

The Caryatid Grove

Part of the Bloodstone Bestiaries

If one travels beyond the great city-states, north along the coast for a few weeks times, where towns give way to villages, and villages to hamlets, one will come upon the foothills of the high black mountains. Once within the foothills, if one stays near the within sight of the coast, they will eventually see what remains of old quarry cranes in the distance. Thick slabs of wood held together by long rusted iron bolts rise from the hills, partially reclaimed creeping and climbing vines and weeds. The weather of a shoreline cut them down, and few remain standing as tall as they once did. The remnants of fallen beams litter the approach to the hill. For the keen-eyed, an old cobblestone road stretches down the hill and towards the coast, but no docks mark the shore any longer. Only a few scattered stone foundations and pillars remain, long rounded by the constant wind and mist of the seas just feet beyond.

Finding the overgrown road leads to the sea sprayed quarry. The veritable mine drills down in stepped layers. Each carved from the surrounding earth. Each flattened where stone blocks were once hauled free of their home before being taken to faraway lands. The sharp, uncut marble lines the walkways, chisel marks from generations ago still perfectly visible. So too were the tools abandoned. Rusted hammer and pick heads litter some areas of the mine, and rotten crates falling to dust and grime sit as reminders of a once-thriving economic powerhouse of a place. There were luxuries here, once, for those who spent their lives and bodies cutting luxury from the earth for others.

It would be wise to stop one's explorations here on these first steps of the mine. Those who have come this far, though, will have seen the grove. At the bottom of the mine lies a new ecosystem. A small pond of stagnant seawater has given rise to all manner of flora one would tend to overlook - but the colors are vibrant. Deep greens and pearlescent white and gray mark the blooming plants and flowers. Another circle around the quarry and another step lower, and one begins to feel the weight of the place. Something in the air is heavy, and it burdens the breaths taken. Each step towards the goal is more of a struggle. Each is an acknowledgment that going further is taking a choice into your own hands and accepting the dangers below.

For those that travel this far, it is almost always wanderlust that drives them. None come here in search of treasure, or fame, or fortune. Whatever lies at the heart of this place takes none of that and wishes nothing but solitude, but its mere presence and existence beg the curious to come forward and venture deeper.

The scent joins one the third step of the quarry, accompanying the sight below. There is nothing quite like it, except to say that it smells almost like a port. Rotting flesh in stagnant water mixing with the ample salt creates a particularly potent cocktail of scents, even before being stewed in a natural stone pot warmed by the grace of an unblocked sun. The mix of ancient dirt unearthed by mortal avarice and its reclamation by the earth is potent. It isn't only the quarry itself that the soil has reclaimed, however.

Hidden among the white and gray of the marble are the bones of the miners. While once they likely lay open to the sun, the rains that eroded the base rocks away brought a thin layer of silt to cover them and hid them away. Deeper still in the mine, as one approaches the mire of its bottom, there is a change. The birds and other beasts of the region have not traveled here. They have not pushed this

deep. There are no hissing of bugs, chirping birds, and no croaking of toads. The hallmarks of a wetland are missing, despite ample plumage from the plants that have taken up residence here. Then the reason becomes clear.

At the bottom of the quarry, where the earth was opened for deeper veins and to wash away excess water, there stands a figure of marble. She sits on her knees, her face looking up slightly with her hands raised to protect herself. Her clothes are draped across her, even appearing wet and clinging near her knees. Every curve, every wrinkle, was painstakingly preserved in stone. No stray chisel marks exist, no stray hammer falls to cause even a single blemish. This point is as far as most will ever go. This statue, in all its lifelike quality, is the thing of legends. Tales of the monster within the quarry are many.

Our lady statue's last gaze is frozen in time, so lifelike that she must be real. She must have been a person at one point. At least, this is the legend. Stories of a weeping woman seen deep in the quarry, near the statue, are told by local farmers tending their flocks nearby. A landwyrms preys on the beasts nearby, according to local hunters. So, one must venture deeper to know what monster on which one may stumble. One has.

Within the mine, there is little but death. Whatever took residence there, did so with great anger and violence, and it has not left. Deep in that mine lies the reservoir of water collected over the years, a deep underground lake, and near that lake stand a dozen statues. Each statue is of the same woman, perfectly replicated to exacting details, and all stand watching the entrance of the mine for their maker. There is no growth of the natural here; no animals or plants have overtaken these statues or this lake. Beyond these statues, though, the old mine is long forgotten. None of have ventured past here and survived. The only one who has tried came back a broken man, mumbling about the stone maidens, but never finishing his tale before he would panic and escape the conversation through guile, or breaking down into a weeping mess of a man.

There have been a few others who tried to venture into the quarry, who attempted to investigate the mine. Those wise enough stopped at the stench. Those with experience stopped at the first statue. Those that ventured deeper never returned. For whatever has taken the quarry, only one thing remains, the drive to create and maintain the Caryatid Grove.