monster was thwarted, the fire did not have the charring effect that we had grown accustomed to witnessing. The cactus did, however, reverse course, firing a barrage of needles intermittently as it slithered back into the darkness, deterring our desires to pursue it.

Charles tended to the wounds of our companions and the remaining pack mule, removing needles from the pinpricked Finch, Bill, the mule, and himself. We slept uneasily for the remainder of the night, and upon the light of day, we investigated the site of the carnage. Finch, licking his parched lips, noticed a reservoir of water within the trunk of one of the lifeless cacti. A cautionary raised eyebrow from Charles the Righteous stayed his desire to drink the liquid, our reserves being on the strictest of rationing and Finch seeing a possibility of quenching his thirst. Charles soon eased Finch's disappointment when he cut a hole near the base of the cactus and collected the sanguineous liquid into a silver bowl as it poured out. He began to pray to his god, and the liquid gently bubbled, glowed with a dim light, and became colorless. "You may drink it now," he said, and Finch did not hesitate to drink his share before passing it around to the rest of the party.

BLOOD KAKTOS

Large plant, lawful neutral

Armor Class 14 (natural armor)

Hit Points 60 (8d10+16)

Speed 25 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
17 (+3)	10 (+0)	14 (+2)	10 (+0)	9 (-1)	7 (-2)

Skills Stealth +4, Perception (+3 or +1)

Damage Resistances fire

Damage Vulnerabilities cold

Condition Immunities deafened

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 13 (or 11)

Languages Blood Kaktos telepathy

Challenge 2 (450 XP)

Silent Slither. The blood kaktos has advantage moving silently through sand when sneaking up on prey.



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Telepathic Communication. The blood kaktos cannot speak, but it can communicate with others of its kind through telepathic communication. The communication consists of the conveyance of emotions and intent, allowing groups of blood kaktos to loosely coordinate attacks against prey.

Actions

Multiattack. The blood kaktos can make two Prickly Punch attacks.

Prickly Punch. *Melee attack:* +5, range 5 ft. *Hit:* 6 (1d6 + 3) piercing damage and 3 (1d6) poison damage.

Lover's Embrace. If both prickly punch attacks are successful against the same target, the blood kaktos has embraced the victim. The victim is grappled and restrained until it breaks the embrace. On the same round, the blood kaktos extends its proboscis to penetrate any exposed skin, writhing through armor joints if need be. This is an automatic hit that causes its victim to lose 3 (1d4 + 1) hit points each round as the blood kaktos gorges upon the victim's blood. If the victim breaks free from the lover's embrace, the blood kaktos immediately retracts its proboscis, fearing damage to its delicate organ. The victim must succeed in a DC 13 Strength (Athletics) or Dexterity (Acrobatics) check. A victim that escapes a lover's embrace sustains an additional 3 (1d6) slashing damage as the needles rip the escapee's flesh.

Huff and Puff (recharge 4-6). The blood kaktos inhales air into the space between its outer layer of skin and its inner membranous tissue and then forces it out sharply, spraying needles in all directions over a 10-foot radius. Any creature within this area must make a DC 14 Dexterity saving throw. Those that fail the saving throw take 7 (2d8) piercing damage from the flying needles while those that succeed take half this amount.

HUNTING THE BLOOD KAKTOS

There is profit in hunting the blood kaktos for its flower and other body parts, and the best way to find them is through rumors from travelers of their presence in the desert or to simply seek out known oases where they would be expected to feed.

Ranged attacks, outside of the kaktos' needle range, are best if wishing to avoid casualties. If able, attackers should stand upon rocky outcroppings and shoot arrows from above as the blood kaktos is incapable of climbing or proficiently traversing rocky surfaces. They will, however, slither out of range of attackers, given the opportunity.

The creatures are resistant to fire, having grown accustomed to the extreme heat of the desert, but are susceptible to cold attacks. Blood kaktos are considered to be plants with regards to a ranger's favored enemy and magical spells or devices that affect plants though they are considered magical creatures.

TREASURE

Blood kaktos usually have no treasure other than their harvestable body parts, the exception being any valuables carried by their dead victims as they have no use for possessions.

HARVESTABLE PARTS

Water, up to five gallons, can be found inside the trunk of the blood kaktos though it is often tainted with the blood of its victims, and the water and blood mixture has a 25% chance of causing a bloodborne disease of the liver or immune system (GM's discretion). The water can be purified through magical means to remove the disease potential.

GM Note: Create situations where your players are desperately thirsty. Include consequences for dehydration such as penalties to attack and damage rolls, saving throws, and skill checks. Death should also be a possibility.

The leathery hide of the blood kaktos can be used as primitive armor if cured properly. The armor will inspire no fear or beckon no envy, but it will turn an occasional blade (AC 11). Some desert tribes wear this armor exclusively for lack of other available resources. It takes 1 hour and 30 minutes to remove enough kaktos hide to create the makeshift armor and

another 3 hours to fashion it into useable armor.

The spines of the blood kaktos have a mild irritating poison. Native tribes and practitioners of poison value the needles as they can be used as part of a tincture to increase the damage of weapons, usually projectiles. Twenty needles can be sold for up to 1 gp to a poisoner or the equivalent in trade from a native tribe.

The flower of the blood kaktos is said to have the deepest of red hues. It is called midnight red, and one flower does not produce much dye but fetches a high price amongst the nobility and the wealthy. It can take up to twenty flowers for a single garment. This price has resulted in a small decrease in the population of blood kaktos, but the harsh desert environment is usually enough to keep hunting parties away, allowing the species to still flourish. If flowering, there is a 10% chance that the flower will be indigo (and worth 10 gp) and a 90% chance that the flower will be midnight red (and worth 100 gp on average).

The proboscis is considered by some to be a phallic symbol and is used by hedonistic cults to symbolize virility. It is either dried and lacquered in its erect form and used as a ceremonial rod (called a kaktos rod) or dried and pulverized into a powder to be eaten or snorted as an aphrodisiac. If properly harvested and preserved, one can sell for 25 gp to the right buyer.

PREPARATIONS USING THE BLOOD KAKTOS PARTS

SPINES

The spines of the blood kaktos must be carefully harvested from the creature, wearing thick leather gloves and removing them with pliers. Once acquired, they are ground into a powder, and witch hazel is added to form a paste. The paste can be applied to darts, arrows, etc. to add damage (1 hp) to any projectile. The paste can also be applied to bladed or piercing melee weapons, but the effect only lasts for one hit (adding 1 hp of damage). The compound degrades after being exposed to air for more than 24 hours.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

Below are some adventure hooks with specifics that can either be used as written, expounded upon, or tweaked as the Game Master sees fit.

- Blood kaktos make great wandering monsters in any desert or sandy beach setting, creeping up on any campsite or party taking a short break or camping for the night.
- Grindawk, a nefarious gnome merchant, seeks to hire the party to retrieve water from a small pond in an oasis in the desert. The water, he tells them, is magical and is a necessary ingredient for a vitality potion, and he wishes to sell the water to a wizard the next town over. He will give the characters a precise map that leads two day's journey into the desert. He will pay the characters 200 gp for the retrieval of two wineskins of the water, giving them 50 gp in advance for their journey and suggesting they collect as much water as they can for their own profit. If the characters agree, they will find the oasis as described at the end of the second day of the journey, now needing to camp nearby or continue traveling through the night. What Grindawk doesn't tell them is a cove of blood kaktos awaits them upon arrival to the oasis. There is a pond fed by a subterranean stream, but the water is not magical. The blood kaktos will attack the party either upon arrival or at night, preferring at night. Grindawk's true plan is to lure wealthy looking adventurers to the oasis, have the blood kaktos do the dirty work of killing them, and then travel to the oasis himself to pick the corpses clean of their valuables (after giving them a total of four days to safely return). He manages this by bringing vessels full of pig's blood as an offering to the blood kaktos, satiating them and buying himself enough time to loot and depart. He will take any desiccated corpses with him and later dump them elsewhere in the desert to avoid alerting the next group of adventurers. However, there is a 25% chance that there will be either a dead human or other mammal present at the oasis upon

BLOOD KAKTOS

arrival of the characters. If the characters successfully acquire the water and survive the blood kaktos attack, Grindawk will sheepishly pay the agreed upon price of 200 gp. The characters will have to deal with the aftermath of trying to pass off plain water as magical if they wish to sell their “magical” water.

- A great haboob pummeled the land for three days. One week later, a caravan arrived, telling of an ancient ruin uncovered by the shifting sands. The ruins are sealed tight, the caravanners unable to open the great doorway to investigate the inside. When the characters arrive at the ruins, they discover a puzzle door barring entrance to an ancient desert monument. As they ponder the door, blood kaktos attack.

- A caravan merchant wishes to hire the party to eliminate a cove of blood kaktos that is attacking his crew at a waypoint oasis in the desert. He offers to pay 300 gp for proof of the eradication of the cove.

- A thief, Tretos, disguised as a desert guide, intentionally leads the characters to a blood kaktos patch en route to their destination. He slips off in the night and will return with his gang (that trailed the party at a distance) to engage the party in combat during the blood kaktos attack. The rogue gang will attack at range with the plan to safely loot the party after the blood kaktos have fed.

- High fashion has gripped high society, and the color red is all the rage. Khalleed, the bazaar merchant, hears of the characters’ intent to travel into the desert. He offers them 50 gp for each (midnight red) blood kaktos flower they return to him. What he doesn’t tell them is Prince Madigral is seeking these flowers for his wife’s new dress and is paying 200 gp per flower. If the players engage in diplomacy or otherwise investigate, they

will learn that they can fetch a higher price for the flowers from other buyers, perhaps not 200 gp but at least more than 50 gp with successful Charisma checks (the better the check, the higher the reward).

- Prince Vespious is the secret apex buyer of the midnight red flowers, hoping to convert his wardrobe to entirely midnight red as well as attire his fledgling cult of blood drinking followers in the deep red hue. The cult’s ultimate goal is to summon a demon to barter for immortal life in exchange for an offering of tortured souls—the cult has been abducting citizens of the realm to torture, drink their blood, and offer their broken bodies in sacrifice to their demonic overlord. The characters are tasked by the beleaguered town guard to investigate the disappearance of citizens of the region.



HORRORS UNBOUND

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