

Haunted Cloud Mesa

Kraken Island is a little-known, rarely-visited, yet still large, island near the centre of the Forlorn Archipelago. Haunted Cloud Mesa is a group of high, flat-topped, mountains that rises suddenly from the great eastern lowland expanse of Krakens' Plain on the Island, including the highest peaks on the isle, and an unmistakable landmark. Its highest summits reach roughly 10,000 feet (3,000 metres), thus the Mesa can be at least glimpsed on the horizon from much of the Island within 100 miles (160 kilometres) or more, out to sea, and even (so some say) from the northwestern coast of neighbouring Squeak Island, some 150 miles distant (240 km).

Centred at approximately 60 degrees South latitude, the general climate is cool temperate, although the Mesa enjoys - indeed helps create - its own microclimate across its roughly 25 mile square area (40 by 40 km), which influences the nearby Plain too. Overall, this helps make it warmer, and notably wetter, than might be expected so relatively near Nibirum's Antarctic Circle (at 65 degrees South). Mists, fogs and low clouds often linger in the region, commonly rising in spires and walls from the Mesa tops and valleys respectively, making the Mesa's presence visible over a still greater area, much as volcanic smoke or ash plumes might elsewhere. Closer to the Mesa, strange piping, whistling winds may be heard, even on still days, all of which alone might be sufficient to explain its full name.

However, the Mesa is a strange place in other ways. Krakens' Plain is not named by chance, as great **Land Krakens** roam it, singly or in small family groups. Vast, slow-moving, tentacular beasts, liable to snatch and eat anything they see that moves within range of their tentacles, the vast bulk of the adults makes them all-but impervious to harm, while they may roll over and crush an entire village by accident without noticing. Consequently, many of the more-nearly humanoid Plains-folk are nomadic, able to move quickly aside when such trouble approaches. These are chiefly the **Plains Krakenfolk**, who in other contexts might be called "Squidfolk", since while land-dwelling, they have the soft-bodied form of a loosely humanoid squid, with two or four "arm" tentacles, and usually two, or occasionally four, longer "leg" tentacles, merging into a roughly conical, upright body and head form, with two large, sharp eyes. Blunt weapons and falls cause them no significant harm. Despite their unusual shapes, they are able to move freely and swiftly on their own, like any land humanoid, although for preference, they normally ride tamed **Land Sharks**, large, shark-like creatures with four powerful, stout, short legs, which are equally soft-bodied and safe from blunt-weapon attacks or falls. Both are, or can be at need, amphibious, for all they also thrive in air. The Sharks are capable beasts of burden as well, able to carry one or two adult Krakenfolk riders, their tents and belongings, with ease. While Land Sharks often burrow through earth and sometimes rock, their training prevents this, except in emergencies. Such training also equips the Krakenfolk with what to do when a Shark may suddenly need to descend. The Krakenfolk lifestyle is that of hunter-gatherers, and occasionally they will even hunt Land Krakens, which they regard otherwise with both reverence, and (once dead) as a valuable resource, every part of which is not to be wasted. Land Kraken skin makes excellently waterproof tents and groundsheets, for example. The Plains Krakenfolk rarely venture into the more enclosed spaces of the Mesa, as they become uncomfortable when they cannot see all-round for what they consider a healthy distance.

Other Plains-dwellers to be found near the Mesa (though rarely elsewhere on the Plain, as they tend to be less nomadic) include the **Krakenfolk Goblins**, who, despite their name, are quite typically-formed small humanoids, with pale skins, dark hair and eyes. They have a couple of village-sized settlements on the map, towards its western edge, not far from the Mesa's base. By the northern map edge, again on the lower ground not too distant from the Mesa's lower slopes, is a separate village of **Eyebright Hobgoblins**, a tall, rangy form of humanoid, with yellow hair and bright green eyes. They are an outdoor folk, mainly of hunters, with tanned, reddish skins.

Among the highlands of the Mesa itself, the only humanoids that live there permanently are another nomadic, amphibious, goblin-like people, small and very like the Krakenfolk Goblins in appearance, except that they have gill-slits in their necks too. They are known as **Mountain Krakenfolk**. A small number of them have short, manipulative tentacles growing from their chins, a little like beards. They set-up tented temporary settlements, or use caves and woods in a more permanent fashion, in various parts of the mountains, while typically tending to favour more the lower parts of the central and eastern peaks. They hunt much of the copious wildlife available here, except for the Giant Flying Polyyps, which they fear and try to avoid.

There are some genuine, largely humanoid-form, undead **Ghosts** in the mountains, and a particularly nasty **Revenant** stalks the Plain not far from the Eyebright Hobgoblin village (they believe it keeps following them when they have moved the village site previously), but most of the creatures listed as “Ghost” types - the **Ghost Jellyfish**, **Sharks** and **Squid** - are really living, natural animals, identical in form to their deep-marine namesakes, except that these can breathe easily in air, fly without effort as though they were swimming in the sea, and have palely transparent bodies, sometimes with colourful, occasionally bioluminescent, internal organs. They only live in the Haunted Cloud Mesa plateau area. The **Giant Flying Polyyps** are similarly transparent to invisible creatures, although of a more alien cast. They have forms somewhat like coral polyyps, except for their gigantic size, and free-moving nature. They are especially inimical creatures of Lovecraftian type, and most inhabitants of the Mesa avoid and fear them. They are also responsible for creating many of the piping, whistling windy sounds. The locals dislike any similar-sounding genuine wind noises as a result.

Much of the vegetation across the Mesa has something of an “undersea” quality to it, being commonly tall and straggling, something most obvious in the coniferous woods, where some of the trees seem almost giant-kelp-like in appearance. By contrast, the trees on Krakens’ Plain tend towards much more typical conifer, and some deciduous, forms. All this has led those few who have visited here and written of it afterwards in their homelands, to sometimes suggest Kraken Island must have risen whole from the deeps at some distant epoch, and that some creatures and plants were magically able to adapt and survive the change.

Even the individual mesa peaks have a very tall, steep, spindly shape in places, with angled lower slopes giving way to an increasing steepness that eventually becomes great vertical columnar cliffs thousands of feet high in their upper reaches. The mesa peaks on the western and northwestern sides of the plateau tend to be smaller. These are the thirteen **Spectral Spire** peaks. The southwest-northeast-angled central line of **The Wights**, the great central massif of **Hooded Host** (most often wreathed in mist and low cloud over their tops, as being the highest peaks of any here), and the two northernmost of **The Nine Ghosts** (the easternmost of the two Wights is counted among them), are the largest, highest and most robustly-formed of all, with the eastern curve of the remaining Nine Ghosts being a little lower and smaller in general. The central Hooded Host has deep, dark, narrow ravines separating its five huge, flattened summits. In winter, these vales are often filled with snow and ice that sometimes never clears completely during the short summers. Radiating out from the Mesa are nine small rivers. These often cascade down the interior cliffs in spectacular falls, notably where the marked steeper cliff-lines are. All run clear, swift and fresh.

Numbered Sites

Sites labelled with numerals on the map comprise a variety of ruins and unusual features. Details on all twenty-seven follow.

1) Colossal Statue: On the northern edge of the Mesa plateau, this huge stone figure was likely carved from a small rock spire at one time. It is a robed, slim humanoid, too weathered to try identifying its type beyond this. It is locally known as “Garanard”.

2) Ruined Stone Wall: At the foot of the lowest northeastern Mesa cliffs is an ancient stone wall that runs between two streams where they descend from the basal plateau, which is around half a mile (0.8 km) long. Much of the old masonry has long since fallen and been grassed over, so its original height and purpose are uncertain.

3) Magical Standing Crystal: Nearly a mile and a quarter (2 km) uphill from the Ruined Stone Wall (2), and between the same pair of streams as it, is this single, huge, pale blue crystal, embedded in the ground. It radiates a distinct magical aura, yet also seems entirely passive, perhaps awaiting some key word or act. See also feature 21.

4) Standing Stone Lines: High on the eastern slopes of the most northerly of The Nine Ghosts are two parallel lines each of four large standing stones. The “avenue” this creates lies directly on an east-west axis, so is not quite aligned to point towards the mesa’s centre here. The slope is very steep where the stone lines are, although the stones are still set vertically into the surface. Why they are here is obscure.

5) Arachnoid Figure: By the foot of the lowest northwestern slope of the Mesa, north of the river there, is an area of cleared, bare ground where nothing grows, and where all the surface stones have been moved to create a flattened, smoothed earth figure of a gigantic spider-like form (obvious only if viewed from above). The spread across the full span of its legs is around 200 ft (60 m). Who maintains it, how and why, is unknown.

6) Ruined Stone Masonry: On the lower, steeper, western slopes of one of the northwestern Spectral Spire peaks, about two miles (3 km) east and above the Arachnoid Figure (5), is a scatter of huge, cyclopean worked stone blocks, tumbled about so their original form can be identified no longer. These have created occasional cavern-like spaces between the blocks, especially where fallen stones and scree from the mountainside have collected over time to fill-up gaps between them. Such “caves” are sometimes occupied by one or more of the inimical Giant Flying Polyyps, which may lurk in places beyond these ruins nearby as well.

7) Ruined Settlement: The remains of a hamlet-sized settlement are set by a river bend in one of the broader, north-facing valleys among the northern Spectral Spires. There are signs of old field-boundaries close-by, although it is clear the place was abandoned long before. It is a well-sheltered spot, with good agricultural land still.

8) Haunted House Ruin: Right on the mesa top of the northeasternmost Spectral Spire are the remains of an ancient, substantial, stone-built mansion-like house. Despite its ruinous state, and highly exposed location, parts of the building still stand complete with roofs and ceilings, so it would be possible to shelter here, for all actually getting to the mesa top would need access from the air, or an extremely difficult, long, climb. More problematic is the fact the old house is haunted by at least one undead Ghost.

9) Old Hall: Another large, mostly ruined, property lies at the foot of the lowest northeastern Mesa slope, just on the Plain. Parts stand tall and almost intact too, although it could not be used for permanent habitation without substantial repairs and rebuilding first. It is presently unoccupied.

10) Monastic Ruin: About three miles (5 km) south-southwest of the Old Hall (9), and again close to the base of the lowest Mesa slope into its northeastern side, are the substantial ruins of an abandoned monastery, the buildings set around a large, open, central square garden. All is now very overgrown, although the keen-eyed and knowledgeable may spot several surviving exotic plants, not native to this region, and some of the surrounding buildings are still fairly intact. A Giant Ghost Octopus, much like the other “Ghost” marine-like creatures inhabiting the Mesa’s uplands - so, transparent and almost colourless but for some internal organs, able to breathe equally in air or water, and capable of flying in air as if it were water - has taken up residence here, one of the few such animals to have migrated slightly off the Mesa platform.

11) Great Pyramid: In the valley between the central Hooded Host massif and the Nine Ghost mesa immediately to its northeast, very near where a spring rises to flow northwest as a stream away and eventually off the Mesa plateau, is a very large, polished, grey dolerite, square-based, pyramidal stone. If on the coast, it could have passed for a navigational beacon for sailors. Here, it is simply one more mystery. The stone, while enormous and very carefully prepared, is not of any known local kind.

12) Oracle Temple: High on the eastern slopes, though below the steep, very high cliffs leading up to the longest of the five mesa tops of Hooded Host, is a low cave entrance, from which a stream bursts and flows rapidly down into the haunted valley at the Host’s foot there. Further round this same mountain spur on its northeastern side are two more small cave openings, neither of which is blocked by a stream. In these latter caves lies the Oracle Temple, the subject of a separate Atlas map.

13) Fallen Tower: Very high-up on the north side of the mesa in The Nine Ghosts immediately east of Hooded Host, are the largely collapsed remains of an old, circular, stone Tower, perched precipitously on the slopes just below the vertical final cliffs up to this mesa’s top. More unusual features are on that flat top surface (see 14). Access to the Tower probably always was difficult, but is still possible from the adjacent valleys, and those few knowing of its existence have speculated there may once have been

now-lost hidden ways from the Tower burrowed through the rock to the mesa's summit. One or more of the iniquitous Giant Flying Polyps is liable to be encountered in or near this old ruin now, however.

14) Mesa-Top Marvels & Perils: Atop the northern end of the mesa with the Fallen Tower's remains on its higher slopes (13) is a single, tall, slim, red, standing stone, bas-relief-carved all around with pictorial emblematic symbols in a wide variety of forms. It is very old, although the carvings seem less weathered than they should for its age. In a circle around the stone are eight humanoid corpses entirely covered with blue and purple crystals that seem to have grown out of them. The bodies all lie on their backs, heads towards the stone, with their feet pointing in the eight cardinal compass directions. The mesa's summit is haunted by a number of undead Ghosts, up to eight or nine in number. In addition, the site is a popular attraction for Ghost Sharks, and some of the Giant Flying Polyps that lurk in the vicinity of the Fallen Tower may drift up this far too from time to time.

15) Recumbent Carved Stone: Partway up one of the steeper lower sections of cliffs on the eastern flanks of the Mesa, near the north bank of one of the streams there, where the water drops in a series of falls, is a distinctive, long, needle-like native stone, clearly deliberately shaped and placed to be lying with its long axis parallel to the river falls, in a roughly southwest-northeast direction. The stone's visible surface is covered in low-relief carvings of abstract interlinking designs.

16) Lost Ruin: Nearly diametrically opposite the Recumbent Stone (15), on the western side of the Mesa's lower slopes, is a series of what are probably buried and grassed-over low, straight wall-lines, close to the top of the cliff-line there. The lines seem to form no overall pattern, beyond perhaps once having been parts of a building or two.

17) Abandoned Plains Village: On Krakens' Plain, by the north bank of a river bend near the map's western edge, are the remains of an abandoned village. There is a viable ford on the stream nearby still, though the village itself seems to have been partly demolished, with very little upstanding masonry left, other than the lower wall courses. Those familiar may suggest it could have been flattened by a Land Kraken.

18) Fire Temple Ruins: Atop the easternmost mesa in The Nine Ghosts are what survives of a long-derelect stone-built temple complex. Parts are still roofed, although the former great dome has mostly collapsed into itself. It is a surprisingly elaborate and well-made structure for such an isolated, inaccessible site. The Temple may have been originally dedicated to a fire or light deity. It is now home to a Fire Elemental that seems to be trapped within the area of the ruins, as it never leaves them, regardless of provocation.

19) Great Stone Bowl: South of a stream bend on the Plain in a broader valley below the Mesa's southeastern part, is a strange, smooth, hemispherical, stone hollow set into the ground. It is almost perfectly circular, and has a diameter of 90 ft (27 m). Nothing grows on the stone, which otherwise seems quite normal rock for the area. The structure looks as if it may have been formed on the surface of a gigantic bubble, and possibly quite recently too, as the rock shows no real evidence of weathering.

20) Valley Henge: In one of the narrow, higher, valleys among The Nine Ghosts, in the southeastern segment of the Mesa, to the east of the stream running along it, is a large, grassy henge (raised circular bank), in the centre of which is a single, tall, native rock standing stone. The henge is about 50 ft across (15 m).

21) Lone Crystal: On the western mid-slopes of the southeasternmost mesa in The Nine Ghosts, south of a stream that drops down from higher on the same peak, is a large, pale blue, single standing crystal. It seems almost a twin in colour and shape to the Magical Standing Crystal (3) around 18 miles (30 km) to the north, except this one radiates no magical aura. It does though seem to be a frequent haunt for Ghost Sharks, which are often found in its vicinity.

22) Talking Stone: On top of the lower southeastern Mesa cliff edge is a large, plate-like standing stone, whose narrower edge runs parallel to the cliff-top. When certain ceremonies are performed here,

the Stone is said to be able to make prophetic, divinatory pronouncements. Both Mountain and Plains Krakenfolk make use of the Stone at times, hence the relative concentration of several of their settlement camps to it. A truce holds around the Stone for any who wish to make use of it, and no disputes are permitted within sight of it. Tribal shamans from all the local groups will combine their efforts to enforce this, if required.

23) Trilithon Avenue: A broad “avenue” of two parallel lines, consisting of five stone trilithon groups each, runs up the steep slopes of the lower Mesa platform, between two streams that flow south out of The Nine Ghosts. The route the stones mark is roughly 100 ft wide (30 m). At the top break of slope, on the more level raised ground, is a large, high-banked grassy henge, approximately 500 ft (150 m) in diameter. In combination, and as seen from above, the two features look a little like a comet. The site has been adopted as a lair by a Giant Ghost Octopus (see feature 10 for details).

24) Old Burial Ground: Set on the lower slopes of the more westerly of the two Wights is a heavily overgrown old graveyard. Parts have slumped downslope, and bones may be seen poking from the soil along with old, often cracked or broken, grave-markers. There are undead Ghosts here too, and the area attracts Giant Flying Polyps as well for some reason. Some have speculated this site is why The Wights are so-named.

25) Ancient Castle Remains: Situated on the upper parts of the lower Mesa cliff slopes of the southwestern edge of the plateau, are the partly tumbled ruins of a former castle. The location was chosen well for defence from the Plain, so it seems likely the place simply outlived its usefulness, and fell into its current state of collapse after being abandoned. The foundations are still sound, so it might be possible to rebuild it one day, should someone choose to.

26) Gateway To Haunted Cloud Mesa: On the Plain some miles south of the southwestern edge of the Mesa, well away from the nearest river, or any habitation, is a great, carved-stone gateway arch, with its open way facing north-south. Its decoration is heavily weathered, but seems to have been of simple, straight, linear designs. The Gateway appears to have no obvious function.

27) Serpentine Hydra Wall: In the valley mouth between the two southernmost of The Nine Ghosts (the northern one of which is also the eastern Wight peak) is a partly scree-buried stone wall, to which is still attached a huge, marble sculpture of a giant, serpent-bodied, multi-headed hydra. The number of its heads cannot be counted, as not all are above the scree level. A Mountain Krakenfolk encampment is set up nearby, whose people show the wall and sculpture great reverence.