

ROSEBUD CAVERNS

NUMEROUS NATURAL CAVES ARE A FEATURE OF THE PETROC HILLS IN THE NORTH CENTRAL REGION OF ALARIUS, AN AREA OF MIXED VOLCANIC, METAMORPHIC AND SEDIMENTARY ROCK TYPES. THESE CAVERNS ARE SET IN ONE OF THE MAINLY SEDIMENTARY-ROCK LOWER HILLS THERE, NAMED ROSEBUD, HENCE THEIR TITLE. THIS SMALL COMPLEX IS AN EXPERIMENTAL DRUID STATION, TESTING OUT THE FEASIBILITY OF USING SUBTERRANEAN PLACES FOR GROWING FOOD AND MEDICINAL PLANT CROPS, WITHOUT BEING SUBJECT TO THE OFTEN PROBLEMATIC SURFACE CONDITIONS LOCALLY. AT ABOUT 56 DEGREES NORTH, OUTSIDE HERE THE SUMMERS ARE SHORT, AND WINTERS LONG, FOR INSTANCE. THE PLACE HAS BEEN KEPT SECRET FROM THE GENERAL POPULATION, AND ONLY A VERY FEW SENIOR LOCAL DRUIDS KNOW OF IT, INCLUDING THE ARCHDRUID, A HILL DWARF, WHO CURRENTLY RUNS IT, AND WHO IS OFTEN HERE, OR SOMEWHERE NEARBY. NO PATHS LEAD TO ROSEBUD CAVERNS, AND THEIR EXTERNAL ENTRANCE, ON THE LOWER SOUTHERN SLOPES OF ROSEBUD HILL, IS WELL-CONCEALED BY STRATEGICALLY-LOCATED BUSHES AND TREES.

FOUR WILLING, SUMMONED ELEMENTAL CREATURES GUARD THE ENTRANCE CAVES, WHICH REMAIN IN CONCEALMENT UNTIL THEY NEED TO ACT. AN AIR ELEMENTAL COVERS THE EXTERIOR HILLSIDE AROUND THE ENTRY TUNNEL, WHICH WILL USE WIND POWER TO FURTHER HIDE THE WAY IN, DRIVE AWAY THOSE HUNTING FOR THE CAVERNS, OR DEFLECT THOSE APPROACHING THE ENTRANCE TOO CLOSELY (EXCEPT THE ARCHDRUID AND ANY HE ALLOWS TO ACCOMPANY HIM). EVEN WHILE DOING THIS, THE ELEMENTAL WILL REMAIN AS INCONSPICUOUS AS POSSIBLE, MAKING THE WINDS SEEM FAIRLY NATURAL, AT LEAST INITIALLY. IT WILL NOT USUALLY ENTER THE CAVERNS.

THE OUTER OPENING TO THE CAVERNS IS ABOUT 6 FEET HIGH (1.8 METRES), AND ROUGH, ROCKY STEPS LEAD DOWN IMMEDIATELY INSIDE IT. AS EACH STEP ALSO SLOPES DOWN QUITE STEEPLY, THIS CAN BE DANGEROUS FOR UNPREPARED NEWCOMERS. THE STEPS DESCEND AROUND 9 FT (2.7 M) TO UPPER CAVERN. ABOVE THE MIDDLE PART OF THE STEPS, THE CEILING RISES NEAR-VERTICALLY, LIKE A SEALED CHIMNEY, FOR ABOUT 10 FT, 3 M (THERE IS NO UPPER EXIT FROM IT), BEFORE DROPPING EQUALLY SHARPLY AGAIN, FORMING A MAXIMUM 7 FT HIGH ARCHWAY (2.1 M) INTO THE CAVERN ITSELF.

THE UPPER CAVERN HAS A ROUGH CEILING HEIGHT OF SOME 12 FT (3.5 M) ABOVE MOST OF ITS CENTRAL SECTION, LOWERING TOWARDS THE WALLS, WITH ANOTHER MORE OR LESS 7 FT HIGH (2.1 M) EXIT ARCHWAY AT THE TOP OF A FRESH SET OF NATURAL STONE STEPS DOWN TO MIDDLE CAVERN, IN THE WEST WALL. THESE STEPS HAVE THE SAME UNCOMFORTABLE DOWNWARD SLOPE EACH AS THOSE LEADING IN. AN ARRAY OF WOODEN BOXES AND BARRELS ARE ON THE ROCKY FLOOR TOWARDS MOST OF THE WALLS AND IN THE ALCOVES. SEVERAL OF THE BARRELS ARE FULL OF OIL.

PALE, DASHED LINES ON THE FLOOR OF UPPER CAVERN INDICATE THE LOCATION OF EXTENSIONS TO MIDDLE AND LOWEST CAVERN DIRECTLY BELOW THIS ONE. NO SUCH INDICATION IS VISIBLE IN UPPER CAVERN ITSELF. WITHIN EACH OF THOSE LINES, THE CIRCLES LABELLED WITH A CAPITAL LETTER T, ARE A PAIR OF PIVOTING TRAPDOORS. ANY WEIGHT ABOVE 30 POUNDS (13.5 KILOGRAMMES) PLACED ON EITHER CAUSES THEM TO ROTATE ABOUT THEIR DIAMETRIC SPINDLE HINGES, DROPPING WHATEVER IS ON THE TRAPDOOR DOWN INTO THE APPROPRIATE LOWER CAVERN CHAMBER. STEEL SPRINGS THEN CAUSE THE FLOOR TRAPDOORS TO SPIN BACK AND LOCK IN POSITION AGAIN. LIKE MUCH OF THE COMPLEX HERE, THESE TRAPDOORS ARE OF HIGH-QUALITY, ANCIENT DWARF CONSTRUCTION, HELPING TO MAKE THEM EXTREMELY DIFFICULT TO SPOT. THEY CONTINUE TO FUNCTION PERFECTLY TOO, DESPITE THEIR GREAT AGE. THE TRAPDOOR ABOVE THE ANNEXE CHAMBER TO MIDDLE CAVERN DROPS DOWN APPROXIMATELY 10 FT (3 M) TO THE SOLID STONE FLOOR THERE. THAT ABOVE THE LOWEST CAVERN'S ANNEXE DROPS AROUND 25 FT (7.5 M) TO THE SURFACE OF THE WATER IN IT, WHICH WATER IS A FURTHER 20 FT DEEP (6 M).

UPPER CAVERN IS GUARDED BY A FIRE ELEMENTAL THAT WILL START FIRES WITH CHOKING SMOKE TO HALT INTRUDERS. THESE FIRES ARE ESPECIALLY DANGEROUS, BECAUSE OF THE NUMBER OF WOODEN CONTAINERS HERE, AND OF COURSE THE OIL BARRELS.

BEYOND THE WEST WALL OPENING IN UPPER CAVERN, THE STAIRS DESCEND 10 FT (3 M) MORE TO MIDDLE CAVERN. HOWEVER, THE CEILING DROPS TO BE ONLY SOME 4 FT (1.2 M) ABOVE THE STAIRS OVER MUCH OF THEIR MID SECTION. THE MAIN PART OF MIDDLE CAVERN HAS A GENERALLY 9 FT HIGH (2.7 M) CEILING, AS HAS THE SMALLER ANNEXE CHAMBER OFF

ITS EASTERN SIDE, INTO WHICH ONE OF THE UPPER CHAMBER'S SWIVELLING TRAPDOORS LEADS. A NARROW PASSAGE CONNECTS THE TWO MIDDLE CHAMBER CAVES, WHICH IS NO MORE THAN 5 FT HIGH (1.5 M), AND IS BARRED BY A GRILLE OF DWARF-MADE SOLID IRON BARS. A 3 FT SQUARE (90 CM) HINGED DOORWAY IS SET INTO THESE BARS, FITTED WITH A DWARFEN LOCK THAT IS ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO PICK. THIS GRILLE DOOR IS KEPT CLOSED AND LOCKED. AT THE NORTH END OF THE MAIN CAVE, MORE PARTLY NATURAL STEPS LEAD AND SLOPE DOWN, MUCH LIKE THE PREVIOUS TWO SETS, FROM A 7 FT HIGH ARCHWAY (2.1 M) TO LOWEST CAVERN. MIDDLE CAVERN IS GUARDED BY AN EARTH ELEMENTAL, WHICH WILL RESHAPE PARTS OF THESE CAVES AS TRAPS, SLIDING EFFORTLESSLY IN AND OUT OF THE ROCK WHILE DOING SO, TO MAKE SURPRISE ATTACKS.

LOWEST CAVERN HAS A DRY FLOOR ONLY OVER ITS NORTHERN HALF. ITS SOUTHERN PART IS FILLED BY A ROUGHLY 10 FT DEEP (3 M) POOL OF FRESHWATER. HOWEVER, THE DRY FLOOR SLOPES UP MARKEDLY TOWARDS THE EASTERN EXIT TO GROWING CAVERN. BY THE FOOT OF THE ENTRANCE STAIRS FROM MIDDLE CAVERN, THE CEILING IS ABOUT 10 FT HIGH (3 M), AND THE DRY FLOOR SOME 2 FT (60 CM) ABOVE THE WATER'S SURFACE. THE EXIT STAIR ARCHWAY LEADING UP NORTHEASTWARDS IS THOUGH BARELY 3 FT HIGH (90 CM), AND THE DRY FLOOR HERE IS NEARLY 7 FT ABOVE THE WATER LEVEL (2.1 M). THE CAVERN'S ROOF DESCENDS TOWARDS THE FAR (SOUTHERN) WALL AS IT PASSES ABOVE THE WATER, TO BE JUST ABOVE THE WATER LEVEL BY THAT WALL. A NARROW, WATER-FILLED PASSAGE CONNECTING WITH THE ANNEXE CAVE FURTHER SOUTH OPENS AROUND 5 FT (1.5 M) BELOW THE WATER'S SURFACE BOTH IN THIS CAVE AND THE ANNEXE ONE. THE ANNEXE CAVE HAS A MAXIMUM OF 5 FT (1.5 M) AIRSPACE ABOVE ITS WATER LEVEL, WHICH IS MUCH DEEPER THAN IN THE MAIN LOWEST CAVERN POOL. A WATER ELEMENTAL GUARDS BOTH CAVES OF THIS CAVERN, AS MIGHT BE EXPECTED.

IT IS POSSIBLE FOR THOSE WISHING TO VISIT THE CAVERNS TO SPEAK WITH THE FOUR ELEMENTALS, USING EITHER THE USUAL LOCAL LANGUAGE, OR THEIR OWN ELEMENTAL TONGUE, TO CONVINCE THEM THAT THEY MEAN NO HARM. SO LONG AS NO MAGIC IS USED TO TRY TO INFLUENCE THEM - THEY SPOT THAT RIGHT AWAY, AND WILL TREAT IT AS A HOSTILE ACT AGAINST THE CAVERNS - THE INTERACTION MAY BE SUCCESSFUL. SUCH ATTEMPTS CAN BE ENHANCED BY PRESENTING A TOKEN GIVEN BY THE ARCHDRUID, AND FOR EACH PRIOR ELEMENTAL CONVINCED ON THE WAY IN.

FROM THEIR LOW OPENING OFF LOWEST CAVERN, THE STEPS UP TO **GROWING CAVERN** ASCEND ABOUT 10 FT (3 M), AND THE CEILING ABOVE THEM SOON RISES TO BE AROUND 8 FT HIGH (2.4 M), BEFORE DESCENDING AGAIN SLIGHTLY TO MAKE ANOTHER 7 FT TALL (2.1 M) ARCHWAY ENTRANCE INTO THE NEW CAVERN. PASSAGE HEIGHTS IN GROWING CAVERN VARY BETWEEN ROUGHLY 10 TO 12 FT (3 TO 3.5 M), WHILE THE MORE OPEN AREAS ARE SIGNIFICANTLY HIGHER, TYPICALLY BETWEEN 25 TO 35 FT (7.5 TO 11 M).

ONCE IN GROWING CAVERN, SEVERAL THINGS QUICKLY BECOME APPARENT. AMONG THE MOST IMMEDIATELY OBVIOUS IS THAT THE FLOORS ARE NOT ROCK HERE, BUT RICH SOIL, AND THAT THE WALLS AND CEILINGS ARE COMPLETELY COVERED WITH MULTICOLOURED MOSSES, FORMING A CONTINUOUS CARPET THROUGH WHICH NUMEROUS MINOR RIVULETS OF FRESH WATER SLOWLY FLOW AND DRIP. IN MANY PLACES ON THE FLOOR ARE HOSTS OF GROWING FUNGI, OF BOTH WELL-KNOWN AND COMPLETELY UNFAMILIAR KINDS, TOGETHER WITH MANY COMMON TYPES OF OVERGROUND FOOD AND MEDICINAL PLANTS, INCLUDING CEREALS, HERBS, PEAS, BEANS AND ROOT VEGETABLES. ALL THE GROWTH HERE IS VERY FRESH AND HEALTHY, AND THE AIR SMELLS CLEAN AND ALIVE, AS IF JUST AFTER RAIN ON THE OUTSIDE. FROM TIME TO TIME, MISTY CLOUDS OF SPORES OR POLLEN DRIFT ABOUT, APPARENTLY QUITE HARMLESSLY (EVEN THOSE WHO ORDINARILY HAVE POLLEN ALLERGIES WILL FIND NO PROBLEMS WITH THEM).

ALONG WITH THESE FEATURES, ANOTHER QUICKLY OBVIOUS FACET IS THAT THERE IS ALWAYS SOME LIGHT THROUGHOUT THIS CAVERN. THIS COMES FROM INDIVIDUAL TINY MOTES THAT FLOAT AND DRIFT EVERYWHERE, ALWAYS SINGLY, ALTHOUGH SEVERAL MAY BE IN THE SAME LARGER AREA TOGETHER. THESE **WITCHLIGHTS** SHED NORMAL DAYLIGHT-LIKE ILLUMINATION OVER THE AREA SURROUNDING THEM, OUT TO MUCH THE SAME DISTANCE A TORCH ORDINARILY WOULD ELSEWHERE. THEY ARE INSUBSTANTIAL, AND CANNOT BE STRUCK PHYSICALLY - THEY SIMPLY DRIFT ASIDE OR DODGE ANY SUCH ATTEMPTS. USING MAGIC TO TRY TO DESTROY OR DISPEL ANY MAY WORK, BUT ALWAYS CARRIES CONSEQUENCES. ANY SUCH SPELLS WILL AFFECT ROUGHLY HALF THE NUMBER OF WITCHLIGHTS IN THE SPELL'S ZONE AT MOST ANYWAY, CAUSING THEM TO VANISH AT ONCE. THOSE REMAINING WITHIN 60 FT (18 M) OF THE OFFENDING PERSON FLARE-UP WITH PERSISTENTLY DAZZLING BRILLIANCE,

BLINDING THE OFFENDER AND ANYONE ELSE NEARBY THAT SEES THEM. THIS MAKES ANY VISUAL ACTIVITIES IMPOSSIBLE, AND RESTRICTS OTHER ACTIONS, SINCE AT LEAST ONE HAND IS LIKELY TO BE NEEDED TO SHIELD THE EYES A LITTLE. THIS DOES NOT GREATLY HELP, HOWEVER. THE LIGHTS WILL THEN MOVE AND CONGREGATE TO HERD THE PERSON OR PEOPLE OUT OF THE CAVERN. SUCH AN ACTION WILL ALERT THE ELEMENTALS ELSEWHERE, WHO WILL FURTHER ACT TO REMOVE THE OFFENDERS FROM THE ENTIRE COMPLEX AS SWIFTLY AS POSSIBLE.

THESE EFFECTS, AND OTHERS, ARE MAGICALLY CREATED TO MAINTAIN BENEFICIAL SURFACE GROWING CONDITIONS HERE BY THE FOUR LABELLED STATUE-LIKE FEATURES SET IN THE LINE OF LARGER CAVES ON THE NEAR-CENTRAL SOUTH-NORTH AXIS THAT CONNECTS TO THE REST OF THIS CAVERN. EACH STATUE HAS A LOOSELY ELEMENTAL ASPECT TO IT. THE FOUR OPERATE THE GROWING CAVERN'S SYSTEMS, AND WILL ACT TO DEFEND IT REGARDLESS OF WHETHER THE ARCHDRUID IS PRESENT OR NOT. HOSTILE ACTS WITHIN THE CAVERN, OR AGAINST ANY OF THE FOUR, WILL AGAIN BRING CONSEQUENCES (INCLUDING THE FLARING WITCLIGHTS ALREADY NOTED ABOVE).

IN THE SOUTHERNMOST CAVE, THE AIR PILLAR LOOKS LIKE A 15 FT TALL (4.5 M) CLOUD OF VAPOUR RISING FROM THE FLOOR AS IF FROM A GEYSER. A FAINT HISSING SOUND CAN BE HEARD NEAR IT, AND THE AIR AROUND IT SHIMMERS AND DISTORTS THE VIEW BESIDE AND BEYOND IT A LITTLE. ALTHOUGH APPARENTLY MADE FROM SOLID GREY STONE, IT CONTINUOUSLY RELEASES AIR THAT HAS THE SCENT OF A FRESH, COOL BREEZE SOON AFTER RAIN. IT RECYCLES SPENT AIR FROM THE CAVERNS AS IT DOES SO, ALBEIT THIS IS MUCH LESS OBVIOUS. ITS DEFENCE AGAINST HOSTILE ACTS IS TO INCREASE THE POWER OF ITS AIR FLOW, AND DIRECT IT AS A STRONG JET AT THE OFFENDER AND ANYONE WITHIN ABOUT 5 FT (1.5 M) OF THEM, INCREASING AS NEEDED TILL IT FORCES THEM BACK TOWARDS THE EXIT TO LOWEST CAVERN AND BEYOND. ODDLY, THIS AIRFLOW JET, WHICH CAN INCREASE TO HURRICANE-LIKE VIOLENCE, NEVER AFFECTS ANYTHING ELSE IN THE CAVERNS, EVEN IF THE AFFECTED PERSON TRIES TO HIDE AMONGST THE VEGETATION.

NORTH OF THE AIR PILLAR, THE ADJOINING CAVE HOSTS THE WITCLIGHT LAMP, A GREAT GREY STONE OBJECT LOOKING LIKE A 15 FT TALL (4.5 M) LANTERN THAT GLEAMS AND GLIMMERS PERPETUALLY, AND WHICH RELEASES A FRESH WITCLIGHT MOTE EVERY FEW MINUTES. WHILE THESE BOB AND DRIFT AWAY SEEMINGLY AT RANDOM, THEY ALWAYS MOVE IN THE DIRECTION OF WHERE ANOTHER HAS RECENTLY DIMMED AND FADED-OUT. EACH MOTE LASTS BETWEEN ABOUT 4 AND 16 HOURS, BEFORE FADING AWAY OVER APPROXIMATELY TEN MORE MINUTES. THE LAMP CAN ALSO FLARE-UP BRILLIANTLY, LIKE THE MOTES, WHEN REQUIRED, UNDER SIMILARLY HOSTILE CIRCUMSTANCES.

BEYOND A NARROW WAY NORTH FROM THE WITCLIGHT LAMP, THE NEXT LARGER CAVE CONTAINS THE WATER PITCHER, A 15 FT TALL (4.5 M) GREY STONE JAR, FROM WHOSE OPEN TOP A GREAT STREAM OF WATER SHOOTS, BECOMING A JET OF MIST ONLY A FEW FEET ABOVE THE PITCHER'S TOP. THIS WATER VAPOUR THEN SPREADS AND CONDENSES TO FORM THE WATER RIVULETS RUNNING THROUGH THE WALL AND CEILING MOSSES THROUGHOUT GROWING CAVERN. THE WATER IS FRESH, AND COMES FROM PONDS AND STREAMS ACROSS THE PETROC HILLS AREA ABOVE. IN DEFENDING ITSELF AND ROSEBUD CAVERNS, THE PITCHER CAN CREATE A THREE-INCH (8 CM) DIAMETER POWERFUL WATER JET ANYWHERE IN THE ENTIRE CAVERNS COMPLEX, FORCING THE OFFENDER ALWAYS TOWARDS THE NEXT EXIT. AS WITH THE AIR PILLAR'S HURRICANE-FORCE AIR JET, THIS CAUSES NO HARM TO THINGS ORDINARILY LOCATED WITHIN THE CAVERNS.

THE MOST NORTHERLY OF THE FOUR LARGER STATUE CAVE AREAS, ADJOINING THAT OF THE WATER PITCHER, IS THE REPELLING STATUE. AGAIN, THIS IS MADE OF GREY STONE, AND IS ABOUT 15 FT TALL (4.5 M). IT DEPICTS A PILE OF HUMANIDS WRITHING IN AGONY, EACH WITH A GLOWING SCARLET RUNE SOMEWHERE ON THEIR EXPOSED FLESH. THE STATUE'S POWER IS TO ACTIVATE SUCH RUNES SET ON THE FLESH OF ANY CREATURE WITHIN ROSEBUD CAVERNS AND ANYWHERE ON ROSEBUD HILL OUTSIDE THEM, RIGHT DOWN INTO THE VALLEYS SURROUNDING THE HILL. THOSE CAUSING HARM WITHIN THE CAVERNS IMMEDIATELY GAIN SUCH A PULSING RUNE SOMEWHERE ON THEIR BODY, USUALLY ON EXPOSED SKIN, OR THEIR FOREHEAD OTHERWISE. AT THE SAME TIME, A SIMULACRUM OF THAT PERSON APPEARS PROMINENTLY AMONG THE WRITHING MASS OF FIGURES ON THE STATUE. IF THE PERSON TRIES TO REMAIN IN THE CAVERNS AFTER THIS, THEY WILL FEEL INCREASING BURNING PAIN FROM THE RUNE, WHICH RUNE CANNOT BE REMOVED OR DISPELLED. UNLESS THEY LEAVE THE CAVERNS, AFTER 3 TO 6 MINUTES, THIS PAIN INCREASES TO THE POINT OF CAUSING ACTUAL PHYSICAL BURNING DAMAGE. THIS WILL REACH KILLING INTENSITY AFTER ABOUT TEN

MINUTES. SUCH PAIN EASES AND DIMINISHES ONLY IF THE AFFECTED PERSON KEEPS MOVING TOWARDS THE OUTSIDE. IT PERSISTS AT A LOW, THOUGH NON-DAMAGING, LEVEL SO LONG AS THE PERSON REMAINS IN THE VICINITY OF ROSEBUD HILL, CEASING ONLY WHEN THEY MOVE BEYOND THE VALES SURROUNDING THE HILL. THE GLOWING RUNE REMAINS, HOWEVER, AND RETURNING TO ROSEBUD WILL REACTIVATE IT. LOCALS IN THE PETROC HILLS REGION, WHILE UNAWARE OF THE RUNE'S TRUE PURPOSE OR POWER, UNDERSTAND IT IS A MARK OF SHAME, AND WILL TREAT THE BEARER OF ONE, AND THEIR COMPANIONS, ACCORDINGLY LESS WELL THAN THEY MIGHT HAVE DONE BEFORE. THE LOCAL DRUIDRY WILL REINFORCE SUCH BELIEFS AND REACTIONS IF NECESSARY, ALTHOUGH THEY MAY BE WILLING TO REMOVE THE MARK, PROVIDING THE AFFLICTED PERSON UNDERTAKES SOME SIGNIFICANT TASK OR QUEST TO BENEFIT THE REGION AND THE CAVERNS.

THOSE PAYING CLOSE ATTENTION MAY NOTICE THERE ARE NUMBERS OF SMALL FLYING INSECTS ACTIVE THROUGHOUT GROWING CAVERN, INCLUDING BEES, THE KIND OF CREATURES THAT WILL HELP POLLINATE PLANTS GROWING HERE THAT REQUIRE IT. THE TWO DEAD-END PASSAGeways ON THE WESTERN SIDE OF THE CAVERN (BEGINNING BY THE WITCHLIGHT LAMP AND WATER PITCHER) ARE DRIER AND HAVE LESS TO NO MOSS ON THEIR CEILINGS AND UPPER WALLS RIGHT AT THEIR CLOSED ENDS. THERE ARE SEVERAL NATURAL, PAPERY BEE NESTS HERE, WHICH IS WHERE THE BEES IN PARTICULAR LIVE, THEIR NESTS ATTACHED TO THE WALLS AND CEILING.