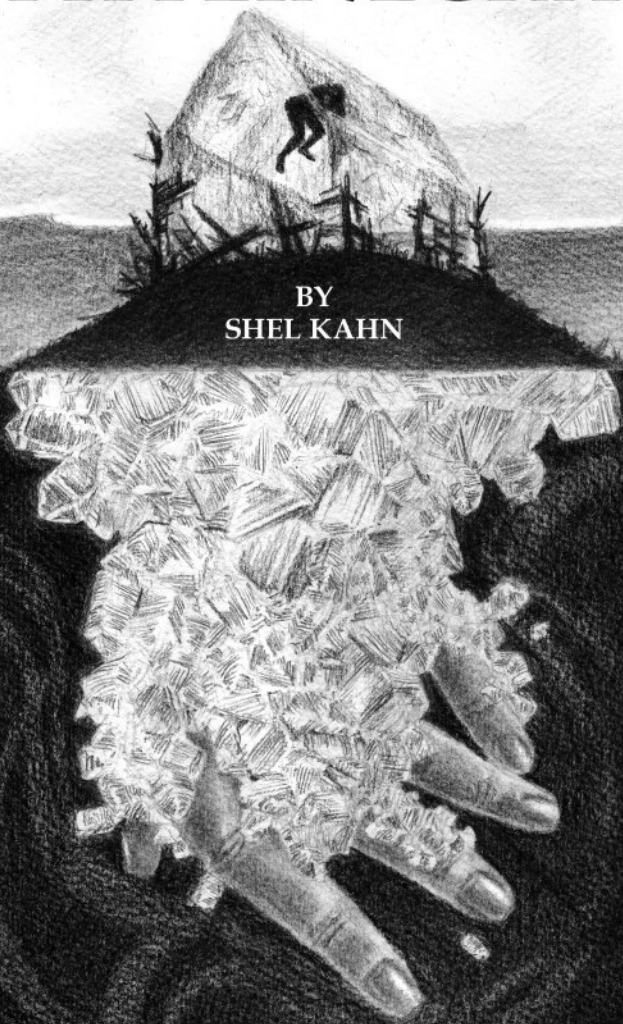


THE GHOST HOUSES of PHYLINECRA

BY
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The Ghost Houses of Phylinecra

*is a Pocket Dungeon, published in 2019,
written and designed by Shel Kahn.*

*This dungeon would not have existed without
the advice and assistance of Ruth Tillman.*

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The Ghost Houses of Phylinecra



Content Note:

This game is both a dungeon delve and a storygame-inspired investigation into *grief, loss, and mortality*. Please, before you start play, make sure you discuss *safety and consent* with your players. This adventure will be the most powerful, exciting and moving if everyone at the table is comfortable, safe, and able to buy in equally.

Easily googlable methods like the *X-Card*, *Lines & Veils* or other *safety tools* can add a lot of comfort to the table mood, but most importantly, please clarify that player comfort is paramount to this whole experience. If you are GMing, please also assess your own comfort as you play - you are a player as well!

If things get too heavy, I, the author, will be relieved to hear that you paused, reapproached and found mutual common ground narratively.

Now, for the adventure!

Creating your Village of Phylinecra - and your Adventurers

As you begin character creation, share all of this setting and set-up information with your players.

Before this adventure begins, the Village of Phylinecra has suffered a **devastating flood**.

Adventurers are members of, or are familiar with this village - they may be neighbours, relatives of residents, frequent visitors - players' choice. They could have been there for the flood and been lucky to survive, or they could have shown up after hearing about the flood and been horrified.

If they were present for the flood, this is their understanding of what happened:

A flood came, the water rising first suddenly, a torrent pushing down the river, wiping away almost a third of the village's population; and then slowly, bringing disease and worse from farther upstream. People had to flee until the waters receded, and when they came back, their homes were in disarray, their gardens and infrastructure destroyed, the beauty of the town just washed away by the water. And while they were slowly rebuilding their homes, making the village livable again, they mourned without focus.

Then, after about a week of living back in their village, rich red crystal growths began to erupt from the ground, grabbing survivors' treasured mementos of their lost loved ones. Most people were too stunned to try and prevent it - they watched the

uncanny crystalline arm creep up and surround the memento, then retreat back down into the ground. Many returned to their homes to find a shallow hole in the ground below where that memento once stood.

*Those who tried to fight the crystal as it emerged instead **became encased in it**, and it grew around them to fill the shape of their house - the house as it was before the flood, that is. So even if walls or roofs were missing, the glittering red form fills in the spaces as they once were. Inside these new faceted houses, those encased seem to go into a **deep sleep**.*

*After this surreal invasion, the village is not just rebuilding from the flood and the loss of lives, it now holds what people are referring to as the **Ghost Houses**, each with a once-living human sarcophagied in stasis inside. Some of the surviving residents chose to flee this additional horror, and the few that remain have noticed that in the crystal of the ghost houses, a **strange woman** is reflected as if she is walking the town constantly, but she is not visible or detectable with the usual senses.*

If adventurers were absent for the flood itself, they may have received word that things have gone awry at home, or at least heard news of the disaster, and when they arrive, the few residents still on site can fill them in on what happened.

As the players start to consider who their adventurers are, share with them this information about the village itself.

Phylinecra - The Village's Past

*This village was founded as a creative retreat, home to a large artistic collective. Even after generations, this village's diverse roots still show in the faces, the architectural styles, the fashion and the art. Each family built a house that combined private living space with public gathering space - workshops, forges, studios, cafés and more, creating a tradition of exchanges of visits. The houses stand near the banks of a river, in which lies **The Blessed Isle**, a preternaturally beautiful island with a **reflecting pool** in the centre, where the village created their graveyard.*

*This isn't a field of buried corpses, but instead a beautiful collection of shrines to those lost, where people may bring artwork and plants to leave as tributes and enact musical and poetic grieving rituals. These surround the reflecting pool. Once a year at most, this large pond washes small pieces of a pristine, sparkling **pink crystal** to its shores. These crystals exude a kind of gentle, calm comfort - while being immensely hard and near indestructible. Some folks collect them as blessings from the Goddess - residents might decorate their hearths or place them above doorways for good luck; other folks trade them as building supplies or tools.*

*The village has been there for many generations now; but the rumours of how it was founded revolve around the Blessed Isle. The official story is that a group of young bards, artists, theatre folk and such were travelling from town to town to perform for folks, and came across this beautiful island; upon spending the night there, each dreamt of a **beautiful** Goddess who draped them in flowers and sang sad, enchanting songs to them, and so they decided to settle down and found their own village nearby.*

In less official records, folks tell tale of a member of the troop who fell in love with the Goddess, and refused to leave the island. They drowned in the reflecting pool, and the community, devastated, set up homes nearby so they could honour their companion's death, and built a shrine at which to mourn them on the island itself.

Here are some leading questions to help feed these details about the town's past to the players:

- **What did your family do with the finger-sized crystal your relative found when they set up a shrine on the island for a lost friend?**
- **What is your favourite secret spot on the Blessed Isle?**
- **Have you ever seen a vision of the Goddess?**
- **Who do you think fell in love with the Goddess?**
- **What kind of fish do you catch in the river?**
- **What trade did your neighbour take up to honour the artistic ancestry of the village?**
- **What have you most recently contributed to the shrines? For who? Why?**
- **How often does your family group practice the grieving rituals? Do you join them? Do you go alone?**
- **What type of community space did you run out of your home before the flood?**

Building the Village

Players and the GM flesh out the village's residents together - the town of Phylincra is different each time you play.

First, get the players to create their characters, remembering to tie them to the town in some way, and then encourage them to create friendly histories with each other through asking each player to answer one or two of these leading questions - share the whole list and let players opt-in via one or two rounds around the table, making sure that *everyone is the answer to at least one or two other players' questions.*

Record these answers on the *Player Character Bonds Handout* so everyone can see them.

1. Who here defended you once?
2. Who here believed you when no one else did?
3. Who here knows a secret from your childhood?
4. Who here encouraged you during a rough time?
5. Who here took you in when you had to leave your prior home?
6. Who here have you thought of yourself as mentor to?
7. Who here have you always kept in touch with?
8. Who here are you keeping a secret for?
9. Who here gave you a cherished gift?
10. Who here was well thought of by your family?
11. Who here do you work well with?

Once they're a tight-knit group of friends, *ask each player* the following questions to create a few NPCs - if you have a smaller group of players, encourage them to generate new NPCs for each answer; if you have a group of five or more players, it's okay if there's some overlap.

1. Who did you spend the most time with in Phylinecra? Why?
2. Who did you find the most frustrating in town? Why?
3. Who were you most worried about when the flood happened? Why?
4. Who most recently gave you a gift? Why?
5. Who were you emotionally closest to in town? Why?

As players take their turns, encourage them to *tie these people together into a town* - who was mayor, or blacksmith, or nurse, or teacher, who managed trade and who gardened? Who was whose family, or friend, or enemy?

Write down the answers for each of the players, then work together as a group to assign consequences as such:

Of each player's answers to 1 through 4, two have either died in the flood or fled the town, one is sick and due to be taken out of town tonight with a caravan to find better medical care, and one is alive and healthy and staying in town trying to fix things back up as best they can. Roll 1D4 to figure this out randomly, or assign these roles as feels meaningful to everyone at the table.

NPC #5 for each of the players was alive and well, but suddenly today was locked into a ghost house, peaceful and frozen into the crystal form.

Use the *Player Character's NPCs and Griefs* handouts to make a list of the answers for each player and record their status as well.

Ask each player what part of the loss after the flood their character is having the hardest time accepting - ask them to be *small and specific*. Some examples could be: feeling unable to believe they'll never eat lunch together again, or hold someone's hand, or sit on the hill and watch the sunset over the river and the beautiful little town. Get them to write these down.

GM, make sure to *write these sensations down* as well, at the bottom of the *Player Character's NPCs and Griefs* handout, because they are going to come up again in future.

If the adventurers were on site to see the ghost houses form, ask them to narrate where they were when it happened. Did they watch their loved one (#5 from the questionnaire above) become encased? Did they fight the unbreakable crystal? Did they lose anything else to the formation? Or did they hear it happen from across town?

If they arrived after these houses formed, ask them what they did when they realized their loved one was locked inside?

Ask them when or how they realized that *they couldn't break* these house shaped sarcophagi on their own. What or who convinced them to give up - at least for now?

Using the Maps

This adventure comes with **two maps** - a **town map** and a **cave map**. As the GM, you need to know how these maps interact with each other - but *don't share that info just yet!* Let your players figure that out on their own using the structural clues you build here. Right now, *only share the larger town map with the players.*

On the town map you'll see buildings. Ahead in the book are the numbered maps for reference; if you've got the larger paper maps or fabric maps you'll notice the buildings aren't numbered, but the roofs are different tones or colours.

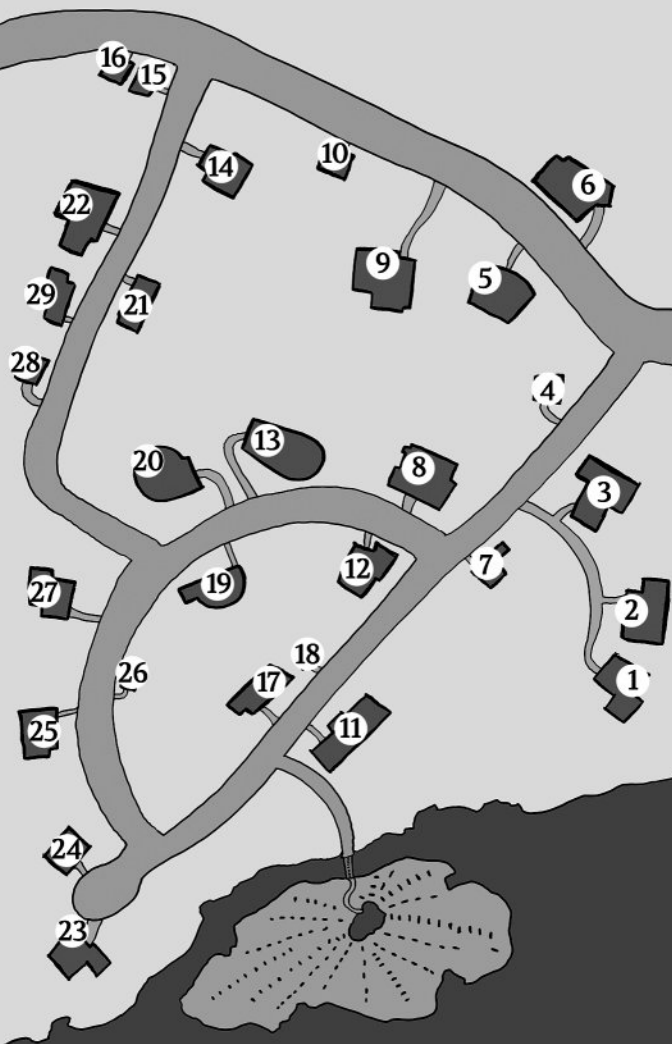
If you *have 3 or less players*, you need 3 houses to be ghost houses. Mark these so you can all find and remember them. On the fabric map, use the light blue houses, #'s 2, 9 and 27 as your Ghost Houses; *if you have 4 players*, use the green houses, #'s 4, 8, 14 and 25; *if you have 5 players*, use the orange houses, #s 3, 6, 10, 20 and 23; *if you have 6 or more players*, use the pink houses, #s 1, 5, 12, 13, 17 and 22.

Do not put a ghost house on any of the dark blue houses - these do not line up with the caves below.

The **community centre** is #29 - it's small but it's still in good shape thanks to strong brickwork.

Refer to the numbered **Cave map** in the rules, but don't share it with your players. When the time comes, *let them explore the blank Cave map.* When your adventurers explore the caves, place the markers for the vertical pillars in places where they correspond with the ghost houses - *use the numbered maps here to line things up*, but again, don't show the numbers to the players!





Beginning the Action

Whether adventurers have arrived to find these **ghost houses**, or were there to watch them form, they are called to join the remaining townsfolk for an early dinner in one of the remaining safe buildings, a simple and small **performance hall/community centre**. It has now been converted into a group refuge, complete with cots for those sick from the flood waters, or left without roofs to sleep under, along with a communal kitchen, and a large hearth around which to gather and talk.

There's a group meal happening, as folks drift in from their day spent cleaning up the town. An intense NPC named **Marko**, on of the community's younger adults, comes into the kitchen room in a frenzied state, clutching a fistful of small flowers, and he proclaims excitedly that the blessed pool is purifying the island!

Despite the destruction and mess, he had gone there to build a **shrine** for his lost sibling, and he found new growth! And he proudly holds forth a **fist-sized dark pink crystal**, the largest anyone has ever seen arrive on the island, announcing that their Goddess has not abandoned them in their time of need.

Adventurers who have spent any time with the ghost houses realize - or are finally forced to admit - that **this crystal matches the crystals that encased their friends**.

Marko pulled this specimen from the edge of the blessed pool, and tells them it gave him a vision: through it he could see **their beloved Goddess** was walking amongst the houses.

An adventurer who steps outside to try this catches a glimpse of a figure moving towards the island, between the houses.

If the adventurers aren't immediately running to the island, have one of the NPCs curse the Goddess, whose blessed crystals have stolen more from an already wounded town.

This is a blasphemous thing to say, but the crystals do match, and NPCs may begin to wonder if she can be reasoned with. **Marko** is appalled and begs everyone to **come to the island**, to see what he saw, to know she still cares for Phylinecra.

The sick folks stay back, as do a few people to care for them - so use your NPC list you generated with the players to populate a little convoy of the healthy survivors who accompany the adventurers and **Marko** to the island.

Walking through the town as the sun is setting, adventurers get the feeling that they can see the Goddess - or someone - glowing in the reflections of the ghost houses' facets, as if walking with them. If they use **Marko's fist-sized crystal** to see, they might see her walking ahead, or just behind houses - never clearly standing still in front of them.

The closer to the river, *the more destroyed the town is*. Buildings have been flattened, or picked up and moved by the torrent, and the ground is still soaked. The smell of stagnant water slowly draining from cellars and basements is rank. Bodies have been cleared from the wreckage - those folks could find - but everything stinks of decay. Adventurers have to pick their path carefully through muddy patches full of wreckage.

Along the way they may find:

- Miraculously intact **small keepsakes** like cameos or small waterlogged portrait paintings, jewellery or spectacles from loved ones lost
- Damp but serviceable **household tools** such as hammers and chisels, shovels or garden hoes
- Small, pink **blessed crystals**, still in the decorative nets from which they were hung for good luck

Looking through any crystal allows an adventurer to catch glimpses of the Goddess, but no one can get a good look at her.

As they approach **the island**, adventurers see how high the river still is. **Marko** points out that the stone bridge is mostly whole though, and *only under a half a foot of water*.

Traversing this half submerged, semi-intact structure requires dexterity tests, with folks at risk of falling into the water and needing to roll a strength or athletics test to swim safely to shore before taking one-off poisoning damage from the contaminated water. Adventurers can help one another or help NPCs get safely across this unsteady pathway.

The island at first looks as destroyed as the mainland - huge trees were uprooted, and the remains of generations of mourning shrines are spread in a swath across the mud of the island. But even from the shore, adventurers can see the spring green of new growth and when they approach the **blessed pool** they see it is radiating lines of beautiful new plant life - flowers, clover, ferns, moss, all starting to work through the muck and gunk and debris of the flood damage.

The scent of the new growth is heady and sweet as the party approach the pool. If anyone examines the new plants thoroughly, they see *each has grown up from a broken piece of a shrine as if that painted stone or shard of coloured glass was a seed*. These resemble natural flowers, but something strange has placed them here.

Marko runs to the pool and declares proof that the Goddess still loves them. He stares adoringly into the water, and an adventurer can roll to discern that he is definitely whispering to a person he clearly sees in the pool itself. If the party is still at a distance, **Marko** kneels beside the water and plunges his arms in, and an **ethereal pair of arms** reaches up from the water to pull him down into the pool. *If folks are close enough to be able to try and prevent that, instead this happens:* **Marko** suddenly leaps in, and observant eyes may notice **ethereal arms** reach up from the water to catch him.

NPCs that came along for the ride are horrified at what **Marko** has done - it is blasphemous to dive into the sacred pool - **but then he doesn't come back up**. And their debate turns to if, or who, should dive in to rescue him.

Adventurers who approach the pool see a perfectly calm surface mirroring the darkening sky and their peering faces; then, *just before they would turn their head away*, they see a blurred and shifting face of a woman - **the Goddess**. Her mouth opens in silent song; *ask for wisdom or constitution oriented rolls from whoever sees her*. Successes mean adventurers are able to resist reaching out to her, middling results are haunted by regret as they resist, and failures feel themselves pulled into the pool, though to onlookers they seem to dive or jump in. NPCs may have seen **spectral hands** reaching for all of the adventurers, and if any adventurers are still on the shore, they see that the NPCs are now terrified and *turn to flee back over the submerged bridge*.

Again, any arms-reach distance or closer examination of the pool leads to a constitution or wisdom save to avoid being lured into the water, but adventurers *can also choose to jump in on their own accord*. Adventurers who **look through a crystal** at the pool see a strange glow where the water is, which seems to seep into the ground around it. *Detect magic detects magic in the pool, the crystals, the flowers - but strange, old magic, not the contemporary stuff*.

To free their friends in the ghost houses, to find and save **Marko**, the adventurers *need to jump or fall into the pool. Encourage them to do so*.

The Red Caves

The first adventurer to dive in finds themselves surfacing in a dark room. Swimming to the edge of an identically sized pool as the one they dove into, they notice that the floor of the room feels like facets of crystal, hard but thankfully not too sharp. If they do not immediately light a torch, especially if they have dark vision, they realize the walls have a low, dim, red glow to them. If they light a torch, or magical light source, they discover that the walls and ceiling are also faceted crystals, which now sparkle in the artificial light and look less red and more pink and purple.

Slightly slower, as if time is stretched out here, but still in the order in which they dove in, the adventurers emerge from the pool into this dark room.

There is initially no sign of Marko. Calling out for him sends the adventurers' voices echoing down long crystalline hallways. A strange resonance in the walls responds to the voices, turning the echoes into an eerie, sad singsong refrain for a moment.

If adventurers break out any small crystal fragments to look at things, they discover that they have all turned an opaque red in this realm.

When the adventurers go forth to explore, this is what they find.

GM, spread out the *cave map* now, the one without numbers, and make note of where the pillars go, with markers or tokens or such.

This first room is ovoid in shape, with a large opening to a split hallway. The walls appear as if they were once perfectly smooth crystal, but **flaws have formed** where smaller, more faceted and textural portions of crystal have grown, warping the pristine ovoid shape - these line up with the cross-hatched and lighter portions of the cave walls on the map. The pool takes up the center of the room, as large as it was on the other side, its waters dark and deep.

Using the Pool

*Adventurers can return to the surface world through the pool **if they are holding crystals**, by diving as deep as possible. Use a strength or constitution-related check to see if they manage to push their own limits. They can retry if necessary; if they fail the rolls badly they may **take some damage** from holding their breath or from the effects of water pressure, such as temporary or permanent deafness and dizziness.*

The crossroad of narrow hallways has similar smooth-with-flaws walls on almost all sides except **the center shape** - this wall is made of crystals with enormous facets, that feel thicker and sharper than the structure of the outer walls.

There's a lot to find in the red caves. *Let the players use the un-numbered map to choose where they explore and scatter these finds throughout:*

There are patches in the walls, floor and ceiling of **that smaller, more faceted crystal**; a geologist would call them newer or younger crystals.

What initially seemed to be walls with bigger, sharper crystals turns out to be some **enormous rounded shape** that's occupying the huge central cavern. It has a slow rhythmic vibration coming from it, that vibrates in the adventurers' bones.

The larger hallways are mostly made of smooth crystal, but there are also **narrow, round passageways** connecting them, and these smaller ones are lined entirely with the small, sharp crystals.

Throughout the caverns are several **floor-to-ceiling pillars of sharp, faceted crystal**. There are objects floating within them, and all of them glow faintly, which is especially visible if the artificial light is extinguished, turning the red crystal orange, pink or blue.

These contain and are powered by the objects stolen from the Ghost Houses - GMs, line these up on your cave map with the houses you chose on the town map.

There are three or four other **mounds of crystal** on the floors, some about 4 x 4', some slightly larger or slightly smaller. The smallest is a 2 x 3 x 4' pillar and unsettlingly, the **crystal of it is still growing** and thickening - which is why the adventurers can tell that **there is a person in there**, though they are becoming increasingly obscured. This crystal seems impossible to damage with the usual equipment - it's diamond hard and has strong magic resistance - and *there's a definite risk of damaging the person inside*. Adventurers can deduce that that person is **Marko**.

Encased in crystal in the floor, ceiling or walls, are **small keepsakes** - the sorts of things usually placed at shrines, these small objects are clearly recent acquisitions by the crystal caves - they are objects from people who died in the flood.

Adventurers who examine the walls closely realize there is something very, very unsettling on the other side of them - not earth, but a **dark void**, or possibly impossibly dark water. And shapes, moving around and occasionally attacking or **gnawing or grinding** at the thick red crystal. They're really difficult to make out or detect - all they can see clearly are the **various sizes of teeth** that scrape and crunch and gnaw at the crystal. And those teeth come in all different sizes. They don't seem to belong to creatures anyone has seen before.

*Should adventurers start to bemoan their fate, first they will notice that the walls echo their distress more than anything else. When they grieve or express frustration, the walls start to **hum with the vibration** of their voices, and if they continue despite the humming, their sadness summons **The Goddess**.*

The Goddess

She appears as an 8' tall feminine, humanoid shape, but anyone with any magical lore **immediately mistrusts** the image they see. Each adventurer sees in her *reminders of those cherished things they told the GM* they were having trouble accepting the loss of - whether it is the colours of her drapery, a scent of flowers, a distressingly familiar smile on lips that don't seem quite human. Her face is **mostly obscured** - one adventurer may see a warm and friendly eye, another the crook of an eyebrow, a third may take comfort in a kind and caring mouth.

Her garb is **not consistent** from viewer to viewer; there are ceremonial headdresses, veils, gowns, cloaks, scarves - many drawn from the religious or spiritual experience of the adventurer looking at her. Each person sees **two arms**, but what they are doing changes - sometimes they hold candles, or censers, or gesture occultly, or hold flowers, or wave through an unfelt breeze, again, often in ways specific to the spiritual context of the observer. Her hair changes by observer, but often seems to **drift faintly** in whatever ritual or formal or religious arrangement it appears in, as if an unfelt, invisible breeze moves it.

Ask the players some of these leading questions to describe her and force inconsistencies.

- Whose eyes do hers remind you of?
- When did you last see a headdress like hers? What did it look like?
- You see a different headdress - what strikes you as impossible about the one you look upon?
- You can't see her eyes, but she has an old friend's smile on her lips - whose?
- Her hands hold a ritual object you've only ever heard rumours about - what does it look like?
- Her hands reach out in a familiar gesture to you - what does it mean?
- Her robes are covered with ancient patterns you read about once - where are they from?
- The flowers falling from her arms remind you of ceremonies from your childhood - what can you recall of them?



When she appears summoned by distress or sadness, *she solemnly walks directly to that adventurer.* They feel themselves immersed in that grief moment they can't accept yet; and then from somewhere beneath folds of fabric **two additional arms** extend, and she'll take the adventurer's hands in these. They feel **an immense sense of peace** and need to *make a charisma or emotional intelligence based roll* to notice what she is doing to their hands - she is encasing them in growing crystal.

She has a **total of eight arms**, so two additional pairs of arms can emerge to *take the hands, or touch the face, or hold the shoulders of whoever is near her.*

These arms also *defend her from attack* by quickly **summoning crystal gauntlets** that can parry most blows.

She *does not attack beyond soothing the adventurers with encasement in crystal.*

An adventurer who catches it quickly is easily able to withdraw from her grasp, but removing the crystal from their body takes a strength, constitution or related roll and if they fail, they realize that pushing through will cause them injury. This injury scales to the extent of crystal coverage.

If adventurers flee, she does not pursue quickly, but *as long as they remain in audible distress she inexorably approaches.* She cannot fit down the narrow rough hallways though and adventurers can recuperate and calm down in there safely.

If adventurers try to talk to her, she responds to them only in solemn, caring **platitudes**:

- Everything will be okay.
- They wouldn't want you to be sad.
- I'm sorry you have to go through this.
- They're in a better place now.
- Just let the pain out.
- You have to be strong.
- Try to focus on the time you had together.
- Everything happens for a reason.
- Life never gives us more than we can handle.
- Time heals all wounds.
- Don't upset everyone else.

Her humanoid form *does not take damage or track HP*. Adventurers might be able to determine from magical knowledge that her form is a projection from a **protected bodily synecdoche**, a smaller part of herself hidden away somewhere.

The Ethereal Scavengers

If adventurers stay or return to **calmness** in the caves they will also come across **the Goddess** outside of combat, busy with a **small hole in the wall**. She ignores the adventurers as she repairs the damage the walls have taken from being eroded and chewed by vague forms beyond the crystal. If adventurers distract the Goddess in this moment, a **small creature** from the outside might make its way in.

Any of these **ethereal forms** that get in go right for the **large interior shape** at the centre of the cave and gnaw at its crystal surface. The **hole** that they leave in the outside wall has a faint and unsettling **suction** to it - *adventurers who spend time examining it feel their hp ticking away one at a time, like losing blood, but no pain.* It is a **Soul Void**. Adventurers who push their way out into it *lose HP at an increased rate*, and find themselves suspended in a **strange aether**, full of writhing and incorporeal **ethereal scavengers**. They need help to re-enter the caves.

The Goddess aggressively and desperately pushes to reseal the central shape first, and then use her crystals to **encase** the ethereal creature and push it back out the hole in the wall, and only then seal the hole. *She uses strength checks against adventurers, she goes silent, she ignores their distress, and she uses crystal to restrain and move anyone who is aggressively in her way as she does all this.*

Adventurers notice the resealed hole in the wall is **malformed and fragile** - the **crystals** are smaller, they bulge out into the void, and the eldritch forms focus on the newest **crystals** with their attacks. While these new **crystals** still blunt or destroy weapons used on them, they do seem to *take damage* in a way the smoother walls and such don't.

If several **ethereal scavengers** get through the gap and **the Goddess** is actively attacking them, they might in their distress attack the adventurers, but they are *by far most interested in that huge protected shape in the middle*. If adventurers do choose to fight them, though, they then *defend themselves and seek to suck the adventurers' souls*.

These ethereal creatures have **physical form** here in the caves - they can be attacked with melee weapons, ranged weapons and magic. They also **do physical damage** here - all four types have **uncannily hard teeth**, with the **Gliders** doing *damage averaging out to about half of the strongest adventurer's HP*, and the **Ropers**, **Scuttlers** and **Worms** doing less damage but being *more nimble and quicker to attack*.

They can *definitely be killed*. The **Goddess** also attacks any ethereal scavengers that come in to her caves, though, and works each round to encase them in crystal so she can force them back out through the wall.

If adventurers DO kill one of these ethereal scavengers, the **Goddess** will stop worrying about it and *focus on other things around the caves again, including the adventurers' distress*. The **scavenger's corpse** sort of deflates, and only the hard **crystal-chewing parts** remain.

These **Ethereal Scavengers** come in a few types, but have some *standard vulnerabilities*: They are all vulnerable to magic and fire, and have resistance to ice and invulnerability to poison. When dead, all their soft bits deflate and degrade incredibly quickly.

All **Ethereal Scavengers** possess the ability to **suck souls**, and *reduce health steadily as long as they are in contact* with their victims.

All **Ethereal Scavengers** focus their attention and soul-sucking on adventurers who have fallen prone over adventurers who are actively defending themselves. All **Ethereal Scavengers** defend themselves if attacked.

Ethereal Scavenger Types:

Ethereal Worms

Essentially arm-length, 10" wide polychete worms - segmented worms with myriad legs, blind heads and five-part mouths, each part tipped with a wedge-shaped bone-hard tooth. Their segments have small solid shell parts on top, but mostly these are soft and wiggly.

Attacks: biting, wrapping and squeezing, soul-sucking.

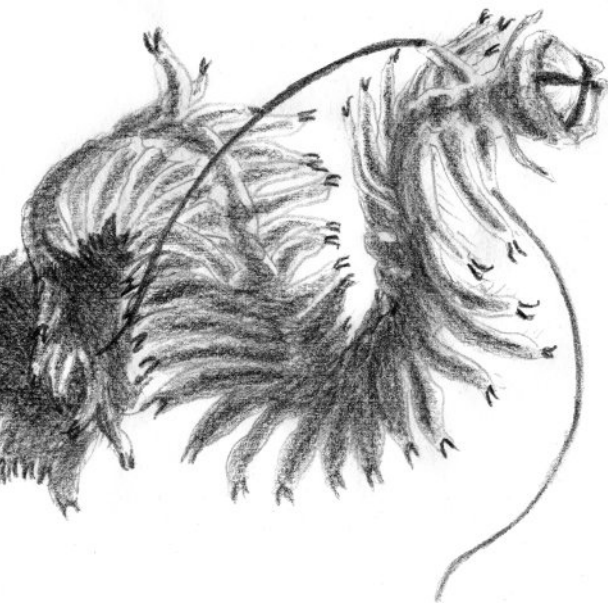
- Bites are blunt but strong, and if they are not shaken off they can grind through armor.



- The worms wrap their segmented bodies around an adventurer's arm or face and squeeze, requiring a second adventurer to remove them before they start to suffocate or crush their victim.
- If they hold on to a victim for two rounds, they begin sucking out their soul, extracting 1/10th of their total health each round.

Vulnerabilities: the **soft underside** of the worms are vulnerable to bludgeoning, slicing and stabbing weapons; on their shell side they are very difficult to harm with melee weaponry.

The worms have pretty **limited health**. Budget one round of successful hits from the party per worm for a satisfying fight.





Ethereal Scuttlers

Essentially grizzly bear sized, asymmetrical crabs. Their shells are made of incredibly hard material, with gaps exposing their softer innards at the segments.

Attacks: grabbing, snapping, smashing, soul sucking

- Grabbing adventurers with their biggest pincers is their first instinct - their claws are blunt but strong and someone will have to damage the claw or arm to get them to let go.
- All of their pincers, large and small, can snap at the adventurers in small, quick movements. These aren't how the Scuttlers get ahold of anyone, but these snaps can be quite painful if they make contact.
- If the largest pincers have been injured, instead of trying to grab an adventurer, the Scuttlers try instead to smash at them with the injured large pincers, doing significant bludgeoning damage.
- Soul sucking - after one round grabbed by a Scuttler, adventurers have their souls sucked, the smallest pincers grabbing at their exhaled breath and pulling out 1/10th of their total health worth of soul per round



Vulnerabilities: stabbing weapons, magic, being flipped over

- The Scuttlers' thick shells are almost impenetrable, but their joints are vulnerable to stabbing and slicing from accurate adventurers.
- These are especially vulnerable to magic, particularly fire, which makes them bubble at their joints and take 1.5x damage
- While the small pincers are quick and dexterous, overall the Scuttlers are clumsy and slow and can be easily escaped if they are flipped upside down and left on their backs.

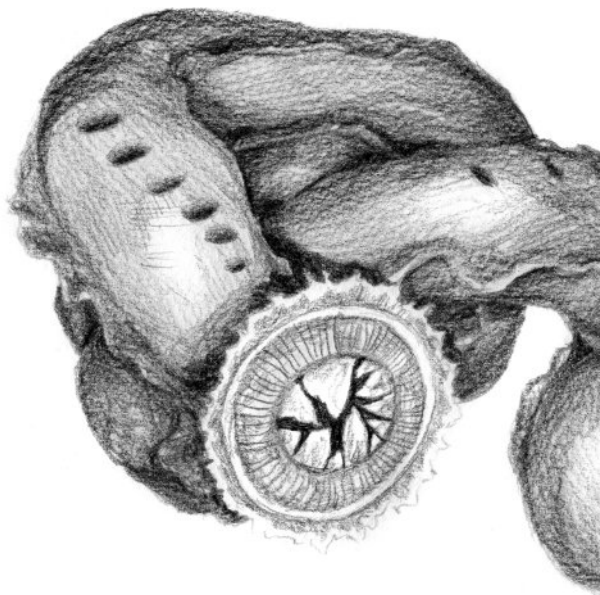
Health: Scuttlers are **robust for their size** and would take two successful hits from each party member to defeat.

Ethereal Ropers

Essentially six foot long lampreys, about the thickness of the average human thigh, slippery and squishy and muscular, with jawless mouths lined with multiple rows of dull, hard, grinding teeth.

Attacks: latching on, wrapping and squeezing, whipping, soul sucking

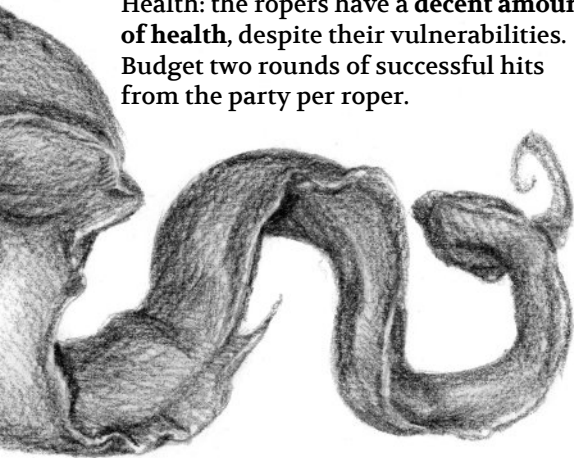
- Ropers' main move is to latch on to their victims with a horrible combination of suction from their jawless mouths and grip from their dull, incredibly hard teeth. They aim for any surface large enough for their mouths to attach like a vacuum, and have to suffer damage to be convinced to let go.



- Whether in combination with latching on or as a stand in until they can find a good grip, ropers also wrap themselves around victims' heads, torsos or legs. They can do a decent bludgeoning attack by squeezing if allowed to stay wrapped, but can be removed by another adventurer grabbing them from the tail end, or by doing damage to them.
- Ropers can also whip with the tail half of their body, which moves at an incredible speed. The whip functions like slashing damage to any of its victims.
- If they can keep their mouth on a victim for one full round, ropers begin sucking out their soul, extracting 1/10th of their total health each round.

Vulnerabilities: **largely undefended**, ropers are especially vulnerable to bludgeoning, slicing and stabbing weapons; damage increases if done near their mouth end.

Health: the ropers have a **decent amount of health**, despite their vulnerabilities. Budget two rounds of successful hits from the party per roper.



Ethereal Gliders

Essentially enormous sleeper sharks, these 18' (half as long as a school bus) ethereal scavengers have an unstable shape that reminds adventurers of sharks. Their form tends to shift as they move, as if their face and jaws were trailing a curtain shaped like a shark in some invisible current. Their 24" wide jaws are the real problem - they have many rows of small, sharp, incredibly hard teeth, surrounded by firm muscles and wrapped in uncannily slippery skin. That said, they do not move fast from place to place and can be avoided if adventurers pay attention to their location.

Attacks: these gliders are simple creatures - their attacks are: **biting, holding on, and soul-sucking.**

- Biting consists of the glider doing just that - biting its victim. They can absolutely get their mouths around arms, legs and heads if they choose to, and do a combo of piercing and bludgeoning damage (whichever is more effective) on whoever they have bitten.
- Gliders hold on when they bite unless they take damage, which only registers if it is damage to their head and jaw area - their wispy, ethereal bodies do not seem to notice or sustain damage.
- If they can keep their mouth on a victim for one full round, roppers begin sucking out their soul, extracting 1/5th of their health each round.

Vulnerabilities: Gliders are not vulnerable to much, and **only rate damage dealt to their heads and jaws.** Slashing damage slides right off them; piercing and bludgeoning damage are the most effective. Magic attacks must be aimed at the head or jaw to do damage. That said, they travel very slowly. *Adventurers who avoid them and don't deal them damage for 4 rounds can lose their interest completely.*

Health: gliders have **a lot of health** - budget three rounds of successful party attacks to give the appropriate effect.



The Crystals

The Crystals are **immensely hard**, but can be broken or degraded in these ways:

- By being hit with another **equally hard** crystal.
- Sometimes by being hit with **mundane tools** and weapons:
 - All crystals destroy mundane weapons in a few hits, but newer, more fragile crystals also *take damage* from them.
- Crystals *pass some damage on through* to whatever they contain.
- By having their *magic drained, blocked or countered* through spells. This weakens the crystal and allows mundane weapons to be more effective.
- By the **crystal-chewing parts** of Ethereal Scavengers. These can be attached to weapons or used as hand-held tools to effectively grind down the crystal without damaging what's inside.

Adventurers successfully **breaching** the outer crystal walls or the large central shape immediately *attracts the attention* of the Goddess, who makes her way at a good speed over to them.

Inside the Crystals

There are **human-sized mounds** of crystal throughout the cave, and if these are **opened gently** they contain seemingly sleeping people. The freshest or newest of these contains **Marko**. If they are opened roughly, the *people inside WILL take damage* - be sure to *communicate this clearly to the players* so their adventurers can make conscious choices and not kill the people they're rescuing.

The **pillars of crystal** attached to the floor and ceiling contain more **shrine-sized keepsakes** - a small portrait, a cameo, a hand-made knife, etc. These are the objects the **ghost houses'** victims were trying to rescue from the crystal that pushed up through the floor of their houses and then encased them. *Removing these from their crystal pillars visibly weakens the pillars*. But don't forget, it's possible for the adventurers to remove these roughly and damage the objects. The **Goddess** show up as soon as one of these is breached as well.

The **shrine objects** in the walls are not too deep and can be removed as well, but attacking the walls can summon the **Goddess**.

The Goddess' Heart

The **large central mound** is deeper encased in crystal than anything else - it's thick, it takes time to remove, and as soon as it's breached, even with only the smallest hole, the **Goddess** comes to stop them.

If they hold her off and persist, though, *as they breach the crystal casing, she gets stranger*. The trappings of **grief structures** start to fall away, the censers and robes and formal hats start to change, and as the interior is exposed, she *becomes more consistent in the eyes of the adventurers*.

As the adventurers chip away at the thick crystal coating they become convinced they see a **person** inside, and something else...

When they open it up enough to clearly see the **interior** of the crystal shell, the **Goddess** no longer looks human, but like a **draped ethereal being**, ten-limbed, with long hair that swims around her robes. Her face is vaguely humanoid, with two eyes and a mouth, and someone has painted it. There are dry flowers falling from her robes. Her eyes are actually **closed**.

She can also **make conversation** now - instead of spouting platitudes, she is able to engage in dialogue, though much like someone just on the edge of **sleep**. Her language is clipped, a little awkward, like she is translating herself into a language she's not familiar with.

The **Goddess** expresses distress that they are **uncovering** this thing, which she refers to as herself, but can be reassured that they mean no harm. When adventurers mention the **person** they see inside, she seems to remember, and maybe regret, something. If they **let her think** about this, they will be able to convince her to let

them unearth what is inside **without further violence**.

They find inside it a huge **heart** - the size of a four-poster bed. It is as much made of flesh as the ethereal scavengers - a strange, unusual flesh. Pressed against it, hugging it, is another sleeping **person**, an older **woman** in very out of date clothes. The huge heart is **beating** - but slowly, immensely slowly, and with only the smallest movement. If anyone checks her pulse, the **old woman's** heart is beating in time with the large one while she is pressed against it.

If adventurers go to peel the **old woman** off the heart, they hear the **Goddess** protest - she no longer fights them, but she weeps and with conversation and magical lore the adventurers may realize that this **old woman** is somehow fused to the **heart**, keeping the **Goddess** alive. The **Goddess** tells the adventurers that she was laid to rest here, but this **woman** came to her and gave her a new purpose. She doesn't know who she is or what will happen without that purpose. She seems a little **scared** of laying back to rest.

She can't tell them much about her life before being laid to rest. She drops hints of being a springtime **Goddess** - someone who made the flowers grow, caused the mountains to crystallize into beautiful forms, called the moon to sing to the sea - and she also drops hints that she is impossibly ancient.

Someone with an *expertise in magical lore* may place her as an ancient **Goddess** and may pick up on the **funeral garb** she wears - the face paint, dried flowers - and could conclude that they are standing in her **grave**. Only her **physical heart** remains; the rest of her has long decayed, despite her crystal defenses.

The Rescued People from the Caves

Each **person** extracted from a **crystal sarcophagus** is asleep, unwakeable, while in the cave. They can be safely carried, and if they are given a piece of **crystal** and accompanied by someone with a piece of **crystal**, they can be taken back through the **pool** to the other side, where they wake up.

In the cave adventurers can rescue **Marko**, as well as two or three other **folks** found in crystal casing around the red caves. These three other folks are in **dated clothing**, and are from the near or more distant past - though all were villagers here in Phylinecra in their lifetimes. *Pull one of these people from a player's character's family history - a lost great aunt or mysterious great grandparent or such.*

They each came to the caves in the same way: after a **tragic loss** - the death of someone they cared deeply about - and in their distress they were drawn to the **sacred pool** and found themselves facing the **Goddess** in the water. Pulled into her cave, their distress only magnified and she encased them in the calming, immutable **crystal**.

The Ghost Houses

There are a few ways to approach the **ghost houses**; if adventurers go to the surface and attempt to chip away at the **crystal** of the houses without weakening the **Goddess** or the **pillars** at all, they see it grow back faster than they can destroy it.

If they remove the **objects** from the **pillars** they can climb the holes that lead up through the void and then the soil into the houses and return them to the hands of the **person** encased in the crystal. At that point the **crystal house** starts to weaken, threading through with flaws and cracks, and can be destroyed with **melee weapons**. Whoever climbed up the hole will be unable to re-enter the **Goddess'** caves through the hole as soon as the object is **replaced** - the hole closes, and the connection to the **void** and the **Goddess's** cave disappears, and all they find at the bottom if they fight through the crystal is hard soil and stone. They must be smashed out of the **ghost house** along with the sleeper.

Killing the Goddess

Adventurers may choose to rescue the woman holding the **Goddess's heart**, despite the **Goddess's** unhappiness with that plan. The **Goddess** won't physically stop them at this point - she's lost, unsure of what she is supposed to be doing, and adventurers can point out that she's doomed this **woman** to an uncanny eternal sleep as long as she's holding that heart. Adventurers might also see from her sleeping face and dreamy conversation that the **Goddess** has also doomed herself to an uncanny eternal sleep. Adventurers might also be disinterested in her plight after the things that have happened to their friends and family. Either way, *she's done fighting them* once her **heart** is exposed, and they can pull the sleeping **woman** off it without any physical intervention.

When they pull the old woman off, the **heart** stops beating. It was a low, deep, impossibly slow sound, but then it stops. And the caves feel suddenly colder, and the grinding of the **ethereal scavengers** grows stronger, grating on everyone's ears.

The **Goddess** grows faint, flickering again insubstantially, but this time not between shapes the adventurers are familiar with - now she is shifting between her eight-armed form and things much stranger: images that seem like they are tree roots, but made of crystal; clouds, but of small flowers; a rainfall of seeds and beetles, and things stranger still. She walks over to her heart, now bare and still, and lays her own arms - or tree branches - or glittering rivers - on its cold surface, and envelops it in her image. A sense of her old self re-emerges, her **original scale** suddenly apparent as

ethereal and flickering rivers, rain, clouds, seeds, leaves, pollen, beetles, birds and other springtime memories start to form a strange anatomy, filling the caverns. As she settles in, a ringing sound moves through the crystal architecture, and a river of **flaws**, faint hairline cracks and instabilities moves out from the **heart**, throughout the entirety of the caves.

At the same time, the grinding of the **ethereal scavengers** strikes a strange rhythm, as they all work in unison to reenter the now undefended cavern. When they do, the first rush of them move to consume the **heart**, but those who can't access it approach **any soul** they can find - whether a living adventurer, anyone still encased in **crystal sarcophagi**, or even a memorial **object** encased in the walls. Adventurers need to grab **crystal** shards, rescue anyone they haven't already, and escape the crumbling caverns to the pool as quickly as possible, fighting off *ethereal scavengers* along the way.

If the Goddess is laid to rest before the **ghost houses** are dealt with, they will be weakened and flawed when adventurers approach them to dismantle them after their escape from the caves.

Keeper of the Goddess's Heart

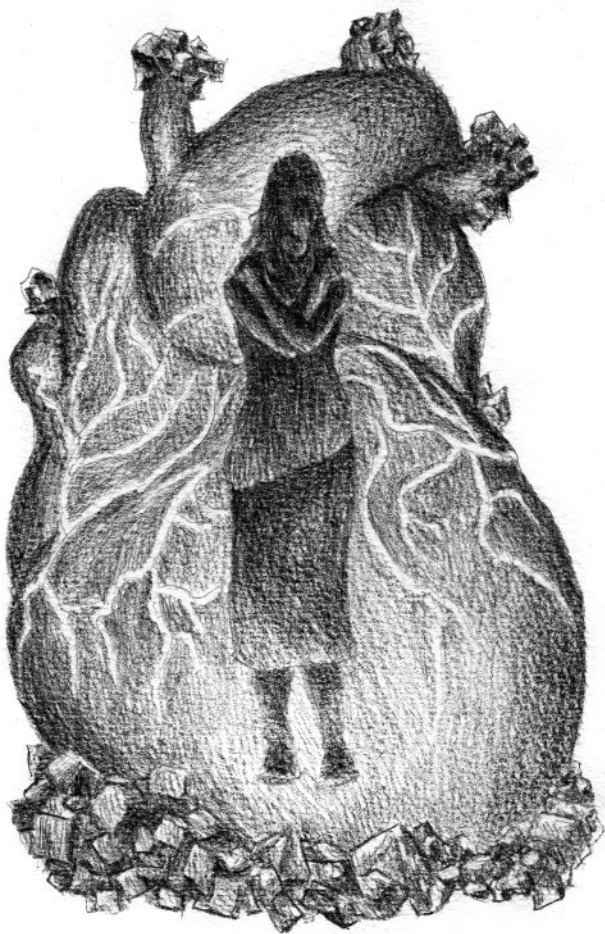
Once taken off the heart, the sleeping woman's own heartbeat slowly speeds up, reaching a natural sleeping rate after a few minutes, and her face brightens slightly. She wakes up when taken through the pool back to the surface world. Her name was **Sorna Omarn**, and she was part of the group, hundreds of years ago, of nomadic performers who chose this place to build themselves a permanent home.

Once woken, she is weak and frail and tired, but she has not aged, and she seems relieved and also sad to be up on the surface again. She confirms the rumoured tale of someone who sought the **Goddess**, and tells a story of a spring **Goddess** who was still bringing gorgeous weather, gorgeous wilderness and more to the area.

Sorna met her when she was sitting beside the pool, eager to settle down but **grieving** the life they were leaving behind. The **Goddess** appeared to her and gave her comfort, almost as if responding to **Sorna's** emotional state, appearing in fashions that reminded her of the places she'd traveled and the people she'd known, and **Sorna** became obsessed, eventually diving into the pool to join the **Goddess**. She found her in a soil cave, an ethereal image that flickered to look like whatever **Sorna** was missing, and **Sorna** eventually realized that she was living in a cave with a ghost, or **nearly a ghost**.

Her new **sadness** upset the **Goddess** further, and the first **crystals** formed in her attempt to comfort **Sorna**. As **Sorna** realized that her presence and emotional demands were actually what was now keeping this ghost here, she felt

guilty and cruel, and when she fell upon the Goddess' heart to try and comfort the Goddess, her sadness grew into the crystals the enveloped them both. Freed now, she remembers strange, springtime dreams while she slept under the comfort of the crystals, and she certainly mourns the Goddess.

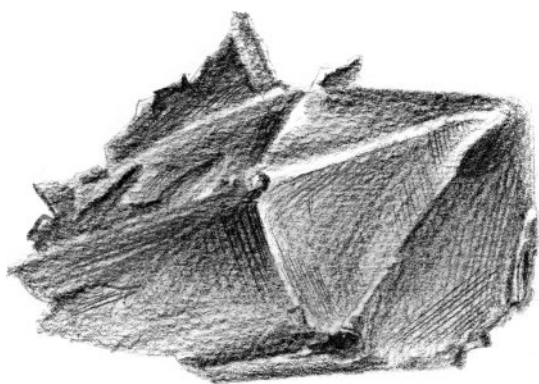


Final Choices

Depending on your adventurers' actions, there may or may not be a **Goddess** still under the **Blessed Isle**; adventurers have to decide what they tell the other townsfolk. If they go back to the community centre without having seen anyone since they fell in the pond, folks will be awed that they are alive. Townsfolk are excited and then disappointed that those they rescued aren't the recently lost folks, but there's beds and hot food for them all.

If they do explain things to the other townsfolk, they'll be asked a few questions:

- Is it over?
- Is it safe to stay here?
- Is it our fault?
- Should we build the **Goddess** a shrine?



The Ghost Houses of Phylinecra is a story-heavy, system-agnostic dungeon crawl.

The town of Phylinecra has suffered a terrible fate at the hands of a torrential flood, but as the townsfolk try to rebuild and restart in the aftermath, they find their home invaded and their loved ones encased by ghostly crystalline forms of the houses they lost.

Solving this mystery will take adventurers to the Blessed Isle and into the Red Caves to face the Goddess in her own territory. Will they find the connections between her world and theirs? Can they untangle this haunting mystery?

This is a *Pocket Dungeon*, designed to launch a campaign or run smoothly as a one-shot.

Learn more about all the other Pocket Dungeons at pocketdungeons.portablecity.net

