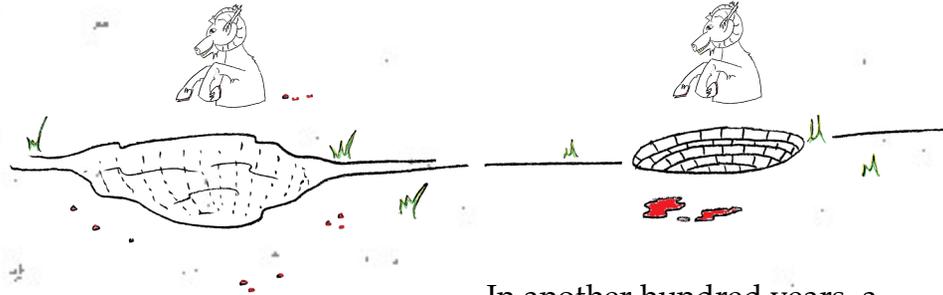


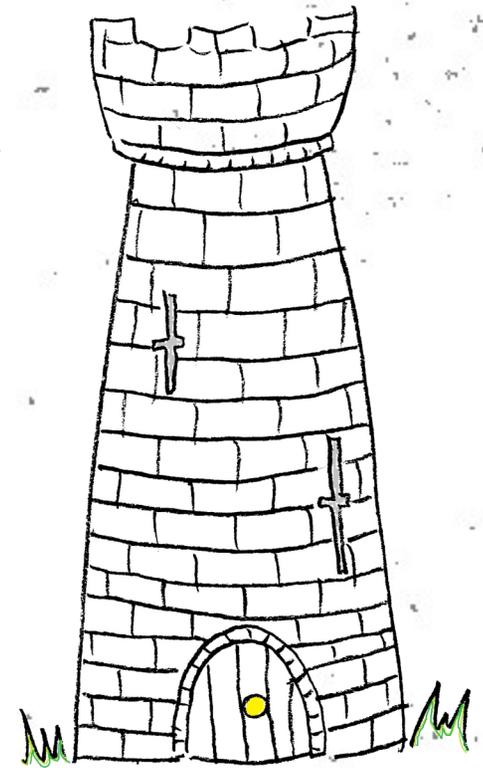


Long ago, a devastating forest fire exposed a dark idol of a foul, ancient fertility god. It stood silently in the ashes for centuries as new life grew up all around it. The good fey avoided it but wicked little forest sprites began to leave seeds, nuts, and flowers around it. As it became more ominous, so they became more wicked.



Much later, some goblins took note of it and dug a sacrificial pit to honor it. For a hundred years, into this pit were thrown all manner of things from simple trinkets to bound and tortured animals. As it became more ominous, so they became more *cruel*, more wicked.

In another hundred years, a town of humans accumulated nearby and some of the more wicked people lined the pit with stone and began a sort of frenzied, codified worship of orgies and blood sacrifice. And as it became more ominous, so they became more *paranoid*, more cruel, more wicked.



The deserted valley before your adventuring party seems verdant and cool. As you descend alongside a brooklet you realize that here once stood a large town, perhaps even a small city. The buildings long ago collapsed into ruins but the unmistakable foundations of cut stone mark where the more substantial structures once stood. Here, probably, the mill. There, possibly, the mercantile. And there, perhaps, their church—strangely more ruinous than the rest. What manner of people lived here, and how long ago? It must be hundreds of years, hundreds and hundreds. And nothing to tell their stories, nothing to mark their lives, but these vacant ruins. And then you see it. The huge tower standing sixty feet around and easily as tall. Built of dark, dressed stone, and built well to pass the test of time. Yet as you approach you realize something more must be at play here, for it seems almost as new. Somehow preserved long past its time. Even the oaken door remains durable and whole; even its iron bindings remain proud and untouched by rust, though the whole structure is choked by weeds growing even thicker here than elsewhere. The warrior declines to attempt to force the door—“*too strong*”. The rogue declines to attempt the climb—“*too smooth*”. The priest takes a backward step, ill at ease. But the wizard, peering closely at the inscription in the stone arch above the door, reads “*Sanctificatæ Bæl*” ... And the doorlatch clicks...