

Guts & Gears



HELLMOUTH

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INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

In recent years, I have witnessed many terrible things on my blighted Nyss and dragonspaw research excursions. I watched blighted Nyss move with almost preternatural grace as they cut down swaths of men. I looked on as dragonspaw with half-formed bodies erupted from gore-filled cauldrons to devour enemies. I have observed and catalogued these things and more in my never-ending quest for zoological discovery, yet there is one unique biological organism—I hesitate to use the word “animal”—that has continually eluded first-hand study. Even with the growing activity of this blighted legion, sightings of this entrenched predator remain almost apocryphal.

I admit my fascination with this creature has bordered on obsession as of late, but perhaps it is this same dogged persistence that has uncovered clues to a possible resource for new information. While I have referred to myself as a coward in the past, my esteemed mentor, Professor Pendrake, has always kindly corrected me. He believes I possess a “scholarly courage” vital to our profession as extraordinary zoologists, but I fear the extent of that courage will be fully tested before the end of this expedition . . . If my research is accurate, I anticipate I will soon find the blighted horror known as the hellmouth.

OBSCURED ORIGINS: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND CONNECTION TO MORRDH

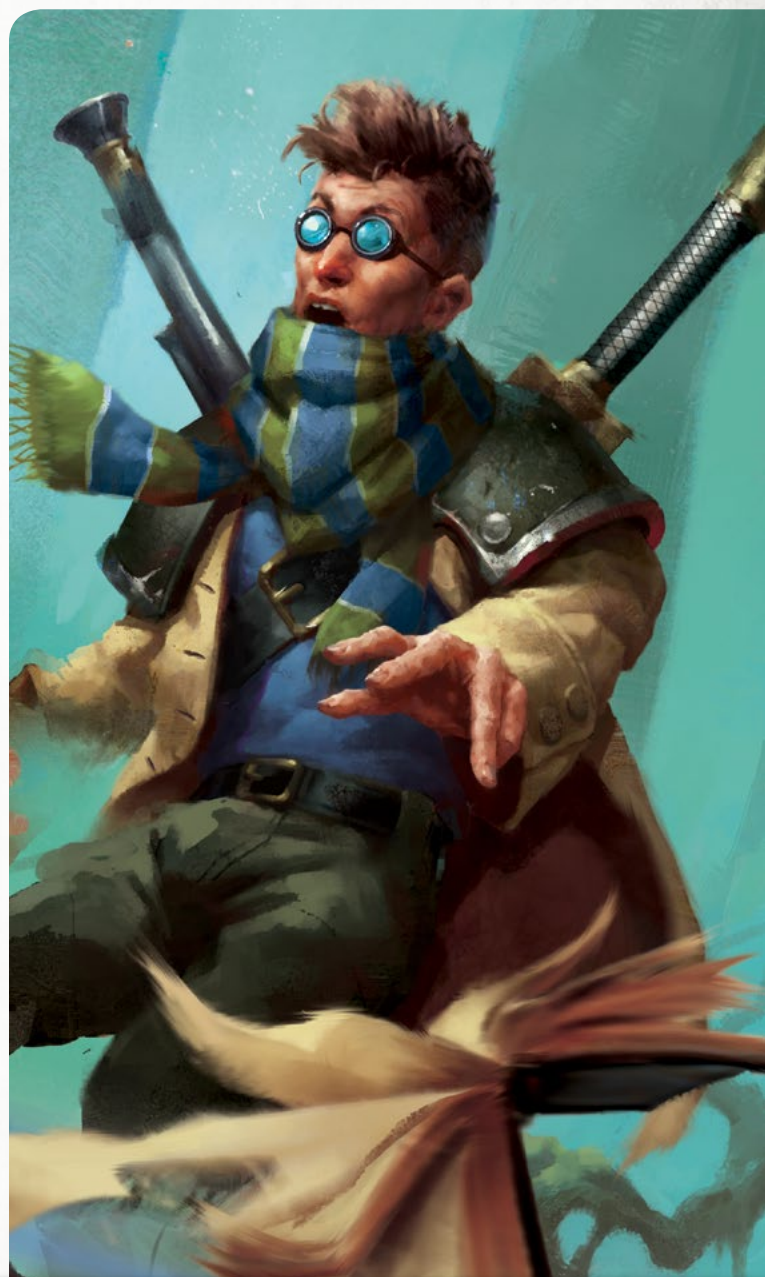
“Proper research is half the expedition.” Those were some of the first words Victor Pendrake ever said to me, and they are words I have come to live by. My first clues into the nature of the creatures known colloquially as hellmouths came from assorted Cygnaran military reports that detailed encounters with blighted Nyss just past the northeastern border. These reports described tentacles rising from the earth, grabbing soldiers, and pulling them into a large mouth-like opening that burst from below.

After weeks of cross-referencing, I was reminded of a series of lectures I read on ancient Morrdhic creatures by Professor Cassandra Rovall, a renowned archeologist and leading expert on Morrdhic studies at the prestigious Merin School of Learned Sciences in Ord. After some professional back and forth and what I can only describe as academic bribery, Professor Rovall was kind enough to collate much of her published and private writings on various legends pertaining to extraordinary creatures in the historical kingdom of Morrdh.

Using Rovall’s work and my own sources—an amalgamation of anecdotal sources, fragments of historical documents, and writings bordering on mythological lore—I was able to piece together accounts that likely referred to the hellmouth creature. The earliest record of the hellmouth that I could find detailed creatures called *kuriel*, horrors “bound to the earth” with great tentacles that rose like living chains and enveloped warriors and slaves alike. These sources also wrote of “deep holes filled with razor-sharp teeth” located near the “living chains.” Other writings described the *kuriel* as having a hide “stronger than the best forged mail.” Additionally, I

stumbled upon some accounts that discussed the *kuriel*’s gestation, stating it was “small at first, barely the size of a fist, but once seeded to the ground would grow to enormous size after at most a fortnight of feeding.” Based on several records of interest, it appears these creatures were quite popular with Morrdhic lords. Many accounts explained these “little devourers”—likely a translation of their name—had been placed around especially important fortresses and holds as a means of deterring would-be trespassers. It is said the once-great Morrdhic keep was so “protected” by these entrenched creatures that the entire landscape was a barren desert where only hungry mouths grew.

One noteworthy anecdote comes from an ancient saga known as “Heroes’ Return,” which detailed how a powerful and gluttonous lord of Morrdh kept a legendary creature known as the “Salivating Death.” Over the decades, thousands of disobedient slaves and enemies of the lord were offered to the Salivating Death’s tentacles to be consumed by the hungry



maw below. While this tale may seem far-fetched, I find it far more plausible than some of the documents from the era identifying these creatures as juvenile *gorgandur*, another subterranean beast with a voracious appetite and rows of razor-sharp teeth and known to grow to tremendous size. Far be it from me to disrespect the men and women of learning of that period—they are the forbearers of modern-day scholarly thinking, after all—but I find that conclusion to be dubious at best. Even without accounting for the incredible rarity of these large beasts, if a fraction of the creatures described in the ancient texts were in fact *gorgandur*, the resulting geological damage to the region would have crippled the kingdom of Morrdh centuries before its known collapse.

I have found ample evidence to support my hypothesis that these Morrdhic creatures are at least related to the modern-day hellmouth. But I should clarify how I developed such a theory. As I have previously stated, most of my sources are clouded by ancient Morrdh's elusive history and lore; however, numerous obscure documents refer to a "great emissary" said to have originally gifted the tentacled maws to a few lords of Morrdh in return for "service and alliance." I believe that certain physical descriptions of this emissary (scaly patches skin, protrusions of bone-like ridges) are consistent with a creature affected by prolonged exposure to dragon blight. Additionally, the physical descriptions and behavior of the *kuriel* that I have cited bear a striking similarity to present-day hellmouths. I admit, I may be reaching in these conclusions, but I do believe there is enough compelling evidence to warrant an examination into a possible link between Morrdh and the hellmouths. Perhaps I will share my findings with Professor Rovall as a means of lessening my future debt to her.

FIELD OBSERVATIONS: TENDRILS OF DEATH

Just when I had exhausted every avenue of research, fortune struck; I received word of multiple legion sightings by Cygnaran forces a few days northeast of Corvis. Professor Pendrake was kind enough to put me in contact with an old mercenary friend of his who was under contract to patrol that region: Captain Armand Dukain. He was a quiet yet affable man who led a respectable force of his Steelhead halberdiers and riflemen in recent skirmishes against blighted Nyss in the area, and I must admit I found comfort witnessing the captain's competent leadership throughout the expedition. During our several days' march around the area, Edrea and I became acquainted with two Steelheads named Leighton and Harks. While both made for good company, as far as mercenaries go, I had the distinct impression that Harks suffered from a bit of misguided infatuation with my Iosan colleague.

After spending some time questioning everyone I could about his or her encounter with the blighted legion, I determined that Leighton provided the most noteworthy account. According to him, sometime before our arrival, the force had encountered a small settlement recently devastated by an attack. No bodies were found in any of the ransacked buildings, but the earth had been displaced, with scores of craters and holes all around. Eventually, we discovered a lone survivor, a man named McKee, who claimed that a pair of horrendous creatures had caused the majority of the destruction. He described half-buried mouths and powerful tentacles that sprang from the earth to consume the townsfolk, an attack he survived by hiding in a turnip cart. He recounted being paralyzed by fear while a tentacle probed around the cart, as if it were looking for him, when a terrified horse rode by and was grabbed instead. McKee swore that lying still while the horse galloped was the only thing that saved



him. After a full day and night, the creatures sank back into the earth, apparently retreating to sleep. McKee said the creatures were still under the town—he urged our mercenary companions to flee, but after a thorough search of the area, we discovered nothing. His story, while seemingly fantastic, provided some further clues as to the nature of the elusive hellmouth. Could they somehow be sensitive to vibrations? I spent the next few days treading softly, just in case.

On the afternoon of the eleventh day of our patrol, a few riflemen on forward scouting positions found inhuman tracks that only a sizable force could have made. After less than an hour of cautious marching, it became clear that we had blundered into an ambush, as multitudes of arrows and large javelins were launched from a nearby tree line. We were then beset by a number of blighted Nyss and ogrun. Our group responded swiftly, and for a moment it seemed that we had the upper hand, but then the earth shook and cracked open as massive tentacles sprang out from beneath to envelop a swath of unlucky soldiers.

The next several minutes unfolded in almost exaggerated slowness, as the orderly formations and gun lines of the Steelheads were thrown into chaos by a mass of impossibly swift tentacles pulling hapless soldiers into the air. I was able to follow one of the blighted appendages as it dragged a halberdier—I believe it was Leighton—to open ground just as a monstrous maw erupted from the earth and consumed the poor man even as I hacked at the tentacle with my great sword. The horror of the scene threatened to overwhelm me,

but as usual, it was Edrea who managed to steel my resolve. With my Iosan companion hurling arcane blasts at blighted warrior and subterranean horror alike, the analytical part of my mind sprang into action. I observed the hellmouth's attacks, a flurry of seemingly chaotic actions, until a pattern emerged. It was with new-found horror that I realized the creature exhibited a cold, instinctual cunning.

It became apparent that the hellmouth did, indeed, sense potential targets through vibrations, as no primary sensory organs were visible. The creature prioritized the Steelheads who were on the move or screaming over those who silently stood their ground. What's more, the speed and alien grace of these giant appendages was truly something to witness; not only did they manage to dodge the occasional blow from a skilled halberdier but they also chose peculiar angles of attack, often gripping defenders from behind before dragging them to their death. We seemed perpetually flanked by this creature's bizarre anatomy.

Still, it was the hellmouth's hide that proved the greatest challenge; sword, rifle, and magical blast did little beyond superficial damage. It was the Steelheads' coordination that began to turn the tide as multiple riflemen and halberdiers would coordinate on a single tentacle. When we finally managed to cut down the appendages, we found our relief short-lived. More tendrils sprang from the earth in place of the wounded ones, suggesting the beast possessed regenerative abilities. Still, we pressed on, and toward the end of the battle I was shaken from my analytical stupor as I witnessed a tentacle about to close around Edrea's neck.



Before I could act, Harks pushed Edrea aside and was quickly enveloped and flung into the cavernous maw of the hellmouth. We fought on, and just as it seemed the gruesome carnage would never end, Captain Dukain led a final offensive with the remaining Steelheads, causing the surviving Legion forces to retreat. Victory came at a bloody cost: over half of our force had been cut down, most consumed by the subterranean horror. As Edrea, the remaining mercenaries, and I took in the devastating aftermath of battle all around us, I could tell what they were all thinking as the same question ran through my own mind . . . *How safe could we be when the very earth beneath our feet could rise to consume us?*

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS AND ANATOMICAL EXAMINATIONS

While the remaining mercenary forces took stock of casualties and tended to the wounded, I used the opportunity to approach Captain Dukain about the possibility of soliciting a few of his men. I desired to dig up the hellmouth's corpse for as much observation and analysis as possible. The good captain bristled at the suggestion, as his soldiers had crucial duties to perform. I knew that Dukain was right, and I empathized with soldiers who would want nothing less than to risk digging up a creature who had just eaten over a dozen of their comrades, but I also knew that this was my only chance for close observation. I had a scientific duty to do whatever it took to study this creature.

I eventually convinced the captain with the argument that studying this monster would provide valuable intel on better ways to defeat it and perhaps even guard against it in the future. Dukain proposed the following conditions: I would have to pay anyone who volunteered out of my own pocket for the extra effort, and we would only have three hours for the entire venture. Seeing no alternative, I agreed and was rewarded for my efforts with a fascinating study of an extraordinary creature. What follows are my very abridged notes during my analysis. (More complete observations can be found in Edrea's dictation journal.)

Physiology: The vast majority of the hellmouth's anatomy is hidden below ground. As the volunteer Steelheads only managed to dig about five feet deep around the creature, it is difficult to determine even an approximate size, but I would wager that I only saw about half of its total body. Therefore, I would place its overall length between ten and fifteen feet. Its body has a passing similarity to the monstrous floating platforms I have previously observed known as the Thrones of Everblight. Its armored hide is extremely tough and dense, able to withstand the pressure of soil over long periods of time. Chitinous plates protect the mouth and some of the upper body, perhaps the sections that breach the surface of the earth, but eventually these plates give way to exposed flesh. A series of wickedly sharp, hooked teeth encircle its mouth and also grow inside the main oral cavity. A large, central tentacle extends from the mouth and appears to function as the creature's tongue.

Locomotion: While it appears to be immobile—possibly rooted by a network of fine tentacles along the dorsal and ventral surfaces embedded in the earth—the creature does appear *capable* of movement. In theory, the bristles along the exposed flesh of its lower body, along with extremely strong stretching and flexing of its muscles, could allow it to gain traction and move underground. Perhaps this method of locomotion is used in the creature's juvenile form?

Tentacles: At roughly twelve feet long with incredible power, the hellmouth's tentacles seem to be its main weapons and primary source of sensory input. Highly packed with muscle, these tentacles are lined with sharp, barb-like suckers along their ventral surface, which, along with a set of chitinous plates along the back and end of the appendage, aid in grasping and gripping prey through a combination of adhesion and muscle contraction. I also discovered evidence to support the theory the creature has some regenerative capabilities, as the observed specimen seemed to have been in the process of growing new tendrils to replace ones lost before its death.

Sensory Input: Between each row of plates protecting the creature's main body are small but incredibly sophisticated sensory organs. These organs were also under the bristles located on the areas of exposed flesh and within the tentacles. Upon dissection, I noticed parts of these gland-like sacks were extremely sensitive to vibrations. I hypothesize that blighted energy is used to heighten the senses of these organs.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

After returning to Corvis University relatively unscathed, I have had the chance to ruminate on my experiences and observations of the blighted hellmouth. While I examine my findings and continue to analyze the various samples I managed to take with me, I find myself growing more disturbed with each minor discovery of this creature's physiology. I have examined numerous dragonspawn and blighted creatures in my time, but in most cases their attributes appear random, akin to a mutation or a cancer. To put it plainly, this creature's anatomy exhibits deliberate attributes suggesting a designed evolution toward a very specific purpose. It is just as much a weapon as it is a living creature. The fact that it seems to have been created by a force serving a dragon is even more alarming.

As the blighted Nyss continue to spread across the Iron Kingdoms, I believe these hellmouths will be no strangers to our battlefields. While I will continue my research and try to find some kind of weakness or approach to defeating these creatures, I fear for the lives of unsuspecting soldiers who find themselves forced by horrendous tentacles into a hungry maw that emerges from beneath. For now, I will do what I can to learn more. Perhaps I should format my research on the hellmouth for potential publication in case Professor Pendrake's musings about writing a new volume of his *Monsternomicon* bear fruit. If we continue to amass knowledge about this terrible threat, we may be able to save ourselves from being consumed by this blighted menace.