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# DUNGEON BACKDROP: DESZRAUL'S HOLD



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# DUNGEON BACKDROP: DESZRAUL'S HOLD

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*Hidden deep in the hills, Deszraul's Hold has a sinister reputation. The medusa Dezraul claims the caves and evidence of her fell powers—a bewildering array of uncannily lifelike stone statues—stand about her gloomy domain. All that remains of adventurers daring to face the cave's snake-headed mistress, the statues are a salutary warning on the dangers of facing a medusa in her lair. But does Deszraul still lair within? Has a band of savage, merciless bandits fallen under her sway? Only you can decide.*

*You are a GM, but you are busy. You want to write your own modules, but you just don't have the time. And you don't want to use commercial modules. You want to make your campaign your own. That's where the Dungeon Backdrop line comes in! Each Dungeon Backdrop presents a fully fleshed out and lovingly detailed self-contained dungeon ready for you to use as you see fit. Stock the dungeon with your own monsters (and—perhaps—their treasure), decide their back story and you are good to go.*

*Every Dungeon Backdrop is carefully designed to be easily inserted into almost any fantasy campaign and is compatible with virtually any fantasy roleplaying game. Dungeon Backdrops: we describe the dungeon, you add the monsters (and the treasure).*

## CREDITS

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## USING A DUNGEON BACKDROP

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Tweak and modify this dungeon to make it your own. The parts of this supplement describing the actual dungeon itself feature extensive space for you to make notes—adding treasure, opponents and so on.

- **Location Descriptions:** The various location descriptions provided herein only describe the basic appearance of the dungeon's rooms, chambers and corridors. They do not include descriptions of any monsters lurking therein. Remember when describing the dungeon to your players the snarling orcs (or whatever) are probably more noticeable than the room's features. Also remember, creatures in the dungeon will modify their home to better suit their needs. For example, the aforementioned orcs may have set up a rough camp—mention these changes when describing the area.
- **Treasure:** The text only presents the details of minor treasures the PCs could discover in the course of their adventure. Most is of little value, but serves to underline the flavour of the dungeon. Remember to add level-appropriate treasure when designing the dungeon.



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DUNGEON BACKGROUND

The wooded forests and hills to Languard’s east have long been a haven for bandits, brigands and other outlaws. The forest’s wild reaches have long stymied the duke’s attempts to winkle out the lawless folk dwelling beneath their boughs.

A score of years ago, the medusa Deszraul Valos fled into the hills. Coming from the far east, she was fleeing the wrath of an adventuring party—the Crusaders of the Burning Light—intent on slaying her. She found a small, hidden cave network and made it her own. The caves once housed a family of dwarves prospecting in the region and it suited her to dwell therein. Inevitably, word of a terrible creature dwelling in the hills trickled down into the civilised lands to the west. Many adventurers have subsequently tried to make their names by slaying the cave’s snake-headed mistress, and over a dozen have since fallen prey to Deszraul’s stony gaze.

ADDITIONAL GM RESOURCES

*20 Things #35: Bandits & Brigands* presents additional resources to bring to life the bandit gangs in your campaign. Use the material therein to add depth and flavour to any bandits lairing in the caves. Alternatively, *Monstrous Lair #12: Medusa Lair* provides seven handy tables to add more detail to Deszraul and her lair.

OPTION 1: DESZRAUL LIVES!

While Deszraul has been attacked by several adventuring bands over the years, none have managed to overcome the medusa. The remains of these adventuring bands litter the cave’s outer reaches. A survivor of one such ill-fated group, Auni Helliikki (NG female human fighter 3), recently staggered into Languard and gasped out her story over a half-dozen of ales. Thus, do the caves comes to the party’s attention.

OPTION 2: DESZRAUL HAS MINIONS

Deszraul yet dwells in the caves, but a few months ago a gang of bandits staggered into the caves after being driven away from a merchant caravan by an adventuring party travelling with the traders. Deszraul saved the bandits from the adventurers’ depredations and they have since thrown in their lot with the medusa. For her part, Deszraul likes having minions; they bring her treasures and she rarely has to leave the caves. For Deszraul, life is good. The emboldened bandits have begun more frequent raiding and have come to the attention of the local authorities who are casting around for a suitable group of adventurers to stamp them out.

CREIGHTON’S DESIGN SUGGESTIONS

- Given the main feature of this small complex, when stocking the dungeon, you’ve essentially got three choices about how to deal with the cave’s stony statues (and who, or what, made them).
1. You can use the various statues standing therein as the victims of a medusa, basilisk, cockatrice or other creature with the ability to turn its prey to stone.
  2. You could decide such a creature once dwelled in the complex but that it has been slain or driven off. The current dungeon inhabitants—perhaps a band of goblins, bandits or the like—use the statues as a deterrence, trusting in the obvious presence of a medusa or the like to scare away most intruders.
  3. You could combine 1 and 2 and decide a medusa leads a band of humanoids and the cave is their lair.

Whatever option you chose, the presence of so many highly detailed statues is sure to make even the most confident player somewhat cautious—no one likes to be turned to stone after all. (Which reminds me, I dedicate this Dungeon Backdrop to Tim Ayres; if anyone can fail a save against petrification, it’s Tim!)

As an aside, in my *Adventures in Shadow* campaign, I went with option #2 as the PCs were low-level—a mixture of 1st- and 2nd-level PCs, and although the party was large (numbering seven adventurers) there was no way they could have dealt with a medusa. I did, however, play up the statues for all they were worth and had the bandits pretend their leader was a medusa to try to get rid of the PCs.

## OPTION 3: DESZRAUL'S DEAD

Deszraul is dead, slain by adventurers. Her lair has been fought over and claimed by many groups since then. (This background gives the GM the most flexibility in stocking the caves as desired).

### ADVENTURE HOOKS

The PCs can merely stumble on Deszraul's Hold by happenstance and decide to explore the locale on a whim. Alternatively, use one of the hooks below to lure the PCs into the caves.

- **Bandit Attack:** The PCs are on the road travelling to their next adventure when they are attacked by bandits. They drive off the attackers, who leave an obvious trail to follow. Alternatively, if the PCs take a prisoner, the captured bandit offers to sell out his companions for his freedom.
- **Bandit Attack Aftermath:** The PCs are on the road when they encounter the aftermath of one of the bandits' ambushes. A cart lies on its side by a dead horse. Three arrows sprout from the horse's chest and the cart has been comprehensively looted. As the PCs search, one of them hears a low moaning. Investigation reveals a badly wounded mercenary—Aake Neuvo (LN male human fighter 2—with an arrow in his thigh. He relates details of the bandit attack and begs the PCs to

### WHISPERS & RUMOURS

If the PCs think to learn more about the dungeon, use the table below to determine what information they uncover. Determine which rumours are true based on your dungeon design.

1. A small cave complex hides a terrible creature—which has the ability to turn its foes into stone statues! Many people have entered the cave over the years, and none have emerged alive. Only fools dare enter the caves!
2. A terrible monster with the ability to turn its victims to stone once lived in the caves but it is long dead. The statues of its victims yet remain, however.
3. Bandits—Venla's Crew—have been seen in the area in recent months. The gang prey on travelling merchants and the like and have had some success. The local lord grows weary of their depredations and seeks someone to rid him of the detestable bandits.
4. It's not bandits preying on travellers and the like, but fey creatures made angry by the logging and hunting carried out in the forest's fringes.
5. The local lord has offered a reward of 100 gp to the group or person who can bring to justice whatever or whoever is responsible for the recent attacks on lawful travellers.
6. Bandits certainly have been active in the local area recently, but a few weeks ago their attacks abruptly ceased. No-one has claimed responsibility for killing or driving them away and speculation is rampant among the peasantry as to who or what is responsible.

help rescue the merchant (Ilta Lempo [NG middle-aged female human]) and her daughter (Charlotta [NG female human]). Perceptive PCs quickly realise Take has fallen in love with Charlotta. Searching the area, the PCs discover the bandits' tracks.

- **Missing Adventurers:** The PCs are relaxing in a tavern or inn in the locality when they overhear two regulars gossiping about a band of adventurers who came through this way a few weeks ago. The adventurers planned to explore a specific area of nearby forest or hills. If asked about the adventurers and their plans, the locals warn the PCs a ferocious creature is reputed to dwell in the area in which the other adventurers disappeared. It is said, the creature can turn its prey to stone and most of the locals believe this is the fate that has befallen the disappeared adventurers.

### THE LOCALITY

The dungeon complex stands in an area of rugged, forested hills near a well traveled road used by merchants, traders and the like. Game and forester trails criss-cross the region. A character skilled at tracking can discover a relatively well-trod path snaking away from the road and up into the hills.

The trail meanders through the undergrowth for several miles before entering a narrow, steep-sided valley. Trees hang far out of the valley's flanks plunging much of the valley floor into shadow. Eventually, the trail leads to the mouth of a cave. When the PCs reach this point, proceed to area 1.

### THE CAVES IN YOUR CAMPAIGN

Deszraul's Hold is not like a normal commercially available adventure. While we have done the bulk of the work for you describing the dungeon in detail, setting out its history, designing plot hooks to get your PCs to the dungeon and so on, there is still (a little) work left: you must stock the dungeon with appropriate monsters and treasures and make any other changes or additions you see fit. In short, you must make the place your own!

This Dungeon Backdrop is designed for use with the Duchy of Ashlar and the Gloamhold megadungeon. However, the dungeon is relatively self-contained and so with minimal effort it can be easily modified to fit almost any campaign world.

The major salient components of the complex comprise:

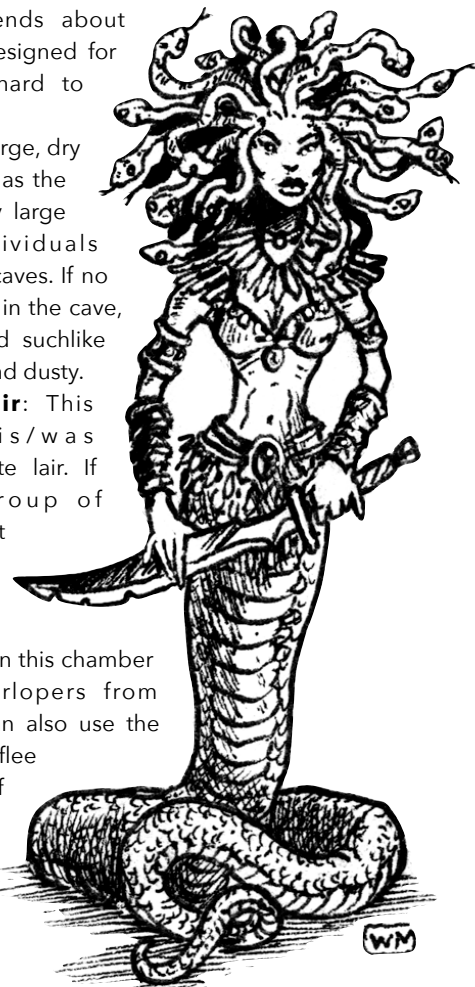
- A small, self-contained cave system comprising a mix of natural caverns and worked passageways.
- Many life-like statues scattered throughout the place.

Because the cave complex is essentially self-contained it could be placed anywhere in almost any campaign setting. It could even appear as an "add-on" or sub-level in a larger dungeon.

## NOTABLE LOCATIONS AT A GLANCE

Much of the cave system's features depends on what or who dwells within. Use the notes below as a starting point, and modify them as necessary to complement your design.

1. **Main Entrance:** Two life-like statues watch over the cave complex's main entrance, from a raised escarpment. These statues are the PCs' first concrete clues that something terrible lurks in the caves.
2. **Cramped Steps:** This secondary entrance to the caves is clear of suspiciously detailed statues.
3. **Cave of Statues:** This large cave comprises the bulk of the outer caverns. Over a dozen life-like statues—adventurers who once challenged Deszraul—are scattered about the area.
4. **Cavern of the Two:** Here stand two statues—these unfortunate adventurers were the two who made it furthest into Deszraul's lair. Their progress availed them naught.
5. **Unfinished Chamber:** The dwarves who built the complex's inner chambers did not finish this large room before departing for a new home.
6. **Sloped Passageway:** This slightly sloped, low-ceiling passageway leads up to a set of curving steps. This passageway runs under parts of area 4.
7. **Short Staircase:** This curved staircase descends about five feet. It is designed for defence, and hard to fight on.
8. **Barracks:** This large, dry chamber serves as the barracks for any large group of individuals dwelling in the caves. If no such group lairs in the cave, the bedrolls and suchlike are old, musty and dusty.
9. **Deszraul's Lair:** This chamber is/was Deszraul's private lair. If she, or a group of intelligent creatures claims the caves, they use the secret door in this chamber to attack interlopers from behind. They can also use the secret door to flee their enemies if the PCs seem too mighty.



## DUNGEON DRESSING

Use the entries below, to breathe life and detail into the locales described on these pages. Alternatively, use the information below to describe otherwise empty areas.

1. Water oozes down the wall to form a small puddle.
2. Rubble has been pushed to the side against the wall.
3. A burnt-out torch stub lies on the floor against one wall. A smear of soot on the nearby wall and floor show where the torched smouldered for a while after being discarded.
4. Deep scrape marks on the floor show where something heavy was dragged toward the exit.
5. The remains of a small campfire fill a hollow in the ground. A small pile of dry firewood lies nearby.
6. Several spots of dried blood decorate the floor.
7. Water drips from the ceiling, turning the ground to sticky, wet mud. Several easily detected footprints in the mud provide a clue to what might lie deeper into the caves.
8. A faint smell—sweat and animal musk—hangs in the air.
9. Scratches on the floor show where someone or something tried—and failed—to dig into the stone.
10. Clumps of mottled green and brown lichen cling to the wall and ceiling. Several small bats hang from the ceiling.

## THINGS TO FIND

Use this list, to determine what minor objects or features of interest the party discover if they take the time to search. Modify the value of items below to suit your campaign.

1. The broken-off tip of a stone finger lies on the floor.
2. Wisps of dusty cobwebs obscure part of the ceiling. Careful investigation reveals a small stone spider attached to the ceiling at the centre of the webs.
3. A grime-covered gold coin lies on the floor; only perceptive PCs—or those searching the area—spot the coin.
4. Graffiti daubed in chalk on one wall reads, "Despair for Deszraul dwells here."
5. The tracks of several booted footsteps lead further into the caves. A skill tracker can spot at least six individuals. The track's age depends on what dwells in the caves.
6. Graffiti, neatly chiselled into the wall in Dwarven reads, "Dolrak Thorhig" along with a date eighty years past.
7. A loose stone hides a small hollow in the floor. A rotting pouch containing 12 gp and 19 sp fills the niche.
8. A ripped sack lies on the ground. It holds nothing but a few mouldering heads of wheat.
9. A (dried) bloody handprint decorates the wall. The blood is smeared as if whoever left it was steadying themselves.
10. Broken and rusty, a bear trap languishes on the floor.

## GENERIC CAVERN FEATURES

The outer reaches of this small complex are of natural stone. They have several generic features:

**Illumination:** Beyond areas 1 and 2, it is dark in the caves unless otherwise noted. Dim light fills areas 1 and 2 within 30-foot of the cavern entrance.

**Rough Hewn Steps:** Flights of rough hewn steps count as difficult terrain. The steps are hacked out of the floor's natural gradient.

**Floor:** The cave floor is of stone covered with gravel and (mostly dried) mud. In a few places, where water oozes down the walls or drips from the ceiling, the mud is wet and glistens in the party's lights.

**Walls:** The cave walls in the cave are rough and natural.

**Ceiling:** The ceiling is about 20-foot high throughout the caves. Above escarpments it is corresponding lower. For example, above a ten-foot high escarpment the ceiling is only ten-foot high.

**Stone Statues:** Many stone statues stand about areas 1-4. These statues are incredibly detailed. Note, if the statues are petrified adventurers and the like, destroying or damaging them will likely "kill" the petrified individual. Refer to individual statue descriptions for more details.

## GENERIC DUNGEON FEATURES

The deeper parts of this small complex are of worked stone. They have several shared features:

**Dwarven Artifice:** A dwarf, or other character skilled in architecture or mining, recognises the artifice of the inner caves as being of dwarven origin.

**Illumination:** Unless otherwise noted, it is dark in the dungeon portion of the complex.

**Ceiling:** The ceiling is about 10-foot high. In most places it is plain and unadorned. Perceptive PCs spot the occasional signs of tool marks on the ceiling.

**Floor:** Flagged, the floor is generally flat and unimpeded.

**Walls:** The dungeon walls are of unadorned worked, natural stone.

**Wooden Doors:** The complex's wooden doors are in good repair and open into the room they ward. Unless noted in the text, the doors are plain and unadorned.



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### GM NOTES

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*Depending on what dwells in the cave, the PCs will likely find tracks in areas 1 and 2. They may also see light emanating from area 4.*

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### 1: MAIN ENTRANCE

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Two life-like stone statues stand on the escarpment overlooking the cave entrance.

*A narrow set of rough hewn steps, overshadowed by a stone escarpment, leads down into the cave. Two life-like statues—one an elven man, the other a human woman—stand atop the ledge.*

**Escarpment:** The stone escarpment is ten-foot high; its flank are easy to climb and can be scaled with a +10% chance to the character's climb check.

**Stone Statues:** Two stone statues stand atop the escarpment:

- **Northern Statue:** This elven man wears fine robes adorned with mystic symbols around the hems. He is holding a stone scroll and was caught in the act of reading from it.
- **Southern Statue:** This human woman wears stone chainmail and carries a mace in her left hand. Her right arm is extended and her hand points into the cave beyond.

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### 2: CRAMPED STAIRS

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These narrow natural stairs provides a shortcut into the caves.

*A narrow set of stairs leads downward into a large cave.*

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### 3: CAVE OF STATUES

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Life-like stone statues stand about this large, natural cavern.

*At least a half-dozen incredibly life-like statues stand about this large, natural cavern. To the north east a crumbling stone escarpment rises about ten feet high and hosts two more statues.*

**Eastern Escarpment:** Two statues stand atop the ten-foot high escarpment in the north-western part of the cave. Characters scrambling up (or down) the escarpment get a +10% bonus to their climb check.

- **Eastern Statue:** A half-elf woman clad in leather armour points a bow down into the main part of the chamber. A look of anger mixed with fear is fixed on her face.
- **Western Statue:** A halfling man wearing studded leather armour and holding two daggers is frozen in the act of creeping toward the wall. His eyes are narrowed in concentration and his demeanour and pose is that of a hunter.

**Secret Door:** A secret door pierces the eastern wall. It is nothing more than a cleverly counterweighted slab of stone—simply pushing on it causes it to spin about an iron pole set into its centre line.

**Stone Statues:** A dozen or so stone statues stand about the main part of the cavern; all are highly detailed and life-like. Some of the statues are smashed and broken; others remain whole. Use the following table to generate the details of the statues the PCs investigate:



D12	STATUE
1	A goblin crouches on the floor. It has its hands over its eyes, but clearly it could not resist seeing its doom approach. Observant PCs note the unfortunate was petrified because it was peeking between its fingers.
2	This large, muscular human warrior has been petrified in the act of charging. His axe is held high over his head and his face is twisted into a terrible snarl. As the warrior was petrified while running forward, the statue is finely balanced; anyone moving passed it has a good chance of knocking it over and smashing it.
3	Smashed rubble surrounds this statue which is missing from the waist up. The figure seems to have been a human or elf based on his legs and waist and was wearing fine flowing robes.
4	A snarling wolf stands in the centre of the area, hackles raised and teeth barred. Slightly behind the wolf, and to one side, stands a female half-elf dressed in leather armour. The half-elf is pointing deeper into the cave.
5	This headless statue of a muscular warrior wields a huge falchion. The man's legs are set wide and the falchion is pulled back as if he were ready to strike.
6	The statue of a halfling, a stone dagger clenched between its teeth, lies on the floor, practically filling a deep niche in the floor. The halfling is snarling. Cold, muddy water fills the remainder of the niche.
7	A stone warrior holds his shield up in front of his eyes and his short sword down low ready to murderously rip the weapon up into his opponent's belly.
8	This heavily overburdened human woman wears an oversized backpack and holds a lantern outstretched in front of her. A look of horror mars her otherwise attractive features.
9	This small rat was petrified in the act of looking around the stony legs of another statue.
10	Bones surround this statue of an adventurer caught as he looked back over his shoulder. From the stance of the statue—and the skull and spinal cord still draped about it—it looks like the adventurer was carrying a dead or unconscious companions when he was petrified.
11-12	This statue is smashed and broken—it is little more than a pile of rubble.

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## GM NOTES

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*Add detail to the statues as you see fit. Perhaps the PCs recognise an adventurer they have previous encountered. Such a discovery could lead to further adventures—particularly if they try to return the trapped adventurer to flesh.*

**The Pit:** A crumbling ledge bounds a ten-foot deep section of cave to the north-western. Characters scrambling up (or down) the escarpment get a +10% bonus to their climb check.

**Narrow Passage:** A two-foot wide passageway leads roughly northward from the bottom of the pit. Small or larger creatures must squeeze if they plan to explore the passageway. Two short flights of natural steps each drop down about five feet.

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## GM NOTES

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*Organised inhabitants of the dungeon dwell in areas 8 and 9. They likely keep a watch in area 4 so intruders will find it difficult surprise them. Remember, if human bandits dwell in the caves these guards will probably have some source of illumination in area 4, which the PCs will automatically spot when they enter area 3.*

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## 4: CAVERN OF THE TWO

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This raised ledge is a good place for organised groups claiming the caves to set a watch on the outer caverns.

*Two more statues stand atop this low escarpment. A wooden door pierces the chamber's far wall.*

**The Statues:** Two more stone statues stand here.

- **North Statue:** Missing its left arm, which lies half-way down the crumbling escarpment, this statue of a female half-elf is in a sorry state. A look of fury mars the woman's face.
- **South Statue:** This statue of a dwarven man wearing studded leather armour has been extensively vandalised. Some wag has carved his initials—MC—into the dwarf's buttocks.

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## 5: UNFINISHED CHAMBER

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This large chamber marks the extent of the dwarves' work in the cave complex.

*The western portion of this chamber is akin to a natural cave, although here and there, signs of improvements are evident. To the east the far section of the cave has been shaped and smoothed to be habitable.*

**Stonework:** The stonework in this chamber is rougher, less finished, than in areas 6 - 9.

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## 6: SLOPED PASSAGEWAY

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This area is a natural choke point; organised defenders may try to hold intruders here while more of their brethren use the secret door in area 9 to take intruders from the rear.

*This 20-foot long passageway slopes gently upwards to a set of stone steps leading up to the east.*

This area has no notable features. Roll on "Dungeon Dressing" or "Things to Find", if the PCs search here.

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## 7: SHORT STAIRCASE

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A wooden door stands at the bottom of the stairs. Defenders in area 8, may try and hold this door shut if intruders appear strong or numerous.

*This short staircase spiral downwards to a wooden door.*

Except the staircase, this area has no notable features. Roll on "Dungeon Dressing" or "Things to Find", if the PCs search here.

**Staircase:** The staircase counts as difficult terrain. Built for defence, the staircase was designed to hamper attackers. Characters lower down on the stair than their attacker gain cover from the curving wall.

## 8: BARRACKS

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Here dwell the rank and file of any organised group claiming the caves.

*Bedrolls and other personal pieces of camping equipment lie scattered about this large chamber. Soot covers the ceiling around a natural fissure in the north east corner. The remains of a large campfire fill the niche under the fissure.*

**Camping Equipment:** The bedrolls, spare clothes and other miscellaneous equipment here are mundane and have little value.

## 9: DESZRAUL'S LAIR

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Herein dwells the most dangerous creature in complex—either Deszraul or the bandit chieftain.

*Surprisingly richly appointed, this chamber has several rugs on the floor and what looks like a comfortable bed in one corner next to a chest. In the east wall, clear, fresh water fills a small niche.*

**Secret Door:** A secret door pierces the west wall. It is nothing more than a cleverly counterweighted slab of stone—simply pushing on it causes it to spin about an iron pole set into its centre line.

**Natural Basin:** Clear, fresh and cold water oozing from a crack in the rock fills this stone basin.

**Rugs:** The rugs are dirty, but serviceable; one has an interesting geometric pattern.

**Bed:** The bed is sized for a human-like creature; furs and blankets cover the bed.

**Chest:** This stout wooden chest is locked. The bandit chieftain, if one is present, has the chest's key. The chest holds clothes and the band's choicest pieces of treasure.

## CONCLUSION

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Once the PCs have cleared out the cave system they can simply move on to their next adventure. Alternatively, the PCs:

- Could use the caves as a handy base from which to explore the surrounding area.
- Could be altruistic and try to return to flesh some of the unfortunate petrified individuals.
- Might become victims of their own success. If they claim the caves and fail to publicise their victory over the cave's denizens they could be assaulted by other bands of adventurers seeking to make a name for themselves by slaying the cave's foul denizens.
- Might discover another set of passages and chambers after a rock fall in area 5 reveals a narrow passageway in the north wall; the tunnel slopes steeply downwards into the bowels of the earth.

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## GM NOTES

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*If an organised group lair in the caves they'll likely make their stand in areas 8 and 9, but don't be afraid to have them send out skirmishers to attack the party from behind using the secret door in area 9.*



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