

# AT THE HOUR OF DEATH

AN ADVENTURE LOCATION BY MICHAEL PRESCOTT

## THE SITUATION

The lost tomb of **Sierk the Carver** is closer than anyone thought. Any old dry well or crumbling brickwork could reveal a way into its **soot-black chimney**. Sierk dwells at the tomb's center, refusing to allow his long life to end in an act of magical stubbornness.

The other inhabitants are all trapped here, fixed in their ways by the magic of the **game board** in the **study**.

## THE STORES (VI)

A cord of dry, brittle **firewood** is stacked against the walls. Careful listeners hear the gnawing and scuttling of a legion of boring insects. In the bottlery, two dozen **tuns of wine**, strong but halfway to vinegar. Hidden among them are four **jade bottles** of fine mead.

## GAMES ROOM (V)

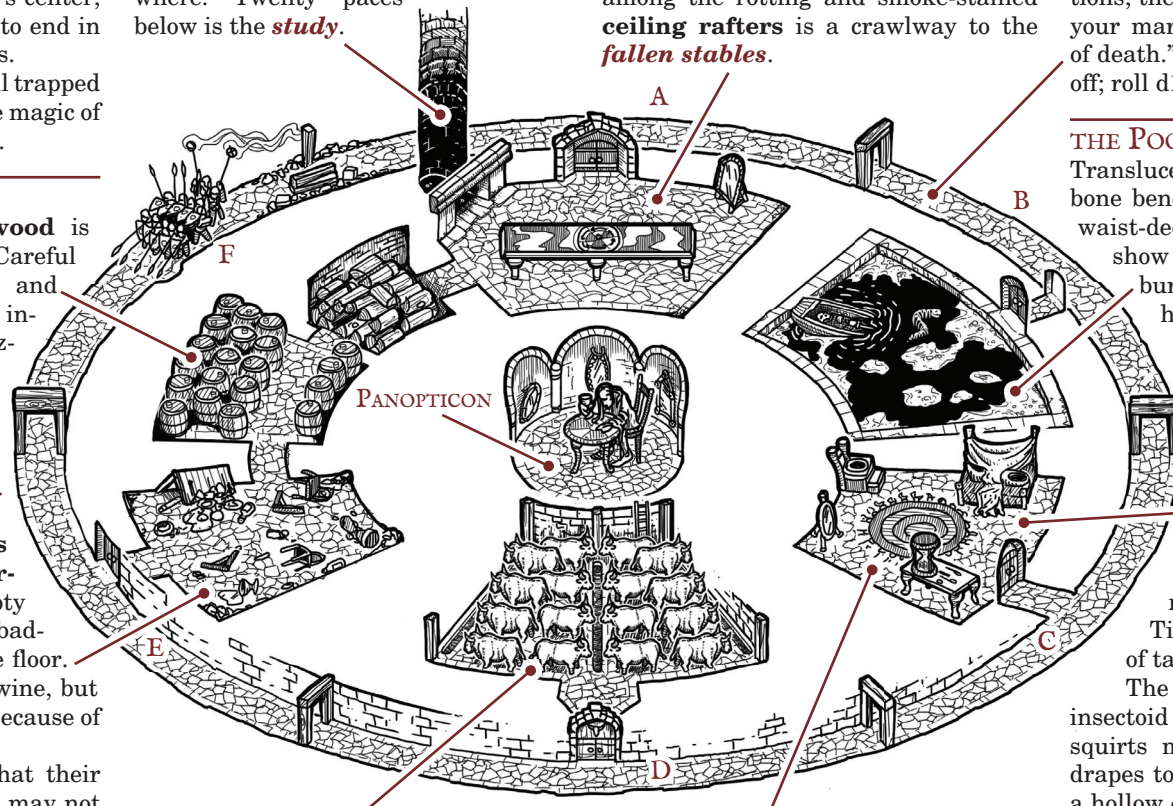
A half-dozen **Ricalu goblins** perch on rich but **smashed furniture**, playing dice amid empty bottles, torn drapery, and a badly dented **mirror** lying on the floor. They complain of the lack of wine, but don't think to visit the stores because of the **game board's** magic.

They vaguely remember that their host, **Sierk**, has taken ill and may not return, despite his love of dice and reputation for long nights of merriment.

If attacked, they fight with knives, frantically leaping and throwing. Their empty **goblets** are silver with precious stones. The **Physician** has crudely etched each with a message to **Sierk** in reverse letters, "Vanity ends at the hour of death." Drinking from them causes ill health.

## THE SOOT-BLACK CHIMNEY

Rough-hewn stone blocks are coated in tar-like **creosote**. Anyone climbing will become utterly filthy, leaving tell-tale footprints and hand prints everywhere. Twenty paces below is the **study**.



## THE STUDY (I)

A mighty **fireplace**, heaped with **cold ash** and blackened by fires past. In the center of the polished **oaken table** is the **game board**, lit by two fat **candles**. The frame of the three-legged **mirror** reads, "Reflect on your master's aim." Shapes reflected in it seem simplified, as if hastily carved. Hidden among the rotting and smoke-stained **ceiling rafters** is a crawlway to the **fallen stables**.

## THE OUTER CORRIDOR (A-F)

The corridor is patrolled by the **skeletal phalanx**, at least with the **game board** undisturbed. The marching skeletons have worn deep, undulating **grooves** into the flagstones, and have scraped great **gouges** into the walls with their "lamps" of dark glass.

At the center of each of the six sections, the outer wall is **engraved**, "Let your march give comfort in this hour of death." All but d3 words are scraped off; roll d10 to determine which.

## THE POOL ROOM (II)

Translucent **eels** glide like ribbons of bone beneath the scum of a stagnant, waist-deep **pool**. Stained **mosaics** show **Sierk** in scenes of conquest, burning enemy navies alongside his lover. A waterlogged **skiff** holds a cadaver, clothed in rotted silks and silver chainmail. A wide, underwater **channel** leads to the privy in the **bedchamber**.

## THE BEDCHAMBER (III)

A four-poster **bed** is draped in embroidered **curtains**. A **mildew stench** fills the room. Tiny moths dance in the flicker of tall, silver **candlesticks**.

The **Physician**, a cadaverous insectoid pressed into human shape, squirts mist from a tiny can at the drapes to moisten them. On the bed is a hollow **effigy** of **Sierk**, a form-fitting coffin awaiting his death. Under the bed, out of view behind moldering bed skirts, are the **dried husks** of three Ricalu goblins, perfectly embalmed. Their brains and other organs are preserved in small clay pots. This is the work of the **Physician**, who will deny any knowledge of how they got there.

The grandiose **privy** connects to the pool room.

## THE FALLEN STABLES (IV)

Sixteen **stone oxen** are material wealth for Sierk's afterlife journey. Beneath thick dust, ruby eyes and gold filigree adorn them (two sacks in all, but it would take a day to pry it all out).

At the back, a wooden **ladder** rises into the rafters, to a **crawlway** to the study. Tucked under one ox is a giant **spider**, hiding and ready to ambush.

A tall **mirror** on a hinged stand. Runes read, "One last look before passing." Displayed on the **desk** before it are a set of fine **embalming tools**: long-handled spoons and hooks, all silver. A great **hourglass** is etched into sixths. When sand falls toward the ebony cap, those nearby fall asleep; toward the ivory, all rise. The ebony cap is etched "SLEEP" and the ivory, "ARISE".

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## SOUNDS AND IMPRESSIONS

- dust falls from creaking rafters
- smell of dry rot and mildew
- clinking of glass, a laugh; like a tavern up past bedtime
- the scrape of glass on stone walls
- the sound of breaking furniture
- a rapid tapping of spider legs, suddenly silent
- the squeak of a mirror's hinge

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## THE TWIN MIRRORS

The smoky mirrors of polished steel in each inner chamber is paired with one in the **Panopticon**. Anyone who says, "Let me pass," or similar can walk through the mirror, emerging from its twin. **Sierk** and the **Physician** know this and use them.

If anyone ever **rests near a mirror**, **Sierk** carves a new piece for them, then sneaks to the study to place it.

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## THE GAME BOARD

A round game board of light and dark wood is inlaid into the study's oaken table. Four **playing pieces** are placed on it in Sierk's **opening arrangement**.

The board's design has thirteen areas, mirroring the outer corridor and inner chambers of the tomb:

- A thin ring of **six outer segments**, marked clockwise A through F. Each has an arrow pointing counter-clockwise.
- A large section of **six inner wedges**, numbered I through VI.
- A small **center circle** or bullseye.

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## COMPELLED BY THE GAME

Each of the playing pieces carved by **Sierk** are magical tokens used to control the living subjects they depict. When placed on the board, they compel behavior: placing a piece on an inner wedge or the bullseye will cause the subject to travel to the corresponding room if at all possible, and remain

there. (Although, only **Sierk** and the Physician know how to reach the central **Panopticon**.)

Placing a piece on an outer ring segment is different: this compels the subject to take up a counter-clockwise patrol duty along the outer corridor. Subjects move slowly, taking a full hour to make the circuit. The outer segment number indicates when the subject will pass the study (room I): a piece placed on outer ring segment A will pass the study at the start of each hour; segment B arrives ten minutes later, segment D at half past, etc.

Removing a piece from the board, or destroying pieces or the board has no effect; the compulsion continues based on each piece's last position on the board.

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## THE OPENING ARRANGEMENT

Initially, four pieces are on the board, like so:

- A wooden **beetle** on wedge III (the **physician** in the bedchamber)
- An ivory **phalanx** on outer F (the **skeletal phalanx** on patrol)
- A clear glass **spider** on wedge IV (the **spider** in the fallen stables)
- A dancing **goblin** of rubbery plant gum on wedge V (games room)

To the touch, the pieces feel somehow alive, like holding a sleeping mouse that might start wriggling any second.

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## THE SKELETAL PHALANX

A dozen or so heavy infantry (it's hard to say) in close formation. Their slate-gray **plate armor** holds only bones and cobwebs, and gleams silver at the joints—wherever two pieces scrape together. They are **short**; the endless patrol has literally worn them down to the knee bones. Several of them drag **clattering greaves** or sabatons behind them on tattered leather straps.

At the first sign of intruders in front of them (counter-clockwise in the

corridor), they will form up dramatically into two ranks of five, **spears** bristling above overlapping **shields**, shouting and jostling.

If engaged from the rear, they will fight a disorganized retreat as their patrol compels them around the corridor.

They are noisy and raucous, and **bicker** constantly about not seeing properly or the will of the gods—are they late, on time, properly in formation? They shout fearsomely as they advance upon intruders. They are overwhelming on the attack, but brittle in prolonged battle: straps tear, armor clatters, bones splinter, limbs fall.

The two in the rear carry **lamps**, staves tipped with melon-sized orbs of priceless, indestructible dark glass. Charged by scraping them against the walls, they throw a **pale blue light**, the only light their dead eyes can see.

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## THE SPIDER

A pony-sized hunting spider, trapped in the tomb by **Sierk**. It **hides** in the ceiling rafters, staying motionless behind dust-colored, bristly forelegs. It moves (or attacks) in furtive **bursts of speed**, hiding again as soon as possible. If forced to patrol by the game board, it hides for nine minutes, then rushes into the next segment to immediately hide. In the pool room, it will hide in the boat, legs pressed long and flat.

The spider is starving and terrified. It will pounce on lone intruders and inject **paralytic venom** (effect in d6x10 seconds, lasts d6x10 minutes), dragging them away to devour. If it encounters groups, it will hide unless it can pick members off one by one without being noticed. If confronted in force, it will attack light sources.

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## THE PHYSICIAN

An insectoid horror squeezed into humanoid shape, wrapped in a heavy

leather frock. The Physician was entombed with the **Sierk** to embalm him after his death. It is frustrated by Sierk's undeath, and nurtures the molds and mildews so that the old man will rot speedily once he finally dies.

"Alas, in the hour of death there is so much waiting."

Unknown to Sierk, the Physician can briefly return to its natural shape (a monstrous, dappled **mantis**), a trick that lets it evade Sierk's magic and move freely around the tomb.

An oath stops it hastening **Sierk's** death, but if it notices intruders it will move game board pieces to get them killed so it can practice embalming with their bodies.

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## THE PANOPTICON OF SIERK

A withered **old man** sits at a desk, carving playing pieces between three **mirrors**. Wisps of white beard trail from sunken cheeks and drape over his cotton shroud. If the panopticon is ever breached by anyone other than the Physician, the sustaining spell ends. Sierk weakens and dies an hour later.

Despite this, Sierk is pleasant. "One final game, perhaps?" He is apologetic for the lack of refreshment, but suggests dice: if he loses, he will answer one question about the tomb. If he wins, his opponent must sit for a carving.

If Sierk **dies**, the game board loses its power and all the tomb's inhabitants are freed, including the oxen who noisily return to life. The Physician soon arrives to cut into the old man's skull for the crystalline **wizard flower** inside. This is the embodiment of Sierk's magical ability, and the Physician's reward for an eternity spent waiting.

# TRILEMMA ADVENTURES