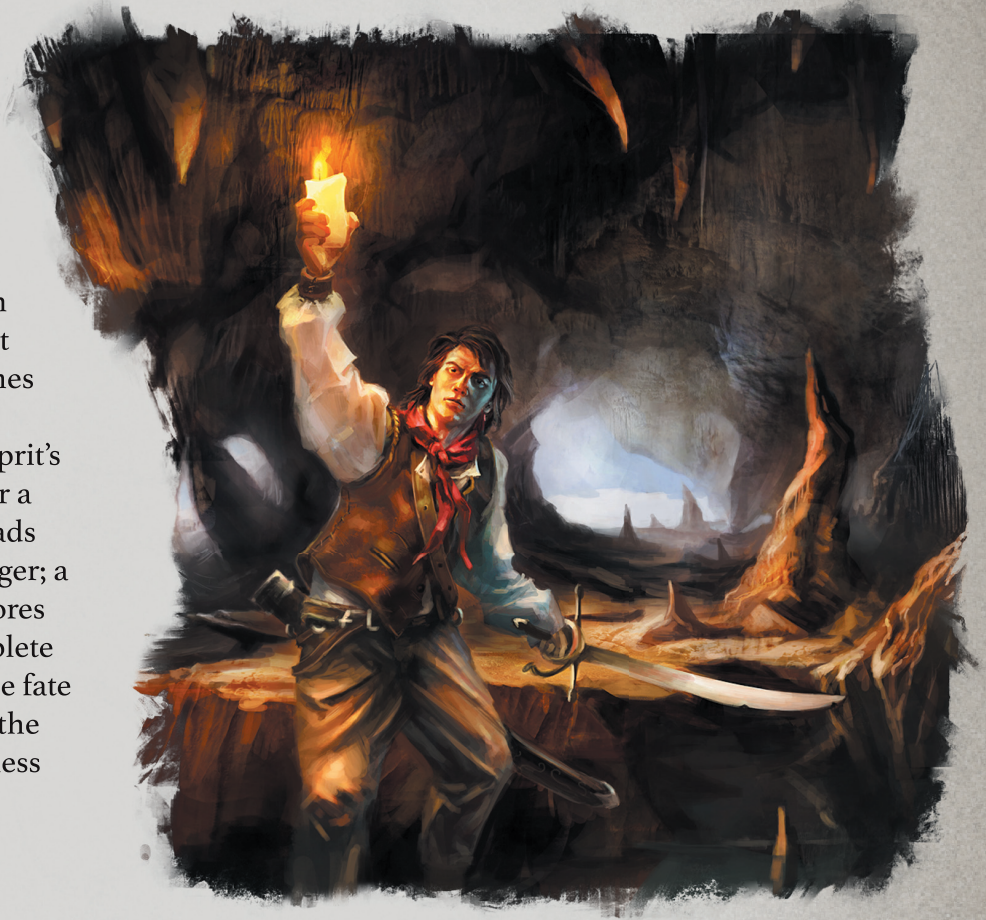


a case of consumption

An Adventure for Expert Characters

All three heirs to the Garnach family line have gone missing, sending the household into a panic. *A Case of Consumption* is an adventure for expert characters who have developed a reputation as people who can get things done in the Northern Reach. The Garnach family is influential in the Reach, but they're at their wits' end when it comes to rescuing their children. More an exploration than a mystery—the culprit's motives and plans become clear after a rudimentary investigation, which leads the player characters to the true danger; a dark, and mysterious cave on the shores of Mirror Lake. The characters complete the adventure when they discover the fate of the Garnach children and escape the horrors uncovered in the fetid darkness into which they must go.



~CREDITS~

WRITING AND DESIGN:
DAVID NOONAN

EDITING AND DEVELOPMENT:
ROBERT J. SCHWALB

PROOFREADING: KARA HAMILTON AND
CARLOS DANGER

ART DIRECTION: ROBERT J. SCHWALB

GRAPHIC DESIGN AND LAYOUT:
KARA HAMILTON

ILLUSTRATION: KIM VAN DEUN
AND BOB SCHWALB

CARTOGRAPHY: CECIL HOWE

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SCHWALB ENTERTAINMENT, LLC



PO Box #12548, Murfreesboro, TN 37129
info@schwalbentertainment.com
www.schwalbentertainment.com

BACKGROUND

About four weeks ago, the three children of Lord Garnach—17-year-old Auri, 15-year-old Byron, and 12-year-old Vanessa—were struck ill with a strain of the Shuddering Pox (see *Fever Dreams*) that hadn't been seen in the Northern Reach for years. The family sent for priests of the New God, but they lacked the means to cure the affliction. Fearing the children would spread the sickness to the entire household, they were quarantined in the high tower of Castle Garnach, where it seemed they would slowly waste away from the disease.

Lord Roderick Garnach lived an ordinary noble's life, but he chose a commoner—an uncommonly beautiful one—to be his wife. Among Lady Lyssa's many brothers and sisters was a man named Padraig, a staunch follower of the Old Faith. He remembered folklore the Garnachs had forgotten, specifically how the people of Thorpe dealt with the Shuddering Pox years ago, long before the cult of the New God came along. To save the rest of the community, they carried the sick into a cave on the shores of nearby Mirror Lake.

Padraig found it no trouble to pluck the children from the tower, for Lord Garnach has always prided himself as being a man of the people, and always welcomed his wife's family within the castle walls. Since none of the castle's servants or guards wanted anything to do with the plague-stricken and possibly contagious children, no one stood in Padraig's way when he came for and then left with the children early one morning. When Roderick and Lyssa realized the children were missing, the call went out—a call the player characters have answered.

Meanwhile, Uncle Padraig took the children to a cave on the western shore of Mirror Lake and bade them enter. If harsh words and an unexpected shove were required, well, that's only cruelty in the service of kindness. However, what Padraig did not know was that the cave wasn't just a cave; it was the mouth of a subterranean horror that had grown fat on victims of the plague long ago and has been starving for years for want of fresh, diseased meat. After depositing the children in the cave, Padraig began to suspect the truth—the children were meeting a terrible fate somewhere within—and has become nearly mad with grief, too afraid to go inside and find out what befell the children he had doomed.



GETTING STARTED

Castle Garnach overlooks the town of Thorpe, just east of Crossings in the Northern Reach. When Lord Garnach discovers his children are missing, he sends men into Thorpe to roust anyone who might be useful in the search effort, while Lady Lyssa and the castle's servants try to piece together what happened in the tower earlier that morning. Exactly how the player characters get up to Castle Garnach is up to you. Some possibilities include:

- The characters have a reputation for bravery and heroism—both quantities in short supply in these dark times. Even if they merely look dangerous, that's enough to attract the attention of the lord's men.
- The characters dealt with Lord Garnach in a prior adventure and know him to be a fair sort... at least as petty lords of the Reach go.
- One or more characters has a background that involves the people of Thorpe generally or the Garnach family specifically.
- Garnach's men aren't exactly subtle when they hint about a reward. The adventure site itself doesn't have any treasure, so you can be generous when it comes to the terms of the reward.

AN AUDIENCE WITH THE LORD

Lord Roderick Garnach is all business when the characters arrive. He greets them brusquely, explains what little he knows, and gives the characters the run of the castle, with servants attending them as escorts.

As mysteries go, this one is straightforward. The guards at the castle gate waved Padraig inside the walls early this morning, knowing him to be Lyssa's common-born brother. Visits from him were never frequent, but the guards knew him by sight and assumed it was an ordinary family visit—"someone's birthday, maybe?" one guard suggests.

Several chamber-servants saw Uncle Padraig enter the northwest tower, where the children were quarantined. One servant heard the children walking about, which she took as a good sign since they've had little energy of late. No one goes into the tower except to drop off trays of food, so no one saw Uncle Padraig or the children within it.

A cursory search of the northwest tower reveals the children dressed and took their breakfast with them—the trays are empty, but the servants find no fruit peels or other waste one would expect. There's a tunnel (unguarded) leading to a larder (unoccupied) with an exterior door (unlocked). Lord Roderick fumes if the characters inform him of the last.

Uncle Padraig lives in Thorpe with his wife, Vera, and they have no children of their own. Vera is at home, and once she knows “those darling children” are at risk, she turns white as a sheet and tells the characters what she suspects:

“Padraig still follows the Old Ways, and for several days he’s been mutterin’ about how the Shuddering Pox is back and how that damn fool Roderick is just going to let it claim everyone.

“Last night he was especially grim. He said he knew of one sure way to end the plague and the suffering of those kids. He said his grandfather showed him a cave on the shores of Mirror Lake—a cave where they took those who had the Pox.

“Oh no—when he said ‘end the suffering of those kids,’ I thought he meant cure them. You don’t suppose he meant....”

Vera also notes Padraig took their black donkey, Pete, with him when he left that morning and, sure enough, donkey tracks lead east from the larder door.

EXPANDING THE ADVENTURE

The characters should be able to figure out what happened in a matter of hours, and Roderick gladly lends them horses to follow Uncle Padraig. You can expand the story before the characters reach the cave in two ways.

First, you can obscure the rather obvious clues and introduce other suspects to make it a full-fledged mystery. Lord Roderick is no tyrant, but one doesn’t remain a lord without making a few enemies. Figuring out it’s not a kidnapping (the children went willingly, though under false pretenses) and Padraig is the culprit can be fun if you’ve a table of would-be detectives as players.

Second, the journey to Mirror Lake is a short, uneventful one that takes only a day on horseback. However, it doesn’t have to be that way! You can extend the distance to emphasize the overland travel as described in the Running the Game chapter of *Shadow of the Demon Lord*, using weather, travel conditions, and random encounters to make it a challenge to reach Mirror Lake. You can also make it less obvious which of the many caves in the nearby cliffs is the right one. Many of the other caves lead downward into troglodyte lairs and worse.

One other note: If the characters’ motivation to help seems to be flagging, one servant within the castle can take them aside and relate the following:

“If you find the oldest lad, Auri, make sure he’s still got that silver signet ring his dad gave him. The castle’s treasure coffers are magic, and those silver rings are what opens ’em. Lord Roderick wears one, and he gave his eldest the other one.

“Now, I’m not saying the children shouldn’t come back, of course. No, not at all. I’m just saying if the ring comes back, I might know the secret room where the coffers are.”

THE CAVE ENTRANCE

Unlike the dozens of other caverns dimpling the western cliffs of Mirror Lake, the cave with the Garnach children isn’t a geological feature. It’s a living thing—an ancient demon-worm bigger than a whale, and what appear to be caverns are actually its digestive tract.

Imperial Sages probably have notes about a creature called “The Consumptor” somewhere in their archives, but no one in the adventure knows it by that name. To Padraig and the folklore he remembers, it was simply “the cave.” He and other members of his religious community knew it was different but didn’t know why.

As the surroundings become less cave-like and more organic, the characters should realize they’re inside a living creature. That’s the key horror element to this adventure—well, that, and the knowledge they’ll be traversing the entirety of its digestive tract if they would escape from the demon’s body. Let the players speculate, but resist the urge to either tip your hand or obscure the truth. Let it play out naturally; some might guess it right away, while others could hold onto the idea that they’re inside a cave all the way up until the point when it tries to digest them.

Note, the adventure site is necessarily a linear experience. It is an immense demon-worm, after all, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t meaningful choices to make. The characters need to decide what to do with the children once they reach area 5, and they may face additional threats if they intentionally hurt the Consumptor during their exploration.

PADRAIG

The children’s uncle is mostly useless at this point, teetering on the verge of madness. He was certain he was doing the right thing for his gods and his people, at least until the moment he pushed a 12-year-old girl into a pit. The folktales and rites of the Old Gods didn’t prepare him for the eerie silence that followed.

He has no idea what happens next and he won’t object to the characters entering the cave to look for the children. He has lucid moments in between crying jags, but he can do little beyond express regret and worry.

Padraig won’t willingly descend into the cave. The characters can force him to do so at sword-point, but he’ll be even more useless and weepy inside the cave than he is at the entrance.

DAMAGING THE CONSUMPTOR

As far as the characters can tell, the Consumptor is insensate and doesn’t consciously react to the miniscule creatures within it. Whatever it perceives, it does so on levels mortals cannot fathom. The Consumptor isn’t

defenseless, though—it has “antibodies” of sorts that protect its innards from damage.

The first four areas include descriptions of what constitutes damage to the Consumptor. The first time the characters damage the Consumptor, it reacts by extruding 1 **muttering maw** from the walls of the digestion chamber (area 5). The muttering maw makes its way to the point of the damage and attacks anything it perceives to be a threat. The second and subsequent times the characters damage the Consumptor, 2 **muttering maws** pull free from the walls.

The muttering maws don’t respond to damage within areas 5 and 6; the players already have enough to deal with there.



A RAIL CONNECTION

If you’re planning to use the “Off the Rails” adventure from *Tales of the Demon Lord* later in your campaign, mention the rail line running along the western shore of Lake Mirror. The rail line is atop the shoreline cliffs and the cave is beneath them, it isn’t important in the context of this adventure. However, the line blows up during “Off the Rails,” so you can foreshadow it a bit by mentioning it in passing now.

1. THE CAVE MOUTH

Unlike the other caves nearby, the cave mouth sits right at the lake’s shore. The water level on the lake is high enough for it to trickle from the lake and down the steep slope into the darkness below.

The mouth of the cave has stalactites you can describe as “roughly hewn to look like teeth.” (That’s a bit of a dodge, of course.) It’s a steep, rocky slope downward of more than 45 degrees—treacherous enough to make a safety rope a good idea, but not so steep that a challenge roll is needed. After 15 yards, the slope levels off.

The slope has another unusual feature: there are rough protrusions every yard or so that look like places where stalagmites broke off. The protrusions can be used as foot- and handholds by descending characters, but if they try to climb up, the protrusions change from helpful to lethal. Sharp, stony spikes emerge in a 3-yard-radius circle whenever a creature moves upward, dealing 4d6 damage to everything within 1 yard of the slope. A creature that gets



a success on an Agility challenge roll (with a bane if the creature is climbing) takes half the damage. The stony spikes then retract, but re-emerge each round whenever they detect movement.

Bones cover the cave floor—about two-thirds human and one-third troglodyte, mixed with some from livestock and from unidentifiable sources. Few bones are intact; they've all been cracked or snapped in half.

Characters lingering in this chamber notice a faint, fetid breeze blowing from deeper in the chamber. This is actually the Consumptor breathing, and each exhalation takes several minutes. If a player asks about the breeze later in the adventure, point out that it's still present... but it comes from the opposite direction. (Now it's inhaling.) The breeze is present even if the characters are beyond area 2—the Consumptor's equivalent of lungs—because the creature's respiration travels its entire length.

Damaging the Consumptor: The Consumptor reacts if the characters break off the stalactites at the cave mouth or the stalagmites that emerge from the protrusions on the slope.

2. FUNGUS CHAMBERS

These two linked chambers are identical. They're roughly equivalent to an ordinary creature's lungs, though food passes through them as well. The Consumptor has lain dormant for years, and a variety of spores and fungi have colonized these chambers, living in symbiosis with the cave.

When the characters enter one of the fungus chambers, they see the soft phosphorescence of mushrooms, with branchlike fungus festooning the walls and hanging from the ceiling. Characters pausing to examine their surroundings might spot the branchlike fungus twitch and move of its own volition with a success on a Perception challenge roll with 1 bane.

When the characters step into the chamber, the mushrooms "pop," releasing spores into the air as a chain reaction. The spores aren't dangerous to breathe (though they'll make a creature cough), but coalesce into a **fungus hulk** at the end of the round. The creature attacks anything that isn't a fungus. Each chamber has its own fungal hulk.

Characters who pass within 3 yards of the walls discover the branchlike fungus strands are sticky and motile and such characters must get a success on Agility challenge rolls or become immobilized by the strands. Creatures caught in the fungus can use an action to make a Strength challenge roll with 1 bane. A success removes this affliction as the creature pulls free. A character grabbed by the fungus can accurately gauge how far they reach.

Damaging the Consumptor: The Consumptor reacts if the characters use fire or otherwise create smoke or poison gas in these chambers.

3. GIZZARD

The passage leading to this chamber is smooth and feels like glazed ceramic, not the natural stone of the cave mouth or the soft fungus of area 2. The walls, ceiling, and floor within the chamber are a fibrous substance, giving slightly to the touch—a strong clue the characters are within something organic. Smooth, ceramic columns are scattered throughout the chamber, seemingly at random. (The surface is more like tooth enamel, actually, but don't describe it like that unless the players at your table are sure they're inside something alive.)

Once all the characters are inside the chamber, doors like valves (think of the aperture on an old-fashioned camera) close ahead and behind them. The entire chamber rumbles and the "chewing" process starts. Roll a 1d6 and another d6 at the start end of each every round the characters remain in this area. The floor and ceiling within 3 yards of the column corresponding to the number rolled stretches to rise and fall (respectively) to crush anything nearby. Each creature within the area must make an Agility challenge roll. On a failure, it is pinned between floor and ceiling, taking 1d6 damage, falling prone and becoming immobilized. On a success, the creature leaps beyond the 3-yard radius around the column.

The remains of a troglodyte patrol has been converted into a **ghastly chorus**, which hides behind column #6 until the gizzard starts to move. The creature is essentially flat, so it's not crushed by the chewing action of the gizzard.

This ghastly chorus is even less articulate than others of its ilk. If you want it to say something specific, it can allude to being "inside a greater evil" and otherwise suggest that the real enemy is the site itself.

The gizzard "chews" for 6 rounds and then stops for at least 2 rounds (at which point the doorway valves open). If there's movement across any surface within the gizzard after that point, the process repeats. The gizzard stops for 1 minute if the characters deal 15 damage to any of the columns or if they brace spears or other sharp objects to strike the chamber when it contracts to "chew."

Damaging the Consumptor: The Consumptor reacts if the characters damage the columns or hurt the surface of the gizzard.

4. PERISTALTIC PASSAGE

This "hallway" is overtly organic, round in shape and with veinlike tubes several inches across running along the walls. It's all a purplish-black and noticeably warmer than previous chambers.

When all the characters are inside the passage, they feel it shudder beneath them and then contract in a series of moving waves intended to force its contents into area 5.

At the end of every subsequent round, each creature in the passage must get a success on a Strength challenge roll or fall prone and be moved $2d6 \times 2$ yards down the passage. Characters already prone when a wave hits make the roll with 1 bane. Furthermore, prone characters attempting to stand up while the passage is active must make Agility challenge rolls. A character stands up on a success, or slips and falls prone again, wasting the movement.

The waves push the creatures toward the digestion chamber until either the passage is empty or the walls of the passage take damage. If a veinlike structure takes 5 damage, it splits open to release a flood of a red-orange fluid and meaty chunks within it or a fecal solid, moist and black (equal chance of each). The walls themselves bleed if they take 15 damage or more, dripping with a thin reddish fluid (like a rare steak). It takes only 1 minute for the passage to heal all the damage it has taken.

Damaging the Consumptor: The Consumptor reacts if the characters damage the passage enough to stop the peristaltic waves.

5. DIGESTION CHAMBER

The inner surfaces of this chamber are a deep red—essentially made of meat—and it's stifflingly hot in here. A pool of yellowish fluid spreads across the center, and tentacles suspended from the roof of the chamber hold Auri, Byron, and Vanessa, the three Garnach children.

Also within the fluid is a **living tar**—effectively the Consumptor's digestive mechanism. It was devouring the Garnach children at its leisure, but it immediately attacks intruders it senses.

The pool of fluid is only about two feet deep, even in the center. It's difficult terrain, but the fluid isn't actively dangerous. (It smells bad and stings the skin if touched.)

RESCUING AURI

Auri is alive, but he's bloated almost beyond recognition from the strange growth hormones the tentacles pump into him. His clothes hang from him in tatters and his left hand is a vivid purple, constricted by a silver ring. It takes several minutes of gory and painful cutting to get Auri free. The bloating starts to disappear, but the hand (especially the ring finger) starts to turn black. Unless the characters have a tool kit to cut off the ring, cutting off the finger is the only way to relieve the pain.

RESCUING BYRON

Byron clings to life by the thinnest of threads. He's dying, and you should make Fate Rolls for him as soon as combat starts. Unlike most dying creatures, he's conscious (the tentacles are seeing to that), and he wails piteously until stabilized or he dies.

RESCUING VANESSA

Most of the tentacles holding Vanessa can be easily brushed away—except for the three attached to her face. Removing them requires a success on a Intelligence challenge roll followed by a success on an Agility challenge roll. The Agility roll must be made the round after the Intelligence roll, but it doesn't need to be made by the same character. The tentacle comes off either way, but it leaves a hideous permanent scar if either challenge roll fails.

If rescued, the children are defenseless and fatigued, but they're no longer ill. Whatever ordeal the tentacles put them through seems to have cured them of the pox.

6. CLOACA

Getting back out through the mouth of the cave is difficult. The children are in no condition to get past either the peristaltic passage or the climb up the slope to the cave mouth.

Instead, the characters can continue through the rest of the tunnels and while a lot less dangerous, it is much grosser. The passageway has about a foot of black, slimy feces at its start, and as it climbs to the surface, the passage narrows and the feces accumulate. By the end (in both senses of the word), they must crawl through a passageway less than one yard in diameter, pushing their way through a wall of black feces. They emerge in a fetid swampy bit of shoreline to the south.

The feces are a natural disease vector, so you're certainly within bounds to insert some sort of disease at this point. It's up to you whether you think the characters have suffered enough.

AFTERMATH

Mercifully, it's an uneventful journey back to Castle Garnach. The children are quiet and withdrawn. Padraig, if left outside, is nowhere to be found, though his donkey is still tied up near the cave entrance.

Lord Garnach is overjoyed to see his children again, though that's tempered with sorrow if Auri is mutilated, Vanessa is scarred, or Byron is dead. He gives the characters the reward promised and says he'll send a work crew—with an armed guard—to close off the cave entrance. (That effort might fully awaken the Consumptor, which could be an adventure all its own.)

Some threads are left for you to tie up. How did the children fall ill in the first place? What happened to Padraig? The characters might be striving for answers, or they may want to forget the horrors of exploring a demon-worm's innards.