

MOAR! MONSTERS KNOW
WHAT THEY'RE DOING

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AUTHOR OF

*The Monsters Know
What They're Doing*

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INTRODUCTION

Greetings, reader! If you've picked up this book, you're probably already familiar with *The Monsters Know What They're Doing: Combat Tactics for Dungeon Masters*, my guide to applying the traits and features of fifth edition Dungeons & Dragon monsters in combat encounters, or with the blog it was born out of. This book builds on the material of the first book, examining the stat blocks of more than two hundred fifty new creatures and non-player characters for clues as to how they'll behave in combat. Like *The Monsters Know What They're Doing*, *MOAR! Monsters Know What They're Doing* is not a substitute for the official D&D books in which these adversaries appear, but rather a supplement to them; you'll need to have those books to get any use out of this one.

In addition to these analyses, *MOAR! Monsters* includes my thoughts on combat-adjacent topics, such as how different types of monsters fight in tandem, how to run monsters that are smarter than your player characters (and, perhaps, even smarter than you), how to handle the tricky spells *darkness* and *counterspell*, and the astonishingly controversial optional flanking rule. Finally, I present to you something that a lot of readers have been requesting for a long time: recommendations on running archfiends.

This book cites official D&D publications over and over, in particular the three fifth edition core books and the two books that the monsters herein are drawn from, *Volo's Guide to Monsters* and *Mordenkainen's Tome of Foes*. In the interest of brevity, I refer to these latter two books throughout this work as *Volo's* and *Mordenkainen's* (which are more pleasing to my eye than the abbreviations often used online, *VGM* and *MToF*). Also, I cite chapters and sections of the *Dungeon Master's Guide* and the *Player's Handbook* rather than page numbers, because page numbers can change from printing to printing.

Since I refer to it so many times, I use "Targets in Areas" as a short-form reference to the Targets in Areas of Effect table in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, chapter 8, "Adjudicating Areas of Effect."

Finally, next to each section heading is a (V) or an (M), indicating whether the monster(s) in that section are found in *Volo's* or *Mordenkainen's*, with two exceptions. "Lesser Demons" contains fiends from both books, and I indicate the source of each one in the section text. "Scouts and Spies" has no such indication, because these NPCs—which, in a regrettable oversight, were left out of *The Monsters Know What They're Doing*—are found in the *Monster Manual*, appendix B.

HOW TO ANALYZE A STAT BLOCK

In *The Monsters Know What They're Doing: Combat Tactics for Dungeon Masters*, I discuss the premises behind my analyses in the section “Why These Tactics?” (1–4). However, that section, by itself, doesn’t provide a step-by-step tour through my whole process, and I’ve often been asked to discuss it in more detail. Also, no matter how many of these books I write or how long I can keep my blog going, there will always be monsters—in published adventures I haven’t bought yet, in third-party supplements, and so forth—that I won’t have analyzed in time for your game. So while I greatly enjoy supplying you with fish, let me give you an overview of how to catch them yourself.

As a case study, here’s a homebrew monster stat block:

BIN'AZG

Large monstrosity, neutral evil

Armor Class 16 (natural armor)

Hit Points 136 (21d10 + 21)

Speed 30 ft, burrowing 10 ft, climbing 30 ft

Str 20 (+5), **Dex** 16 (+3), **Con** 12 (+1), **Int** 8 (-1), **Wis** 11 (+0), **Cha** 10 (+0)

Saving Throws Dex +8

Skills Perception +5, Stealth +8

Damage Resistances bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing from nonmagical attacks

Senses blindsight 60 ft (blind beyond this radius), passive Perception 15

Languages understands Undercommon but does not speak

Challenge CR 13 (10,000 XP)

Keen Hearing and Smell. The bin'azg has advantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks that rely on hearing or smell.

Spider Climb. The bin'azg can climb difficult surfaces, including upside down on ceilings, without needing to make an ability check.

Spindly. The bin'azg can squeeze through a space as narrow as 2 1/2 feet wide.

Too Many Legs. When the bin'azg has less than 15 feet of either horizontal or vertical clearance, its walking and climbing speeds are increased to 50 feet.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The bin'azg uses Terrify, then makes a Barbed Claw or Smashing Claw attack.

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +10 to hit, reach 5 ft, one target. *Hit:* 11 (2d4 + 6) piercing damage plus 14 (4d6) acid damage.

Barbed Claw. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +10 to hit, reach 10 ft, one target. *Hit:* 17 (2d10 + 6) piercing damage, and the target is grappled (escape DC 14). When a target creature that is not an undead or a construct escapes the grapple, it must make a DC 17 Constitution saving throw. On a failed save, the creature takes 5 (2d4) slashing damage, then loses 5 (2d4) hp at the start of each of its turns due to a bleeding wound. Any creature can take an action to stanch the wound with a successful DC 12 Wisdom (Medicine) check. The wound also closes if the target receives magical healing. The bin'azg has two barbed claws, each of which can grapple one target.

Smashing Claw. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +10 to hit, reach 10 ft, one target. *Hit:* 13 (2d6 + 6) bludgeoning damage, and the target must succeed on a DC 14 Constitution saving throw or be stunned for 1 minute. The target can repeat the saving throw at the end of each of its turns, ending the effect on itself on a success.

Terrify (Recharge 5–6). Every creature within 60 feet that can see the bin'azg must make a DC 13 Wisdom saving throw. On a failed save, a creature is frightened for 1 minute. If the saving throw fails by 5 or more, the target is also incapacitated, unless it is immune to the frightened condition. The target can repeat the saving throw at the end of each of its turns, ending the effect on itself on a success. If a creature's saving throw is successful or the effect ends for it, the creature is immune to the bin'azg's Terrify for the next 24 hours.

LEGENDARY ACTIONS

The bin'azg can take 3 legendary actions, choosing from the options below. Only one legendary action option can be used at a time and only at the end of another creature's turn. The bin'azg regains spent legendary actions at the start of its turn.

Chow Down. The bin'azg makes a Bite attack against a grappled or stunned opponent.

Detect. The bin'azg makes a Wisdom (Perception) check.

Spring (Costs 2 Actions). The bin'azg moves up to its speed toward a hostile creature, then makes one Barbed Claw or Smashing Claw attack. This movement is not slowed by difficult terrain. The bin'azg cannot use this legendary action while squeezing through a space.

Hundreds of years ago, a crew of mountain dwarf miners returned from a dig, hollow-eyed and shaken, telling of a nightmarish encounter: a creature with “too many legs” which pursued them with terrifying speed through the tunnels they had dug. Several of their number were so frightened by the creature that they could barely stir themselves to run. Those who made it back swore that the creature had no eyes in its spiderlike head yet seemed to know exactly where they were. They named it *Bin'azg*, “the Eyeless,” and never ventured again into the tunnels where they had found it. For years they believed it was the only one of its kind—until reports came from other dwarven citadels of monsters that fit the same description.

Like spiders, bin'azg have dual-segmented bodies, with their heads fused to their thoraxes. Accounts vary on the number of legs they possess, from as few as eight to as many as eighteen, but it is consistently reported that they also have two pairs of claw-tipped arms, one pair for impaling prey on harpoonlike barbs and one pair for clubbing prey with hammerlike blows. Witnesses also agree that bin'azg have no visible eyes yet seem to track other creatures with uncanny accuracy by sound or smell, and that they prefer to immobilize their prey before devouring it.

Bin'azg are never seen aboveground and seem to strongly prefer tunnels to open caverns. The radial configuration of their legs allows them to propel themselves rapidly through tunnels by making simultaneous contact with both floor and ceiling or with walls on either side. Dwarves who have escaped encounters with them observe that bin'azg are easier to outrun when they cannot orient their legs in opposite directions as they move.

FLAVOR TEXT

The lore accompanying a monster's stat block is often the last thing I look at, unless I'm having trouble making sense of the stat block. My fundamental premise is that eons of existing in the D&D universe have allowed creatures, as species, to develop instinctive behaviors that make the highest and best use of the game mechanics behind their traits and features (with a few exceptions, such as undead compulsions and the mechanistic behavior of constructs). Once I've determined what kinds of behaviors the contents of a stat block imply in and of themselves, *then* I turn to the flavor text for context, clarification, and nuance. I find that reading this text *after* looking at the stat block, rather than before, helps me recognize further implications of the features I've just looked at—adding to the number of tactical possibilities I'm considering. Conversely, if I read the flavor text first, I'm more likely to let it override my own insights—*limiting* the possibilities.

However, there is one relevant quality you'll sometimes find in the flavor text that may not have a proxy in the stat block: fanaticism. Monsters and non-player characters that engage in combat for ideological rather than instinctual reasons are more likely to fight to the death.

The bin'azg is a creature of my own creation, and it acts exactly as I want it to act, so there's no inconsistency between its flavor text and its stat block. Not all flavor text is as consistent. An example of flavor text highly consistent with the features in the accompanying stat block is that of the steel predator in Mordenkainen's, which describes it as "a merciless machine with one purpose: to locate and kill its target regardless of distance and obstacles." An example of flavor text less consistent with the accompanying stat block is that of the marut, also in Mordenkainen's, which implies that only one marut is ever bound to enforce a given contract, even though multiple maruts may sometimes be required to retrieve all the parties who've violated it.

MONSTER SIZE, TYPE, AND ALIGNMENT

Size often correlates inversely with numbers: Tiny and Small monsters are more likely to swarm their opponents, while Huge and Gargantuan monsters are usually loners. When monsters depend on numbers to overwhelm their opponents, the decision to retreat is often made on a group basis rather than individually, as a function of what fraction of their total force is seriously injured or slain. Especially if they have a feature, such as Pack Tactics, that grants them bonuses when attacking alongside others of their kind, such monsters will often abort an attack when they no longer outnumber their opponents by at least two to one—or even three to one, depending on relative strength.

A monster's type, as I explain in *The Monsters Know What They're Doing* ("What Monsters Want," 7–12), is a reliable predictor of its goals and priorities; whatever its tactics, it uses them in service of these. Alignment indicates a monster's usual initial attitude: Good creatures tend to be friendly by default, neutral creatures indifferent, and evil creatures hostile. Note, however, that lawful creatures may be less friendly and more hostile toward characters behaving chaotically, and vice versa. (Calling unaligned beasts "friendly" or "hostile" anthropomorphizes them. They're beasts; they do beast things for beast reasons.)

The bin'azg is a Large monstrosity, neutral evil. It's a self-interested, territorial hunter; it hunts alone, and it's hostile to other creatures it encounters by default. It also doesn't stop chomping on a target who's reduced to 0 hp. It came to eat; it's gonna eat. If attackers interrupt its meal, however, it does try to drive them off, dragging any grappled prey along with it wherever it goes.

ARMOR CLASS, HIT POINTS, AND SPEED

The stats in this section have one thing in common: They all influence when and how a monster runs away. Higher Armor Classes (above 15) make Dodging a feasible damage-reducing action to take while retreating; a speed higher than 30 feet strongly favors Dashing. An alternative movement mode (burrowing, climbing, flying, or swimming) allows a monster to flee where its pursuers can't go. Starting hit points determine the thresholds for light wounds ("It felt that"), moderate wounds ("It knows you're a threat now"), and serious wounds ("Its survival is at stake"). I set these bars at 10, 30, and 60 percent of starting hit points, so that a monster with 70 percent of its starting hit points or less is moderately wounded, and one with 40 percent or less is seriously wounded.

Natural predators, which dislike prey that fights back, tend to break off their attacks when they're only moderately wounded, as do monsters and NPCs with a heightened sense of self-preservation. More belligerent monsters and NPCs retreat when they're seriously wounded, and fanatics don't retreat at all—or wait to retreat until they're seriously wounded,

if they otherwise would retreat when only moderately wounded. I prefer these more nuanced figures to the 50 percent guideline given in the *Player's Handbook* (chapter 9, "Describing the Effects of Damage"), which strikes me as not enough damage to induce more belligerent monsters to run away and superfluous for more cautious ones.

The higher a monster's Armor Class, the more willing it is to risk an opportunity attack by leaving an opponent's reach without Disengaging. The lower the Armor Class, the less willing.

If a monster's base speed is lower than its speed in an alternative movement mode, it favors the alternative mode. For example, a monster with a 30-foot speed but a 40-foot flying speed prefers to stay in the air; one with a 20-foot speed but a 30-foot swimming speed prefers to stay in the water.

With 136 hp, the bin'azg is moderately wounded when reduced to 95 hp or fewer and seriously wounded when reduced to 54 hp or fewer. As a predatory creature, the bin'azg might normally be expected to flee when only moderately wounded: Predators favor weak prey over prey that fights back. However, its nature as a monstrosity and its evil alignment drive it to keep fighting until it's seriously wounded before running away. Its high speed favors Disengaging when retreating, but it may not be smart enough to know how; its Armor Class is high enough that Dodging as it retreats is slightly preferable to Dashing, unless it's being pursued by an opponent with Extra Attack.

ABILITY CONTOURS

Every set of ability scores has its peaks and valleys. Every monster naturally plays to its strengths and is held back by its weaknesses. Thus, the highs and lows of a monster's ability scores are crucial to understanding its fighting style: how it attacks and how it defends.

A monster's primary offensive ability, the one that determines its preferred mode of attack, can be Strength, Dexterity, Intelligence, Wisdom, or Charisma. It's usually the highest of these, though not always. If a monster's POA is Strength, it favors brute-force melee attacks. If its POA is Dexterity, it favors finesse or ranged attacks. If its POA is Intelligence or Wisdom, it favors spellcasting. If its POA is Charisma, it may also favor spellcasting, or—if it's proficient in one or more social skills—it may be more inclined to talk than fight.

A monster's primary defensive ability is Dexterity or Constitution.¹ If a monster's PDA is Constitution, it's happy to engage in melee. If a monster's PDA is Dexterity, it prefers to keep its melee engagements short—or to keep its distance.

The combination of POA and PDA produces certain characteristic types, such as the brute (Strength + Con), the shock attacker (Strength + Dex, or Dex + Dex without a ranged attack), the sniper (Dex + Dex with a ranged attack), the skirmisher (Dex + Con), the long-range spellcaster (mental ability + Dex), and the war caster or support caster (mental ability + Con). It's possible to imagine other profiles (e.g., the "finesse mystic hexblade," a mental ability + Dex duelist that employs a weapon rather than spells), but the aforementioned encompass the overwhelming number of published monsters.

Intelligence and Wisdom also influence how analytical and intuitive a monster is with respect to the fight it's in, how well it adapts to unexpected circumstances, and how accurately it assesses threats. For more specifics on these, see *The Monsters Know What They're Doing*, "Why These Tactics?" (2–3).

The bin'azg's highest ability scores are Strength and Dexterity, making it a shock attacker: a big damage dealer that strikes hard, tries to end the fight quickly, and retreats if it can't. If it hasn't managed to take out at least one opponent after three rounds of combat, or if its foes are still trying to fight it off at that point, it withdraws—perhaps to attack again later, perhaps not. Its Intelligence is low-average, indicating a lack of sophistication in tactics but some ability to adapt to circumstances. Its Wisdom is also middling: It has a normal self-preservation instinct, but it's indiscriminate in its target selection, tending to attack whoever or whatever is closest.

RESISTANCES, IMMUNITIES, AND VULNERABILITIES

These generally don't influence a monster's tactics directly; what they influence instead is how great a threat a monster considers a particular foe to be. A monster that's resistant or immune to bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing damage from non-magical sources is much more blasé about getting whaled on by a melee fighter with a mundane weapon than one without such resistance or immunity, and it's also more willing to risk an opportunity attack by moving out of its opponent's reach. Smarter monsters recognize opponents who deal damage they're more susceptible to as targets that need

to be taken care of first. Stupid ones don't think in those terms, but they can tell more ouch from less ouch, and they know that more ouch is something to avoid.

Although it's usually found further down in the stat block, among a monster's passive traits, consider Magic Resistance to be in the same category as these.

With resistance to physical damage from normal weapons, a bin'azg expects little resistance and is surprised to meet opposition that strikes back with enchanted weapons or other magical damage. It may turn tail sooner if it takes a lot of these kinds of damage at once.

SENSES

Any monster with a special sense that lets it see under certain adverse conditions prefers to fight in those conditions. Monsters with darkvision attack in dim light or darkness rather than broad daylight. Monsters with blindsight hunt in total obscurity. Monsters with tremorsense, especially if they can also burrow, lurk underground until they feel the movement of prey.

With blindsight and Keen Hearing and Smell, a bin'azg waits quietly in subterranean darkness until it bears or smells potential prey. It creeps quietly toward its targets until it's about 60 feet away, then uses its speed, combined with a long-reaching claw attack, to strike with surprise.

SKILL PROFICIENCIES

Certain skill proficiencies signify particular types of behavior. One of the most common combinations is Perception and Stealth: Together, these proficiencies indicate an ambush attacker that lies in wait until it detects prey, then strikes, hoping to surprise its foes and also, perhaps, gain advantage on its first attack roll. Stealth proficiency plus a trait that allows a monster to Hide mid-combat as a bonus action, such as Nimble Escape, indicates reliance on repeated hit-and-run attacks. Athletics proficiency may indicate a predilection for grappling; Acrobatics suggests that a monster is hard to pin down by such means. Survival proficiency often indicates a predator that tracks prey by sign or scent, and if a chase ensues with such a monster in pursuit, it may continue to go after its quarry even after they believe themselves to have escaped. Deception, Intimidation, and Persuasion are all different approaches to parley; a monster proficient in one or more of them sees and seizes opportunities to achieve its goals through conversation rather than combat. Bring Insight proficiency into the mix, and you add an extra level of shrewdness.

With proficiency in Perception and Stealth, the bin'azg is a classic ambush attacker.

PASSIVE TRAITS

The sections above all lay the foundation of a monster's tactical behavior. This section and those that follow are the edifice.

Now that you know a monster's basic approach to combat and whom it sees as its most important targets, you can determine the specific techniques it uses by looking at its passive traits (which often include available bonus actions), actions, reactions, and spellcasting ability, both learned and innate. In particular, the traits in this section should give you an idea of the monster's *style*, as well as how it expresses that style through one or more game mechanics. Keep an eye out for anything that directly confers advantage or imposes disadvantage, that sets a condition (especially blinded, charmed, paralyzed, prone, restrained, or stunned), or that can be used in combination with some other trait. When it comes to combos, pay attention to sequence: Often, traits work together in one order but not in another. Ask yourself when during its turn a monster should use a bonus action to gain the most benefit from it.

The bin'azg's Too Many Legs and Spindly traits, together with its blindsight, make underground tunnels its ideal hunting ground, but Spider Climb lets it lurk in surprising places underground as well. The speed boost of Too Many Legs allows it to appear and attack seemingly from out of nowhere, and the combination of Too Many Legs and Spindly lets it aggressively pursue fleeing prey almost anywhere it tries to run. Keen Hearing and Smell gives the bin'azg a way to detect prey beyond the range of its blindsight.

SPELLCASTING

Analyzing spellcasting monsters can be daunting because of the number of options that have to be weighed against one another. There's no easy answer but to slog through it.

Innate Spellcasting spells are either "at will" or limited to a specific number of uses per day. At-will spells are ones that a monster casts anytime they give it a leg up. Remember, though, that at-will spells aren't free: They cost *time*, and therefore you have to decide whether the benefits they offer are worth the opportunity cost of casting them. However, if they provide a lasting benefit—and especially if they don't require concentration to sustain, or can be cast as bonus actions—they probably are. A spell limited to one use per day is meant to do a specific thing in a specific situation; figure out what that thing and that situation are. A spell limited to three uses per day can be employed more opportunistically, whenever appropriate circumstances present themselves, but they're not as all-purpose as at-will spells are and should be cast more mindfully.

For further discussion of spellcasting monsters, see "Magical Specialists," [page 139–45](#).

The bin'azg doesn't cast spells, even innately, so there's no decision to make here.

ACTIONS AND REACTIONS

The actions included in a stat block are mostly attacks; those that aren't attacks are mostly abilities that set up attacks. Actions that must recharge before they can be used again are especially powerful—their use is rationed!—which usually means that a monster wants to use them whenever they're available. But there's an exception: An action that recharges only on a roll of 6 is one that you must assume the monster will get to use only once during a combat encounter. It has to strike when the iron is hot, which may or may not be at the outset of combat. Figure out what likely circumstances are necessary to maximize the effectiveness of that action. If by chance the monster does roll that 6 and gets to take the action a second time, it's much less fussy about preconditions.

A monster's ability contour tells you whether it favors melee attacks over ranged attacks or vice versa, but when weighing attack actions of the same type against one another, and also when weighing attack actions against actions whose effects require saving throws to resist, it's important to know how to calculate average and expected damage. By "average damage," I mean the average amount of damage an attack deals on a hit. By "expected damage," I mean average damage times the probability of hitting, which I usually base on AC 15 at lower levels of play, AC 18 at higher levels. Since attack actions of the same type nearly always have the same chance to hit, it's simplest to compare their average damage—although I prefer to calculate it myself, rather than pull it directly from the stat block, in order to know the exact values before rounding.ⁱⁱ However, when you're comparing apples with oranges, you need to know how much damage each action can be *expected* to deal.

To calculate the expected damage of a saving throw ability, I generally assume a 50 percent chance of success, since monster saving throw DCs tend to scale with their challenge ratings as PC saving throw modifiers scale with their levels. Since most damage-dealing actions that require saving throws deal half damage on a successful save, expected damage usually works out to three-fourths the average damage on a failed save (50 percent chance of full damage plus 50 percent chance of half damage).

Figuring the impact of a saving throw ability that doesn't deal damage directly but rather imposes a condition or increases the likelihood of success on another action requires gaming out the outcomes of the various possible sequences. You won't get far down this road without a grounding in probability math, which I have neither the space nor the credentials to provide here. If you don't have it, go with your gut and don't worry about it—you're not being graded.

When calculating the expected damage of an area-effect ability (including area-effect spells), remember to multiply the expected damage against *one* target by the number of *expected* targets, as determined per Targets in Areas. Also, remember that the value of a Multiattack action equals the total expected damage of all the actions it comprises.

Of the bin'azg's three attack actions, Bite deals the most damage but also has only 5 feet of reach, while the claw attacks both have 10 feet of reach. Barbed Claw deals more raw damage than Smashing Claw, but Smashing Claw can impose the stunned condition, which adds value since it incapacitates the target and confers advantage on attack rolls against them. Terrify is a 5–6 recharge ability that's also part of the bin'azg's Multiattack, so naturally it will seek to combine Terrify with a claw attack whenever the former action is available, until all prospective targets have gained immunity to it. Both claw attacks have the potential to immobilize opponents, making them easier targets for Bite. Thus, a reasonable attack sequence is

Terrify/Barbed Claw, followed on subsequent turns by Smashing Claw if the grappled target escapes and Bite (or its other Barbed Claw against a second opponent) if they remain grappled.

LEGENDARY AND LAIR ACTIONS

Actions that a monster can take on other creatures' turns make lovely retorts to whatever those creatures have just done—but they can also allow a monster to underline the *irrelevance* of whatever those creatures have just done by using a legendary action against someone else, or by not bothering to use one at all. Remember that legendary actions, like Readied attacks, must be used where the monster stands (or hovers), unless they specifically include movement. Set common-sense criteria for using each one, with stricter criteria for options that cost two or three legendary actions. Don't skimp on legendary actions: Your monster's challenge rating depends on them.

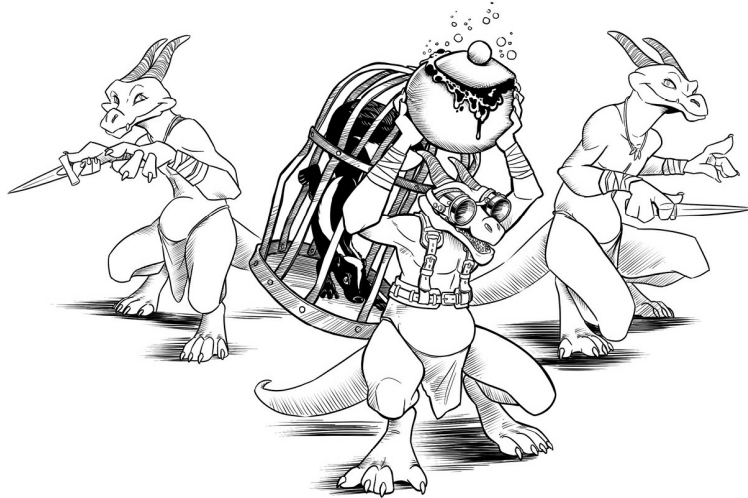
Lair actions, which occur on initiative count 20, give a monster even more home-field advantage than it already possesses. They're often more strategic in nature, allowing a monster to change the conditions of combat in its favor, control movement, or divide opponents. It's rarely difficult to figure out what kinds of opponents these actions are meant to thwart. When a lair action does nothing but deal direct damage, it's usually a default to employ when there's no particular need to use some other lair action. Note that a monster with lair actions is often—but not always—prohibited from using the same one twice in a row.

The bin'azg doesn't exercise much care in choosing its targets—it tends to attack whatever's nearest—but if all its prospective targets are hidden beyond the range of its blindsight, it can use its Detect legendary action to try to sniff one out. Spring lets it quickly close the distance between itself and the nearest fleeing opponent, and Chow Down simply deals more of that massive Bite damage. The dwarves who dug this critter up had good reason to be scared.

I. Wisdom is technically a defensive ability as well, but one that defends only against social and mental manipulation, not against bodily damage. It would only be considered a monster's PDA if its Wisdom were significantly higher than both its Dexterity and its Constitution. Generally, such a monster would avoid combat altogether; if it did fight, it would do so only if it enjoyed a major numerical advantage.

II. In fifth edition D&D play, the general rule is to round fractions down. In this book, while analyzing damage probabilistically, I round fractions to the nearest whole number, with one-half rounded to the nearest *even* whole number.

THE MONSTERS



HUMANOIDS

XVARTS (V)

Xvarts are difficult to devise tactics for, because their ability scores, their features, and their flavor text in *Volo's* all seem to be at odds with one another. Their ability scores suggest Dexterity-focused sniping and shock attacks. Their Overbearing Pack feature suggests a reliance on shoving opponents prone, presumably to be followed up with melee attacks (both of which depend on Strength). And the flavor text states that they attack primarily to abduct, which implies either grappling targets or knocking them unconscious.

There is a solution, but it's tricky.

Xvarts move at the normal humanoid speed of 30 feet per round. Their Strength is low, and their Constitution merely average, so they're averse to melee slugfests. Xvarts necessarily seek strength in numbers—and allies, specifically giant rats and giant bats. Giant rats make particularly good allies for xvarts, because of their Pack Tactics feature; giant bats, however, are tougher, with a slightly higher challenge rating. A xvart encounter should include, at a minimum, two xvarts per player character, plus an animal ally for every two xvarts.

Xvarts are neither smart nor wise. They have no ability to adapt if their favored strategy doesn't work, and they may not be particularly quick to notice that it isn't working. However, unlike the usual low-Wisdom monster, which waits too long to run away, xvarts are cowardly; if anything, they'll run away prematurely from encounters that favor them. The Low Cunning feature gives them Disengage as a bonus action, but this represents instinctive evasive ability, not discipline.

So how do you create an effective kidnapper out of a low-Strength creature without proficiency in Athletics? By building a strategy around the distinctive Overbearing Pack feature, which gives a xvart advantage on a shoving attack as long as it has an ally—in this case, a giant rat—within 5 feet of the target. The xvart's Strength modifier is an unimpressive -1, but advantage jacks this up to an effective +3 or +4, allowing it to compete with stronger or nimbler PCs.

Xvarts have darkvision and proficiency in Stealth. By attacking *only* in twilight or (if the party contains PCs who have darkvision themselves) at night, xvarts can minimize their chance of being seen before they attack. They send their animal allies out first (giant rats have darkvision, and giant bats have blindsight, so visibility isn't a problem) to distract their enemies, then follow up with attacks of their own.

Let's say we start with giant rats. The xvarts send in the rats, which lack Stealth proficiency, so they attack in pairs to gain advantage from Pack Tactics. The xvarts wait until their enemies are engaged, then move in and attack to shove their victims prone, intending to follow up by grappling so that they can't get back up.

Observant readers will have noticed that, based on my encounter building guidelines, there won't be enough animal allies to engage every enemy. The rats and bats are for use against the front line. The xvarts themselves, which are numerous, can take care of the rest of their opponents by double- and triple-teaming them.

Example: A level 1 party consists of Áine, a wizard; Daria, a marksman ranger; George, a sword-wielding rogue; Lennie, a front-line fighter; and Tolmac, a druid. These five PCs are ambushed at night by a pack of ten xvarts, accompanied by five giant rats. When the attack is launched, three of the rats swarm Lennie, while the other two go after either George or Tolmac—let's say George. (Sending rats to attack a druid would be a mistake, but then again, it's exactly the sort of mistake a dimwitted xvart might make. Don't overthink it. The xvarts pick George because George has a sword, while Tolmac just has a big stick.)

Once the rats have engaged their foes, the xvarts move in: one against Lennie—nah, make it two, he's pretty big; one against George; two against Áine; three against Daria, who looks a little tougher; and two against Tolmac. (Xvarts judge their opponents mainly on the basis of size, armor, and armament.) Taking advantage of low visibility and their targets'

distraction (*Player's Handbook*, chapter 7, "Hiding"), they slink up to their targets and try to waylay them without being noticed before they strike. If a xuart is spotted as it approaches, it doesn't attack; instead, it immediately runs for cover and tries to Hide again.

As I mentioned above, the xvarts' first attack is a shoving attack, to knock their opponents prone. If two or more xvarts are attacking a single target and the first succeeds in knocking the target prone, the second immediately attacks to grapple. If the target isn't grappled by the end of the turn, they'll probably get right back up, which will scare the xvarts and cause them to run for cover.

If the target *is* grappled, the xvarts remain adjacent to one another as they drag the target off, the auxiliary xuart using the Help action to give advantage to the grappling xuart on its Strength (Athletics) checks, while menacing the victim with its shortsword. If there's a third xuart (as against Daria above), it gives the victim a smack with its shortsword for good measure, aiming to knock them unconscious.

Additionally, as the *Volo's* flavor text says, the xvarts throw nets or sacks over their grappled victims, since probability dictates that a strong victim will get lucky and break the grapple after a few rounds even if the xvarts have advantage on their rolls. You'll have to use DM discretion and combine the restraining effect of the net (*Player's Handbook*, chapter 5, "Special Weapons") with the xvarts' advantage on Strength (Athletics) checks to resist escape, or it will be too easy to get out. Even so, being restrained imposes disadvantage only on Dexterity checks, not on Strength checks, so in all likelihood, Lennie will still burst his bonds sooner or later—and that's okay. Making things fair for the xvarts doesn't mean making them *unfair* for the PCs.

Xvarts are team players by necessity, not by nature, and if one is moderately wounded (reduced to 4 hp or fewer), it runs off—using the Disengage bonus action, then the Dash action—and leaves its companions to their fate. Xvarts hauling a grappled or restrained enemy who breaks free also make a run for it, as do their companions, as soon as they notice. So do xvarts abandoned by their "partners" in the initial attack.

The presence of a **xuart warlock** changes the parameters of the encounter. For starters, xuart warlocks, if they leave their settlements, are usually leading expeditions in search of magical treasure, not sacrificial victims to abduct. In this scenario, the xvarts apportion and comport themselves differently: A giant rat attacks each target, then two xvarts attack that target normally with their shortswords (statistically superior, in terms of expected damage, to giving up one of those two attacks in order to try to knock the target prone). Then both xvarts Disengage (bonus action) and retreat 15 feet from their target; if the target pursues, it's subject to an opportunity attack from the rat. Moderately wounded xvarts still run away, Disengaging (bonus action), then Dashing (action).

Meanwhile, the xuart warlock, fortified with *mage armor*, keeps its eyes peeled for enemies who are seriously wounded, whom it can finish off. The warlock always wants to try to get in the last blow, because Raxivort's Blessing gives it 4 temporary hit points whenever it reduces an enemy to 0 hp.

The warlock has four offensive spells, two leveled (*burning hands* and *scorching ray*) and two cantrips (*eldritch blast* and *poison spray*).

Burning hands requires a Dexterity save to resist and deals 4d6 fire damage to each enemy in its area of effect who fails their save and half that to each enemy who succeeds; the warlock wants to make sure there are at least two (Targets in Areas). Thus, we're looking at about 21 expected damage.

Scorching ray, on the other hand, is a ranged spell attack, and it does only half as much expected damage—but it's good out to a range of 120 feet, as opposed to *burning hands*' 15 feet.

Each of these spells costs a spell slot, of which the warlock has only two—and it wants to save one for either *expeditious retreat* or *invisibility*, its escape-hatch spells. Thus, it saves them for moments when it can finish off at least one of two opponents at close range or at least one of three at long range.

It has no limit on *eldritch blast* and *poison spray*, but neither of these can be expected to deal more than a few points of damage—in fact, if an enemy comes within 5 feet of the warlock, it's going to take a swing with its scimitar rather than take a chance on *poison spray*. *Poison spray* tends not to work so great on the kinds of enemies who'll charge a warlock.

Expeditious retreat and *invisibility* both require concentration, so the xuart warlock can cast one or the other but not both. It casts the former if its path of escape includes an abundance of cover, the latter if it has to run away across open terrain. Like other xvarts, the xuart warlock is a coward, and it takes to its heels when it's only moderately wounded (reduced to 15 hp or fewer).

DERRO (M)

Derro are small humanoids native to the Underdark. “Equal parts fearful and vicious,” says *Mordenkainen’s*, “[they] prey on those weaker than themselves, while giving simpering obeisance to any creatures they deem more powerful.” You know the type: They believe absurdities, and they applaud atrocities.

With high Dexterity and above-average Constitution but merely average Strength, derro are skirmishers, but they’re not especially mobile ones. Their Intelligence is average, but their Wisdom, for some reason, is in the cellar. This mental ability contour is unusual; the reverse is far more common, especially since Wisdom supports the Perception skill. Not only are they easy to get the drop on, they also have an underdeveloped survival instinct, making them more likely to fight to the death. They are, however, proficient in Stealth, predisposing them toward an ambush strategy.

They have excellent darkvision and Sunlight Sensitivity, so they rarely venture aboveground for any reason, and absolutely never during the day. These traits combine with their innate paranoia to suggest an intense territoriality: Not only do they defend their turf viciously, they hardly ever leave it at all, except to try to conquer an adjoining sliver of new territory.

Derro have two weapon attacks, Hooked Spear and Light Crossbow. One option with the spear is to knock an enemy prone (presumably by hooking and tripping them), which would give any adjacent melee attacker advantage on a follow-up attack. However, a ranged attacker has *disadvantage* against a prone target, so this doesn’t help the crossbow-wielding derro at all. Even worse: It turns out, if you run the numbers, that even if the first derro in a group successfully hooks and trips an enemy, its allies nearly always deal *less* expected damage, despite having advantage on their attack rolls, than the group would do if all of them simply attacked to deal damage.

This holds true for any group of two to five derro. It takes *six or more* derro attacking a single opponent in melee for the advantage from hooking and tripping to produce an increase in overall damage, and at that threshold, it works only against unarmored, lightly armored, or moderately armored opponents.

Reflecting on this fact, I think the hook-and-trip should be considered an “advanced” derro tactic. Derro have a challenge rating of only 1/4, so you can throw them against even level 1 PCs. Against these PCs, they don’t appear in great enough numbers to do anything but stab. But once your PCs are up around level 5 and higher, they’re going to be fighting hordes of derro, not just patrols and platoons, and in *that* instance, the first in each group of attackers hooks and trips to try to give the rest advantage. (For the sanity of your players and yourself, use the “Handling Mobs” rule in chapter 8 of the *Dungeon Master’s Guide*, and figure that advantage gives +4 to hit.) Assuming they all share the same initiative count, derro wielding crossbows all shoot first, before any of their enemies fall prone, and *then* the derro with spears attack.

Alternatively, if you’re more interested in flavor than in optimization, *always* have the first derro in a group of three or more wielding spears attack to hook and trip! The average difference in damage is less than 1 point, and your players probably won’t do the math on the fly and realize that being flat on their prats doesn’t put them in any more danger than they were in standing up.

After all that, it seems almost anticlimactic to point out that the light crossbow deals significantly more damage than the spear—86 percent more, on average. So rather than divide up a derro unit between crossbowmen and spearmen, assume that every derro carries both a crossbow and a spear; that they prefer to use their crossbows over their spears; but that when an enemy rushes them, they switch, and so do their immediate neighbors. Also, if at all possible, they launch their first crossbow volley from hiding, to gain unseen attacker advantage.

Derro paranoia and low Wisdom mean they don’t flee when seriously wounded but rather keep on fighting until they’re down to 1 or 2 hp. At that point, the gravely wounded derro run, baiting out opportunity attacks—and their erstwhile allies seize that opening to retreat out of melee range themselves and go back to attacking with their higher-damage crossbows. If combat drags on beyond three rounds, *all* derro flee the scene, Dashing away. But this is simply a strategic retreat. They’ll gather some more allies, stalk their opponents, and ambush again as soon as they get the chance.

The “Derro Madness” sidebar in *Mordenkainen’s* is mainly a roleplaying guide, with little or no impact on derro tactics. Advantage on saving throws against being charmed and frightened doesn’t change much, since derro already have Magic Resistance; it adds only a small number of edge cases, such as being resistant to a Berserker barbarian’s Intimidating Presence. The effect of Insanity is already encapsulated by the derro’s pitiful Wisdom score, which scrambles its awareness of how much danger it’s in.

Derro savants are derro with sorcerous ability. Aside from having high Charisma and slightly below-average Strength, they have exactly the same ability contour as a regular derro. Because that below-average Strength makes them even less effective in melee, however, they always attack from range, and other derro run interference for them in case an enemy tries to close to melee distance.

Lightning bolt is the big gun in the derro savant's arsenal, but it has the drawback of affecting only a narrow, straight line. *Invisibility*, however, gives the derro savant the freedom to position itself where it can cast a *lightning bolt* that nails four or more enemies, if they're properly lined up. It's most likely to get this chance if the battle has a well-defined front line. In a more all-over-the-place battle, there may never be a good opportunity to cast *lightning bolt*.

Normally, I'd say, the derro savant should use its 3rd-level spell slots for *lightning bolt* and nothing else. But I'd also say that because of the *length* of its area of effect, it's practically wasted if cast against just one or two enemies. So what about, say, boosting *chromatic orb* with a 3rd-level spell slot? That would make it deal 5d8 damage (22, on average) against a single enemy with a ranged spell attack roll, vs. 8d6 damage (28, on average) against one or two enemies, with the burden on them to make a Dexterity saving throw, and half damage dealt even if they succeed. There's no comparing the two. *Chromatic orb* falls far short.



Burning hands? At least that one requires a Dex save, deals half damage on a success, and can affect a second target, but even when boosted to 3rd level, the base damage is only 5d6 (17, on average). This one's a self-defense measure for when the derro savant gets sacked, nothing more. As for *sleep*, it just doesn't scale well. So save those 3rd-level spell slots, even if the opportunity to cast *lightning bolt* doesn't seem to present itself. The derro savant holds out hope that the moment will come eventually, and when it does, it will be ready.

As for cantrips, the derro savant has two that deal damage: *acid splash* and *ray of frost*. *Ray of frost* is better, but neither is that great. The derro savant uses up its *lightning bolts* and *chromatic orbs* before resorting to cantrips. *Spider climb* is useful for casting from the safety of a high ceiling, escaping in a high-verticality environment, and not much else—and the derro savant is as unlikely to flee as any other derro. *Sleep* won't be much use once the PCs are past level 4 or so, unless a significant number of them are seriously wounded. Then again, derro—even derro savants—are poor judges of the strength of their opposition, so a derro savant may unwittingly waste *sleep* on a group in which it will affect one target at most.

GRUNGS (W)

I have to hand it to *Volo's* for giving us **grungs**, undisputed winners of the Most Adorable Evil Creature title, formerly held by kobolds.

Clearly based on poison arrow frogs, grungs are arboreal rainforest dwellers, tribal and territorial. In the latter respect, their behavior in groups therefore resembles that of lizardfolk, so I refer readers to my entry on them in *The Monsters Know What They're Doing* (34–38). Grungs' amphibian nature also invites comparison to bullywugs.

Lizardfolk are brutes, but grungs are low-Strength, high-Dexterity, high-Constitution skirmishers. Their low Strength means they're going to be encountered in large numbers: no fewer than half a dozen at a time, I'd say. If they're going to initiate an encounter against your PCs, rather than vice versa, they'll have to outnumber the party at least three to one.

Grungs share the Amphibious and Standing Leap features with bullywugs. This means they'll often be found in swampy areas, around rivers, and in other sorts of difficult terrain, which they can get around in easily by jumping. They're quicker than bullywugs, though not as quick as most PCs, and since they can climb as well as jump, they use their proficiency in Stealth to hide in trees and drop on their enemies from above.

Grungs aren't stupid. They have average Intelligence and Wisdom, so they're not going to keep using a certain tactic if it's not working, and they know when they're beaten. Once they no longer outnumber their foes by at least two to one, or once a majority of them are seriously injured (reduced to 4 hp or fewer) or killed, they Dash off toward the heart of their territory.

Ordinary grungs wield daggers. Using them as a ranged weapon isn't a completely absurd proposition, but their range is so poor that grungs can easily close with any enemy they could reasonably hit with a dagger and engage them in melee. Ideally, therefore, grungs would like to outnumber their opponents and surround them; they throw their daggers only if this isn't an option.

Fighting grungs should be like fighting popcorn. Anytime an opponent lands a hit on a grung, the first thing it does on its next turn is jump away, either off into the undergrowth or up into a tree. Either way, it can then use its action to Hide, since its fellow grungs can keep whoever struck it occupied. Once it's hidden, it maneuvers around until it can attack from hiding again. This assumes, of course, that the damage the grung took wasn't enough to seriously wound it—in that case, it simply flees.

The Grung Poison variant suggests a variety of quasi-hallucinogenic side effects of failing the saving throw against grung poison. What's not clear is whether these effects are meant to apply only to the toxin in the grung's Poisonous Skin or the one on its dagger as well. If it includes the latter, an army of grung warriors will consist of green grungs, whose toxin limits a poisoned creature's movement to climbing and standing jumps. Once an enemy is poisoned, the grungs stop attacking it and take it captive.

If you're not using the Grung Poison variant, capture is still the grungs' ultimate goal. Two or more grungs that have knocked an enemy out drag it back toward the heart of their territory; one alone can only move at a speed of 5 feet per turn if its burden weighs more than 105 pounds, and since it would be moving across difficult terrain (rainforest), that speed would be reduced to 2 feet per turn. (Jumping while carrying the dead weight of an unconscious abductee simply isn't workable.) However, if enough of them are cooperating to manage the burden, the only applicable penalty is the terrain penalty, meaning they'll move at 12 feet per turn. I'd also say the half-movement penalty for moving a conscious grappled

enemy (which would further reduce their speed to 6 feet per turn) doesn't apply if two or more of them are cooperating to carry them off.

The Poisonous Skin feature is an interesting one, because it explicitly describes what happens when another creature tries to grapple a grung but not what happens if a grung tries to grapple another creature. Should the same effect occur? I'd say yes, based on the phrase "or otherwise comes into direct contact with the grung's skin." This ruling aids the grungs in their efforts to kidnap trespassers.

In summary, here's how I see a grung combat encounter playing out:

- Green grung warriors hide in trees, scouting for trespassers. They attack when they outnumber the trespassers by three to one or more.
- On their first turn, they leap down upon their (hopefully) surprised targets, attacking from hiding (advantage) with their daggers.
- On their second turn, if they've taken a light or moderate hit (up to 6 damage), they leap away (movement, possibly incurring an opportunity attack), Hide (action), and prepare to attack from hiding again. If they've taken a serious hit (7 damage or more), they Dash (action, possibly incurring an opportunity attack) back home. If they haven't taken any damage, they attack one more time.
- On their third turn, assuming they still outnumber their enemies by at least two to one, they all try to grapple their targets. If the first grung of a pair succeeds on its grapple, the second one takes the Help action to grant it advantage on its roll to keep the opponent grappled should they try to escape. A successful grapple requires the target to make a DC 12 Constitution saving throw against being poisoned. The poisoned condition gives the target disadvantage on all attack rolls and ability checks; in addition, if you're using the Grung Poison variant, the poisoned target can no longer move except to climb or make standing jumps.
- On their fourth turn, those grungs that have successfully grappled their opponents haul them off, while those that haven't keep trying until their opponents are subdued or their numbers are too badly reduced for them to keep fighting.
- If a grung fails two grapple attempts in a row against a particular target, it gives up on this tactic and goes back to attacking with its dagger.

Grung wildlings have spellcasting ability, and this ability is nastier than it looks at first, because of how their spells can be combined. Specifically, *spike growth* plus *plant growth* is a killer combination. *Plant growth* instantaneously causes all normal plants within a 100-foot radius to grow so thick that movement is slowed by a factor of four. (This doesn't inhibit the grungs' movement, since they can jump over the growth rather than have to slog through it.) *Spike growth*, meanwhile, deals piercing damage to any creature moving into or through its area of effect. Because *plant growth* gives not only a grung wildling but also all its allies a comparative advantage over their foes, a wildling casts this spell on its first turn and follows up with *spike growth* on its second, casting it where it can catch at least four enemies in the area of effect. If the wildling's enemies are too spread out for it to target four of them with *spike growth*, it uses its second turn to cast *barkskin* on itself instead. (It can't sustain both of these spells at the same time.)

On its third turn and thereafter, the grung wildling supports its team, shooting into the melee with its shortbow. If at any time it needs to jump away, it does so with the help of the *jump* spell, which allows it to jump a distance of 75 feet (and remains in effect for a full minute, without concentration). It uses *cure wounds* only to support an elite warrior, if one is present.

Grung wildlings are red grungs, and a creature affected by their toxin is overcome by hunger and uses its action to eat any food it can get at.

A **grung elite warrior** has the same combat abilities as an ordinary grung, only better, plus the Mesmerizing Chirr action. This feature stuns non-grungs within earshot who fail their saving throws, so that they can't take actions or reactions and automatically fail Strength and Dexterity saves, and attacks against them have advantage. If a PC spots the grungs before they launch their attack from hiding, the grung elite warrior uses this feature right away, to try to regain the advantage denied by their blown cover. Otherwise, it uses it on its second turn, and again as soon as it recharges.

Aside from this, the grung elite warrior fights as a normal grung, with a couple of exceptions.

First, the elite warrior can take a lot more hits than an ordinary grung can, so it doesn't leap away when it takes one, unless that hit seriously wounds it (reduces it to 19 hp or fewer).

Second, in that instance, it calls a retreat and takes the Disengage action rather than the Dash action, fighting as a rearguard while its allies disperse; it only leaps away itself once all its allies are safely gone.

Third, grung elite warriors are orange grungs. Their Grung Poison causes the victim to be frightened of their allies. A close reading of the frightened condition is important here: "A frightened creature has disadvantage on ability checks and attack rolls *while the source of its fear is within line of sight*" (*Player's Handbook*, appendix A, emphasis mine). This rule is easily distorted by imperfect memory into having disadvantage on attack rolls against whatever the frightened creature is frightened of; in fact, a PC who's frightened of their own allies has disadvantage on *all* attack rolls—and ability checks—as long as any ally is visible. Thus, once a grung elite warrior grapples an enemy, if that enemy fails their save against being poisoned, they have disadvantage on attempts to break the grapple as long as one of their own allies is still in view. And if the grungs are carrying the whole party off together...

Fourth, key locations within the grungs' territory may be heavily guarded by elite warriors. These grungs don't mess around with the kidnapping shtick. They stand at a distance and pincushion intruders with poisoned arrows.

KOBOLDS (V)

Volo's includes stat blocks for three new varieties of kobold: the kobold dragonshield, the kobold scale sorcerer, and the kobold inventor.

The **kobold dragonshield** is simply an exceptionally strong kobold with a melee Multiattack and selective elemental damage resistance. These don't affect its tactics, nor does its Heart of the Dragon feature, which allows it to shake off the frightened or paralyzed condition and do the same for allies around it. But its above-average Dexterity and Constitution, as well as its greater number of hit points, reduce its dependence on ranged combat and make it an effective skirmisher. Kobold dragonshields are bold nuisances, charging in to jab with their spears, then Dodging as they retreat. In kobold lairs, they use this maneuver to draw their pursuers into tight situations or traps, Multiattacking until they take a light wound (5 hp or greater), then Dodging and retreating. Elsewhere, they retreat when moderately wounded (reduced to 30 hp or fewer) but don't go far, hoping to resume their attack later; when seriously wounded (reduced to 17 hp or fewer), they retreat for real. Since the kobold dragonshield's Armor Class is predicated on its carrying a shield, assume that it wields its spear one-handed.

The **kobold scale sorcerer** has a more impressive set of spells than you'd expect a kobold spellcaster to have. Its 2nd-level *scorching ray* and 1st-level *chromatic orb* are sound and solid damaging spells that it doesn't need to think twice about casting. *Expeditious retreat* gives it a way to slip away from a charging melee attacker; *fire bolt* and *poison spray* are useful self-defense techniques if it runs out of spell slots.

Its two metamagic options, Heightened Spell and Subtle Spell, are curiously only useful for *charm person* and *mage hand*, respectively. Any ranged spell attack would give the kobold sorcerer's position away, regardless of whether the spell had a verbal or somatic component, and *charm person* is the only spell the sorcerer possesses that requires the target to make a saving throw. Both spells strike me as particularly useful for setting off traps—either using *mage hand* to do so remotely or using *charm person* to get an enemy to walk directly into a trap or to trigger one against their own allies.

The **kobold inventor** is sheer lunatic brilliance. It's an ordinary kobold, and it fights like one, except that it uses Weapon Inventions in lieu of normal weapons. But which of its Weapon Inventions is most effective? Here's my attempt to rank them:

1. *Green Slime Pot*. On a direct hit, deals an average 6 acid damage and distracts the target, who has to spend their next turn figuring out how to get it off, or it will keep dealing damage; on a miss, creates an environmental hazard. Its value depends on its dealing ongoing damage, so it's best deployed in round 1.
2. *Basket of Centipedes*. Marginally more powerful than Wasp Nest in a Bag, in that a victim reduced to 0 hp by the centipedes' bites is paralyzed for an hour. That probably won't come to pass, though, since the centipede swarm deals only 8 expected damage, total, over three rounds of combat. This invention and the Wasp Nest in a Bag are strongest when they're first deployed, so they're the best choices for the second and third rounds of combat.

3. *Wasp Nest in a Bag*. Like the Basket of Centipedes, deals only 8 expected damage over three rounds, but you get to yell, “*Beeeeeeeeees!*” (Yeah, they’re wasps, not bees. Who cares?)
4. *Rot Grub Pot*. Its drawback is that an enemy has to walk into it for it to do any damage—or not walk away from it, if it was deployed to the enemy’s space. But in either of those cases, or if the rot grubs get to act before the enemy does, it deals 9 damage on a hit and requires the victim to *burn themselves with fire* in order to keep the rot grubs from burrowing in and dealing the same amount of damage again, round after round, until the hapless victim is cured or killed. Like the Green Slime Pot, it’s best used in round 1—but since it’s consistently just a bit inferior to the various alternatives, it never quite makes the cut until round 5. I rank it fourth anyway because it’s a viable alternative to the Green Slime Pot in round 1, should you prefer it.
5. *Acid*. Deals 7 acid damage on a hit (4 expected damage). Nothing special, except that it can bypass the damage resistance of a raging barbarian. Best in the last round of combat, but still not as good as the Basket of Centipedes or Wasp Nest in a Bag. Break it out if the combat encounter drags into a fourth round.
6. *Skunk in a Cage*. No. 1, hilarious, except to the unhappy skunk. No. 2, can potentially take an enemy out of combat entirely. But, No. 3, can end up disabling the inventor or one of its allies (“It rolls initiative and, on its turn, uses its action to spray musk *at a random creature within 5 feet of it*”—not necessarily at an *enemy*).
7. *Scorpion on a Stick*. Deals only 2 expected damage, with no other benefit, in any given round. However, the kobold inventor can keep using this gizmo round after round, unlike its other inventions. It comes in behind the Basket of Centipedes and the Wasp Nest in a Bag because the default length of a combat encounter in fifth edition D&D is assumed to be three rounds.
8. *Alchemist’s Fire*. Weak damage, easy to put out. Can rob the target of one turn’s action, but even if it lasts three rounds, it probably won’t deal more than 2 damage.

Note that Acid, Alchemist’s Fire, and Green Slime Pot are all ranged weapon attacks with a normal range of only 5 feet. If it uses them at that range, the kobold inventor will have disadvantage on its attack roll from attacking point-blank (*Player’s Handbook*, chapter 9, “Ranged Attacks in Close Combat”); if it uses them from any farther away, it will have disadvantage from attacking at long range. Having disadvantage either way, the kobold inventor makes these attacks only against targets it has an ally adjacent to, so that Pack Tactics cancels its disadvantage out.

TURTLES (M)

Turtles are easygoing, nomadic, testudinal humanoids who rarely fight except in self-defense, having friendly dispositions and no territorial impulse. Except when they gather to exchange goods and news, they tend to live relatively solitary lives and are unlikely to be encountered in large groups.

The common turtle is tough, with high Strength and above-average Constitution, Wisdom, and Charisma. They lack proficiency in any social skill, so if being straightforwardly nice isn’t enough to get them out of a jam, they’ll either defend themselves in melee combat or, if they can tell they’re outmatched, retract into their shells until the danger passes.

According to their stat block, turtles typically carry quarterstaves—repurposed walking sticks, perhaps—and since these deal more damage than their natural claws, they’re the preferred mode of attack. Indeed, since turtles’ Claws attack deals only 1d4 + 2 damage, they’ll prefer any melee weapon deadlier than a dagger over attacking unarmed, as long as they’re proficient with it. You can therefore choose to arm an individual turtle with any melee weapon you like. As long as they’re wielding a versatile weapon such as the quarterstaff, they wield it two-handed, since they don’t carry shields.

Turtles also carry light crossbows, but they’re not as good with these (or any other ranged weapon) as they are with a staff. They use their crossbows only against enemies who won’t come within their melee reach or who repeatedly slip away by using a feature that denies opportunity attacks.

When melee ensues, turtles slug it out until they’re moderately wounded (reduced to 15 hp or fewer), at which point they use their Shell Defense action to hunker down. They remain hunkered until their assailants go away—or, if those assailants keep attacking, until they’re seriously wounded (reduced to 8 hp or fewer). At that point, they realize that their shell is insufficient to keep them safe, and they pop back out (bonus action) and make a run for it, Dodging as they flee. Turtles are surprisingly spry, and their high Armor Class makes the Dodge action a strong choice: With disadvantage on their attack rolls, most attackers will be at an effective -5 to hit them.

The **turtle druid** is lawful neutral rather than lawful good. Presumably preferring wilderness treks over urban sightseeing, it's less friendly than most other turtles; its default attitude is indifference. It may be talked into casting *cure wounds* as a boon, but it will expect suitable payment for the service.

Since its Wisdom is slightly higher than its Strength, its preferred method of dealing with a belligerent foe is spellcasting, and if they fail their saving throw against *hold person*, the turtle druid considers the problem solved: It simply walks away from its paralyzed enemy. Only if seriously provoked—by an intractably hostile opponent, or by chaotic characters chaosing all over the place—does it take advantage of that spell's effect to deliver a beatdown with its staff.

A turtle druid can figure out relatively quickly—say, after just one round of combat—whether it's a match for its opponents. If they're level 2 or lower, it's happy to do whatever it takes to teach them a lesson: It casts *hold person* to stop a lone assailant, *thunderwave* when it's double- or triple-teamed, and *produce flame* to answer ranged attacks from less than 30 feet away. If none of these conditions applies, it attacks with Quarterstaff (two-handed, just like non-druid turtles), preferring paralyzed targets over nonparalyzed targets. When it reduces a foe to 0 hp with its staff, it merely knocks them out, unless it's annoyed beyond the limits of its patience.

On the other hand, if its opponents are level 3 or higher, it uses *hold person* to neutralize threats and *thunderwave* to get multiple melee opponents off its back before beating a hasty retreat—also using the Dodge action. It uses Shell Defense when moderately wounded (reduced to 23 hp or fewer) and flees when seriously wounded (reduced to 13 hp or fewer).

FIRENEWTS (V)

Firenewts are quasi-humanoids adapted to conditions of extreme heat, and they display the corresponding fiery temperament: “aggressive, wrathful and cruel,” according to *Valo's*. They're raiders, slavers, and zealots. If you encounter a small band of them, they're probably looking for captives. If you encounter a horde, they're on the warpath.

Firenewt warriors have above-average Dexterity and Constitution and merely average Strength. Despite this ability contour, they fight as brutes, because Dexterity is their primary offensive ability (they wield scimitars, a finesse weapon) and because they lack any feature that would adapt them especially well to skirmishing. They also wear medium armor and carry shields, and they have Multiattack.

They're not bright. With an Intelligence of 7, they show no imagination or adaptability in their tactics, essentially fighting like primitives. Nor do they discriminate among targets. “’Tis always a fight to the death for them, so ’tis always one for ye,” says “Elminster” in *Valo's*, but I'd consider this optional, not gospel. It's true that they're described as fanatics, so they may well fight to the death out of conviction. But their Wisdom of 11 is high enough that they can be presumed to have a normal survival instinct. I might split the difference and say they're more likely to fight to the death when they're on some kind of mission, in the company of other firenewts; if they're just minding their own business, they'll Dash away if seriously wounded (reduced to 8 hp or fewer).

Firenewt warriors have two attacks: their Scimitar Multiattack and the Spit Fire action. Spit Fire can be used only once per encounter, and it does more damage on average than the melee Multiattack, dealing partial damage on a successful saving throw as well as full damage on a failed save. So the simple pattern of a firenewt warrior attack is to charge, use the Spit Fire action as soon as they come within 10 feet of their targets, then Multiattack for the remainder of the engagement. If a firenewt warrior is somehow captured, however, it regains Spit Fire after an hour of inactivity, the equivalent of a short rest.

If you've got firenewt cavalry, they're riding **giant striders**, basically beaked dinosaurs. These mounts move at a speed of 50 feet and have the recharging Fire Burst action, which they use whenever it's available against any two enemies who are within range and close enough together (20 feet apart or less). Otherwise, they Bite. Since their Dexterity modifier is the same as a firenewt warrior's, I'd have both mount and rider act on the same initiative count, even though the giant striders are technically independent mounts.

Giant striders have only animal Intelligence, therefore no capacity for zealotry, so they invariably Dash away if seriously wounded (reduced to 8 hp or fewer), taking their riders with them unless the riders are feeling fierce enough to dismount and keep fighting. (Remember that dismounting costs a rider half its movement.)

A platoon of firenewt warriors may be led by a **firenewt warlock of Imix**, the spellcasting variant of the firenewt. These, interestingly, fit the brute ability profile more closely than firenewt warriors do, and they carry a melee weapon, but

their primary offensive ability is Charisma. Since they can cast *mage armor* at will, without spending a spell slot, they always have it cast upon themselves before initiating battle.

Firenewt warlocks have only two spell slots available to them, and at least one is always saved for *hellish rebuke*, which is cast as a reaction to taking damage. As for the other slot:

- *Flaming sphere* requires a Dexterity save and deals half damage on a success. It's best against at least two targets but in practice often ends up being used against just one. Because the spell is continuous, it can be used to chase an enemy around. The fact that it's controlled as a bonus action enhances the caster's action economy.
- *Scorching ray* is a ranged spell attack that can be cast at up to three targets; its chance to hit is 5 percentage points greater than the chance of hitting with a melee weapon. On a hit, each ray deals an average 7 damage, for a total of 21.
- *Burning hands* also requires a Dexterity save and deals half damage on a success. On a failed save, a target takes an average of 14 damage. The 15-foot conical area of effect indicates use against at least two targets.

Here's our heuristic, then: If one enemy stands out as obviously, exceptionally dangerous (the only way for firenewts to judge this is by their size, so to them, "obviously, exceptionally dangerous" equals the 6-foot-8-inch, bellowing barbarian, not the quiet wizard in the back), the firenewt warlock casts *flaming sphere* as its first action, using its bonus action on the same turn and on subsequent turns to ram the sphere into that enemy. If no such enemy stands out, but there are at least two front-line fighters or supporters close enough to one another *and* to the firenewt warlock that it can catch them in a 15-foot cone, it casts *burning hands*; if it can't do so this turn but will be able to do so on its second turn, it uses its first turn to position itself accordingly, also making a melee weapon attack if the opportunity presents itself. If the conditions aren't right for either *flaming sphere* or *burning hands*, it casts *scorching ray* at up to three opponents in the enemy back line.

The only other spell the firenewt warlock casts is the cantrip *fire bolt*, a ranged alternative to its Morningstar melee attack. Which attack it makes is a matter of battlefield positioning. The firenewt warlock generally favors spellcasting over melee attacks, casting *fire bolt* at back-line opponents, but it's not shy about clobbering any foe who comes too close.

Firenewt warlocks share the firenewt warrior ideology and flee—or not—according to the same criteria.

GNOLLS (v)

There are four new gnom variants in *Volo's*: the gnom hunter, the gnom flesh gnawer, the gnom witherling, and the flind.

The **gnom hunter** has high enough Dexterity to qualify it as a shock attacker and high enough Wisdom to identify weak targets, and it has proficiency in Stealth. Its longbow attack also has the added virtue of slowing its target's speed by 10 feet on a hit, giving it the combination of attacking from hiding, then running down its target to finish it off with melee attacks.

The **gnom flesh gnawer** has a high Dexterity, but without a ranged attack, it's clearly a shock attacker, not a sniper. Also, it has the Sudden Rush feature, which lets it charge into melee faster; the exemption from opportunity attacks allows it to charge right past its opponents' front line to get at weaker targets in back. Its merely average Wisdom suggests that it's not that choosy about *which* weak back-liner it goes after; anyone not willing to engage on the front line is fair game.

The **gnom witherling** is undead, and it gets an extra attack as a reaction whenever one of its allies is killed. It's also immune to poison and exhaustion. That's it.

The **flind** has a magic flail. The flail has three different powers, but the flind doesn't get to choose among them; instead, its Multiattack comprises one use of each. The flind's Aura of Blood Thirst power also grants gnom allies within 10 feet of it an extra bite attack as a bonus action. That ups their damage, but it doesn't affect their tactics in any way. It affects the flind only to the extent that it benefits from being surrounded by lots of allies, as opposed to running off on its own, so that's where it stays.

ORCS (v)

Volo's gives us fantastic resources to use when designing bases for kobolds and hobgoblins and planning out how they'll behave in a combat encounter. When it comes to orcs, though, *Volo's* ducks these topics, instead giving us an anthropological (orcological?) overview of the highly theocentric structure of orc society. This offers some guidance on encounter building but no new insight on how orcs might behave during a fight, save one detail: war wagons.

We can surmise that a group of orcs escorting a war wagon are less likely to charge Aggressively if doing so means leaving the war wagon unattended. Also, as reluctant as orcs are to retreat to begin with, they're even more reluctant if doing so means abandoning a war wagon. To allow a well-laden war wagon to fall into the hands of an enemy by fleeing would be unforgivably disgraceful. Orcs are so hung up on pride and valor, they don't even use the war wagon for cover if they're seriously wounded. If they have 1 hp left, they place that 1 hp between the enemy and the war wagon.

What *Volo's* does offer are five new varieties of orc, two of which are spellcasters, all of which build on the orcish pantheon of the Forgotten Realms setting.

The **orc Blade of Ilneval** is a front-line battlefield commander. It has three distinctive features—Foe Smiter of Ilneval, Ilneval's Command, and Multiattack—that together make its combat sequence surprisingly simple.

Foe Smiter grants an extra die of damage when the Blade hits with a Longsword attack. Well, gosh golly, seems like the Blade will be favoring its Longsword melee attack over its Javelin ranged attack, then. The Blade's Multiattack grants two weapon attacks (either both with Longsword or both with Javelin), plus one use of Ilneval's Command, if that feature is available. Ilneval's Command is a recharging ability that grants attack reactions to three of the Blade's allies within 120 feet, a distance that allows the feature to work at battlefield scale.

Just about all we need to know about the orc Blade of Ilneval is right there: First, it charges up to the front line and fights there, using its longsword. Second, whenever it can, it also confers attack reactions on three of its allies at the end of its turn. The only other meaningful difference between a Blade and an ordinary orc is that it has slightly higher mental abilities. It can tell when a certain tactic isn't working and make adjustments, it leads the pre-combat parley (which, for orcs, consists mostly of taunting), and it prioritizes the targets that seem most threatening.

The **orc Claw of Luthic** is a support caster, although it can also do wicked melee damage with its claws, so it's not going to hang back as spellcasters often do.

The key spells in the Claw's arsenal are *bestow curse*, *warding bond*, *bane*, *cure wounds*, and *guiding bolt*.

- *Bestow curse* is an interesting one. The Claw can sustain only one instance of it at a time but can cast it twice. Suppose it chooses the option to add necrotic damage to its attacks against the target. The Claw's Multiattack grants it *four* melee attacks as long as it has half or fewer of its maximum hit points. Every one of those attacks, if it hits, will deal an extra 1d8 necrotic damage. One way for the Claw to use this spell, therefore, might be to charge the desired target using the Aggressive feature when seriously wounded or nearly so, cast *bestow curse* upon them, and finally, in the following round, make a four-Claw Multiattack, hopefully dealing bonus necrotic damage with each strike. However, this tactic has two problems. First, it's slow: It takes a full turn to set up, and if the Claw defeats its foe, it takes another turn to set up for the next one as well. Second, the extra 1d8 damage is less than the damage it deals on a normal hit (1d8 + 2), so rather than cast *bestow curse*, it's better off using its action on another Multiattack. Consequently, since its Dexterity and Constitution are greater than its Strength, it casts the disadvantage-on-attacks option against its desired target instead. The Claw has fairly high Wisdom, so it's choosy about its target, favoring enemies who seem likely to have low Wisdom themselves, such as bards and rogues. Alternatively, when it's not yet wounded that badly, it chooses instead to target a fighter already engaged by one of its allies with the turn-wasting curse option, which has greater impact the more Extra Attacks an opponent has.
- *Warding bond*, cast on a more powerful ally, effectively lets the Claw take half the damage that would normally go to that ally; it also provides nominal boosts to Armor Class and saving throws. Because it doesn't need concentration to sustain, and because it's useful right away and remains useful as long as it's in effect, it's the kind of spell a caster would normally cast first thing in a combat encounter. The trouble is, once again, it takes a full action! If a Claw uses its first turn to cast *warding bond* and its second turn to charge and cast *bestow curse*, the combat encounter is already well on its way to being over. As the DM, you can sleaze this by deciding that the Claw has *already* cast this spell on an ally before the combat begins, which means it has one fewer 2nd-level spell slot to work with, but if I were to do this, since I'm an honest sort of guy, I'd first want to make sure the Claw had some reason to expect that combat was soon to break out. Maybe the Claw casts this while its commander is parley-taunting. Maybe, in fact, part of the reason for the parley-taunting is to give the Claw cover while it casts *warding bond*? In any event, if the Claw is casting this spell within view of your PCs, they should be given a Wisdom (Perception or Arcana)¹ roll to notice it, as a contest against the Claw's Dexterity.
- *Bane* requires concentration and therefore is no good if the Claw is sustaining *bestow curse*. However, since it targets

Charisma rather than Wisdom, it may be useful as an alternative to *bestow curse* if the latter seems unlikely to take hold. If the Claw casts *bane* as an alternative to *bestow curse*, it may as well do so at *bestow curse*'s level (i.e., 3rd), allowing it to target five opponents.

- *Cure wounds* will be cast on any ally that's seriously wounded, which I define as being reduced to 40 percent or fewer of its maximum hit points. If the target is a powerful ally, the Claw casts *cure wounds* using a 2nd-level spell slot, since *warding bond* uses just one of these slots and can only be cast on one target at a time. If the target is a grunt, the Claw uses the normal 1st-level slot.
- *Guiding bolt* is a nice prelude to an Aggressive charge, dealing an expected 7 radiant damage and giving the Claw advantage on its next attack roll. It's not quite as good as *bestow curse*, though, so the Claw will probably use this spell only if the combat encounter drags on and it runs out of higher-level spell slots.

The **orc Hand of Yurtrus** is also a spellcaster, whose role varies more between support and assault. It can cast *silence* or *blindness/deafness* to shut down enemy spellcasters (the former is absolute and affects a whole area; the latter allows a Constitution saving throw and affects only a single target, but it can be used against anyone, not just a spellcaster, and it gives them disadvantage on attack rolls and their opponent advantage on same). It can cast *inflict wounds*, boosted to 2nd level, to deal 4d10 necrotic damage on a hit—much better than the 2d8 necrotic damage of the Hand's normal melee attack, with a better to-hit modifier to boot. It can cast *bane* in the same manner as the orc Claw of Luthic, if there's no spellcaster among its opponents who needs to be stifled.

The most important thing to keep in mind about the orc Hand of Yurtrus, I think, is that despite the Aggressive feature and its lack of any ranged attack, it's not nearly as well suited to toe-to-toe melee combat as orcs usually are. Of its physical abilities, only its Constitution is high. It doesn't float like a butterfly or sting like a bee. All its damaging eggs are in the one basket labeled *inflict wounds*. So while it still charges its enemies, because that's what orcs do, it's relying on that single spell to take its opponents down rapidly. It casts it twice using 2nd-level spell slots—three times, if there's no need for *silence*, *blindness/deafness*, or *bane*—then keeps casting it at 1st level. It simply doesn't have any other, better way to hurt its opponents, so it uses this one over and over.

The **orc Nurtured One of Yurtrus** has three distinctive features: Corrupted Carrier, Corrupted Vengeance, and Nurtured One of Yurtrus. The first two make the Nurtured One a walking plague bomb: As an action, it can voluntarily cease to exist and explode, splashing toxic bodily fluids over a 10-foot radius. If anyone in this radius fails a DC 13 Con save, they're poisoned, giving them disadvantage on attack rolls and ability checks, and they take 4d6 damage. In contrast, the Nurtured One's Claw melee attack—it gets only one per turn—deals a measly 1d4 + 2 slashing plus 1d4 necrotic damage. The Nurtured One's sole purpose on the battlefield is to sacrifice itself for the team: It charges into the midst of its enemies and detonates itself where it will contaminate at least two of them, preferably more. In contrast, Nurtured One of Yurtrus is kind of a pointless feature: It simply grants the Nurtured One advantage against being poisoned or infected by *someone else's* filth. If the Nurtured One is fulfilling its intended purpose in combat, its opponents will never get a chance to do so.

The **orc Red Fang of Shargaas** is an assassin. Its Shargaas's Sight and Veil of Shargaas features allow it to cast *darkness* at will, without the material components, and to see through the magical darkness unimpeded. Its Slayer feature gives it advantage on attacks against targets that haven't taken a turn in combat yet, and any hit against a surprised target during this turn is a critical. Since its Scimitar melee attack does more damage than its Dart ranged attack, it uses this weapon if it can. The Red Fang, alone among orcs, doesn't have the Aggressive feature, but the Dash bonus action of its Cunning Action feature has the exact same effect, so you can assume the Red Fang behaves the same way, Dashing (bonus action) toward its foe before Multiattacking with Slayer. It actually doesn't help the Red Fang to drop *darkness* on its target before doing this. First, the advantage gained from attacking a blinded target is no better than the advantage gained from Slayer; second, although *darkness* might frighten and disorient the target, it removes the element of surprise, so that Slayer no longer turns hits into crits. Instead, the Red Fang uses *darkness* as a defense when its presence is already given away and it no longer has the element of surprise.

There is one other creature listed alongside the orc variants in *Volo's*, the **tanarukk**. But the tanarukk is a straightforward "Rrrrraaaahhh, stab stab stab" brute, whose features do nothing except increase its damage resistance and ferocity. It's stupid and savage and has no self-preservation instinct, fighting until either its enemies are destroyed or it is. You can run this one on autopilot.

SKULKS (M)

Skulks are former travelers who somehow stumbled into the Shadowfell and got so lost that they eventually lost *themselves*. Summoned back to the material plane to perform tasks for their summoners, they do their jobs but also take their frustrations out in all sorts of inappropriate ways. They're invisible except in mirrors, to children, and in the light of a particular, outlandishly extraordinary candle, and even when they can be seen, they no longer have any individual identifying features.

Their stat block establishes them as chaotic neutral. The flavor text's description of their behavior is unambiguously chaotic *evil*. Decide from the outset which way you want to go. A chaotic neutral skulk performs its tasks in the most slapdash manner possible and throws everything into disarray wherever it goes, but it's not bloodthirsty. A chaotic evil skulk is a murder machine—a *messy* murder machine.

The skulk's ability contour has only one peak: Dexterity, which is extraordinary. Everything else is average or below. This contour marks the skulk as a hit-and-run attacker that deals as much damage as it can in a turn or two, then retreats. Because it's (mostly) invisible, it can withdraw from melee when it feels like it without subjecting itself to opportunity attacks.

With 120 feet of darkvision, it has a strong preference for dim light or darkness, but it doesn't *require* these conditions. Importantly, unlike the *invisibility* spell, Fallible Invisibility doesn't end if the skulk attacks or casts a spell. "The skulk is invisible"—full stop. This trait is subject to only three workarounds, one of which (the candle) is a horror story all its own and is so rare and specific that finding it is likely to entail an entire side quest. The other two (mirrors and kids) are unusual enough in D&D adventures that as a DM, you're almost forced to make sure they're included. Otherwise, you have an adversary that's completely invisible, all the time.

Not only that, the skulk is Trackless: You can't identify its location by looking for footprints. You *can* listen for it, as well as watch for jostled objects in its vicinity, so it's not entirely impossible to figure out where it is. But without *see invisibility*, *faerie fire*, or something similar, you'll *always* have disadvantage on attack rolls against it, and it will always have advantage on attacks against its foes.

Most of the time, the skulk goes about hidden. Its Stealth modifier is +8, and it can Hide just about anywhere, so assume that it's hidden until it reveals itself. As DM, you can either make a Dexterity (Stealth) roll on its behalf while preparing your session, or you can just let it use passive Stealth, with DC 19 to detect it using either passive Perception or the Search action.^{II}

A chaotic neutral skulk maintains an indifferent attitude most of the time, attacking only if someone tries to bring it to heel. The first time, it makes one Claws attack against that individual, then moves away at full speed; if no one comes after it, it uses its next turn's action to Hide. If its foes search for it assiduously and try to hunt it down, it's fifty-fifty whether the skulk lashes back or runs away to someplace where it won't be hassled.

A chaotic evil skulk, on the other hand, is always ready for a bit of the old ultraviolence—and like all chaotic evil creatures, it loves to pick on the most vulnerable. Being invisible, it doesn't even have to wait for its chosen victim to wander off alone; it can simply stroll up and shred without warning. Although its Claws attack doesn't render it visible, it does *reveal its position*, so after attacking, it moves to a random space not too far away, just to make matters a little more confusing, before returning and attacking again the same way on its next turn.

If no one rushes to its victim's aid, it keeps on attacking. If they do, it backs off after its second attack and Hides again, observing its opponents' reactions. If an ally of the victim heals them, it attacks the healer. Otherwise, it goes after someone who looks distracted, then exploits the confusion to go after its original victim again a couple of rounds later.

Because the skulk only deals necrotic damage when it attacks with advantage, it doesn't attack when it doesn't have advantage. Lighting it up with *faerie fire* is a good way to ruin its fun, but so is dropping a *darkness* or *fog cloud* spell, which it can't see through—forcing it onto equal footing with all its foes. In such a situation, the irritated skulk may simply go someplace else where folks are more easily victimized—or, if its foes still can't see it, it may sulk invisibly on the periphery, waiting for the pall to dissipate before lashing out at them again.

Even a chaotic evil skulk doesn't attack children, not because it has a soft spot for them, but because they can see it, which means it doesn't have advantage against them.

With a Wisdom of only 7, the skulk has little regard for its own safety and doesn't retreat because of injury, only because circumstances are interfering with its preferred method of attack. This plane of existence is bogus anyway, and the skulk

can't wait to be off it.

DUERGAR (M)

The central question in running duergar—which otherwise are simple and straightforward brute fighters—is when to use Enlarge and when to use Invisibility, the complication being that Enlarge both breaks invisibility and takes an action to execute, preventing a duergar from attacking on the same turn. Thus, any additional damage it deals from being Enlarged has to make up for the round in which it deals no damage at all. As I note in *The Monsters Know What They're Doing* (82–85), the break-even point for ordinary duergar is in the third round of combat. Over just one or two rounds, Enlarging doesn't add enough damage to make up for the lost round. Over four or more, it offers a clear advantage. Thus, the more likely a fight is to drag out—in other words, the more evenly matched the two sides—the greater the benefit of Enlarge. Invisibility, meanwhile, is really useful only for either ambush or flight, since it's a once-per-combat feature that's disrupted by attacking, casting a spell, or Enlarging.

Interestingly, not all the duergar in *Mordenkainen's* possess Enlarge and Invisibility. In fact, only four of the seven duergar variants in *Mordenkainen's* have these two features, and one of them has Invisibility on a 4–6 recharge, resulting in a big increase in the breadth of its usefulness. Also, while most of the variant duergar are also brutes, one is a quasi-spellcaster (it has no spells to cast, but it does have an Intelligence-based long-distance offensive ability), and one is a shock attacker. Finally, alongside those seven variants, there are two profiles of constructs that duergar employ. As I go through the various stat blocks, I'll focus primarily on how these variants differ from run-of-the-mill duergar.

Duergar soulblades are the shock troops, relying on their high Dexterity for both offense and defense. Their primary weapon is their (surprise!) Soulblade, a psionic melee weapon that deals bonus damage when the duergar attacks with advantage. For this reason, gaining advantage on attack rolls is central to the duergar soulblade's strategy, and it happens to have a couple of different ways of doing this built-in. One is its Invisibility; the other is *true strike*, a mostly useless cantrip whose one practical application is to gain advantage on the first attack roll in a combat encounter. (Gaining advantage is useful; the problem with *true strike* is that it consumes a full action to cast, so the caster gives up one whole attack action in order to gain advantage on another. This tradeoff is never worth it unless you weren't going to use that first action to attack anyway.)

Duergar soulblades can cast *true strike* at will, but what's the point? There's no good time to cast it except right before the start of a combat encounter. Which means that duergar soulblades don't necessarily want to start combat already invisible. That would be redundant: Gaining advantage from more than one source doesn't grant you *more advantage*.

In other words, while duergar soulblades have two built-in sources of attack advantage, they get only one use of each per encounter, and each of them takes an action—and therefore a full turn—to set up once a combat encounter has begun. This fact sends my mind in the direction of thinking, what if duergar soulblades plan to spend only two combat rounds attacking, period? What if, in fact, they're only employed when a unit of duergar know that a fight is going to happen and that it's going to be prolonged, and they want an underhanded way to swing the battle dramatically in their favor?

I'm getting a little ahead of myself in sharing this conclusion, because I haven't talked about two of the duergar soulblade's other “spells” (really psionic abilities), *jump* and *hunter's mark*. Bringing these two powers into the mix makes things wacky.

I suspect that both players and DMs alike underuse *jump* because the rules governing jumping are so complicated compared with the rest of fifth edition D&D, so I'll do all the heavy lifting for you right now. *Jump* triples a creature's jumping distance—but it does nothing to the creature's *speed*, so what you often end up with is a creature that can jump farther than it can move in a turn, and by extension, a creature that begins a jump on one turn and completes it on the next. The duergar soulblade, like most dwarves, moves only 25 feet per turn. Its running long jump distance is 11 feet, its standing long jump distance 5 feet, its running high jump distance 3 feet, and its standing high jump distance 1 foot. *Jump* increases these distances to 33 feet, 16 feet, 9 feet, and 4 feet. It takes an action to cast and lasts 1 minute without concentration.

So here's a hypothetical duergar soulblade attack sequence, which begins at the same moment its other duergar allies initiate combat:

Round 1. The duergar soulblade, hiding out 40 feet away from where the action is going to occur, casts *jump* on itself.

Round 2. The duergar soulblade gets a 10-foot running start, then leaps 30 feet toward its enemies. However, it's only able to complete 15 feet of its jump, so it ends its turn still 15 feet away from its foes. While in midair, it casts *true strike* as an action and uses Create Soulblade as a bonus action. (It could have used Create Soulblade in round 1 instead, but this way is more cinematic, don't you think?)

Round 3. The duergar soulblade completes its movement, lands next to an opponent, and uses its action to attack with its Soulblade. It gains advantage from *true strike*, and having advantage also gives it an extra 1d6 force damage on a hit.

Round 4. The duergar soulblade takes the Invisibility action.

Round 5. The invisible duergar soulblade attacks again, with unseen-attacker advantage, gaining its extra "advantage damage."

It's awesome-looking, but it's slow. Let's be hard-nosed and compare the damage it deals to the lesser elegance of a straight fight. In the sequence above, the duergar soulblade gets only two attacks, both with advantage, dealing $2d6 + 3$ damage on the first hit and another $2d6 + 3$ on the second. Against AC 15, we're looking at 16 total expected damage (20 average damage over two hits, 80 percent chance to hit). In contrast, what if it just stood there and dully swung its Soulblade for five rounds, neither seeking nor obtaining any source of attack roll advantage, but having concentration available to cast *hunter's mark*?

Here the math is a bit trickier because the 55 percent hit probability is low enough that we can't know for sure how much of an impact *hunter's mark* will have—it's entirely possible that the duergar soulblade will lose one or more uses of it owing to its concentration being disrupted after a missed attack. Let's suppose that out of five attacks, the duergar soulblade gets to apply *hunter's mark* damage on two hits but loses its third use to broken concentration. All told, we're looking at 18 expected damage over five attacks, plus another 7 from *hunter's mark*, for a total of 25. That's significantly better than the *jump*-powered, slow-motion banzai charge I came up with above.

But wait—shock troops aren't just going to stand in one place swinging a sword for five rounds. That's brute style. It's not how they work. For one thing, they don't have the staying power: Duergar soulblades have only 18 hp, vs. the standard duergar's 26 hp. Their Constitution is merely average, their Armor Class only 14. Shock troops get in, wreck face, and *get out*. The "get out" part matters. And what mechanism does the duergar soulblade have for getting out of a fight? None, other than killing its opponent! *Jump*, alas, doesn't have a Disengage action built into its effects, and the duergar soulblade is already using Invisibility to gain advantage on a second attack roll; it's not available for evacuation.

In any reasonably close matchup, a player character can probably take out a visible, stationary duergar soulblade in a head-to-head fight in three rounds (if the soulblade doesn't take them out first). It's not going to have five rounds to attack; it's only going to have three, and two of those at most will have *hunter's mark* damage attached. So the real expected damage total we should be looking at is 11 over three attacks, plus the 7 from *hunter's mark*, or 18 damage. With this, the *jump* assault still falls short but at least is in the same ballpark. Plus, no one else attacks quite that way. So let's stick with it.

Of course, having said that, now I'm going to bring up an exception. In total darkness, against creatures without darkvision, duergar don't need Invisibility or *true strike* to gain advantage on their attacks; they have it by default. Thus, those intermediate steps aren't necessary—even *jump* isn't necessary, really, because they don't have to start at a distance to avoid engagement long enough to cast *true strike*. They can join the fight immediately, alongside their comrades, and julienne away. But that's only if *none* of their foes has darkvision, or even a torch. Duergar aren't walking encyclopedias, but they know which other humanoid species have darkvision and which don't.

Duergar soulblades have the common sense to retreat when seriously injured (reduced to 7 hp or fewer), but they're fairly indiscriminate in their target selection.

Duergar stone guard are essentially normal duergar, but tougher and better-armored, with the Phalanx Formation trait. Phalanx Formation works similarly to Pack Tactics, granting advantage on attack rolls while adjacent to "a duergar ally wielding a shield" (i.e., another stone guard, a duergar warlord, or a regular duergar—duergar kavalrachni carry shields as well, but they don't stay in one place). It also grants advantage on Dexterity saving throws. The stone guard need attack roll advantage, because their King's Knives do less damage than the regular duergar's war pick.

Duergar stone guard make their Enlarge and Invisibility decisions the same way standard duergar do. The only difference in their fighting style is their deployment, which is used either to block for a line of javeliniers or xarrorn behind them or to keep foes out of a strategically important location. When half or more of a line of stone guard are seriously wounded (reduced to 15 hp or fewer), they Disengage and fall back in formation, always keeping the shield wall intact.

Duergar xarrorn are brutes that engage enemies in direct melee if they don't have duergar stone guard to block for them. They have two offensive actions: Fire Lance, a standard melee weapon attack with a long reach, and Fire Spray, an area effect with a standard 5–6 recharge that's always used against at least two foes, never just one. If the xarrorn needs to reposition in order to strike two or more, it does so.

The recharge suggests that Fire Spray is the preferred action whenever it's available, and as long as a xarrorn isn't Enlarged, it is. But an Enlarged xarrorn can do more damage with its Fire Lance as long as it has at least an 81 percent chance to hit. That means having advantage against a target with AC 14 or lower. (The xarrorn isn't smart enough to read a PC's Armor Class off their character sheet, so it would rephrase that as "a target wearing light armor or none, or hide armor or a chain shirt without a shield.") If those two criteria are met, it always favors the Fire Lance.

Xarrorn use the same criteria for Enlarge as regular duergar do, and they also turn invisible and flee when seriously wounded (reduced to 10 hp or fewer).

The **duergar kavalrachni** are, as you might guess from the name, giant spider cavalry (araignery?). They ride **steeders** (also in *Mordenkainen's*), specifically female steeders. Their Cavalry Training trait lets a kavalrachni follow up a successful attack with an attack roll by its steeder mount, which is good by itself and even better if you treat the steeder as an independent mount rather than a controlled mount (although, based on their low Intelligence, flavor text description, and paucity of features, you may not want to—I wouldn't).

Kavalrachni can attack at range, but their ability contour and Multiattack incline them to charge into melee. Their Heavy Crossbow attack is useful for making ranged attacks while they're on their way to a melee engagement and for taking potshots as they depart. Because the typical function of cavalry is to smash through a front line and run down more valuable targets behind it, this is what kavalrachni do, even though they have no particular acuity for choosing one target over another; the fact that an enemy is sheltering behind the front line is evidence enough that they should be run down.

One of the subtleties of fifth edition mounted combat is that if a controlled mount provokes an opportunity attack, the attack may target either the mount or the rider—but if the mount takes the Disengage action, it exempts both the mount *and* the rider from opportunity attacks, since the rider is moved out of its opponent's reach by its mount's movement, not by its own. Thus, when a kavalrachni doesn't need its mount to Dash in order to reach its opponent, but it does need to pass through one or more opponents' zone(s) of control, the mount Disengages. (If it doesn't need to pass through any opponent's zone of control, the mount Dodges.)

Shared Invisibility gives the kavalrachni ambush potential; regular duergar usually use their Invisibility to retreat rather than to attack, but a quirk of the Shared Invisibility feature, combined with steeders' mobility, makes invisibility less necessary for a fleeing kavalrachni. This quirk is that Shared Invisibility allows a steeder mount to make an attack without disrupting the invisibility of the duergar riding it. (In contrast, if the duergar kavalrachni attacks, both the steeder and the rider become visible.) This allows a rider-mount pair to approach invisibly, the steeder mount to attack with advantage, then the kavalrachni to make its first attack with advantage as well. Note, however, that this sequence only works if the steeder mount is independent rather than controlled: A controlled mount can only Dodge, Dash, or Disengage.

That being said, allowing the steeder mount to act independently also allows a kavalrachni-steeder pair to perform a more effective leaping assault than the duergar soulblade can manage, because the wording of the steeder's Extraordinary Leap differs from the wording of *jump*: "[E]very foot of its walking speed that it spends on the jump allows it to move 3 feet," meaning that it doesn't have to spend two turns' movement to cover the extra distance. With a 10-foot running start, that lets it travel another 45 feet, with 5 feet of movement to spare after it lands. However, it can still only clear obstacles 5 feet high.

Kavalrachni have a double War Pick Multiattack, no doubt to make up for their inability to Enlarge. This makes them stronger than regular duergar, but not significantly so. If they've used their Shared Invisibility to attack, they need something to enhance their retreat, such as a mount that can Disengage on their behalf. Thus, a kavalrachni retreats not only when it's seriously injured (reduced to 10 hp or fewer) but also when its steeder mount is seriously injured (reduced to 12 hp or fewer), because the steeder's Disengage action is the kavalrachni's ticket out of a losing fight. However, an independent steeder mount, being a predator that doesn't like it when prey fights back, is liable to nope out prematurely, when it's only moderately wounded (reduced to 21 hp or fewer). Controlled steeder mounts stay in the fight as long as their riders need them to.

The **duergar mind master** is the last of the CR 2 duergar, the one with the ability contour of a spellcaster but no actual spells. What it does have is Mind Mastery, a feature with a 60-foot range that requires an Intelligence saving throw to resist. More to the point, it targets *one creature* within 60 feet and requires a *DC 12* Intelligence save to resist.

This feature, frankly, is terrible. Even a level 1 PC who's dumped Intelligence still has a 40 percent chance of succeeding on this saving throw. It's a straight-up waste of an action in any circumstance save one: as part of an ambush. In this instance, a hidden mind master can use Mind Mastery against a target without giving away its position or even its presence if it fails, since Mind Mastery is technically neither an attack nor a spell with a verbal component. If it succeeds, it gets to force an opponent to sucker-punch one of their own allies—or, depending on the local terrain, walk directly into a chasm or a river of lava or something. With Intelligence 15, a mind master is smart enough to know not to bother using this feature in open combat.

So forget treating it as a spellcaster; we'll pretend that its Intelligence is nothing special after all and it's just another shock attacker, using Dexterity for offense as well as defense.

In this case, its Multiattack is its core offensive feature, allowing it to make either two melee attacks or one melee attack along with one use of Mind Mastery. Since we've established that Mind Mastery is awful, it sticks to the two melee attacks. Note the phrasing: Since Multiattack says "two melee attacks," not "two Mind-Poison Dagger attacks," other melee attacks can be substituted, including unarmed attacks, attacks with improvised or seized weapons, grappling, and shoving. However, in most cases, we're just talking about the Mind-Poison Dagger, which deals 3d6 psychic damage on top of the normal weapon damage. Used twice in a single turn, it's vicious.

The mind master has Invisibility on a 4–6 recharge, which is unusually generous: It means that, on average, a mind master is able to use it every other turn. How does a strategy in which the mind master turns invisible on odd turns and Multiattacks on even turns, with advantage on the first attack, stack up against simply Multiattacking each round? Once again assuming a target with AC 15, the mind master has a 55 percent chance to hit normally and an 80 percent chance to hit with advantage on the roll. With damage averaging 16 per hit, that's 9 expected damage per normal attack, 13 expected damage per attack with advantage. Over two turns, two Multiattacks can be expected to deal 35 damage, while Invisibility followed by one Multiattack can be expected to deal only 22—not nearly good enough. The conclusion to be drawn here is that the duergar mind master turns invisible only when it *needs* to turn invisible to slip away (such as when it's being double- or triple-teamed) or when it has just finished off an opponent and is preparing to relocate, not merely to gain advantage on a single attack.

In lieu of the standard duergar's Enlarge, the mind master, hilariously, has Reduce—with a handy clause in the description of its Mind-Poison Dagger which ensures that it still does the same amount of damage despite having shrunk to the size of a toothpick. Thanks to this guarantee, Reduce is nearly all upside: Although the mind master won't be bending any bars or lifting any gates while minimized, it gets to Hide as a bonus action with +5 on its Dexterity (Stealth) check, and its Armor Class increases from 14 to 19. Most important, it gains these benefits at no penalty to its speed, so it can scamper around, Hiding behind rocks, and pop out to stab confounded foes with its Mind-Poison Dagger. While waiting for them to come within reach, it can use Mind Mastery opportunistically. This bonus Hide action, not Invisibility, is the mind master's strongest source of advantage. Best of all, when it Reduces itself, it can use that bonus action as part of the same turn, so it doesn't even give up much in the way of time.

The mind master turns invisible and skedaddles when seriously wounded (reduced to 15 hp or fewer). If its Invisibility happens to be on cooldown when its hit points drop this low, it Dashes away if it's Reduced and Disengages before retreating if it's not.

The **duergar warlord**, like the common duergar, is a brute, but a much tougher brute. It's better armored and has nearly three times as many hit points, but more important, it gets to both Enlarge *and* attack as part of its Multiattack. Thus, it has no reason not to Enlarge, regardless of the difficulty of the battle. Although the weapon attacks are listed first, the order of the Multiattack isn't strictly specified, and using Enlarge *before* attacking is a no-brainer. After doing this, the duergar warlord combines its melee attacks with Call to Attack on subsequent rounds.

Because Call to Attack consumes the reactions of other duergar, you might think the duergar warlord has to be careful not to use it on allies who might have to make opportunity attacks. It's true that if you want to maximize the effect of Call to Attack, you want to throw the reaction attacks to duergar who aren't going to have to make OAs—but nothing is *lost* by using a reaction for a Call to Attack attack instead of an opportunity attack. The attack simply occurs sooner. That being

said, the foes you most want to wear down with as many attacks as possible are the tough front-liners, and they're also the ones least likely to run from a fight, so using Call to Attack against them is a good bet.

Psychic-Attuned Hammer is a significantly better attack than Javelin. Favor the hammer, unless the warlord can't actually reach an enemy to hit them with it. In that case, huck some javelins—or turn invisible. The duergar warlord's Invisibility, like the mind master's, has a fast 4–6 recharge. But it uses this feature to appear in surprising places, not simply to gain advantage on a single hammer attack; throwing three javelins offers greater benefit than the increase in expected damage from having advantage on one hammer attack.

When the duergar warlord itself clearly has no need to make any opportunity attack, it can use its reaction on a Scouring Instruction instead. This damages the ally the warlord uses it on, but the warlord is lawful evil; do you think it cares? The greatest courtesy it affords its chosen minion is not to use it when said minion is 4 or fewer hit points away from being seriously wounded.

As for the warlord itself, it retreats when it's seriously wounded (reduced to 30 hp or fewer), using the Dodge action if it's engaged in melee with only one opponent and the Dash action if engaged with more than one. (Disengaging is pointless—duergar are too slow to avoid being chased down. Better to take one hit per opponent now than two or three hits on each of your opponents' turns.)

With its extraordinary Strength and Constitution and bargain-basement Dexterity, the **duergar despot** isn't just a brute, it's a juggernaut, and its tactics have nothing in common with those of regular duergar.

It's happy to engage in melee with multiple foes at a time, because its Multiattack includes two Iron Fist attacks, and each of those attacks has the potential to knock a foe back up to 30 feet. But note that this is *up to* 30 feet. "Up to" includes zero. Against a single opponent, the most powerful Multiattack combo is Iron Fist/Stomping Foot/Stomping Foot/Iron Fist, with the first Iron Fist attack knocking the target prone (on a failed saving throw) *but not away*. Thus, the prone target remains within reach of Stomping Foot, on which the duergar despot now has advantage. This sequence also works if the opponent is knocked away only a short distance—say, 5 or 10 feet. Although the duergar despot can knock a foe 30 feet back, it limits its knockback to 25 feet—and then uses its movement to stay in that foe's face, so that they provoke an opportunity attack if they try to get away—unless that foe is either a particularly problematic melee opponent or so far beneath the duergar despot, in its estimation, that it's just taking out the trash. Against two melee opponents, it uses Iron Fist once and Stomping Foot once against each.

Two Iron Fists and two Stomping Feet are a huge combo, dealing an expected 50 damage against AC 19 (if you're tanking against a duergar despot, you probably don't have AC 15 anymore). But Flame Jet is an area effect that according to Targets in Areas can be expected to flambé three opponents, for an expected total of 40 fire damage (assuming a fifty-fifty likelihood of success or failure on the Dexterity save). Usually, when a monster has a Multiattack and an area-effect ability, the area-effect ability consumes a full action and must be compared and contrasted with Multiattack head-to-head. But in the duergar despot's case, its Multiattack allows it to replace *any or all of its melee attacks* with Flame Jet!

The implications are staggering. Flame Jet no longer has to be rationed down to instances in which it can strike three or more opponents. Against one opponent, it's better than Stomping Foot against a non-prone target. Against two, it's better than Stomping Foot against *any* target, prone or no. Against three or more, it's a damage hose that the despot has no need to shut off.

And it's not limited to targets it can hose down from its current position. Once per day, it can cast *misty step*, and woe to foes who slip up and arrange themselves three-in-a-row, in any direction, even once: The duergar despot bamfs to just the right spot to incinerate them all, placing itself adjacent to the nearest one, so that they get whomped if they try to scramble away.

As for the duergar despot's other spells—well, they're less clear-cut than *misty step*. *Mage hand* and *minor illusion* are for dinner parties, not combat. *Stinking cloud* has potential against four or more enemies who aren't lined up properly for a Flame Jet, but the save DC is embarrassingly low, making it a suitable use of an action only when (a) its targets are trapped in a confined space and can't simply walk out of the cloud, (b) the duergar despot can't yet get close enough to beat on them directly, and (c) the duergar despot doesn't need its allies to march into the cloud and help it out, because they're not immune to the cloud's poison. (Duergar *constructs* are immune to the poison, however, so if there are any of those on hand, they can attack targets in the cloud, no problem.)

The duergar despot can cast *counterspell* once per day, and its modifier on Intelligence (Arcana) checks to recognize opponents' spells before they take effect is +2. Since it's immune to being charmed, exhausted, frightened, paralyzed, or poisoned, it doesn't bother countering spells that inflict any of these conditions. (It doesn't care whether its minions are affected by them. That's lawful evil for you.) It also doesn't bother countering 1st-level spells, and its chances of countering spells of 4th level or higher are so poor that it doesn't bother trying to counter them, either. Finally, it braves spells that call for Constitution or Wisdom saving throws, because its save modifiers for these are *very* good. Its Dex save mod, on the other hand, is dismal, so damaging or debilitating 2nd- and 3rd-level spells that are resisted with Dex saves are at the top of its list of spells to snuff out. These include *call lightning*, *conjure barrage*, *fireball*, *lightning bolt*, *sleet storm*, and *web*.

Psychic Engine is a passive feature that deals psychic damage to adjacent creatures when the duergar despot takes a critical hit or is reduced to 0 hp. This trait merely gives the duergar despot an incentive to stay in melee reach of as many enemies as possible. It might also give it incentive to fight to the death, but... nah. Its Wisdom is high enough that it would rather live to tyrannize another day. When it's seriously wounded (reduced to 47 hp or fewer), it withdraws, using Iron Fist attacks to knock pursuers back 30 feet if there are any within melee reach and Dodge if there aren't. In the former case, to round out its Multiattack, it uses Flame Jet opportunistically.

COUNTERSPELL

A lot of DMs are unsure how generous or stingy to be with *counterspell*, vis-à-vis how readily a caster using it can tell what spell is being cast and decide whether it's one that needs to be countered. *Xanathar's Guide to Everything* offers a rule to resolve this question (chapter 2, "Identifying a Spell"), but I think it makes it slightly too difficult to identify 1st-level spells and too easy to identify 7th-, 8th-, and 9th-level spells. As an alternative, here's a house rule I've settled on:

- If an opponent is casting a spell you know, you always recognize it.
- If an opponent is casting a spell you don't know, you recognize it if you succeed on an Intelligence (Arcana) check with a DC equal to 8 + twice the spell's base level (that is, since *scorching ray* is a 2nd-level spell, the DC to recognize it is 12, even if it's being cast using a 4th-level spell slot). If you're not proficient in Arcana, or if you're of a different class from the caster, you have disadvantage on this check. If you've seen an ally cast it before, you have advantage.
- If your passive Intelligence (Arcana) meets or beats the DC, you recognize the spell instantly. Otherwise, trying to identify the spell costs a reaction—but if you choose to *counterspell* it, you can do so as part of the same reaction.
- If you recognize a spell and are of the same class as the caster, you can also tell what level it's being cast at.

Duergar may be accompanied into battle by one or both of two types of constructs. The **duergar hammerer** is an unlucky duergar imprisoned inside a device whose function is to destroy objects and structures, and that's what it does, without subtlety or complexity. Similarly, the **duergar screamer** is a duergar imprisoned inside a device that amplifies its anguish to rock-piercing intensity. Basically a mobile *thunderwave* spell with a melee attack attached, it rolls directly toward clustered enemies and tries to blast its way through them. If opponents aren't clustered, it rolls toward one at random. Beyond these simple directives, neither hammerers nor screamers possess any target selection criteria, any self-preservation impulse, any ability to adapt, or any independent judgment whatsoever.

MEAZELS (M)

Meazels are, to put it simply, kidnappers. Misanthropic humanoids warped by toxic levels of exposure to the Shadowfell, they skulk through the shadows, throttle their victims with cords, and teleport away with them to some godsforsaken locale where they can murder them free from interference.

With low Strength and low Constitution but very high Dexterity, meazels are not in any way suited to attrition fighting; they want to grab their victims and go. Their high Intelligence and above-average Wisdom mark them as crafty judges of whom they need to jump first. They have proficiency in Perception and Stealth, the classic ambush predator combination, and should always begin combat hidden. Their 120 feet of darkvision suits them to subterranean as well as nocturnal existence.

The core of the meazel's strategy is the Garrote/Shadow Teleport combination. Meazels have two attack actions, Garrote and Shortsword, which deal the same damage on average; however, Shortsword is a straightforward melee weapon attack that just happens to deal some bonus necrotic damage as a rider. Garrote, on the other hand, grapples on a hit and enables the meazel, on a subsequent turn, to Shadow Teleport away along with the grappled victim. For low- to mid-level player characters, this combination is potentially nasty, because the range of Shadow Teleport—500 feet—means the victim of the meazel's maneuver is cut off from allies who might be able to help them. They're on their own, possibly still with a strangling cord around their neck.

There are a few wrinkles to this strategy that a Dungeon Master needs to be mindful of. First, while being able to hide in shadow is almost certain to allow a meazel to surprise its victim, the target must be in darkness as well for the meazel to gain advantage on that first attack. Otherwise, it can't help but reveal itself as soon as it leaps out of the shadows and into the light. They're smart enough to know that taking out targets' light sources would benefit them, but alas, they have no way to do it themselves.

Second, as intelligent shock attackers, meazels want to be sure they can make their initial attacks count. Without advantage, a meazel's +5 attack bonus means it can be reasonably confident of success only against a target with AC 12 or lower. Meazels *really* want advantage on that first attack roll: It gives them a two-thirds or better chance to hit against Armor Classes all the way up to 17.

Third, their own AC is only 13—not difficult to hit. With 35 hp, they can absorb a couple of hits, but taking more than that would put them at real risk. They need to be smart about which targets they take out first, and this depends a great deal on whether they're free agents or working for someone else.

“Working for someone else”? The flavor text in *Mordenkainen's* doesn't say anything about that, only that the remote spots to which meazels spirit their victims away draw opportunistic scavengers such as undead (ghouls, specters, and wraiths seem like particularly likely suspects) and sorrowsworn.

Ah, but the “cursed by shadow” clause of the Shadow Teleport action is irresistibly attractive to a powerful undead or Shadowfellian creature with defensible space to protect—say, Strahd von Zarovich. Are the PCs starting to get under his skin? Have him enlist a gang of meazels to patrol his perimeter, then yonk their victims to designated spots in his castle. For the next hour, if they come anywhere within 300 feet of him, he knows *exactly* where they are.

Meazels on a mission will be encountered in greater numbers than unaffiliated meazels, and there's a strong chance that they'll have some intelligence on the characters they're sent to waylay. Anytime they're sent to abduct someone who wears medium or heavy armor, *two* meazels will go after that character, the second one Garroting the target if the first one fails and Helping to keep the target grappled if it succeeds. If the meazels' target isn't toting a light source, even better: Now they can make two Garrote attacks with advantage if need be.

While Shadow Stealth allows a meazel to take the Hide action in dim light, that's not going to stop a character with darkvision who's staring right at it from seeing it clearly, so meazels need to stay in the darkest areas possible in order to avoid being spotted. If they know that one of their targets has darkvision, they'll go ahead and double-team that target, too, whether they're armored up or not. In fact, as common as darkvision and Armor Classes from 13 to 17 are, it's not unlikely that a group of meazels on a mission will consist of enough to double-team *all* their targets. That's potentially fatal for a group of low-level PCs, but fortunately, low-level PCs aren't likely to draw that kind of negative attention. Save the meazel special ops teams for intermediate-level PCs.

Meazels on a mission try to take out the biggest threats first: targets with darkvision, tough-looking warriors (particularly barbarians, who are hard to hurt), and, interestingly, dragonborn. Why dragonborn? Because meazels have below-average Constitution, and dragonborn have breath weapons. I know everyone likes to paint their dragonborn PCs every color of the rainbow, but canonically, dragonborn all have similar coloration, which means you can't guess which breath weapon they have just by looking at them. If you have no idea whether the breath weapon you're up against is one that's resisted with Dexterity or one that's resisted with Constitution, you have to assume the worst. Also, anyone who deals moderate damage to a meazel (11 damage or greater) in a single round is going to get moved up the threat assessment list and ganged up on.

I haven't yet discussed targets with AC 18 or greater. These are hard targets for meazels: It's difficult to get a garrote on them, and even if one succeeds, these bruisers often have proficiency in Athletics and will break a grapple like snapping a rubber band. Against these opponents, the meazels' strategy is to attack *three* to one and not even bother attempting to garrote them. Here, finally, is where their Shortsword attack comes in (also against slippery types who keep escaping the meazels' garrotes with good Acrobatics rolls).

Someone like Strahd, who mainly wants to split up his enemies and keep tabs on them, is content to allow the meazels to do their work and then get out of the way. But a less refined enemy—say, a lich, a shadow dragon, or a powerful shadar-kai—might command its meazels to drop off their targets in front of other undead or Shadowfellian attackers with higher challenge ratings that can hurt those targets in ways a meazel can't. Or a meazel hit squad might be accompanied by, say, a shadar-kai gloom weaver, which can cast *darkness* and give its meazel allies free run of the battlefield.

Independent meazels, which don't hunt in numbers large enough to overwhelm an entire adventuring party, are more likely to follow the targeting priorities of a predator, going for the easiest prey first—low Armor Class, not too tough-looking, isolated, oblivious—and splicing all their victims away to separate locations. When they've run off with as many targets as they can, they don't stick around to tangle with whoever's left. They keep their garrotes around their targets' necks for as long as possible, then switch to Shortsword attacks if and when their targets get free—or allow other nasties drawn to the spot to finish the job.

A meazel flees when seriously wounded (reduced to 14 hp or fewer). If its Shadow Teleport ability isn't on cooldown, it uses this action to bamf away; otherwise, it first uses the Disengage action (if necessary to get out of melee), then Hides, and finally Dashes.

SEA SPAWN (V)

Sea spawn are humanoids who once lived normal lives but in one way or another have been “lost to the sea”—either by violating some maritime taboo or by falling under the sway of some powerful underwater denizen. Because they can survive out of the water for no more than a day, their transformation dooms them to live the remainder of their lives beneath the waves.

With an ability contour that peaks in Strength and Constitution, sea spawn are straightforward, fairly uncomplicated melee fighters. However, since their Piscine Anatomy allows three variations, you can enliven a sea spawn encounter by throwing a mix of types at your player characters.

Sea spawn have 30 feet of swimming movement vs. 20 feet of normal land movement, a strong incentive for them to fight in water (where they can move twice as fast as a typical humanoid foe) rather than out of it (where they're 33 percent slower). Similarly, their 120 feet of darkvision is a strong incentive for them to attack only at night or in water so deep that sunlight doesn't penetrate.

A sea spawn's Multiattack consists of two Unarmed Strikes plus one Piscine Anatomy attack, which can be a Bite, Poison Quills, or a Tentacle. Bite does straight piercing damage, and not very much of it. Poison Quills deal poison damage

—even less of it—and also have a chance of inflicting the poisoned condition on the sea spawn’s target. But the poisoned condition only offers indirect benefit to the sea spawn: Its target suffers disadvantage on attack rolls and ability checks, but the sea spawn itself doesn’t gain advantage, so the only result is that the target has a harder time fighting back. Also, the saving throw’s Difficulty Class isn’t hard to beat; unless they’ve dumped Constitution, nearly any low-level PC will succeed on their save at least 50 percent of the time.

Tentacle not only deals the most damage, albeit not by much, but also is the only option of the three that offers an actual tactical wrinkle. Since it has a 10-foot reach, a sea spawn can engage its target from that distance, and if its attack hits, the target is grappled, meaning it can’t come any closer to the sea spawn and therefore may not be able to fight back. Inconveniently, however, this longer reach doesn’t apply to the sea spawn’s Unarmed Strike. Consequently, if it remains at this distance, it has to forfeit two-thirds of its Multiattack.

Can the sea spawn at least make a judgment call about when it’s better to remain at tentacle’s length from its foe vs. when it’s better to close in and pummel? Not with Intelligence 6, it can’t. It has one approach to combat and mechanistically follows that approach whether it’s working or not. Nor does it have the Wisdom to judge which of its targets needs most to be grappled. Therefore, we have to assume that it fights the same way as its fellows, moving in close enough to use all its attacks. However, let’s give it the benefit of the doubt about two things: First, when its opponent tries to run away, rather than strike back immediately with an Unarmed Strike, this sea spawn variant waits for it to try to move more than 10 feet away, then lashes out with a Tentacle and tries to stop it in its tracks. Since Tentacle deals an average of 6 damage on a hit, vs. Unarmed Strike’s 4, this is a smarter move anyway—even if the target succeeds on its saving throw and eludes the grapple (again, not hard to do). Second, if it’s in the water, it knows it may be able to haul its target in with it.

Plus, sea spawn can have a *combination* of Piscine Anatomy traits and choose which one to use on any given turn. Thus, a sea spawn might choose to use Poison Quills most of the time during combat but switch to Tentacle when a foe retreats, or it might choose Poison Quills when its opponent isn’t poisoned and Tentacle the rest of the time. (This last heuristic may be a bit too sophisticated for a standard Intelligence 6 sea spawn, though. Maybe save it for an “elite” sea spawn that’s a cut above the rest.)

Based on their origins, one might reasonably argue that sea spawn would have little self-preservation instinct and would fight to the death, but I think their Wisdom 10 indicates otherwise. However, there’s nothing to suggest that they’re unusually attached to their lives, either, so we’ll stick with the usual criterion of serious injury (12 hp or fewer) for deciding to flee. They’re not smart or disciplined enough to Disengage, and with their low Armor Class, Dodging doesn’t provide enough benefit, so they Dash away, diving back into the water at the earliest opportunity if they’re not already in it.

GOBLINS AND HOBGOBLINS (V)

Volo’s examines goblin behavior and social structure in depth but doesn’t offer much new information on how they fight. There’s a greater emphasis on traps, suggesting that encounters between player characters and goblins not led by more formidable goblinoids should often begin with the PCs walking into one of the goblins’ traps (or avoiding them in the nick of time). The “Goblin Lairs” section provides a nice scaffold for building a series of goblin encounters on if the PCs decide to go hunting goblins themselves, rather than vice versa. However, the basic ambush principle that I laid out in *The Monsters Know What They’re Doing* (15–19) holds.

The one truly new thing, from a tactical perspective, is the **booyahg booyahg booyahg**, the rare goblin gifted with magical ability. Of course, the goblin has little *control* over this ability: Although it uses the mage stat block, supplemented by darkvision and Nimble Escape, it’s actually a wild magic sorcerer, with a wild magic surge accompanying every spell it casts, *including cantrips*.

It turns out that the basic principles of mage combat—always have a way to escape, avoid taking damage, do the greatest damage to the most enemies with each spell—suit goblins well. However, there is one significant difference: Goblins, lacking a trained wizard’s intelligence, may not fully appreciate the value of *mage armor*. Their understanding of combat revolves around being nimble and stealthy and doing damage from a distance. “Defense,” to them, means dodging or running away; making oneself more *durable* is an abstraction that may escape them. (Then again, they might conceive of it as “dodging magic.” You can play them either way.) Other than that, the mage’s combat heuristic works nicely for a booyahg booyahg booyahg. And, of course, the wild magic surges should be played for maximum comedy.

Volo's introduces two new varieties of hobgoblin: the hobgoblin Devastator, a battle wizard, and the hobgoblin Iron Shadow, a rogue-monk-mage. Based on the flavor text descriptions of these hobgoblin variants, I posit that Devastators are most often encountered on the battlefield amid other hobgoblins, whereas an Iron Shadow is typically encountered alone or as part of a small strike team.

Like ordinary hobgoblins, **hobgoblin Devastators** are strong across all their physical attributes, with none standing dramatically apart from the others, although Constitution is the highest of them. What sets Devastators apart is their very high Intelligence and above-average Wisdom. These scores indicate that a Devastator can accurately assess enemies' weaknesses and select targets accordingly, as well as recognize when it's outmatched.

Army Arcana is a handy feature akin to an evocation wizard's Sculpt Spells or a sorcerer's Careful Spell, letting the hobgoblin Devastator lob area-effect spells without regard to whether it has allies in the area of effect. Arcane Advantage, meanwhile, gives the Devastator an extra 2d6 damage on ranged spell attacks against front-line enemies (note that this does *not* apply to spells that require saving throws, only to those that require attack rolls).

So let's look at what spells it has available:

- *Ice storm* is the Devastator's sole 4th-level spell and therefore the only thing it will spend its one and only 4th-level spell slot on. It deals 2d8 bludgeoning and 4d6 cold damage on a failed Dexterity save, half on a successful save, in an area of effect that can be expected to include four opponents, for a total of 69 expected damage.
- *Fireball* deals 8d6 fire damage on a failed Dex save, half on a success, also in an area of effect that can be expected to include four opponents, for a total of 84 expected damage! Why is this only a 3rd-level spell when *ice storm* is a 4th-level spell? Probably because *ice storm* has the additional effect of slowing movement. In any event, there's no need to boost *fireball* to 4th level, because it's potent enough already.
- *Lightning bolt* deals 8d6 lightning damage on a failed Dex save, half on a success, in a straight line. When the Devastator's opponents are aligned just so, this can zap as many as four of them, but most of the time, you can't assume it will hit more than two, so this spell is more situational than *fireball*.
- *Fly* does what it says on the can. It's mainly useful when the Devastator is being charged by a formidable melee attacker. Otherwise, it just lifts the Devastator out from behind its front line, making it an easier target.
- *Gust of wind* can be used tactically to force enemies back from a choke point, allowing the Devastator's allies either to hold the point or to charge through it. It's also a useful countermeasure against *fog cloud* or *cloudkill*. Situational, but darned handy in those particular situations.
- *Melf's acid arrow* and *scorching ray* are the perfect spells to complement Arcane Advantage. *Scorching ray* deals *double* its usual $3 \times 2d6$ fire damage (21 on average, 42 doubled) when aimed at a foe within 5 feet of one of the Devastator's allies. Boosting it to 3rd level deals only an extra 2d6 damage, plus another 2d6 for Arcane advantage, for a total of 56 damage if every ray hits—and against AC 15, its chance to hit is only 55 percent—so it's still not quite in the league of *fireball*. On the other hand, I've calculated the expected damage of *fireball* based on its hitting four targets. What about the effect on just one? If *scorching ray* is focused against a *single* target, it's as good as *fireball* even unboosted, and boosting it increases its potential damage by 33 percent. So while *fireball* is the obvious go-to against clustered enemies, *scorching ray* moves front and center when it's more important to hit *one* enemy hard, and may even be worth boosting if the Devastator's enemies obviously aren't going to group up. *Melf's acid arrow* lacks *scorching ray*'s flexibility but is competitive with it in terms of damage to a single target, being the rare attack spell that deals half damage on a miss. The damage is also less variable, and fewer creatures are resistant to acid damage than to fire damage.
- *Fog cloud* simultaneously blinds every combatant in its area of effect, granting both advantage and disadvantage on every attack and therefore nullifying both advantage and disadvantage from any source, as well as precluding opportunity attacks and spells requiring visible targets. The primary purpose of this spell is to cover a retreat when the Devastator deems it necessary. In fact, if we think of the smart Devastator as a shot caller for its unit, its casting *fog cloud* could be a signal to its allies that it's time to retreat. However, on an aggressively leveled playing field where it's impossible to get a leg up, hobgoblins' Martial Advantage makes them particularly strong damage dealers, so the Devastator may also cast this spell to support a phalanx of fellow hobs pushing forward together, carving through everyone and everything in their path.

- *Magic missile* is what the hobgoblin Devastator turns to when it's out of higher-level spell slots. Even boosted, it can't hold a candle to *scorching ray*. Actually, if the Devastator is reduced to casting *magic missile*, it probably should have cast *fog cloud* and signaled a retreat already. Either that, or the battle's just taken longer than expected, and the Devastator is using it to pick off stragglers.
- *Thunderwave* is the "go away" spell for when a spellcaster is sacked by two or more enemies. A hobgoblin uses it only if it no longer has access to *gust of wind* or *fly*.
- *Fire bolt*, *ray of frost*, and *shocking grasp* are damaging cantrips that a hobgoblin Devastator can make hay out of thanks to Arcane Advantage: *Fire bolt* can deal 2d10 + 2d6 damage (18 expected damage) against a target who's within 5 feet of an ally of the Devastator, *ray of frost* can deal 2d8 + 2d6 damage (16 expected damage) and slow it, and *shocking grasp* can deal 2d8 + 2d6 damage and suppress opportunity attacks. (*Acid splash*, since it requires a Dex save instead of a spell attack roll, doesn't benefit from Arcane Advantage.)

So we see that the hobgoblin Devastator is equipped to handle a variety of battlefield situations. Against strong clustered enemies, *fireball* is the first choice; against clustered enemies whom the hobgoblins need to slow down, *ice storm* is a satisfactory alternative. If one enemy stands out as more threatening than the rest, and if that enemy isn't armored head to toe, *scorching ray* focuses fire (literally) on that enemy. *Fog cloud* both signals and covers a retreat; alternatively, it can cloak a line of allies pushing forward through clustered weaker foes. *Gust of wind* dispels an enemy *fog cloud* when the hobgoblins aren't ready to give up yet, neutralizes *cloudkill*, and is good for both attack and defense of chokepoints. If the Devastator is charged by a melee opponent, it can repel that opponent with *gust of wind* or *thunderwave*, slip away with *fly*, or go ahead and take the melee opponent on with *shocking grasp*. The only spell the Devastator is likely to boost is *scorching ray*, and only if the need to focus down a single opponent significantly outweighs the likelihood that multiple opponents will cluster within the radius of a *fireball*.

The only reason for a hobgoblin Devastator ever to resort to using its quarterstaff to attack (which it does two-handed) is if it's under the effect of a *silence* spell it can't simply walk out of and therefore unable to cast. In any other situation, there's nothing the staff can do that one of its cantrips can't do better.

A hobgoblin Devastator is seriously injured when it's reduced to 18 hp or fewer. At that point, it gives the signal to retreat, if it hasn't done so already.

The **hobgoblin Iron Shadow** is also a tough, shrewd opponent with strong stats across the board. Its Dexterity being slightly higher than its Constitution, and its Constitution slightly higher than its Strength, it leans toward a skirmishing style of combat. This is consistent with its proficiency in Acrobatics, Athletics, and Stealth and its Shadow Jaunt feature. Speaking of Shadow Jaunt, the fact that it's limited to use in dim light or darkness, combined with the Iron Shadow's darkvision, strongly suggests that the hob-ninja chooses to operate only at night.

The fact that the Iron Shadow's Multiattack lets it make *four* attacks, either ranged or melee, in any combination and in any order, *and* use Shadow Jaunt once at any point in the sequence means it's capable of some crazy stunts, including creating the illusion of being two separate attackers (Dart/Dart/Shadow Jaunt/Dart/Dart). Also, think in three dimensions: Shadow Jaunt allows the Iron Shadow to teleport *up* onto a cavern ledge or into the rafters of a dimly lit, high-ceilinged room.

What else can a hobgoblin Iron Shadow do?

- *Charm person* is the classic opponent-neutralizing whammy, good for when the Iron Shadow is spotted on the job by a single snoop.
- *Disguise self* is handy for preventing the aforementioned circumstance. In particular, it's handy for disguising the hobgoblin Iron Shadow as some other kind of humanoid, depending on who else is around.
- *Expeditious retreat* is so useful—granting Dash as a bonus action for as long as the spell is sustained, an invaluable addition to the Iron Shadow's action economy—that, almost without exception, it casts it as a bonus action during the first round of combat and keeps it going as long as it can. Now look at what the Iron Shadow can do with Multiattack and Shadow Jaunt: full move, Dart, Dart, Shadow Jaunt, Dart, Dart, *full move again*. And I haven't mentioned yet that the Iron Shadow has a base movement speed of 40 feet. This combo—and the same elements combined in other orders—represents the full maximization of what the Iron Shadow can do in a single turn.

- *Silent image* is useful, first and foremost, as bait. The lack of an auditory component makes it unconvincing for any other purpose.
- *Minor illusion* is more useful, because especially in the dark, a sound you can't see is more believable than an image you can't hear. Good for voice-throwing and other decoy purposes.
- *Prestidigitation* is rarely useful in combat. Do not take the Iron Shadow for some conjurer of cheap tricks.
- *True strike* is *slightly* less useless than usual, only because (since it has no verbal component) it can be cast from hiding without giving away the Iron Shadow's position, giving it advantage on *one* attack roll in its next round. It's got to be in the next round, because the Iron Shadow isn't going to sustain *true strike* for longer than that, not when it could be sustaining *expeditious retreat*. And it should probably be the *second* attack, because the Iron Shadow already gains advantage on the first one by attacking from hiding. Still, the opportunity cost of *true strike* is substantial, since the Iron Shadow could be using the same action to Multiattack instead.

It's unfortunate that the Iron Shadow has proficiency in Athletics but that grappling and shoving aren't options included in its Multiattack. Instead, a grapple or shove has to take the place of the *entire* Multiattack action. Similarly, since Shadow Jaunt takes a full action when not used as part of that Multiattack, it's impossible to combine it with a grappling or shoving attack.

However, an Iron Shadow sustaining *expeditious retreat* can hide within reach of a target (maybe it used Shadow Jaunt to get there the round before), grapple (action), then use its full movement, plus Dash (bonus action), to drag its grappled opponent a full 40 feet! That's good to know if your Iron Shadow is on a kidnapping mission.

Speaking in general, though, assuming that the Iron Shadow is relying on the combination of Multiattack (including Shadow Jaunt) and *expeditious retreat* to maximize its effectiveness, how's it going to put this combo to use?

First, assume the Iron Shadow knows the lay of the land. It chooses its ground, and wherever it's decided the battle will take place, it knows its hiding places—places that will be in darkness or shadow, whence and whither it can teleport using Shadow Jaunt. Assume that, whenever possible, the Iron Shadow wants to end its turn out of its enemies' view, so that they're denied the effective use of their own turns.

Second, it knows its own weakness: Generally, its susceptibility to area-effect spells, and specifically, its merely average Charisma. The most likely spell its opponents may cast that targets this attribute is *bane*, and that's castable by bards, clerics, and paladins. But paladins are likely to be armored up like a Brink's truck—not really good targets for darts and unarmed strikes, even with +5 to hit. Also, clerics tend to have high Wisdom, meaning high Perception, meaning high chance of spotting the hob-ninja darting around in the shadows. So the Iron Shadow targets clerics first—especially clerics of races that possess darkvision themselves. Secondly, it goes after bards and other spellcasters, along with other enemies with darkvision. Once it's taken out those who pose the greatest threats to it, it shifts its focus to whichever foes stand most directly between it and the object of its mission.

Third, the Iron Shadow's Unarmed Strike doesn't stack up well against its Dart attack, for one simple reason: A melee attack, followed by running away, invites an opportunity attack. The Iron Shadow's whole modus operandi revolves around never giving the enemy a chance to fight back, so it doesn't use Unarmed Strike unless it absolutely has to. When does it have to? When its target or targets are in full cover and can't be reached any other way, when it has a target grappled and wants to attack it without letting go, or when another melee attacker has managed to close with it—and in any of those cases, it uses all its melee attacks, then ends its turn with Shadow Jaunt, if it can, in order to slip away.

Incidentally, while those attacks seem quite weak, consider that they have a 55 percent chance to hit against AC 15, and there are *four* of them, each with a +3 damage modifier, for a total of 12 expected damage per round. That's not a lot against mid-level adventurers, but against low-level ones, it is a lot, especially if the Iron Shadow can avoid being hit.

The hobgoblin Iron Shadow is seriously wounded upon being reduced to 12 hp or fewer, and at that point, it doesn't mess around: It Shadow Jaunts if it can (as the tail end of a Multiattack if it has a chance of finishing its opponent off this way), Disengages otherwise, then flees the scene by the fastest possible route, still using *expeditious retreat*.

YUAN-TI

See [page 192](#).

DEEP SCIONS (v)

Technically a humanoid but giving off serious aberration vibes, the **deep scion** is the product of a pact with a great undersea power—one made under duress, at the point of drowning, so the terms aren't nearly as favorable as those granted to warlocks. Not only transformed but brainwashed as well, the deep scion can take the form of its previous self, but it no longer considers its previous self to be its true self; that identity is lost.

Deep scions have two forms, "humanoid" and "hybrid." The hybrid form is its "true" form, having humanoid torso, legs, and arms but crustacean claws, tentacles (non-prehensile) emerging from its head, and a mouth that *dear God what is that thing?* In its humanoid form, it moves at a humanoid-typical 30 feet on land and, like other landbound creatures, swims at only half that speed. In its hybrid form, its walking speed is 20 feet, but its swimming speed is 40 feet. If it can, a deep scion maximizes its movement by using its Shapechanger action in the middle of the turn in which it travels from land to water or vice versa, taking this action at the moment it reaches the shoreline. This way, even if it's used its full walking movement to reach water, once it transforms, it still has another 10 feet of swimming movement left to go, and if it's used 10 feet of swimming movement or less to reach land, it can transform and enjoy an extra 10 feet of walking movement.

In combat, deep scions are pure brutes, with exceptional Strength and very high Constitution. However, their expertise in Deception makes this skill as formidable a weapon in social encounters as their battleaxes are in melee. They also have proficiency in Insight, Sleight of Hand, and Stealth. Deep scions are spies as well as warriors; they fight only when their cover is blown. As I've said before, it's easier to punch someone after fooling them has failed than it is to fool them after punching them has failed.

They have 120 feet of darkvision, which is useful not only for skulking around at night but also in the watery depths where sunlight doesn't penetrate. These two backdrops—nighttime and underwater—are the deep scion's preferred combat settings. If confronted on land during daylight hours, it runs full tilt toward the nearest body of water to make its escape. It doesn't cover its escape by turning hybrid, then issuing a Psychic Screech: The two full actions this operation takes is too much of a delay.

In water, on the other hand, Psychic Screech is the first action a deep scion takes in combat. It's a once-per-encounter ability, and there's no reason not to use it right away, against as many enemies as possible. Thus, if it isn't within 30 feet of all its foes already, a deep scion first moves toward them until it has as many opponents within range as possible, then uses Psychic Screech.

After issuing its screech, the deep scion closes with an opponent and starts mauling. Ideally, it would like to attack a stunned opponent for advantage on its rolls; however, it's likely that in the intervening turns between its Psychic Screech and its next action, a non-stunned opponent will close in and engage it. That can't be helped, unfortunately. If an enemy engages, the deep scion simply has to slug it out. At least in the water, its enemies will have disadvantage on all but a handful of weapon attacks.

From the flavor text, I get the distinct impression that the writers meant for deep scions to work solo, and they didn't consider the effects of Psychic Screech on other deep scions. While it seems to me that deep scions' screeches shouldn't affect other deep scions, if you're running a group of them and need to sidestep this issue, make sure that they're in a ring around the PCs and all more than 30 feet from one another. The necessary radius for that ring is 20 feet for two or three deep scions, $5 \times (n + 1)$ feet for any greater number.

An oddity about the deep scion is that it's a suitable boss enemy only for low-level adventurers, who aren't likely to have obtained the kind of magic necessary to breathe underwater and consequently may not even be able to pursue it if it dives and swims away. They can hold their breath and dive in after it, but this puts a cap on how long they can fight and how far they can go. Nevertheless, except at night, combat on land is much less desirable for the deep scion: Although it can do almost as much damage with two Battleaxe strikes as it can with one Bite and two Claw attacks, its foes won't be saddled with the disadvantages of fighting underwater. At least in darkness, its darkvision gives it a small edge over opponents without it.

If a deep scion faces off against PCs who are more experienced than level 3, it's going to realize fairly quickly (after being only moderately wounded—reduced to 46 hp or fewer) that it's outmatched, and it will try to strike a deal to get out of the situation. It has no intention of adhering to any such deal, but with its proficiency in Insight, it can make a good educated guess about what the PCs want and offer it to them in exchange for its freedom, and with its expertise in Deception, it can

make its case convincingly. Against a party of level 2 or 3 PCs, it fights until it's seriously wounded (reduced to 26 hp or fewer) before Disengaging, then Dashing off into the deep.

GIFF (M)

After eagles, cats, crows, cattle, lizards, snakes, frogs, hyenas, and more frogs, I'd have expected the next animal-headed humanoid in line to be... well, not hippos. But the **giff**—space-traveling soldiers for hire, dressed like they came to the convention to play Diplomacy rather than D&D—have their place in the succession locked in, having been around since the second edition Spelljammer campaign setting.

Giff physical ability scores are formidable—exceptional Strength, very high Constitution, high Dexterity—but their mental abilities are modestly above average as well. Even if they don't personally have a head for strategy, their training and discipline give them a bit more ability to plan, coordinate, and adapt than they'd have otherwise, as long as they're fighting primarily or exclusively alongside other giff. They choose their targets carefully and can tell a winning battle from a losing one, but their sense of honor and valor supersedes their sense of self-preservation. The giff's reputation for absolute dependability and bravery is essential to the continuation of their stratocratic society, and the survival of the people outweighs the survival of the person.

Their Strength and Con scream “melee brute”; their Dex is significantly lower, and in fact, their to-hit modifier on their guns is +4, vs. +6 on their Longsword attack. Given that they're better melee fighters than ranged fighters, shouldn't they favor that type of attack—doubly so, given the poor range on their guns?

I'm going to posit that giff use their muskets only when a squad of them is defending a position. One musket alone isn't all that deadly, but a bunch of them all firing at once are a deterrent. Against high-level front-line fighters with AC 20, eight to twelve musket-wielding giff deal a total of only 4 to 6 expected damage from 41 to 120 feet away, but at 40 feet or closer, that total increases to 17 to 26 expected damage.^{III} As trained soldiers, they know to fire from behind ample cover—three-quarters, at least—so their own effective Armor Class is no less than 21. Also, while their targets are more than 40 feet away, they take their shots while lying prone, because it imposes disadvantage on their opponents' attacks and doesn't impose any *more* disadvantage on their own. When their opponents come within that range, they stand up and keep shooting.

Then again, since their Multiattack allows them to make two Pistol attacks per action, why should they bother with muskets at all? Doubling the number of attacks more than makes up for the difference between rolling a d12 and rolling a d10. It doesn't make up for the difference between rolling without disadvantage and rolling with, however—not unless they're shooting at a target with AC 15 or less—so at a distance of between 30 and 40 feet, they should definitely stick with the musket. I think this is a decent argument for using Musket at any distance that would be long range for Pistol—at those distances, they're really trying to drive their enemies off, not necessarily to kill them—then switching to their Pistol/Pistol Multiattack once their foes are within 30 feet. If the giff are behind a wall, their opponents won't be able to get within 5 feet of them, so they won't suffer disadvantage from attacking with a ranged weapon at melee range.

In addition to their guns, they have one Fragmentation Grenade each, which they use to hinder their opponents' approach even further (if they're not inside some kind of fortification that prevents them from doing so), throwing one per round into the center of their opponents' formation as long as the most distant of those opponents is less than 80 feet away.

If the giff are on offense, they march forward, sword in one hand, pistol in the other. At a distance of more than 30 feet, they have disadvantage on their Pistol shots, but this fact isn't such a problem if they're shooting at a target with AC 15 or less—taking two shots with disadvantage, their chances of hitting are still as good as or better than their chances of hitting just one shot without disadvantage. (How do they know their target's Armor Class? They're soldiers, cradle to grave. They know.) If its chosen target has AC 16 or greater and isn't behind impenetrable cover, a giff between 30 and 60 feet from its target lobs a Fragmentation Grenade behind them, where their cover won't help them on the Dexterity saving throw.

Once giff are 20 to 30 feet from their targets, if there's no obstacle in the way, they holster their pistols (free interaction) and launch into a Headfirst Charge (movement), hoping to knock their targets down. Whether or not they succeed in knocking their foes prone, they then draw their longswords, attack two-handed (action), and remain engaged in melee until their opponents go down or they do. If they don't have a clear, straight path, they Multiattack with their pistols and try to reposition themselves so that they do have one, as well as the most cover they can give themselves in the present terrain. Giff also switch to Longsword if necessary to break through a front line in order to get close enough to a back-line target.

Giff are trained to assess threats, and they know whom to take out first: Bards are a biggie, along with Enchanter and Illusionist wizards and Trickery clerics, whose magic targets the mental attributes in which giff score lower. Next come Abjurer and Evoker wizards, whose magic provides defense and direct damage; rogues, whose irksome maneuvers could disrupt the giff's disciplined advance; and barbarians, who require significantly more effort to take down. Those are followed by other spellcasters, along with rangers using anti-horde features, and everyone else comes last.

Giff are mission-minded and don't deviate from their objectives. If they're charged with taking ground, they take it; if they're charged with holding ground, they hold it. A raid, an ambush, a blockade, an evacuation, a capture mission, a search-and-rescue—it doesn't matter. They do what they need to do in order to achieve their goal, and then they stop. They'll even have a cordial chat with you afterward. None of it's personal to them. It's professional. An enemy who surrenders to them is courteously taken prisoner, treated with dignity, and released when there's no longer any chance that they can interfere. As long as you're in their way, however, they *will* frag you.

Individual giff don't flee, no matter how badly injured they are. However, a squad of giff may retreat as a unit if it's clear that they're going to be routed; they won't simply let themselves be wiped out. They make this decision after the second round of combat. Seriously injured giff (reduced to 24 hp or fewer) retreat first, Disengaging if they're engaged in melee, Dodging otherwise; then moderately injured giff (reduced to 42 hp or fewer); then, finally, lightly injured or uninjured giff. While more wounded giff retreat, less wounded ones keep fighting as a rear guard until their allies are clear. Retreating giff don't Dash. That would suggest fear.

Using the guidelines in "Combat Encounter Difficulty" (*Dungeon Master's Guide*, chapter 3), giff stand their ground or press their attack if the encounter is Hard or Deadly for the PCs, but if it's Easy, they cede their ground or abort their attack quickly, in order to keep their unit intact and in fighting shape. Attacking giff will call off their assault in a Medium encounter, but defending giff valiantly hold out to the bitter end.

COMBINING MONSTERS

In writing these analyses, my approach is generally to look at monsters in isolation. But what about when they're fighting alongside different monsters—for example, in a combined unit of hobgoblins, goblins, and wolves? Do their tactics change?

Not significantly. Wolves haven't evolved to be hobgoblins' sidekicks. They've evolved to be *wolves*. But if the monster in charge is of above-average Intelligence—as hobgoblin captains and warlords are—it has the sense to take advantage of how these creatures behave to begin with and to look for ways in which they might synergize, then adapt its own behavior accordingly.

A sound approach is to begin with the monster with the lowest Intelligence and work your way up, breaking ties using challenge rating as a proxy for rank. In this example, that means asking three questions:

- How do the wolves fight?
- How do the hobgoblins command the goblins to fight in concert with the wolves?
- How do the hobgoblins themselves fight, given how the goblins and wolves fight?

Note the shift between the first and second questions, which reflects the difference between monsters that are capable only of following their instincts and ones that are capable of understanding and following orders.

Wolves, by their nature, are pack hunters with a shock attacker profile and the skills to ambush prey. This suits them to a stealthy approach followed by a hard and fast melee strike.

Goblins, by their nature, are hit-and-run ranged attackers. They're small enough that they can ride wolves as mounts, effectively increasing their speed from 30 feet to 40 feet; in difficult terrain, such as dense forest, this can make the difference between reaching cover and not reaching it.

The supplementary material on goblins in *Volo's* posits that goblins under the command of hobgoblins suddenly develop discipline and deference, allowing their hobgoblin commanders to fight at the front rather than from the rear. I'm skeptical; maybe they show discipline when the hobgoblins are watching, but when the hobgoblins aren't watching, I think they probably go back to being gobliny.

Still, this dilemma presents two different attack strategies, both valid and effective. If the goblins can be relied on to fight with discipline, then after softening their targets up with a discharge of arrows, they can ride forth on wolfback, allowing their wolf mounts to act independently, and attack with their scimitars. Once the wolves themselves engage—gaining Pack Tactics advantage from their own riders!—the goblins have the option of dismounting, then using their Nimble Escape bonus actions to Disengage, slipping back to a safe distance after attacking while the wolves continue to maul their targets. If the goblins won't have anything to do with melee, they can stay behind and continue to snipe while the wolves charge forward as a pack toward their weakened foes.

Ideally, the hobgoblins would like to be able to charge forward with the goblins in order to use Martial Advantage to deal extra damage. This tactic also has the benefit of letting the hobgoblins provide Pack Tactics advantage to the wolves, so that the goblins can run around and cause trouble at will. But if the goblins shy away from melee engagement, the hobgoblins hang back and provide archery support alongside them. The wolves can still handle the melee assault. Alternatively, if there are enough hobgoblins, some can advance while others (including the unit's commander) stay behind to keep an eye on the goblins.

How do you choose which monsters to combine? Think about what features integrate well as force multipliers, but also think about natural affinities such as type (e.g., fiend) and tag (e.g., devil), alignment, religious affiliation, and environmental adaptations.

What kinds of creatures might be encountered alongside, say, a white dragon? It dwells at a high latitude and/or altitude, so adaptation to cold is helpful. The fog around the lair obscures visibility, so creatures with Keen Hearing or Keen Smell make good minions. Just those two factors establish a solid foundation. White guard drakes are obviously appropriate watchbeasts for a white dragon, with resistance to cold damage and

proficiency in Perception to mitigate the fog penalty. Winter wolves have proficiency in both Perception and Stealth, plus Keen Hearing and Smell, plus Snow Camouflage, which gives them advantage on Stealth checks in snowy terrain, giving them a decided advantage over PCs. They're also immune to cold damage. The region around a white dragon's lair is a perfect winter wolf hunting ground; they'd naturally migrate to such an area. Yetis have the same set of traits as winter wolves, minus Keen Hearing. Ice mephits might colonize the dragon's lair, like elemental cockroaches. Malicious little opportunists, they can show up on the fringe of a fight, adding insult to injury.

How about an efreet? Efreets are genies, which in fifth edition D&D are categorized as elementals, so other fiery elementals make natural minions. The most obvious choice is the salamander. The *Monster Manual* flavor text alludes to the enslavement of salamanders by efreet; additionally, their traits and features synergize to allow interesting tactics. Fire elementals are also suitable minions for an efreet. Magma and smoke mephits can play the same opportunistic nuisance role described above, as can magmins.

Let's go a little deeper. Salamanders are shock attackers. Fire elementals are skirmishers. What have we got that can play the role of a front-line or long-range attacker in the service of an efreet? Not azers, because they have a history with efreet and want nothing to do with them. What about genasi? As a PC race from the *Elemental Evil Player's Companion* (downloadable for free from Wizards of the Coast's Dungeons & Dragons website, dnd.wizards.com), they can be overlaid onto any NPC archetype you like. Need a front-line fighter? Add a fire genasi knight, veteran, or gladiator—or, for an elite lieutenant baddie, a blackguard or champion. Some ranged attackers? Fire genasi archers. Or, for another elite lieutenant, a fire genasi assassin.

Combine, say, 60 percent fire genasi front-liners, 30 percent salamanders, and 10 percent fire genasi ranged attackers (a typical ratio of infantry, cavalry, and archers in a medieval army), tuned to the level of your PCs' party. Throw in some mephits taking potshots at distracted PCs, just to make them tear their hair out. Now you've got a fight that will be just as memorable as the boss fight that follows it.

SHADAR-KAI (M)

If eladrin are the elf-kin with the strongest remaining connection to the Feywild, shadar-kai are those whose nature has been shaped by the grim Shadowfell. Three types are described in *Mordenkainen's*: the shadow dancer, gloom weaver, and soul monger.

Shadow dancers are shock troops optimized for operations in darkness. They can function in dim light, but bright light hobbles them severely, so they'll never willingly choose to fight in daylight or comparable illumination. Dexterity is their one outstanding ability, which they rely on for both offense and defense, and they're proficient in Stealth, predisposing them to ambush.

Although they're tough, their stat block is short, not especially complex, and mostly passive. Their two standout features are Shadow Jump and Spiked Chain (which they can use three times as a Multiattack action).

Shadow Jump is a mobility feature and action economy enhancer that lets shadow dancers teleport from one dark or dimly lit point to another up to 30 feet away. Depending on the environment and the positioning of combatants, they can use this trait either to engage in melee or to disengage from it. Shadow Jumping to engage is a more desirable tactic when fighting in total darkness, as we'll see in a moment.

Spiked Chain is a melee attack with a 10-foot reach and a few different riders that can be invoked if the target fails a Dexterity saving throw. The first option grapples and restrains the target (a shadow dancer can entrap only one target this way at a time), the second knocks it prone, and the third deals a heap of necrotic damage.

The most effective way to use these options begins with grappling. Restraining the target confers advantage on subsequent attack rolls as well as disadvantage on Dex saves, so if the shadow dancer initially uses Spiked Chain to grapple and the target fails their save, its chances of knocking the target prone or dealing the necrotic damage become significantly better. A shadow dancer always chooses the grappling option if it lands a hit on the first attack of its Multiattack.

Once the target is already restrained, however, knocking them prone is a bit redundant. Combining the *grappled* and prone conditions can be very effective, since the fact that being grappled reduces the target's speed to 0 makes it impossible for them to get up again. But the prone condition doesn't offer anything that the restrained condition doesn't—in fact, it offers the target a small measure of protection against ranged attacks. The only reason for the shadow dancer to choose the proning option over the necrotic damage option against a restrained target is if the target has a strong chance of escaping from the grapple, so that even if it does, it's still on the ground and has to spend movement to get up. Unfortunately for the shadow dancer, its Intelligence and Wisdom aren't high enough for it to have any criterion for judging a target's likelihood of escape beyond “looks strong” or “looks spry.”

The best possible outcome for the shadow dancer occurs when it lands hits on every one of its three attacks, its target fails all three Dex saves, and it chooses the grapple option the first time and the necrotic damage option the second and third. The value of the grapple option declines significantly relative to the value of the necrotic damage option if either the shadow dancer misses on its first attack or its target makes that save. Even if its second attack hits and the target fails their save, the fact that the shadow dancer didn't get to apply a rider on the first attack makes it more likely that it won't get to apply one on the third, despite the advantage of having a restrained target. Thus, it becomes preferable to go for the sure thing—the necrotic damage—on both the second attack and the third, unless the target looks like someone who only succeeds on Dexterity saves by dumb luck. (If the shadow dancer has many non-shadow-dancer allies on the field, it may go for the grapple anyway so that *they* gain advantage on their attack rolls.)

If the shadow dancer has advantage on the first of its three attacks, its total expected damage increases by roughly 50 percent, so starting its turn hidden is important. At the outset of combat, it can use its Stealth proficiency to make its first attack while unseen, but once combat is under way, it needs to attack from darkness as much as possible—and even this doesn't help it against targets with darkvision. To avoid being spotted by them, a shadow dancer has to spend actions (and thus turns) Hiding, which is simply too slow. Therefore, opponents with darkvision are to be taken out in the initial ambush if possible.

If you use facing (*Dungeon Master's Guide*, chapter 8, “Optional Rule: Facing”), you can give the shadow dancer a little more leeway, allowing it to Shadow Jump beyond a target's peripheral vision and gain advantage if and only if it can win a Stealth-vs.-passive Perception contest to avoid being seen and heard before immediately attacking (akin to how I treat phase spiders' Ethereal Jaunt in *The Monsters Know What They're Doing*). If you play it this way, to be fair, the shadow dancer mustn't do *anything* between Shadow Jumping and attacking—no movement, not even a free interaction. And

even so, it's gaining its unseen-attacker advantage from positioning, not from obscurity; as soon as it attacks, its darkvision-enabled target sees it.

Shadow dancers' reach and ability to grapple give them a strong incentive always to attack from 10 feet away, so that their grappled targets can't even reach them without a long weapon. Unseen attacker advantage gives them an incentive to attack from darkness, and Shadow Jump gives them a way to place themselves in such a spot just before attacking. Therefore, if a shadow dancer needs to use Shadow Jump at the start of its turn to reach its desired target, it does. But if it doesn't use it at the start of its turn, it may also use it at the end—say, after a particularly successful Multiattack that allows it to move on to its next target.

Most of this analysis assumes that shadow dancers are fighting alone, or alongside other shadow dancers. In mixed company, they fight the same way as long as they're taking the lead. If they're fighting in more of a supporting role, though, they deploy their Spiked Chains in service of their allies' needs—which could result in such madcap sequences as using Spiked Chain to knock one melee-engaged enemy prone, then another, then to grapple a third, Shadow Jumping and moving normally in between to travel from foe to foe.

Gloom weavers, with their exceptional Dexterity and Charisma, are spellcasters—specifically, according to the mechanics of their spellcasting, warlocks with some bonus Innate Spellcasting. A curious synergy between two of their features, Burden of Time and Misty Escape, makes them willing and able to get closer to their enemies than spellslingers normally prefer to be: Burden of Time gives them an incentive to allow foes to approach within 10 feet, while Misty Escape lets them turn invisible and teleport away as a reaction once after taking damage.

They have two sets of spells: their innate set, which are all cast at their base level, and their pact magic set, which are cast at 5th level (except for the cantrips, of course).

INNATE SPELLS

- *Arcane gate* sets up a teleportation portal with a 500-foot range which is persistent and lasts for up to 10 minutes, with concentration. It's not a subtle spell, and not as useful for a quick getaway as *dimension door* or *plane shift*, since enemies can jump through the portals as well. As a method of initiating combat, it does allow a large squad to storm in at once, but its conspicuousness forfeits any element of surprise. A more interesting application of this spell, I think, is to allow a squad of shadar-kai to infiltrate a position from an unexpected direction, such as by gating up to the ramparts of a castle.
- *Bane* is a dependable debuff, but one that requires concentration and that the gloom weaver can't boost beyond 1st level. It seems like a poor use of the gloom weaver's time and concentration; the opportunity cost is much too high, given how powerful its other spells are.
- *Compulsion* can be used in a variety of ways: to pull an enemy within range of Burden of Time, to push away an enemy who's already that close, to drive an enemy within reach of a shadow dancer's Spiked Chain, to cause an enemy engaged in melee to provoke one or more opportunity attacks, or to compel an enemy to march through another gloom weaver's *arcane gate*, whereupon the spell can be immediately dropped, trapping the target 500 feet away. (A single gloom weaver can't pull this stunt, because both *arcane gate* and *compulsion* require concentration, but two can. Also note that *compulsion* can't make a target "move into an obviously deadly hazard," but the portals of *arcane gate* are filled with opaque mist, so it's never obvious what's on the other side.)
- *Confusion* is useful against at two or more clustered enemies (Targets in Areas), preferably ones with Extra Attack or some other feature that makes their action economies more robust. Also requires concentration.
- *True seeing* doesn't require concentration and is worth switching on when the opposing side is making mischief with such spells as *invisibility/greater invisibility*, *darkness*, *blink*, and *phantasmal force*, or before combat if a gloom weaver has good reason to expect that its opponents are going to.
- *Arcane eye* is a surveillance tool, largely inappropriate for combat but very useful for pre-combat reconnaissance. The one stunt a gloom weaver may be able to use it to pull off during combat is to cast *blight* at a creature it couldn't otherwise get at, but it has other spells (e.g., *chill touch*, *hypnotic pattern*) that it can cast at any point within range without having to see its target, so this trick doesn't seem to offer much net benefit.
- *Mage armor* is a no-brainer; unless it's surprised, a gloom weaver doesn't enter combat without this spell cast upon itself already. If it's caught unprepared, a gloom weaver casts it after its first use of Misty Escape. (To be honest, since

it can cast this spell at will without spending a spell slot, and since it lasts 8 hours per casting, I'm not sure why gloom weavers wouldn't just keep it up all the time, making its casting into a daily ritual routine like the Muslim prayer schedule.)

- *Speak with dead* is a cool thing the gloom weaver can do in a social interaction encounter, but the only purpose I can see it serving in combat is to try to interrogate a corpse that the player characters, for whatever reason, want not to be interrogated—providing the reason for combat to take place.

WARLOCK SPELLS

- *Armor of Agathys*, like *mage armor*, is common-sense pre-combat prophylaxis, but the catch is that unlike *mage armor*, it requires a spell slot—and gloom weavers don't have many of those. We'll have to compare it to the gloom weaver's other spells to decide whether it's worth the opportunity cost.
- *Blight* is a big gun with one bullet, one that deals an average 40 necrotic damage on a failed saving throw and 20 on a success. If you figure a fifty-fifty chance of making the save (which would be true for an opponent with a +5 Constitution save modifier), that's an expected 30 damage, which the gloom weaver can crank up to 35 by casting it at an opponent affected by Burden of Time. Since *blight* has only a 30-foot range anyway, why not reserve it for use against opponents 10 feet away or closer?
- *Darkness* makes everyone within its radius effectively invisible, but the gloom weaver doesn't want its *opponents* to be invisible. Therefore, *darkness* is to be avoided unless and until the gloom weaver already has *true seeing* in effect.
- *Dream* has a 1-minute casting time. Not a combat spell.
- *Invisibility* cast only on the gloom weaver itself would be a trap choice, since invisibility comes free with Misty Escape. No, the real benefit of this spell comes in its scaling: Since the gloom weaver casts it at 5th level, it can affect itself plus four other allies, giving them a way to initiate combat with a volley of unseen attacks.
- *Fear* doesn't scale and causes opponents to run away rather than get hurt and die, so aside from the possibility of provoking opportunity attacks, where's the benefit? In causing targets to drop their magic weapons so that the gloom weaver and its allies can thief them up, that's where. But to make this spell worthwhile, the gloom weaver needs Burden of Time imposing disadvantage on their saves. Requires concentration, but once the loot's been scooped up, there's no particular need to keep sustaining it, although it does impose disadvantage on affected targets' attack rolls and ability checks.
- *Hypnotic pattern* has a long range, is good against three or more opponents (again, Targets in Areas), and is useful against the same kinds of enemies as *confusion*. It doesn't scale, but it shuts affected targets down completely, which is especially good if they have Extra Attack or some other action economy-enhancing feature.
- *Major image* requires concentration, costs a spell slot, and provides no combat benefit, only a bit of deception. A gloom weaver should only ever cast this spell to *prevent* an encounter from taking place.
- *Contact other plane* falls into the same category as *dream* and *speak with dead*: cool stuff the gloom weaver can do that has nothing to do with combat and takes too long to cast.
- *Vampiric touch* is double-edged, because it's a melee spell attack with only a 5-foot reach. If the gloom weaver is that close to its target, it would rather be casting spells that require saving throws, upon which Burden of Time will impose disadvantage. Also, even scaled, the damage is lackluster in comparison with *blight*, and the hit points restored are equal to only half the damage dealt. If they were equal to the *full* damage dealt, it might be competitive with *blight*, but they're not.
- *Witch bolt* looks decent at first: a ranged spell attack, good against targets between 15 and 30 feet away, sustainable with concentration, scaled up to deal 5d12 lightning damage—legitimately competitive with *blight*, which is one-and-done. However, if the attack misses, no damage is dealt, and the spell slot is lost—a steep cost for a warlock. Plus, the gloom weaver may not get to sustain it past one round: The target can end the spell either by leaving its range, by taking cover, or by wheeling on the gloom weaver, closing to melee distance, landing a weapon hit, and breaking its concentration. And even if it does sustain the spell, *witch bolt* deals boosted damage only when it's first cast; on later turns, the damage drops to 1d12. Thus, it may not even be worth maintaining, and certainly isn't worth the cost of a level 12 warlock's spell slot.

- *Chill touch* is a ranged spell attack with very long range which doesn't cost a spell slot. But why roll to deal 3d8 necrotic damage when you can cast...
- *Eldritch blast* and deal up to 3d10 + 12 force damage with an implicit Agonizing Blast invocation, at the same range, also without spending a spell slot? Plus, since each beam requires a separate attack roll, if you don't hit with all three, you can still at least hit with one or two. *Chill touch* is all-or-nothing.
- *Minor illusion* and *prestidigitation* are just playing around. When combat starts, playtime's over.

Taking all the pros and cons into consideration, the gloom weaver's plan for its spell slots looks like this: one slot for *invisibility* if the gloom weaver and its allies plan to initiate combat while invisible; one slot for *armor of Agathys*, pre-cast unless the gloom weaver wasn't expecting a fight; remaining slot(s) for *blight*, *fear*, and/or *hypnotic pattern* as needed. *Blight* is for a foe who gets too close, *fear* for a group wielding magic weapons totaling at least 3 pluses, *hypnotic pattern* for at least three opponents whose action economy is too good. In the first two cases, either the target(s) are close enough or the gloom weaver gets close enough for Burden of Time to affect them. Unfortunately, this doesn't work for *hypnotic pattern*, because of the shape and size of the area of effect—well, the gloom weaver may get lucky and have all its targets, or all its most important targets, right at the front of the cube, but probably not, and it certainly can't count on it. So *blight* and *fear* are preferred, and if the gloom weaver is considering *hypnotic pattern*, it should probably try *confusion* instead.

But then again, it can also take advantage of the fact that its mere presence on the battlefield has the potential to throw its opponents' positioning all out of whack. With all this discussion of the gloom weaver's spell repertoire, I've only briefly mentioned its Shadow Spear attack and haven't even brought up its Multiattack. That Multiattack comprises two Shadow Spear attacks and a spell. The gloom weaver always wields that spear two-handed, because it has no shield or off-hand weapon to worry about. Also, the additional necrotic damage on a Shadow Spear hit is staggering. When laid over the spear's base piercing damage, it totals an average 34 damage on a hit—competitive with *blight*. And the gloom weaver gets to attack twice with it. And it can even cast *blight* in the same turn if it wants to. Or *eldritch blast*, or *confusion*, or *fear*... or *darkness*.

This is no ordinary spellcaster. This is a shock attacker who lays into one opponent while also lobbing spells at other opponents elsewhere on the battlefield. Out of both sound strategy and pure spite, whenever it can, it makes its melee attacks against squishy back-liners and its ranged attacks against the hardy front-liners who just happen to be in the wrong place altogether. However, since it can use Misty Escape only once per combat encounter, as the name suggests, it may want to reserve it for when it needs to make a getaway, not simply to reposition itself. Consequently, the gloom weaver may need to make more of an effort to finish one foe off before moving on to another.

In fact, since Burden of Time imposes saving throw disadvantage on creatures within 10 feet, it's implied that the gloom weaver ought to go ahead and hit the melee opponent with a spell as well. The incentive certainly exists. Make sure it's a spell that calls for a saving throw, though, not a spell attack. Not only does *eldritch blast* gain no advantage from Burden of Time, casting it while fighting toe-to-toe imposes *disadvantage* on the attack roll if your melee opponent can see you. (In *darkness*, on the other hand, go to town.)

Both shadow dancers and gloom weavers have normal self-preservation instincts and will try to retreat when seriously wounded (reduced to 28 hp or fewer in the case of the shadow dancer, 41 hp or fewer in the case of the gloom weaver). Shadow dancers use Shadow Jump, if possible, to avoid opportunity attacks, then Dash away; if they can't Shadow Jump, they Dash away from a single melee opponent and Disengage from more than one. Gloom weavers use the head start granted by Misty Escape to get a safe distance away, then Dash or open an *arcane gate*, which they drop immediately after stepping through.

Soul mongers are also spellcasters with a nasty melee attack, but their spells are wizardly. They also have a trio of painful features—Soul Thirst, Weight of Ages, and Wave of Weariness—that synergize to make them more dangerous as combat grinds on.

Wave of Weariness is a recharge ability that refreshes on a roll of 4–6, meaning the soul monger gets to use it every other turn, on average. And it's *mean*: In a cubic area of effect large enough to encompass an entire enemy side, targets have to make a DC 16 Con save or suffer a massive amount of psychic damage plus a level of exhaustion. One level of exhaustion is no big deal, two are bearable, but three or more are deadly.

This feature comes with a cost, though: *Every* creature in the area of effect gets hit, including other shadar-kai, which are immune to exhaustion but not to the psychic damage. (In contrast, Weight of Ages explicitly names other shadar-kai as

being immune to its effect.) This makes it hard for a soul monger with allies around to get as much out of Wave of Weariness as it could on its own. On the other hand, if there are invisible gloom weavers lurking just outside the range of the weariness zone, Burden of Time imposes disadvantage on the saving throws of those within 10 feet of its perimeter.

The upshot is that a soul monger that's not working alone needs to try to bang out as many uses of Wave of Weariness as it can manage *before* its allies jump in and join the fight. Once they do, even when it recharges, it can no longer take this action without risking harm to its own side.

Weight of Ages slows by 20 feet the movement speed of any creature that starts its turn adjacent to the soul monger. This effect makes it harder, if not impossible, for an opponent to run away from the soul monger, which in turn gives it an incentive to remain engaged with them and chase them down. Soul Thirst gives it a *huge* number of temporary hit points and advantage on attack rolls, which gives it an incentive to finish its opponents off. Other shadar-kai know this and will let a soul monger swoop in and take over against seriously wounded foes.

When it's not taking the Wave of Weariness action, the soul monger's primary choice is between Multiattacking and casting a spell. A hit with its Phantasmal Dagger, in addition to dealing hefty damage, imposes disadvantage on saving throws until the start of the soul monger's next turn. The soul monger itself can't benefit from this disadvantage—before it can cast a spell or take any other action that would require a saving throw, the effect wears off—so it chooses targets that it can soften up for its allies' abilities, such as the shadow dancer's Spiked Chain. If it can't reach any of them, gloom weavers know to opportunistically target opponents whom the soul monger has struck with its dagger.

With the exception of the cantrips *chill touch* (long-range, up to 120 feet) and *poison spray* (short-range, within 10 feet), all of the soul monger's spells are one-shots. *Bestow curse*, *gaseous form*, and *phantasmal killer* require concentration and are therefore mutually exclusive; *chain lightning*, *finger of death*, and *seeming* can be cast anytime.

- *Bestow curse* is cast at its base level, which isn't that hot—it requires concentration, lasts for a minute tops, and doesn't accomplish anything significantly better than the soul monger's other spells and traits. Why cast a spell to impose disadvantage on saves made with one ability score when you can just stab someone and impose disadvantage on all of them? What's the great benefit of choosing only *one* opponent to have disadvantage on attacks against you? Is an extra 4 damage per attack, on average, worth your concentration when your simplest melee attack deals 32? The one option that might be worth the opportunity cost is forcing an opponent to make a Wisdom save every turn or lose their action, in order to shut down an opponent with lots of attacks and/or a devastating bonus action. The ideal target for this kind of curse is a monk, but only if the soul monger can team up with a gloom weaver to hit the monk with both Burden of Time and Weight of Ages at once, because monks are too good at Wisdom saves if you can't impose disadvantage on them.
- *Chain lightning* is extra magnificent when it can be made to target enemies restrained by shadow dancers' Spiked Chains, afflicted by Burden of Time, or struck by the Phantasmal Dagger. As soon as the number of foes subjected to one or more of these misfortunes equals or exceeds four, the soul monger seizes the moment.
- *Finger of death*, for some, is a finishing move, to be used against the squishiest opponents when they're hanging by a thread—or already unconscious—to maximize the chance of raising them as zombies. But soul mongers are neutral, not evil; for them, the best application of this spell is to start the Soul Thirst snowball. Casting it at a target with 55 hp or fewer offers a two-thirds chance that the damage will reduce them to 0 hp, thereby activating Soul Thirst.
- *Gaseous form* is another spell that seems best suited to sneaky infiltration, but it's only useful for this purpose if the soul monger is by itself.
- *Phantasmal killer* sadly fails to live up to its name—but a team of shadar-kai may be able to salvage it, owing to their ability to impose disadvantage on saving throws in a variety of ways. The first failed Wisdom save, at the time of casting, merely imposes the frightened condition, but there's nothing wrong with giving an opponent who makes multiple weapon attacks per round disadvantage on them or keeping them from coming any closer. The target begins taking damage when they fail a second save on their own turn, and they keep taking damage as long as they keep failing saves. So a soul monger bearing down on a foe with Weight of Ages and stabbing them with its Phantasmal Dagger, or working in concert with a gloom weaver and its Burden of Time, can potentially turn this into a reasonably assured average 22 damage on each of the *target's* turns, above and beyond the damage from the dagger. But all the pieces have to be in place.

- *Seeming* serves only to disguise the soul monger and its allies until they're ready to start a fight—or to allow them to vanish into a crowd as they retreat.

Of these spells, *chain lightning* and *finger of death* are unambiguously valuable, and the soul monger will probably use them at some point in every fight; *gaseous form* and *seeming* are highly situational and particular in their applications; *phantasmal killer* is strong enough to consider if the soul monger and its allies can ensure that the target keeps failing its saving throws, but otherwise not worth bothering with; and *bestow curse* is worth considering only in the one very narrow circumstance described. As for *poison spray*, frankly, it's a stupid choice when the soul monger can simply walk 5 feet closer and attack twice with its Phantasmal Dagger, and *chill touch* makes sense only when the soul monger has nothing better to do, which is almost never.

Despite its high Wisdom, the soul monger's attitude toward self-preservation is weird. Although it's desperate to maintain its existence, it illogically won't retreat to save itself; instead, it insists on plundering the life force of others with Soul Thirst, and it would rather let itself be destroyed than forgo a chance to do so. If its allies are retreating, it grudgingly joins them—but it's the last to leave, doing its level best to consume its foes' élan vital till the bitter end.

DROW (M)

Mordenkainen's introduces a whole passel of drow variants, all of them boss-grade, one of them legendary, the weakest of them having a challenge rating of 9. Not only that, four of the five have extensive spell repertoires, and even the fifth can cast the same few spells that all drow know.

At CR 9, suitable for mid-level PCs, we have the **drow house captain**. This is a finesse fighter with decent staying power and an unusual Multiattack that combines two melee weapon attacks with either a ranged crossbow attack or attack with a whip. The whip attack is also unusual, because it seems designed to be used against the captain's allies!

With their high Wisdom, drow house captains are keen assessors of their enemies' threat level, and they have the Charisma to parley as needed, though no particular aptitude with any social skill. Aside from their Multiattack, which incidentally implies that they always wield a weapon in each hand, their most distinctive features are Battle Command, Parry (which we also see in the comparable knight and hobgoblin warlord), and their proficiency in all of the "big three" saving throws (Dexterity, Constitution, and Wisdom). This last feature implies a lesser degree of fear of enemy spellcasters.

Like all drow, the house captain is an ambush attacker—in this case, a leader of ambush attackers—with long-range darkvision and proficiency in Perception and Stealth. Although it can cast *dancing lights*, *darkness*, *faerie fire*, and *levitate* the same as any other drow, it's inclined to leave the casting of these spells to one of its underlings, since its Multiattack offers it more bang for its action buck; also, compared with other drow spellcasters, its Charisma isn't especially impressive.

Battle Command is an enhancement to the drow house captain's action economy—or, more correctly, an enhancement to the action economy of the house captain's side, since the bonus action the house captain spends grants a reaction to one of its allies. The Hide option is conferred on an allied ranged attacker that's in a good position to attack from hiding on its next turn. The melee attack option has to be conferred on an allied melee attacker, obviously. The Dodge option is conferred on an allied melee attacker that's engaged with multiple enemies or with one enemy who has Extra Attack, or on an allied ranged attacker that's being focused down by multiple ranged attacks itself.

Positioning-wise, the drow house captain leads from front and center: Its Multiattack and Parry features presume melee engagement. As DM, you should have some sense of what kind of leader your drow house captain is. Is it a champion that leads by example, or is it a tyrannical martinet? If it's the former, give it the hand crossbow and have it take potshots at enemy spellslingers and marksmen. If it's the latter, give it the whip. I have to say, I think this is the most *unexpected* thing I've ever found in a stat block: The drow house captain's Whip action stipulates, "If the target is an ally, it has advantage on attack rolls until the end of its next turn." It can *beat* someone into fighting better.

Any ally will do for the purposes of this feature, but if you want to be wickedly clever, try to anticipate which of the drow's melee foes may try to relocate without Disengaging, and give the Whip advantage to whichever drow is fighting that foe. This way, the drow may get to use its reaction to make an opportunity attack before it takes its own turn, giving it two opportunities to attack with advantage rather than just one. Also, if the house captain's side includes other drow with Multiattack, giving the Whip advantage to one of those drow increases its value, since the advantage applies to every attack roll it makes on (or before) its turn.

The drow house captain is a savvy judge of odds. It doesn't launch an attack unless it believes its side's chances are very good, meaning that encounters with groups of drow that include a house captain should always be Deadly. Drow tend to be zealots to begin with, and drow house captains, according to the flavor text, are selected based on family connections and given extensive military training. Thus, while a drow house captain may order a retreat if its side starts to take major losses (say, half or more of its number seriously wounded), the house captain itself never retreats based on its own injuries alone.

Drow arachnomancers are drow warlocks that can shapeshift into or out of a Large giant spider form as a bonus action and can continue to speak and cast spells in their spider form. Because they're warlocks, unlike most monsters with spellcasting ability, they cast all their spells as if using a 5th-level spell slot, but they're also limited to three leveled spells per encounter (not counting *darkness*, *dominate monster*, *etherealness*, *eyebite*, *faerie fire*, and *levitate*, each of which they can cast once per day without spending a slot, and *dancing lights*, which they can cast at will). Concentration governs which of these spells they can cast, so we're going to look for sustained spells that synergize with multiple instantaneous spells.

Also, since these are warlocks we're talking about, we want to find out what works well with *eldritch blast*. Although it isn't stated explicitly in the stat block, because the drow arachnomancer is a 16th-level spellcaster, *eldritch blast* fires three bolts per casting, for a total of up to 3d10 force damage. In terms of damage dealt, this cantrip can't compete with either its humanoid-form Poisonous Touch attack or its spider-form Bite attack. Based on its ability contour—extraordinary Intelligence, very high Dexterity and Charisma, merely above-average Constitution, average Strength—we might suppose that the arachnomancer is a long-distance spellcaster that would much prefer to stay out of melee if it can. However, none of its attacks are Intelligence-based, so its primary offensive ability is really Dex. Thus, the arachnomancer is a shock attacker first and a spellcaster second, using *darkness*, *hold monster*, and *web* to set up nova attacks with Poisonous Touch and Bite as well as using those melee attacks for self-defense.

The arachnomancer has proficiency in Constitution, Intelligence, and Charisma saving throws, but not Dexterity or Wisdom. It has advantage on saving throws against being charmed, but not against other forms of will-focused magical manipulation, such as *hold person* or *confusion*. Thus, it has good reason to feel nervous around other spellcasters and tries to kill or shut them down first.

It also has proficiency in Perception and Stealth, the classic drow ambush combo. Its Wisdom is high enough that it intuitively senses when a band of trespassers is too strong for it and its squad to wreck quickly in such an attack, and its Intelligence is high enough that it knows exactly which glass cannon to smash in order to swing the odds in its own favor. Any ambush led by an arachnomancer should feel like a worst-case scenario to its enemies. An arachnomancer will parley, but only to the extent that it will accept its enemies' surrender rather than insist on systematically slaughtering them.

The drow arachnomancer, like all drow, has 120 feet of darkvision and Sunlight Sensitivity and thus operates strictly at night and underground. It also has blindsight, so *darkness* is highly advantageous to it. On the other hand, it's well aware that most of its likely companions lack blindsight and will be unable to avail themselves of features that grant advantage or impose disadvantage, making it a highly situational spell for the arachnomancer to use.

Intriguingly, the arachnomancer possesses its climbing speed, Spider Climb and Web Walker features, and spellcasting ability regardless of whether it's in humanoid or giant spider form. This gives it some interesting positioning options as well as an incentive to spam an entire battle zone with webs, created by itself, its companions, or both. It also means that which shape it assumes is largely a function of which of its attack actions is more desirable, given the circumstances. However, one unalloyed advantage of its giant spider form is that it can spin webs as a targeted action that doesn't require concentration, rather than as an area-effect spell that does—good for setting up combos for itself and with allies.

Examining which spells require concentration and which ones don't, we come to the unpleasant discovery that the vast majority of the arachnomancer's spells do require it; the only ones that don't are *etherealness*, *dimension door*, *dispel magic*, *chill touch*, *eldritch blast*, and *poison spray*. *Etherealness* and *dimension door* are transportation spells, used at the beginning or end of a fight, not in the middle. *Dispel magic* is crisis response. *Poison spray* is an all-or-nothing cantrip targeting Constitution, offering little or no opportunity for a tactical combination. Therefore, any synergy we find must involve *chill touch*, *eldritch blast*, Poisonous Touch, Bite, and/or the attacks of the arachnomancer's allies.

CONCENTRATION REQUIRED

- *Dominate monster* targets Wisdom; is weak against elves, gnomes, berserker barbarians, and Devotion paladins and their companions; and only ever affects one target. This spell is high-risk, with not a lot of upside, except as a narrative excuse to have a non-drow, non-spider monster fighting on the arachnomancer's side—and that usage offers no synergy. However, it is useful for one narrow application: poaching a creature summoned by an opponent.
- *Eyebite* also targets Wisdom, but it doesn't charm its target. It allows the arachnomancer some synergy of its own *or* to take down multiple enemies, one by one, but not both. It seems most useful either for guarding a location (frightened effect) or for dropping foes unconscious for subsequent capture (asleep effect), and remember, the latter effect doesn't work on elves.
- *Conjure animals* summons only spiders with a challenge rating between ¼ and 2, which means either sixteen giant wolf spiders or four regular giant spiders (remember, it's being cast at 5th level). If the arachnomancer has an ally that can blanket the area with webs, go with the giant wolf spiders to get loads of attacks with advantage against stuck targets. If not, four lousy giant spiders aren't worth it.
- *Crown of madness* doesn't scale with level and has the same drawbacks as *dominate monster*, and unless the arachnomancer's enemies are in a confined space, it's too easy for them to get out of the attacking target's reach. Pass.
- *Fear* isn't so good for hurting enemies, but it's excellent for driving them away—or, if they're trapped in a confined space, for making it hard for them to fight back. Still, this one doesn't scale, either.
- *Fly* can be used on up to three creatures, but it's mainly useful as a speed doubler for drow elite warriors and shadowblades, since the arachnomancer already has nifty movement abilities of its own.
- *Giant insect* doesn't scale, so it's inferior to *conjure animals*. Instead of four giant spiders, you get three.
- *Hold monster* cast at 5th level might as well be *hold person* cast at 2nd level. Don't get me wrong: *Hold [entity]* is the best spell since *Pepperidge's apportioned loaf*, synergizing with *eldritch blast*, Poisonous Touch, Bite, and pretty much every other attack the arachnomancer's allies might have. But as *hold monster*, it paralyzes only one target, whereas as *hold person*, it could have paralyzed four. Feh.
- *Insect plague* is an area-effect meat grinder that creates light obscuration and difficult terrain but imposes no debilitating condition. It's good for stacking damage on damage, but it can't be used to set up a tactical combination. It can, however, be used as the *second* part of a tactical combo if the first part grapples or restrains its targets, so that they can't get out of the area of effect. Either the Web action or an ally with a *web* spell could fill this part of the bill.
- *Invisibility* is good for making an initial attack with advantage. It's also good for slippery disengagement once the arachnomancer has finished off an enemy it's assassinating with a melee attack, since once this work is done, it would prefer to retreat to longer range again.
- *Vampiric touch* is a poor substitute for the arachnomancer's Multiattack, dealing only 5d6 necrotic damage on a hit vs. a potential 8d6 + 4d12 poison damage, but it has one upside: It also heals the arachnomancer. In the best-case scenario, the arachnomancer uses it against a paralyzed opponent, but the only likely source of that condition is its own *hold monster*, which it can't cast at the same time.
- *Web* is more useful to the drow arachnomancer than it often is for other spellcasters, thanks to its movement abilities. This unboostable 2nd-level spell is nevertheless one of the arachnomancer's better sources of tactical synergy, since it imposes the restrained condition on targets who fail their saving throws, giving the arachnomancer and its allies advantage on all their attack rolls.
- *Witch bolt* could be described as “concentration optional” if not for one thing: Casting it nevertheless requires the arachnomancer to drop any other sustained spell it's concentrating on. Bogus.
- *Darkness*, as mentioned elsewhere, is dandy for the drow arachnomancer but potentially problematic for its allies.
- *Faerie fire* is always super-useful; it's also an innate ability of every drow. One of the arachnomancer's low-level allies can use its less valuable turn to cast this spell instead.
- *Levitate* and *dancing lights* are wastes of the arachnomancer's limited concentration.

CONCENTRATION NOT REQUIRED

- *Etherealness* and *dimension door* are primarily escape hatches, since the arachnomancer can't bring its whole squad along. If it's accompanied by a drow VIP, it favors *dimension door* over *etherealness* and brings the VIP along.

- *Dispel magic* can be used to auto-negate spells of 5th level or lower, which is handy, although it does mean the arachnomancer can't use its action to deal damage instead. For this reason, it casts *dispel magic* only to eliminate an effect that's causing it very serious trouble, with respect to either its ability to deal damage or the ability of it and its allies to survive.
- *Chill touch*, at the arachnomancer's level, deals 3d8 necrotic damage. This is only 3 less, on average, than *eldritch blast*, and it comes with the benefit of suppressing healing. If the arachnomancer is out to straight-up assassinate a single spellcaster, it uses this damaging cantrip instead of *eldritch blast*.
- *Eldritch blast*, in contrast, is better against targets of opportunity, or against a force that lacks healing capability. With Intelligence 19, the drow arachnomancer can size up its foes and know whether or not this capability exists.
- *Poison spray* compares favorably with *chill touch* and *eldritch blast* only against low-Constitution, non-dwarf, non-high-level-monk targets. The DC 16 saving throw is just a little too easy for higher-Constitution enemies to succeed on. Also, because it's resisted with a Con save rather than a Dex save, there's no way to work it into a tactical combo.

So we have a few different possible game plans for the drow arachnomancer. If it needs to take out a single powerful but fragile spellcaster fast, it can cast *hold monster* as its first action, then rush in and deliver a vicious shock attack with Poisonous Touch or Bite while its allies keep other enemies tied up. If there are multiple spellcasters who need to be confronted at once, it can *web* them, granting itself and its allies advantage on all weapon and spell attacks. If it's accompanied by other drow mages, it can let them *web* up the area, then cast *insect swarm* on top of its restrained enemies, then attack targets of opportunity from afar with *chill touch* or *eldritch blast* (the three energy beams can be aimed all at the same enemy or at different ones). Or, after its allies blanket the combat zone with webs, it can cast *conjure animals* and summon a pack of sixteen speedy and fierce giant wolf spiders, which attack as a mob and all gain advantage against restrained targets, and only then start lobbing its cantrips. Finally, fighting primarily non-spellcasters in a confined space, it can cast *fear* as its first action to hobble their counterattacks while its allies engage them in melee, then take potshots with *chill touch* or *eldritch blast*.

Drow arachnomancers, like other drow, are zealots, but they're highly intelligent zealots who keep their objective front and center in their minds. Damage doesn't cause them to flee, but if their objective can no longer be achieved, retreat is a reasonable alternative, especially if it allows them to warn of coming dangers and/or summon reinforcements. Being highly hierarchical and having the kind of contempt for their underlings you'd expect from chaotic evil creatures, an arachnomancer that decides it's time to leave doesn't hesitate to do so on its own (or with the aforementioned VIP), leaving its erstwhile allies behind.

Drow shadowblades are spies and assassins, trained to strike from hiding. With extraordinary Dexterity serving as both their primary offensive ability and primary defensive ability, they're shock attackers, striking swiftly and hard with the goal of taking out their targets as fast as possible. Their Constitution is high enough that they can handle a protracted battle, but they'd rather not.

With proficiency in all of the "big three" saving throws and with innate advantage against being charmed, shadowblades have little to fear from enemy spellcasters and can assail their desired targets without distraction. Like all drow, they have long-range darkvision plus Sunlight Sensitivity, confining them to nighttime and (more likely) subterranean operations. They also have the standard drow spell package of *dancing lights* plus one daily casting each of *darkness*, *faerie fire*, and *levitate*.

In addition, as a bonus action, shadowblades can use the Shadow Step feature to teleport up to 60 feet between one dimly lit or dark location and another; doing so also grants a shadowblade advantage on "the first melee attack it makes before the end of the turn." The wording is crucial, because it dictates shadowblades' turn sequence and mode of striking: The bonus action must be taken before the attack, and the attack must be a melee attack, i.e., Shadow Sword.

That's assuming, however, that a shadowblade *needs* Shadow Step in order to gain advantage on its attack. Simply attacking while unseen grants advantage, too. If the shadowblade's target lacks darkvision and is bumbling around in the murk without a decent light source, the sequence is less crucial, and the shadowblade is free to use Shadow Step to slip out of melee rather than to initiate it.

The drow shadowblade's Multiattack consists of two Shadow Sword attacks that synergize into a nasty combination. By itself, Shadow Sword not only deals piercing, necrotic, *and* poison damage on a hit but also creates a patch of magical darkness. Even if the target has a light source that creates bright light, the creation of this magical darkness gives the

shadowblade a “teleporter pad” by which it can use Shadow Step to slip away—or back. But with its Multiattack, on any Shadow Sword hit during a subsequent turn, the shadowblade can direct that darkness into its enemy for a burst of additional necrotic damage. (This stunt can be performed only once per turn, so even if there’s more than one patch of magical darkness lingering around, it can’t use both its Shadow Sword attacks to deal this extra damage.)

In addition to its melee Multiattack, the shadowblade also has a fairly straightforward ranged attack that deals piercing damage and may also impose the poisoned and unconscious conditions. Does initiating combat with this attack offer any advantage over jumping right into melee? Let’s see.

The Hand Crossbow attack, which consumes a full action, deals an average 8 damage, far less than a *single* Shadow Sword attack, let alone a Multiattack. Any comparative advantage is going to have to come from a debilitating condition. Given the shadowblade’s challenge rating of 11, its targets are likely to be high-level adventurers—or NPCs in the presence of high-level adventurers, which is a pretty different kettle of fish. The NPC isn’t likely to have more than a +1 or +2 saving throw modifier—but even this is enough to give them a 45 to 50 percent chance of success. A high-level PC is probably going to have a Constitution save mod of between +1 and +8, meaning the shadowblade may have as low as a 30 percent chance of poisoning its target, to say nothing of knocking it unconscious. Moreover, the normal range of a hand crossbow is only 30 feet—*less* than the range of Shadow Step! This attack is starting to look like a waste of an action.

The most benefit we can wring out of the Hand Crossbow action is this: The shadowblade casts *darkness* to shroud itself in impenetrable obscurity. From there, it shoots at a target between 60 and 120 feet away, using unseen-attacker advantage to offset the disadvantages of long range and its own blindness. The shadowblade continues to snipe in this fashion until the careless target approaches within 60 feet, at which point the shadowblade Shadow Steps up to its target, and the julienning begins.

There’s a hitch in this plan, though, which is that smart targets, once they start taking hits from an attacker hiding in the dark, will immediately seek to illuminate their surroundings, leaving the shadowblade without an adjacent dimly lit or dark location to Shadow Step into. Now, since Shadow Step advantage doesn’t require that the attacker be unseen, the shadowblade can Shadow Step to a dimly lit or dark spot up to 30 feet away from the target, run up and still gain advantage on that first hit, as long as the target’s light source doesn’t extend that far. Consulting the *Player’s Handbook* (chapter 5, “Adventuring Gear”), a lamp sheds bright light out to a radius of just 15 feet; a torch, 20 feet; a hooded lantern, 30 feet; and a bullseye lantern has a 60-foot range but is unidirectional. These offer no protection against a shadowblade. A *light* spell brightly illuminates a 20-foot radius (no protection), but *daylight* brightly illuminates a 60-foot radius (total protection).

That being said, there’s also a way to overcome this hitch: The drow shadowblade doesn’t have to work alone! Just one confederate that can cast *darkness*—which all drow can, even the lowliest mook—is enough to create a sphere of magical obscuration around a target, snuffing their light source (unless it’s *daylight*) and giving the shadowblade a way to teleport in when the time comes.

So when is that time? That depends on the value of the shadowblade’s Multiattack. On average, one Shadow Sword hit deals 30 damage total. Two Shadow Sword hits do 59 damage, and after the first attacking turn, the second hit gets a nice additional 21 necrotic damage as a rider, for a total of 80. Mind you, this presumes two hits in a row, plus one on a previous turn for the bonus necrotic damage. With a +9 attack modifier and advantage on at least the first strike, the shadowblade’s chances are very good, but they’re not perfect, especially against a heavily armored target. Against a middle-of-the-road AC 15, +9 means a 75 percent chance to hit; with advantage, it’s 94 percent. Multiplying each average damage figure by the chance to hit, our new total expected damage is about 50 on the first turn and 71 on subsequent turns. Against AC 20, +9 means a 50 percent chance to hit, 75 percent with advantage; expected damage against a fighter in a tin can is therefore roughly 37 on the first turn and 55 on subsequent turns, still solid but less imminently life-threatening.

Now let’s take a look at our target. Figure that our middle-of-the-road high-level adventurer has a d8 hit die and a +2 Con mod. At level 11, they’ll have somewhere in the ballpark of 75 hp. Our fighter, who specializes in taking beatings, has a d10 hit die and, by this point in their career, a +4 Con mod, for somewhere around 109 hp.

What this tells us is that, against PCs equipped to confront a drow shadowblade, a single round’s Multiattack is unlikely to deliver a one-hit kill—not unless the target is a squishy wizard or sorcerer. Even two rounds may prove insufficient to finish off a well-armored fighter. Especially if a shadowblade is working alongside allies, which means there’s no good reason to take silly risks, most targets will have to be tenderized before a shadowblade is ready to engage in mano-a-mano homicide. A nice, dramatic pace of combat has the shadowblade’s allies engaging their foes directly while the shadowblade

snipes from darkness for the first round or two; then, the following round, the shadowblade suddenly appears in their midst, and the real carnage commences. I like this sequence because it lulls players into underestimating the shadowblade, but you can certainly have it blitz the back line and scissor up the spellslinger instead.

If a shadowblade is working alone, it can't afford to play games: It has to jump in right away and do as much damage as it can, as fast as it can. If it hasn't accomplished its mission either within three rounds or before being seriously injured (reduced to 60 hp or fewer), whichever comes first, it takes the *L* and skedaddles.

The drow shadowblade has no good reason to cast any of its spells. All of them require concentration, which means that no two can be sustained at the same time; all of them take a full action to cast; and none of them offers the kind of value that the shadowblade's Multiattack does.

What about the variant rule that allows a shadowblade to summon a shadow demon? Sometimes these summoning rules have something to offer, but I've grown skeptical of them, because in a game to which action economy is so central, the chance of failure imposes enormous risk. In this case, the shadowblade has a 50 percent chance of summoning a shadow demon ally—and a 50 percent chance of doing nothing but psychic damage to itself for an entire action. When the alternative is such a powerful Multiattack, there's zero reason for the shadowblade to gamble with its action.

From one DM to another, my advice is, script it the way you want it to play. Don't leave it up to chance. If you want the shadow demon there, then write the shadow demon into the encounter. Have the demon already summoned before the PCs know the shadowblade is there. Then have the shadowblade send the demon in first to harass the PCs—and finally, while they're occupied, have the shadowblade leap into the fray.

Looking at the ability contour of the **drow inquisitor**, a high-level cleric, we see a heavy emphasis on the mental abilities, particularly Wisdom and Charisma, which are extraordinary. Intriguingly, reverse-engineering its Death Lance attack, it appears that this attack is made using either Wisdom or Charisma rather than Strength or Dexterity, so the usual rules of thumb governing combat role don't apply. If we take Dexterity, the highest of the inquisitor's physical ability scores, as its primary defensive ability, we get a spellcasting quasi-shock attacker. Combine this with the obligatory drow proficiency in Perception and Stealth and 120 feet of darkvision, and we have the makings of a nasty ambush.

The drow inquisitor is unafraid of spellcasters, having Magic Resistance, Fey Ancestry, and proficiency in two of the "big three" saving throws (Constitution and Wisdom), plus Charisma. Which opponents does it prioritize, then? For ideological reasons, devout worshipers of gods other than Lolth, along with non-drow elves; for resource competition reasons, dwarves; and for practical reasons, anyone who's showing themselves to be particularly dangerous. Drow inquisitors have the Intelligence to adapt.

They also have proficiency in Insight, so if the odds of victory don't look so hot, inquisitors won't hesitate to parley—even if it means giving up an ambush opportunity. Why launch an ambush if even that isn't enough to give your side a comfortable advantage? The inquisitor isn't uniquely good at getting others to do what it wants, but it's very good at figuring out what *others* want—and whether this is compatible with its own interests. This ability is enhanced by Discern Lie, a trump card it can play on any attempt at Deception.

At the top of the drow inquisitor's spell repertoire are two 6th-level spells, *harm* and *true seeing*—but only one 6th-level spell slot, so it can't cast both. Prudence dictates that it has to wait to spend this slot until it can judge whether *true seeing* is necessary, e.g., if an enemy goes invisible or ethereal. The inquisitor also knows better than to cast *harm* against an enemy who looks too tough.

At 5th level, the inquisitor has three choices—*contagion*, *dispel evil and good*, and *insect plague*—of which it can choose two. *Insect plague* requires concentration and covers a circular area with a 20-foot radius, suiting it for use against four or more enemies (Targets in Areas). Assuming they don't have exceptionally high Constitution, 4d10 damage against four enemies, halved on a saving throw, produces approximately 66 expected damage. *Dispel evil and good* doesn't do much against player characters, only against conjured allies. That leaves *contagion*, which is most useful against low-to-average-Constitution enemies making weapon or spell attacks. Slimy Doom can increase susceptibility to *insect plague*, *harm*, or *blindness/deafness*—eventually. Combat may well be over before the disease takes effect, though, so for other reasons, the inquisitor may opt for a different disease that saps the enemy's primary offensive ability, at which it makes an educated guess.

The inquisitor's 2nd- through 4th-level spell slots are the more fungible ones. *Spiritual weapon* is a no-brainer, cast at 4th level because why not? (It takes the form of a dagger with a spider-shaped pommel.) *Banishment*, *bestow curse*, and

silence all require concentration, making them incompatible with *insect plague* (and one another). *Silence* can't be boosted, and there's not much point in boosting *bestow curse* only to 4th level. *Banishment* is only good for bouncing one extremely troublesome or reviled enemy, and *bestow curse* is only good against a single opponent, so the inquisitor considers these only if its enemies simply refuse to group up so that they can get eaten alive by locusts; and there just isn't all that much to recommend *silence* in combat. If anything, it's better *before* combat—to further conceal an ambush party.

Freedom of movement is situational, and the drow inquisitor keeps one 4th-level slot in reserve for it, just in case it becomes necessary. Otherwise, it tries to save at least one 3rd-level and one 4th-level slot for *dispel magic*, the most crucial all-purpose defensive spell it has in this power range. Since *magic circle* is a ritual and *divination* has no combat application, this leaves *blindness/deafness* as the default application for its remaining 2nd-level spell slots.

That being said, we do happen to have a couple of 1st-level spells—*cure wounds* and *inflict wounds*—that benefit from being boosted. But why cast *inflict wounds* at all when you have a Death Lance Multiattack, which is so much better? As for *bane*, even though it's a good spell, monopolizing the drow inquisitor's concentration with it is a waste of power. The same is true of the inquisitor's Innate Spellcasting repertoire; its drow allies can handle those responsibilities. (The exception is *suggestion*, which it uses during parley rather than combat.)

Once combat kicks off, the drow inquisitor immediately casts *spiritual weapon* as a bonus action. Its action depends on whether or not it can close and engage in melee with an opponent. If it can, it may as well Multiattack, too. If not, it can try *poison spray* (for 3d12 poison damage, thanks to the inquisitor's level), Dodge, Search for a hidden enemy, or Help an ally.

In round 2, the inquisitor must choose between casting a spell or engaging in melee. With +10 to hit, it has an 80 percent chance of hitting an AC 15 opponent, so its triple Multiattack does an expected 64 damage! That's impressive, on par with *insect plague* against four opponents. Combined with *spiritual weapon*, it's such a good nova attack that the inquisitor uses it without a second thought against an opponent wearing any less armor than chain mail and a shield, unless its foes are grouped up so neatly as to make *insect plague* irresistible.

The usual modus operandi of a shock attacker is to strike, then slip away, but the inquisitor's is slightly different. Lacking any unique escape ability such as *misty step*, the inquisitor simply does its ridiculous damage, then remains engaged, as if to say, "You want some more?" Rather than move away itself, it counts on its opponent's moving to get away from it, potentially giving it a chance to add insult to injury with an opportunity attack.

Because of *true seeing*, if there's an invisible or ethereal opponent on the field, the drow inquisitor takes on the responsibility of hunting them down. If not, and if there's a particularly troublesome enemy to deal with, the inquisitor may cast *harm* as its round 2 or 3 action, intending to follow up with a Multiattack in the next round. Alternatively, if its allies are handling the more lightly armored opposition just fine and the inquisitor has to go after a foe in a tin can, it closes with them and immediately casts *bestow curse*, choosing the wasted action option, since a heavily armored front-line fighter is almost certain to have Extra Attack, and the possibility of an entirely wasted action has a *much* greater effect on the action economy of an opponent who can attack more than once in a single action than it does on one who can't.

The drow inquisitor, as astute as it is, is a zealot among zealots. It fights to the death, if that's where things are headed. It simply knows better than to *start* a fight in which this is a likely outcome.

The **drow favored consort**—emphasis on "favored"—is not just arm candy but also an adviser with advanced arcane abilities. While the favored consort occupies a privileged place in drow society, it's not part of the ruling hierarchy; it's still effectively a second-class citizen, high-status only as second-class citizens go. One likely upshot of this is that it's not going to share the zealotry of broader drow society. Unlike, say, a drow inquisitor, which has an example to set and fights to the death in the line of duty, a drow favored consort is keen to preserve its existence, which is probably the only reason it took the job of favored consort in the first place.

The recurring Perception-Stealth proficiency combo is here, along with the drow-standard long-range darkvision, Fey Ancestry, and Innate Spellcasting. All its ability scores are well above average, but in particular, its Dexterity is extraordinary, and its Intelligence and Charisma are exceptional. Because its Dex is higher than its mental abilities, we have an interesting hybrid of long-range spellcaster, sniper, and shock attacker, and we should look for ways in which the favored consort can easily slip into and out of melee.

Looking over its extensive list of spells for mobility enhancements, we find only two: *haste* and *misty step*. *Haste* requires concentration—and this is interesting, because unlike many high-level spellcasting monsters, the drow favored consort isn't heavily laden with concentration-required spells. In fact, aside from *mage hand* and its innate spells, the only other two are

gust of wind and *Otiluke's resilient sphere*. So there's very little reason for the favored consort not to cast *haste* right out of the gate, unless it has a specific reason to want to trap an enemy with *resilient sphere*—maybe its priestess has commanded it—or is being blitzed by melee fighters and needs to throw on some *mage armor*. (A favored consort that has reason to anticipate a combat encounter will always have cast this spell already, putting it one 1st-level spell slot down.) However, the favored consort may not necessarily cast *haste* on *itself*—not if there's a drow shadowblade, house captain, or elite warrior in its group, or perhaps a yochlol already on the scene.

But suppose it does choose to cast *haste* on itself. *Haste* doesn't allow the favored consort to cast a second spell in the same turn: It can only Attack, Dash, Disengage, Hide, or Use an Object as its second action. Disengage is obviously useful when leaving melee, but Dashing into melee usually isn't practical if it can't be followed up immediately with an attack. However, Attack doesn't necessarily have to be a melee attack: It can be an attack with the favored consort's poisoned hand crossbow. DC 13 isn't a high bar to clear, but a failure inflicts the poisoned condition, rendering the target less effective at fighting back, and has a small chance of taking the target out of the fight entirely by knocking it unconscious. And on the turn when it casts *haste*, the favored consort gets to make *two* additional attacks, not just one, thanks to the War Magic trait: one as an additional action conferred by *haste*, the other as a bonus action. Even the hand crossbow can be used twice this way, because the loading property grants one shot per action *or* bonus action. Here, the favored consort is using one of each.

Misty step is a bonus action, which means it doesn't work with War Magic, which requires a spell to be cast as an action. It also prevents the favored consort from using its action to cast a different leveled spell in the same turn. However, while affected by *haste*, a favored consort can cast *misty step*, use its action to Multiattack, and still have a second action available for either one more attack or a Disengage action followed by movement. Or it can use its Multiattack action, then make an additional single attack, then *misty step* away; or Multiattack, *misty step* away, then Hide, vanishing from view until its next turn.

The triple-Scimitar Multiattack is the drow favored consort's true shock attack, each hit slathering 4d8 poison damage on top of the base damage of the blade. (The favored consort does not come to play.) Under a *haste* spell, however, Multiattack can only be the favored consort's main action, not its additional action. Nowhere is it written that the main action must come first (except when the spell is first cast, when, implicitly, the main action is to cast the spell), so as early as the second round of a *haste* spell, the favored consort can Dash up to an enemy as far as 120 feet away, then Multiattack; Disengage from one enemy, use its full movement to run up on another as far as 60 feet away, then Multiattack that one; or cast a spell, then Multiattack, then add injury to injury with a bonus action Scimitar attack, averaging 106 damage on four hits!

The drow favored consort's Scimitar attack also imposes disadvantage on the target's next saving throw against a spell cast by the favored consort before the end of its next turn. These are the spells against which the target might have to make such a save: *chain lightning*, *cone of cold*, *Otiluke's resilient sphere*, *fireball*, *gust of wind*, *shatter*, *burning hands*, *faerie fire*. All of these except *resilient sphere* are area-effect spells. Thus, we're not necessarily likely to see the favored consort follow up a Multiattack by immediately casting a nasty spell against its target while they're at a disadvantage to resist it. The only real candidate for this maneuver is *burning hands*, whose area of effect is fairly small—a 15-foot cone, unlikely ever to encompass more than two enemies—but which does far less damage, on average, than a single Scimitar hit. (Or, I guess, *resilient sphere*, but if the favored consort were going to do that, it probably would have done it already.) Instead, the favored consort casts spells when it casts them, and the Scimitar-induced disadvantage just happens to make things worse for that one target. However, there is one particularly nasty maneuver that a drow favored consort under *haste* can pull off if its opponents are arranged just right: First, Disengage as its secondary action. Second, Multiattack as its primary action, attacking three different opponents as it ducks and weaves among them, immunized against opportunity attacks. Finally, on its next turn, the drow favored consort completes the combo by hitting its unlucky foes with *chain lightning*.

With only one 6th-level spell slot, the drow favored consort uses it to cast *chain lightning* and only *chain lightning*. Similarly, it uses its two 5th-level spell slots only for *cone of cold*, unless it knows that its targets are resistant or immune to cold damage. It has Intelligence 18, so this is something it might know in advance and certainly will know once it sees how they react to its first *cone of cold* spell. If this is the case, and only if this is the case, it uses one or both of its 5th-level slots to boost *fireball*.

These are spells that cover a lot of area: *Cone of cold* is best against six or more opponents, *fireball* against four or more (Targets in Areas), and *chain lightning* against exactly four, per that table and also how *chain lightning* works. Using any of these against just two or three targets, let alone one, is massive overkill. That's where *shatter* comes in. It's ideal for use against two—and also targets Constitution rather than Dexterity, in case the favored consort's enemies are more slippery than tough.

A drow favored consort that's sustaining a *haste* spell on an ally, rather than on itself, is more limited in what it can do, but it can still combine *misty step* (bonus action) with Multiattack (action) or cast *magic missile* (action) and punctuate it with a Hand Crossbow shot (bonus action). (It could also follow *magic missile* with a Scimitar attack, but this combination is inferior to Multiattack unless the drow favored consort is dividing its attention between ranged opponents and a single melee opponent—a bad idea unless it's certain to finish off one or the other.)

Counterspell and *shield* are applied in the usual fashion for the usual reasons, and the favored consort makes an effort to keep spell slots in reserve for them; *gust of wind* is useful only for blowing out torches and deterring pursuit; and *dimension door* is the favored consort's emergency exit. It always reserves one 4th-level spell slot for this spell, but if it's not going to cast *Otiluke's resilient sphere*, it can use its other two 4th-level slots to boost *fireball*, *shatter*, or (if need be) *counterspell*.

As for innate spells, it's unlikely that a drow favored consort will ever have reason to cast *faerie fire*, because all drow can cast this spell, and one of its less powerful allies is sure to do so, if not more than one. Similarly, forget *darkness* and *levitate*: They require concentration and offer the favored consort no tactical benefit, and *darkness* can also be cast by other drow. And the favored consort has better things to do than to cast *dancing lights*, even if it can do so at no cost except to its action economy.

Because it can shift smoothly from spellcasting to sniping to hard-hitting melee—and even engage in more than one of these at a time—the astute favored consort takes careful note of what every one of its enemies does in the first round of combat and plans accordingly. It uses *chain lightning* and *fireball* against tanky fighters and their support casters; *shatter* against less robust targets, along with any constructs its enemies command; its melee Multiattack against glass-cannon spellcasters and archers in the back row; its hand crossbow against enemies who are themselves hard to pin down; and *cone of cold* against, well, *everybody*, if possible.

I mentioned at the start of this analysis that the drow favored consort is emphatically not a zealot, just an underling doing what it takes to survive. That extends to combat. The favored consort is all about playing it safe, dealing as much damage as possible while exposing itself to as little blowback as possible. When a favored consort is moderately wounded (reduced to 157 hp or fewer), it casts *dimension door* and decamps as soon as there's no more important drow watching it. Favored consorts are also quite amenable to parley, although they won't initiate it themselves, and they'll sell their side out in a heartbeat for a deal that offers them protection, along with enough additional incentive, in return.

The **drow matron mother**, CR 20, is second only to Lolth herself in the drow boss hierarchy. She's a spellcaster first, a skirmisher second, certain to be surrounded by a multitude of minions. She's also a legendary creature, with legendary actions—one of which she can turn over to a demon ally for its own use, sort of a drowish Commander's Strike.

Like all drow, the matron mother has Fey Ancestry, Sunlight Sensitivity, and the innate spells *dancing lights*, *darkness*, *faerie fire*, and *levitate*. However, she's got a few additional tricks up her sleeve: She can cast *detect magic* at will, and once per day, she can cast *clairvoyance*, *detect thoughts*, *dispel magic*, and *suggestion*.

Note that the matron mother can cast *dispel magic* with or without using a spell slot, but when she casts it using Innate Spellcasting, it works only against spells of 3rd level or lower. She uses her innate ability to dispel effects of 3rd level or lower before spending a spell slot to do so, but since she has only one innate use of *dispel magic* per day and has other spells competing for her spell slots, she's finicky about what she dispels with it. An excellent candidate is *invisibility*, since *dispel magic* affects “one creature, object, or magical effect” within 120 feet and *doesn't require her to be able to see the target*, only to know they're there. Pop! *Haste*, *slow*, *hypnotic pattern*, *enlarge/reduce*, and *spiritual weapon* are also top choices; *haste* and *enlarge/reduce* together on one target, or in combination with any other buff, are insta-pops.

The matron mother has Magic Resistance, so she's more concerned with what spellcasters can do to her allies than with what they can do to her personally. If she has any weakness, it's her Armor Class: 17 is low-to-middling for a boss monster, and by the time PCs are strong enough to encounter her, they're not going to have much trouble hitting that number. Therefore, as far as target selection is concerned, her main focus is neutralizing ranged weapon and spell attackers—unless a melee attacker blitzes her, in which case she'll switch her focus to them.

She has no ranged weapon attack, but two melee weapon attacks: Demon Staff and Tentacle Rod. Her Multiattack is an interesting mixed bag, allowing her either two attacks with the staff or three with the rod. Judging from the damage she does with them, the staff is a finesse weapon, and the rod isn't, so we'd expect her to favor the staff. But the rod has a longer reach, and while it doesn't do much direct damage, it can impose the same effects as a *slow* spell if she hits a single target with it three times in one turn. If she *doesn't* hit them three times, it's weak sauce, so I think she'll avoid it unless she has at least a 2-in-3 chance of hitting three times *and* the target has at most a 1-in-3 chance of succeeding on the saving throw.

What does this mean? To have a two-thirds chance of hitting three times in a row, she needs an 87 percent chance of hitting once. With her +9 to hit, that means the target's Armor Class must be 12 or lower. As for the saving throw, to have at least a 1-in-3 chance of succeeding against DC 15, the target needs only a +1 Constitution save modifier. That's not much! The upshot is, Tentacle Rod is a good attack only against frail-looking spellcasters wearing no armor. The matron mother's Intelligence isn't high enough for her to "read" targets' stats; she has to base this judgment on observation.

Before I dive into her spell repertoire, there are two more traits to look at: Lolth's Fickle Favor and Summon Servant.

Summon Servant calls up a yochlol, just as Summon Demon does for a drow priestess of Lolth. The difference is that for the drow matron mother, it always works. (Alternatively, it can summon a "retriever"—see [page 469](#)—which is not a very faithful and kind of dopey dog but rather a construct whose primary function is kidnapping.)

Lolth's Fickle Favor is a bonus action with a 30-foot range which *hurts* one of her allies—but gives it advantage on one subsequent attack roll. When does this tradeoff make sense?

For starters, she has to give it to an ally that's making attack rolls (either a weapon or spell attack—it doesn't matter which) rather than casting a spell or using another ability that's resisted with a saving throw. Also, the stronger the ally upon which she bestows this "gift," the less the harm and the greater the benefit—as long as having advantage actually makes a difference. In other words, out of all her allies, she wants to give advantage to the toughest one that has less than a two-thirds chance to hit but will have a greater than two-thirds chance to hit if given advantage. The sweet spot is when the matron mother's ally has a 45 to 65 percent chance to hit, meaning when the ally needs an unmodified attack roll from 8 to 12.

Once again, she can't read stats, but here are some rules of thumb she can follow, using intelligence guided by experience:

- Regular drow are too weak to confer Lolth's Fickle Favor on. The psychic damage would mess them up badly enough that they might not survive long enough to use their attack advantage.
- A drow elite warrior is a good candidate if it's fighting an opponent wearing medium armor and carrying a shield, wearing heavy armor and not carrying a shield, or using Unarmored Defense. (The last case requires the matron mother to see how the opponent is defending, so it won't happen during the first round of combat. Then again, her first-round bonus action is best spent casting *spiritual weapon*.)
- A drow mage is only a good candidate when an opponent wearing medium or heavy armor or using Unarmored Defense is attempting to close with it but hasn't arrived yet, so that it can cast *ray of frost* or *witch bolt* at them.
- A drow priestess of Lolth doesn't engage in melee as long as she has anyone else to do it for her, so there's almost always a better candidate on the field.
- A drow house captain is a good candidate if it's fighting an opponent wearing heavy armor (with or without a shield) or obviously magic medium armor.
- A drow shadowblade doesn't stay on the field for long and is generally able to obtain advantage through means of its own, so it's not a good candidate.
- A drow arachnomancer is a good candidate when it's attacking an opponent wearing heavy armor (with or without a shield) or obviously magic medium armor with either Poisonous Touch, *eldritch blast*, or (in spider form) Bite.
- A drow inquisitor is only a good candidate when it's about to use its Death Lance against a target wearing heavy armor and carrying a shield, one or both of which is preferably magical. Most of the time, it's a poor candidate, because of its reliance on spells requiring saving throws to resist.
- A drow favored consort is a good candidate when it's about to make a Scimitar attack against a target wearing heavy armor and carrying a shield, one or both of which is preferably magical.

The drow matron mother's spells are the backbone of her kit, and they go all the way up to 9th level. Unlike a lot of spellcasting foes, she has a rich panoply of spells that *don't* require concentration, not to mention instantaneous spells that have lasting effects. These spells give her a ton of flexibility and a superior action economy. Add to these the legendary action that lets her cast a spell on another creature's turn, and you end up with a spellcaster who makes the archmage look like a plodder.

Contagion, *death ward*, *freedom of movement*, *guardian of faith*, and *spiritual weapon* are all instantaneous spells with lasting effects; however, only *spiritual weapon* is low-level enough to cast using a legendary action. And since *spiritual weapon* is a bonus action and can be combined, if the matron mother wishes, with the *sacred flame* cantrip, there's only one reason for her to use a legendary action to cast it: She wants to use her first-turn action to cast an even more powerful spell. But which one?

Let's look at her spell slots. She has one 9th-level slot, which she'll only ever use for *gate*, and one 8th-level slot, which she'll only ever use for *holy aura* (which can't be upcast). She has two 6th-level and two 7th-level slots, but neither of her 6th-level spells can be upcast. Her 1st-level slots can only be used to cast 1st-level spells and are what she'll cast those spells with. This leaves her 2nd- through 5th-level slots as the ones that are actually fungible, that may be used either to cast spells at their base level or to boost spells of lower levels.

Which ones can be boosted? *Banishment* (concentration required), *bestow curse* (concentration required—but see below), *dispel magic*, *spirit guardians* (concentration required), *hold person* (concentration required), and *spiritual weapon* (takes *two* spell levels to boost). Boosting *banishment* is a decent deal: The matron mother gets to banish two enemies instead of one. *Spirit guardians'* damage can be raised from 3d8 to 4d8 or 5d8. *Hold person* can paralyze up to *four* enemies, which could be extremely powerful. *Spiritual weapon* can be made to deal 2d8 + 5 damage rather than 1d8 + 5 damage, but is this really worth a 4th-level spell slot? Maybe; it does, after all, deal its damage as a bonus action—and if it's boosted, it can't be snuffed out with an off-the-rack *dispel magic*.

But the two I want to shine a spotlight on are *dispel magic* and *bestow curse*. By upcasting *dispel magic*, the drow matron mother can nullify a 4th- or 5th-level buff—so she can take away not only your *invisibility* but your *greater invisibility* as well, not to mention your *polymorph*, your *conjure elemental*, your *hold monster*, or your *wall of fire*. As for *bestow curse*, when cast using a 5th-level spell slot, it lasts 8 hours and no longer requires concentration. These are so much classier than simply doing more damage.

On the other hand, doing more damage with *spirit guardians* compares surprisingly favorably with the basic 5th-level damage option, *flame strike*, which deals 4d6 fire damage plus 4d6 radiant damage over a 10-foot radius. Against two enemies, which is the minimum that the matron mother will use it against (Targets in Areas), this is an average of 56 total damage on a failed save, 28 total damage on a success, or roughly 42 expected damage. By comparison, a 5th-level *spirit guardians* deals 22 damage on a failed save and 11 on a success, or 17 expected damage to each enemy who enters its 15-foot radius. It seems paltry at first glance, until you consider that the radius implies that it's meant to affect *three* enemies at once (expected damage: 51); plus, it's a sustained spell, so it can do even more damage over multiple rounds. Maybe it will do no damage—maybe opponents will simply decline to walk into it. But maybe, as well, this is a case of the threat being stronger than the execution, protecting the matron mother from melee attacks by imposing a cost that foes won't want to pay.

What about boosting *spiritual weapon*? Forget it. The matron mother has only three 4th-level slots, and *all* her 4th-level spells offer something important. In fact, because they don't require concentration, *death ward*, *freedom of movement*, and *guardian of faith* are arguably so valuable that she'll cast *banishment* only with a 5th-level slot, and only when she can banish two foes at once!

Let's take a look at what her other spells imply:

- *Gate* could be a simple escape hatch, like *plane shift* (which the matron mother has) and *dimension door* (which she doesn't). But there are two big differences between *gate* and *plane shift*. One is that *gate* offers precision: You know exactly where you're going to end up. The other is that *plane shift* is strictly an exit door, but *gate* can be an entrance: If you name a specific creature that resides on a different plane, *gate* snatches it and brings it through, allowing the drow matron mother to call in backup much more powerful than a quotidian yochlol. (“Oh, have you met my good friend... *Lolth*? We pledged Pi Beta Phi together. She's my bestie!”)
- *Holy aura* offers the substantial benefit of conferring advantage on saving throws and imposing disadvantage on incoming attacks to the matron mother and all her allies within a 30-foot radius—an area of effect that should cover

at least half a dozen of them, if not more. But it does need concentration to sustain, preventing her from casting *blade barrier*, *banishment*, *spirit guardians*, *hold person*, *silence*, or *bane*. (She can cast *bestow curse* without using concentration, but only if she uses a 5th-level slot. If she decides she needs to cast *gate*, she'll drop *holy aura* in a heartbeat.)

- *Divine word*, against PCs of a high enough level to be fighting a drow matron mother, is a finishing move. It affects only targets with 50 hp or fewer, and *meaningfully* affects only targets with 40 hp or fewer. The typical level 20 PC will have maximum hit points somewhere in the 100-to-200 neighborhood, so frailer PCs will have to be seriously wounded for *divine word* to be a good bet, while more robust PCs will have to be *seriously* seriously wounded.
- *Plane shift* is an emergency exit that the matron mother can either go through herself, decamping to the Demonweb Pits along with up to eight of her allies, or push one opponent through. Prudence suggests saving it for the former application rather than taking a chance on the latter.
- *Blade barrier* might be better named “wall of razors,” and it covers a huge area. A particularly confident matron mother might cast it in a ring around herself, forcing foes to either fly over it or take an expected 25 damage attempting to run through it. “I’m not trapped in here with you—you’re trapped in here with me!” If her opponents pose a meaningful threat to the matron mother and her allies, however, *holy aura* or a boosted *hold person* is the better play.
- *Harm* deals an expected 37 damage, with a good chance of its being unhealable in the current battle. Good against foes who depend on Dexterity for defense rather than Constitution. Useless against paladins and monks of any consequence, since they’re immune to disease.
- *Contagion* requires touch and doesn’t take full effect for three to five rounds, so its value depreciates rapidly after the first round or two of combat. It also requires a melee spell attack to cast, and a drow matron mother would rather hang back and cast spells than engage in melee combat, particularly at the beginning of a fight. On top of that, like *harm*, *contagion* is ineffectual against opponents who are immune to disease. If a matron mother does cast it, she’ll choose the Slimy Doom option against a melee fighter and Blinding Sickness against anyone else.
- *Geas* takes too long to cast in combat, but it’s fantastic if the matron mother can take an opponent prisoner before the rest of their posse shows up. Charm spells are often poor for making opponents fight one another, but *geas* is an exception to this rule. If the matron mother casts *geas* on a prisoner, remember to mark off a 5th-level spell slot before combat begins.
- *Mass cure wounds* is as nice for a matron mother as it is for PCs.
- *Death ward* is good for 8 hours, and a matron mother who has any reason to suspect that she’ll face mortal danger casts it on herself as a basic precaution. Mark off the slot. (Alternatively, if there’s someone the matron mother must protect, she may cast it on her charge instead. But I think it’s going to be mighty rare that anyone is more of a VIP than the matron mother herself.)
- *Freedom of movement* is also good and long-lasting, but more situational. She won’t cast it unless she is grappled or restrained, sees an opponent cast a spell that paralyzes its target(s), or knows in advance that her foes can cast spells that inflict these conditions, based on whatever intelligence has reached her.
- *Guardian of faith* is good for controlling choke points as well as obstructing access to the matron mother herself. When she casts it depends in large part on whether it looks like melee attackers are closing in.
- *Clairvoyance* is for pre-combat spying—and a hard spell to justify spending a 3rd-level slot on if the matron mother has any reason to think that combat is going to ensue today. She really needs those slots for *dispel magic*.
- *Silence* has the usual benefit (shuts down bards and all but a handful of spells) and the usual drawback (easy to walk out of). Only useful in confined spaces, and the matron mother prefers *not* to be in confined spaces, because of the large radii of her abilities.
- *Bane* smacks of desperation, but the matron mother may in fact be feeling desperate if her concentration on both *holy aura* and *blade barrier* has been broken. Even so, there’s still *banishment*, *spirit guardians*, and *hold person* to consider first.
- *Command* is chancy, only really useful if the matron mother has a whole lot of minions and the timing is right. But she can *make* the timing right by using a legendary action.

- *Cure wounds*, given that she also has *mass cure wounds*, is primarily good for making foes feel like they're wasting their time by using a legendary action to undo the damage they've just dealt.
- *Guiding bolt*, similarly, is a setup for key allies who are taking their turn next and aren't gaining advantage from some other source.

Whoooo. Okay, it's finally time to put it all together.

Round 1 is easy: *Spiritual weapon* as a bonus action and Summon Servant, which always works, as an action. That's two more allied attackers on the field. The drow matron mother hangs back, letting her minions handle the front line for the time being. As other creatures take their turns, she uses her legendary actions to gradually spend down her low-level spell slots. Remember the good old Tower of Hanoi puzzle? That's how she spends her low-level slots: 1st, 2nd, 1st, 3rd, 1st, 2nd, 1st. This pattern keeps her from burning all her 1st-level slots at once. What if there's no 2nd-level spell she wants to cast at the moment (which is likely, given that *spiritual weapon* is already up and *hold person* is better boosted)? Then she'll upcast *guiding bolt*. One exception to this pattern: She'll always cast *dispel magic* to erase a spell of 3rd level or lower that's important enough to erase.

Round 2 is when it gets more complicated. Depending on the deployment of her own side and on the nature of the terrain and her opposition, she casts one of her concentration-required spells: *boly aura* (clustered, on defense), *blade barrier* (clustered, on offense, setting an ambush for opponents to walk into), *spirit guardians* (spread out, on defense, melee-heavy opposition), or 5th-level *hold person* (spread out, only four opponents—gotta paralyze 'em all!). If an enemy rushes her, she casts *contagion* instead, choosing Slimy Doom. Her bonus action is to strike with *spiritual weapon* unless one of the specific favorable conditions of Lolth's Fickle Favor exists. As for positioning, she tries to stay behind and within 30 feet of her allies.

Once she has a concentration spell up and running, she can start to choose between casting more spells and venturing forth to smack vulnerable opponents with her Demon Staff (using the Multiattack action). She does the latter only when conditions are favorable: when she can attack with advantage, or when she can help gang up on a foe who's already been put back on their heels, and she wields the staff two-handed. She uses her Tentacle Rod only within the Multiattack action, and only against the aforementioned frail-looking, unarmored spellcaster. (She knows what *mage armor* looks like, by the way; she's not dumb.) Since she doesn't have an effective way to disengage from melee except spending an action to Disengage, once she engages, she uses her Demon Staff legendary action to bludgeon the stuffing out of her foe until *they* have to disengage. Also remember, if she's sustaining *spirit guardians*, her little cloud of demonic, necrotic spider-spirits comes along with her—as does her *spiritual weapon*, if she wishes.

The drow matron mother isn't one of those cocky boss casters who underestimates the opposition and only breaks out the big guns when it becomes evident how strong they are. She gets stuff done. The faster she can deal with her opponents, the better, and she'll readily start at the top of her spell list and work her way down, with the round 1 and round 2 exceptions described above plus three more: She doesn't cast *divine word* until one of her opponents is looking exceptionally ragged; she doesn't cast *gate* to summon a powerful extraplanar ally unless she's lost at least one-third of her minions or is moderately wounded (reduced to 183 hp or fewer—if you plan to have her call in Big Sister, hold off until she's lost half her minions or is seriously wounded, i.e., reduced to 104 hp or fewer); and she doesn't cast *plane shift* unless she and her allies are clearly, irremediably defeated.

GITHYANKI AND GITHZERAI (M)

Mordenkainen's goes into gith lore in considerable depth and offers stat blocks for five new gith variations: the githyanki gish, kith'rak, and supreme commander, and the githzerai enlightened and anarch. To recap, githyanki and githzerai are divergent lines of the same race, once enslaved by mind flayers. Upon seizing their freedom, the githyanki claimed license to pillage and enslave in the mind flayers' stead, whereas the githzerai retreated into pacifist isolationism and monastic reflection. Both lines possess psionic abilities.

The **githyanki gish** is a sort of eldritch knight or war mage, both a fierce shock attacker and a potent spellcaster, with high ability scores across the board. (This variant was introduced in edition 3.5 and has become an archetypal example of the fighter/magic-user multiclass combo, so that any such character is often referred to as a "gish.") With proficiency in

Perception and Stealth, it also excels at ambush. And its proficiency in Constitution saving throws dramatically improves its chances of maintaining concentration on sustained spells while taking damage.

Since psionics exist in fifth edition D&D as reskinned magic, the githyanki gish has a number of “spells” it can cast innately alongside its conventional wizard-spell repertoire: *mage hand* (essentially *telekinesis* lite), *jump*, *misty step*, *nondetection*, *plane shift*, and *telekinesis*, of which *misty step*, *plane shift*, and *telekinesis* are the most broadly useful.

As for its arcane spells:

- *Dimension door* is inferior to *plane shift*, but (a) the gish can cast it twice, and (b) because *plane shift* doesn't consume a spell slot, it's not an either/or choice. A gish can *dimension door* into battle and *dimension door* out—and still have *plane shift* in reserve in case of unexpected pursuit.
- *Counterspell* is a scornful rejoinder to enemy spellcasters.
- *Fireball* is everyone's favorite classic kaboom spell.
- *Haste* is murder in a can, and because of the massive bonus psychic damage inflicted when the gish lands a sword hit, it's as likely to cast this spell on itself as on anyone else. Requires concentration.
- *Blur* also requires concentration and simply isn't as good as *haste* or the gish's competing 2nd-level spells.
- *Invisibility* needs no sales pitch.
- *Levitate* is of limited usefulness, since it also requires concentration. It can be used against an enemy, *telekinesis*-style, targeting Constitution rather than Strength—but then what? A double-Longsword Multiattack will hurt an enemy more than dropping them from ceiling height.
- *Expeditions retreat* is handy if there's no 3rd-level slot left for *haste*.
- *Magic missile* is useful for dealing with opponents at range or who are proving hard to hit with melee attacks.
- *Sleep* isn't going to accomplish much against a mid-level or high-level party that isn't hanging by a thread; the gish doesn't have enough of an abundance of higher-level spell slots to boost it with.
- *Thunderwave* is situationally useful for knocking down two or more melee opponents, since War Magic allows the gish to follow up with a Longsword attack (with advantage against a prone opponent).
- *Blade ward* would be useful if it lasted more than a round, but it doesn't, so it isn't. The gish is a shock attacker. It wants to be *dealing* the damage, not dodging it.
- *Light* and *message* are useful outside combat, not so much during.
- *True strike* has exactly one use: ensuring advantage on the first attack of a failed ambush attempt. Otherwise not worth bothering.

As we often see with spellcasting monsters, there's a traffic jam at 3rd level, with *counterspell*, *fireball*, and *haste* all competing for three spell slots. Counterintuitively, of the three, *fireball* is the least useful, because (a) it doesn't enhance the gish's action economy, and (b) it relies on opponents' being clustered together in the area of effect. Therefore, the gish casts *fireball* only if four or more of its enemies are thusly clustered, and even then, it will probably do so either to initiate combat with surprise or while acting as backup to a group of other gith. More commonly, a gish instead casts *haste* on itself and keeps its other two 3rd-level spell slots in reserve for *counterspell*.

With both high Wisdom and proficiency in Insight, a githyanki gish has a good sense of when a situation might be resolvable through talk rather than combat. However, to make this happen, it has to have some way of communicating with its foes, or vice versa. It's clever enough that if (a) it and its allies can achieve their goals without fighting, (b) it looks like a fight might go poorly for its side (that is, if the encounter is Hard or easier for the PCs), and (c) its opponents seem like they might be amenable, a gish might try to communicate a willingness to avoid engagement through nonverbal means—gestures, actions, and movements. If a githyanki knight is present, the gish might have it translate.

The gish is also very good at coordinating with allies and at assessing opponents' strengths and weaknesses. It does ferocious damage with its weapon hits, but its first priority is figuring out the worst things its opponents can do and neutralizing them. Generally, the greatest threat is going to be a spellcaster who can cast area-effect spells that require Dexterity saving throws—and anyone dressed in wizardly fashion is likely to be able to do this.

A good way of shutting this threat down is to use a bonus action to *misty step* next to the spellslinger (make a Stealth roll with that *misty step* spell, to see whether the target noticed the gish's materialization),^{IV} then whack them with a Multiattack (with advantage on the first swing if the target didn't see the gish appear) and *counterspell* their next attempt to

fight back or get away. Meanwhile, if the gish has other githyanki allies, they'll engage enemy melee fighters to try to lock them down.

Once combat begins, it may become apparent that the biggest threat is actually an enemy shock attacker, such as a rogue, monk, or barbarian. Against a rogue or monk, the gish can use *telekinesis* to push the target away from its allies or, possibly, into a trap or environmental hazard—something that immobilizes the opponent. Or it can use its normal movement to interpose itself between any shock attacker and its targeted ally, cast *haste*, immediately use its extra action to strike with its longsword, use its bonus action (thanks to War Magic) to do so again, and be set up on its next turn to cast another spell *and* make two more Longsword attacks. Or, if it has to travel more than 60 feet to engage the shock attacker, it can trade its bonus-action attack for *misty step*.

The gish isn't stingy with *misty step*, since combat isn't likely to last so long that it will ever need to cast it a fourth time. If it does, that may be the signal for the gish to teleport out of there with *dimension door* or *plane shift*.

Githyanki in general are highly disciplined, and gishes are no exception. They'll call a retreat when they're seriously wounded (reduced to 49 hp or fewer) or when half or more of their allies are, but knowing that they're more powerful than rank-and-file githyanki warriors and knights, they'll stick around and keep fighting while their allies retreat even if they themselves are only hanging on by a thread, or possibly try to parley.

The **githyanki kith'rak** is, essentially, a captain of a company of githyanki. Fundamentally, it differs from an ordinary githyanki warrior only in its Rally the Troops bonus action and Parry reaction. It uses Rally the Troops as applicable, and whenever it has a reaction available, it uses Parry against a melee weapon attack roll of 18 to 21. Consider it seriously wounded when it's reduced to 72 hp or fewer, but note that it will nearly always be the "least injured" githyanki that stays behind to cover its allies' retreat.

The **githyanki supreme commander** is to the githyanki knight as the githyanki kith'rak is to the githyanki warrior, and consequently shares most of its tactics as well. To the knight's features, it adds the innate "spells" *Bigby's hand*, *mass suggestion*, and *levitate* (self only); the Parry reaction; and the legendary actions Attack, Command Ally, and Teleport. It lacks the innate "spell" *tongues*, though.

Bigby's hand is a concentration-required spell and an action economy enhancer, making it a much better use of the supreme commander's concentration than *levitate*, which is mainly just showing off. It's good for whomping low-AC spellslingers with the Clenched Fist, immobilizing rogues and monks with the Grasping Hand or shoving them into lava pits with the Forceful Hand, or foiling would-be pursuers with the Interposing Hand.

Mass suggestion seems like it ought to synergize nicely with the supreme commander's Intimidation skill as a way of convincing opponents that resistance is futile ("You have no hope of victory—drop your weapons, surrender, and kneel before us!"). However, the supreme commander lacks the ability to communicate with anyone who doesn't speak Gith and consequently needs a githyanki knight to act as its translator, which undermines its ability to use *mass suggestion*. (Then again, there's nothing stopping you from deciding that a *particular* githyanki supreme commander does possess an ability equivalent to *tongues*; it wouldn't affect the challenge rating.)

The fact that the supreme commander's legendary Attack consumes two legendary actions also strikes me as strange, but on reflection, I think I can understand why it costs so much: It's an incentive to use the other two legendary actions first. After all, it's the "supreme commander," not the "supreme attacker." The commander could make an attack itself, but why do that when it can order someone else to? Plus, when the supreme commander orders an ally to attack, the ally—presumably cognizant of what happens when you displease a githyanki supreme commander—gets advantage on the roll.

The legendary Teleport action is a disengaging maneuver, for use when two or more enemies have managed to engage in melee with the supreme commander and are doing more than minor damage to it—say, 57 points of total damage in a round. As soon as the damage crosses that threshold, the supreme commander uses the legendary Teleport action at the end of the turn of the opponent who dealt it. This also applies if only one enemy is engaged in melee with the supreme commander but that enemy's melee damage, on top of other (ranged or area-effect) damage done to it that turn, carries the total over the threshold.

As DM, keep track of the initiative order; use Teleport as soon as it applies, but don't use Command Ally until you reach the third-to-last turn in the order before the supreme commander's turn, unless doing so has a good chance of knocking out a particularly dangerous opponent. (Remember that because Command Ally consumes a reaction, it can be used only once per ally—and don't bother using it on a kith'rak, which wants its reaction free in case it needs to Parry.)

Then use Attack on the last turn in the order before the supreme commander's if and only if it has two legendary actions remaining.

The githyanki supreme commander is seriously wounded when reduced to 74 hp or fewer. If its troops are in equally sorry shape, it calls a halt to battle and parleys, since its enemies are clearly its (near-)equals. However, since it's proficient in Intimidation rather than Insight or Persuasion, this parley consists more of threats and posturing than polite discussion of interests and terms.

The githzerai monk has the ability profile of a shock attacker, but it lacks the mobility to get in and out of combat easily. The **githzerai enlightened** is the more fully developed version of this build concept, differing from the githzerai monk in three ways: higher ability scores, the Temporal Strike action, and a package of mobility- and defense-enhancing psionic "spells": *blur*, *expeditious retreat*, *haste*, *plane shift*, and *teleport*.

Getting the best use out of these abilities requires paying close attention to action economy and "spell" duration. Let's break it down:

Actions: Multiattack, Temporal Strike, *haste* (requires concentration), *plane shift*, *teleport*, *blur* (requires concentration), *jump*, *see invisibility*.

Bonus actions: *expeditious retreat* (requires concentration).

Reactions: *feather fall*, *shield*.

Saliently, *expeditious retreat* is the only bonus action available to the githzerai enlightened, but because it requires concentration, it conflicts with *haste* and *blur*. *Expeditious retreat* grants Dash as a bonus action, but *haste* effectively grants this same benefit by doubling the target's movement, plus an additional action that isn't restricted to Dashing, plus bonuses to Armor Class and Dexterity saving throws. This also makes *haste* far superior to *blur*, whose only benefit is disadvantage on incoming attacks (effectively an Armor Class buff of approximately +4). Thus, there's no reason why an enlightened won't cast *haste* as its first action in combat—if not before combat begins.

Plane shift is an imprecise spell: It can take you to a general area on a particular plane, but with little discretion or control over where in that area you end up. *Teleport*, in contrast, is considerably more precise—plus, as the DM, you can fudge the targeting roll. So while *plane shift* is good for getting out of a jam, *teleport* is what you want to use to drop in and attack with surprise. And since you can bring eight allies along for the ride, we can imagine a githzerai enlightened casting *haste* on itself, then teleporting itself and a whole squad of githzerai monks into the midst of its enemies for the ultimate surprise assault.

Temporal Strike not only has recharge but recharges only on a roll of 6, so the enlightened wants to make immediate use of it—but also has to be judicious about whom it uses it against. How good is the enlightened's ability to size up its opponents? It's very good, but it's not perfect. With an Intelligence of 17, the enlightened can "read" an opponent's abilities just by watching him or her act, but not *without* doing so. Therefore, the enlightened has to wait one round to see what everyone does before using this extremely powerful but also extremely limited ability.

The effect of Temporal Strike is, effectively, to take one enemy out of commission for one round. It stands to reason that this should be the enemy who can do the most with their actions: generally, a high-level fighter with a triple or quadruple Attack or a shock attacker (rogue, monk, barbarian) capable of massive burst damage.

Why not a spellcaster? Because for that purpose, Temporal Strike is overkill. On an average hit, this ability deals 65 damage and also has a chance of neutralizing the opponent for a round; 80 damage is within one standard deviation from the mean, and 116 is theoretically possible. If Temporal Strike kills an enemy outright, the enlightened isn't getting the full use out of it! Plus, spellcasters are more likely to have proficiency in Wisdom saving throws—and to favor their mental abilities in general—and thus are more likely to succeed on the Wisdom save to resist it. For the same reason, even though paladins are also good at dealing nova damage, the enlightened doesn't necessarily want to use Temporal Strike against one.

That being said, the enlightened also has an extraordinary Wisdom score, which means it doesn't want to start a fight it can't win. From an encounter-building perspective, this has an interesting ramification: Any combat encounter you create that includes a githzerai enlightened *must be a Deadly encounter for the PCs*. If it were any less difficult than that, either the enlightened wouldn't initiate combat to begin with, or it would gather all its friends and bamf out (using *teleport*, which would be available if they didn't use it to bamf in) at the first available opportunity!

Mostly, the enlightened relies on the combination of *haste* and Multiattack to inflict barrages of bludgeoning and psychic melee damage. *Jump* presents difficulties because (a) it consumes an action, (b) any distance over and above the

target's movement speed carries over into the next round, and (c) the enlightened has no ranged attack capability. However, combining *jump* with *haste* opens up interesting possibilities. For instance, if a *basted* enlightened downs an enemy with a single unarmed strike (not a Multiattack) on its first action, it can use its main action to cast *jump* to begin moving toward a different enemy, which it may reach on the same turn or on its next one^V—it doesn't matter, since even if it arrives on the following turn, it's immediately ready to throw down again. Even so, such a maneuver is really only useful on difficult terrain or where obstacles or hazards interfere with straight-line movement.

See invisibility is a relatively low-value use of an action, and the enlightened uses it in combat only when three criteria are met: First, it knows one of its enemies is invisible; second, that enemy is one it's already identified as a high-priority target; and third, it's got *haste* going. Otherwise, it's not going to waste its action this way when it can spend it clobbering another foe instead. If it has a plausible reason to believe it's going to have to fight an invisible foe, it may cast *see invisibility* in advance of the encounter.

An enlightened isn't going to stay engaged in prolonged combat. After the third round, it conducts a risk assessment. If its own side is losing, or if it's clearly turning into a battle of attrition, it decamps with its allies using *teleport* (if available) or *plane shift*. If its side seems to be winning, it hangs in there for a couple more rounds. Thus, it's unlikely that its *haste* spell will ever run out—unless its concentration is disrupted by a large amount of incoming damage or a botched Constitution save.

A disrupted *haste* spell takes the enlightened out of action for a round, during which any allies it has close ranks to protect it. Once it's back in business, it has to choose between *blur* and *expeditious retreat*, since it has only one use of *haste* per day. It judges based on the nature and effectiveness of its enemies' attacks and on how spread out they are. The more spread out the opposition and/or the fewer attack rolls they're making, the more it favors *expeditious retreat*. The more attack rolls they're making and/or the closer together they are, the more it favors *blur*.

The **githzerai anarch** is a different critter, more similar to the vanilla githzerai monk. Its distinctive abilities include flight, *globe of invulnerability*, *wall of force*, and three legendary actions: Strike, Teleport, and Change Gravity.

Both *globe* and *wall* require concentration, so the anarch can use only one of them at a time. *Globe* offers protection against magical assault, *wall* against physical assault. Also, *globe* has a fixed shape—a sphere with a 10-foot radius—while *wall* can be configured as a sphere, a straight line, or a zigzagging line. Which it chooses obviously depends on which of its enemies it judges to be the most dangerous. Its own Armor Class is 20, and it's tooled for melee combat, so it generally favors *globe* over *wall* unless it's trying to block its enemies off from a particular location.

Because the range of its Teleport action is only 30 feet, and because it doesn't take anyone else with it, the chief use of this action is to move from one enemy to another without incurring an opportunity attack. Strike is a freebie retaliation against an enemy with whom the anarch is engaged in melee. But the really interesting feature in the anarch's toolbox is Change Gravity.

Like the *reverse gravity* spell, Change Gravity affects an area with a 50-foot radius—this is huge!—and has a range of 100 feet. It requires concentration, meaning it can't be used in conjunction with *globe of invulnerability* or *wall of force*, and it can be oriented in any direction. A githzerai anarch's enemies definitely do not want to encounter it at the end of a 105-foot corridor: They'll be taking 10d6 damage while it stands there pointing and laughing at them, and then they'll have 100 feet of ground to cover before it does it to them again. Then again, if they encounter it outdoors, it may simply cause them to “fall” 100 feet up in the air and leave them there until it gets bored and drops the spell—and them.

It goes without saying that the anarch uses this action only when it has room to exclude itself and its allies from the area of effect, and that it orients gravity in the direction that causes the most falling damage. But also, for it to be worth the three-legendary-action cost, it has to do more damage than three unarmed strikes. Back-of-the-envelope, each strike deals an average of 32 damage on a hit, and with +10 to hit, we can surmise that a strike lands roughly three-fourths of the time. Therefore, we should want Change Gravity to deal more than 72 damage. That's equivalent to about 20d6, so the anarch reserves Change Gravity for when it can cause two enemies to fall 100 feet, three enemies to fall 70 feet, four enemies to fall 50 feet, etc.

Anarchs have a strong self-preservation instinct and retreat when only moderately wounded (reduced to 100 hp or fewer), unless they have a very strong reason to be fighting, in which case they'll stay in the fight until seriously wounded (reduced to 57 hp or fewer). Otherwise, they follow the same principles as the enlightened, not initiating any fight that isn't a Deadly encounter for their enemies and retreating along with their allies if they're not clearly winning by the end of the

third round. Note also that the anarch has *teleportation circle*, not *teleport*, so the “bamf assault” isn’t an available option, and its only evacuation ability is *plane shift*.



NAGPAS (M)

You won't find **nagpas** running around all over the place. According to *Mordenkainen's*, there are only thirteen of them—a coterie of conniving wizards cursed by the Raven Queen and turned into skulking vulture-people scavenging the remnants of lost civilizations for scraps of arcane lore.

Unsurprisingly, nagpas' ability contour is that of a long-range spellcaster, with extraordinary Intelligence and Charisma, exceptional Wisdom, and very high Dexterity. They carry staves, which they somehow are able to use as finesse weapons and deal two dice of damage with, but melee engagement really isn't their style. If they do get into melee, they want to get back out of it quickly.

They have proficiency in all the mental saving throws, but their Dexterity and Constitution save modifiers are unremarkable. Thus, they don't have a lot to fear from bards, whose spells tend to emphasize enchantment, illusion, and crowd control; but casters who sling damaging evocation, transmutation, and necromancy spells pose a threat that they need to neutralize quickly. Taking out these foes is even more important to them than taking out melee fighters.

Although their flavor text says they “work in the shadows” and “emerge [only] when they can deliver a finishing blow,” nagpas lack Stealth proficiency, and their Dex isn't high enough to allow them to hide effectively. They also lack illusion spells, “trap” spells such as *glyph of warding*, and scrying spells. Ambush, therefore, isn't a viable attack strategy; any plan they concoct has to work without their targets' being surprised. They do, however, have proficiency in Deception, as well as *charm person*, *suggestion*, and *dominate person*, which they can use to manipulate others into doing their dirty work for them. Afterward, the nagpas can liquidate the now-expendable marks. Their multiple language proficiencies can enhance the believability of their ruses.

While it doesn't affect their tactics in any meaningful way, nagpas' combination of Perception proficiency and truesight is potent. They may not be able to stage an ambush of their own, but on the flip side, hiding from one of them is nearly impossible.

Nagpas have two distinctive features: Corruption and Paralysis. Corruption is a bonus action (read: action economy enhancer) that affects a single creature, imposing the charmed condition until the start of the nagpa's next turn. As debilitating conditions go, charmed is relatively weak in combat—all it really does is prevent the target from attacking the charmer. (It's much better in social interaction, when a nagpa can use it to lay the groundwork for subsequent Deception.) But it does have the benefit of preventing an opportunity attack, which a nagpa can use against a melee opponent to disengage without having to take the Disengage action—as long as there's only one melee opponent it has to get away from. And one opponent not attacking you is one opponent not attacking you, so there's that as well.

Paralysis is the keystone of the nagpa's kit. It's also a bonus action, and it can potentially paralyze every creature within 30 feet for up to a full minute. The nagpa's DC 20 is high enough that even high-level PCs may take a few rounds to shake this effect off. Even so, the time to take advantage of it is immediately. How can a nagpa do the greatest possible damage to a half-dozen paralyzed enemies—who automatically fail Strength and Dexterity saving throws and can be attacked with advantage, for automatic critical hits at close range?

It's kind of amazing, but among all the nagpa's twenty-six spells, there are only three that fill the bill: *fireball*, *wall of fire*, and *prismatic spray*. And each of them fills it imperfectly:

- *Fireball* seems like a gimme, but it has only a 20-foot radius and thus may miss targets caught in Paralysis's 30-foot radius. The smaller circle covers less than half the area of the larger one (four-ninths, to be exact); normally we'd expect it to encompass four targets, per Targets in Areas, but in this case, we're going to say it can be assured of hitting only three of the six.
- *Wall of fire* has two options: a straight line or a circular ring with a 10-foot radius. Against paralyzed foes who don't get to repeat their saving throws until the ends of their turns, these walls are effectively 11 feet wide, rather than 1 foot (although targets they're drawn directly over take an additional tranche of damage). After the initial casting, therefore, the circular wall becomes either a disc of flame with a 10-foot radius or a ring of flame with a 21-foot radius but a 10-foot-radius cutout in the middle. No matter how the wall is drawn, there's no guarantee that the distribution of paralyzed targets will match the shape of the wall. On the upside, though, it can be sustained to keep dealing damage for as long as targets are immobilized.

A nagpa can't be confident that a straight wall will pass through more than two out of six targets paralyzed in a 30-foot-radius circle. A solid circle with a 10-foot radius occupies only one-ninth the area of the larger circle, so on average, it's probably going to cover only one target; a solid 20-foot-radius circle could be predicted to hit three of the six (as we saw looking at *fireball*), but subtract the doughnut hole, and we're down to just two.

- *Prismatic spray*'s area of effect is a 60-foot cone, which seems great: Both a 30-foot-radius circle and a 60-foot cone can be reasonably expected to include six foes. The trouble is, those two shapes don't overlap very well. Any given distribution of six targets in a 30-foot-radius circle is unlikely to fall entirely within a 60-foot cone no matter where that cone originates from. It's possible, but it's unlikely. Let's say for the sake of argument that out of six targets paralyzed in a 30-foot-radius circle, the most a nagpa can be sure of is that it can find a point of origin whence a 60-foot cone will contain four of them.

The real question here is which of these spells Paralysis does the most to improve. In other words, which deals more damage, and by how much: *fireball* against three paralyzed targets, or *fireball* against four unparalyzed targets? *Prismatic spray* against four paralyzed targets, or *prismatic spray* against six unparalyzed targets? Interestingly, *wall of fire*—if you go by Targets in Areas—can only ever be counted on to strike two targets anyway, so casting it against two paralyzed targets seems like pure win. But by how much still matters.

Normally, to keep it simple, I assume a 50 percent chance of making a saving throw against an area-effect spell for the purposes of calculating expected damage. The nagpa's spell save DC is high, though, so this time I'm going to assume a one-third chance instead.

Cast at 3rd level, *fireball* deals 8d6 damage on a failed save, for 23 expected damage per target, or 93 total expected damage against four. Against three paralyzed targets, who automatically fail their saves, *fireball* deals 84 damage. Boosting this spell to 4th level (or any level) increases both those numbers by the same proportion, and therefore doesn't change the fact that it's better for regular field use than as a follow-up to Paralysis.

Wall of fire, cast at 4th level, deals 19 expected damage per target, 22 expected damage per paralyzed target. Plus, when you cast *wall of fire* on a target who can move, they're usually smart enough to get the heck out before they take more damage—but a paralyzed target *can't*, and the soonest they'll get to make another saving throw to become unparalyzed is the end of their turn, at which time they'll get burned again. So really, it's 19 expected damage per target, 45 expected damage per paralyzed target. But wait—*that* assumes that the target succeeds on their second save, when the chance of succeeding on the second after failing the first is only 1 in 3. So now it's 19 expected damage per target, 60 expected damage per paralyzed target! We could go on, but even if we stop here, assuming two targets in the wall, this combo offers a net gain of 82 damage. Astonishingly effective, given how few targets it affects.

Prismatic spray is tricky, because five-eighths of the time it deals 10d6 damage on a failed save, one-fourth of the time it deals no damage (but rather imposes a debilitating condition), and one-eighth of the time it does damage equal to or greater than 10d6. Trust me when I say this works out to 23 expected damage per target, or 141 expected damage against six targets. Against four paralyzed targets, who all fail their saves, the expected damage is 28 per target, or a total of 112. Once again, contrary to expectations, Paralysis doesn't improve the result of an immediately following *prismatic spray*.

What if the nagpa gets a lucky break, and its targets are arranged just right, so that a *fireball* or *prismatic spray* could strike all six targets affected by Paralysis? Then *fireball* deals a total of 168 expected damage, a gain of 75 over its damage against four targets who are free to make Dex saves, while *prismatic spray* deals 169 total expected damage, a gain of just 28 over its expected damage against six unparalyzed targets. *Wall of fire*, amazingly, is still the best spell to combine with Paralysis—and that's without its targets being arranged so fortuitously that it can hurt more than two.

Paralysis recharges only on a roll of 6. It's entirely likely that the nagpa will get only one chance to use it in a combat encounter. Consequently, it's not going to waste it: It uses it only when six or more of its foes, or all of them if there are fewer than six, are within 30 feet of it. If it can position itself within 30 feet of this many opponents without putting itself at undue risk, it does so (movement), then uses Paralysis (bonus action) at the start of its turn and immediately follows it up with *wall of fire* (action), in whatever configuration incinerates as many paralyzed opponents as possible.

Incidentally, this isn't a bad way to kick off a combat encounter with a nagpa: If you can pull it off, have it use its various charms and deceptions to talk all its soon-to-be opponents into standing in a nice, straight line or a perfect circle! "Ah, that's excellent. Thank you. Now stay right where you are—I mean it!" **fwoom**

To analyze the rest of the nagpa's spells, I'm going to divide them between those that require concentration and those that don't. (Except for *counterspell*, which is cast as a reaction, all of these spells take an action to cast.)

CONCENTRATION REQUIRED

- *Dominate person* does just what it says on a failed Wisdom saving throw. Obviously not so good against a cleric or druid, but not so bad against a fighter or rogue who can then be sent to beat up a cleric or druid. The target gets a new saving throw every time they take damage, so the control may not last long, but that's assuming the PCs are willing to engage in friendly fire to break the charm.
- *Confusion* is somewhat weak compared to other things the nagpa can do: Its radius is small, generally affecting only two targets, and its results are unpredictable. If the nagpa has many minions, it becomes more effective, because that's more attacks that can be directed at bewildered targets while they stumble around.
- *Fly* makes the nagpa much faster, allows it free movement over difficult terrain, and can lift it out of an otherwise inescapable pit or other trap. Realistically, though, by the time PCs are high level enough to fight a nagpa, they have ways of flying, too, so it's a poor escape plan and mainly just makes the nagpa an easier target for archers. It does lift it out of melee reach, at least, but the opportunity cost (both in casting time and concentration) is high.
- *Hold person* is always good, though not necessarily for mopping up enemies that made their saves against Paralysis, because it's the same save. Boosting it to 4th level to paralyze three enemies is an attractive option.
- *Ray of enfeeblement* has the unattractive property of being most useful against those best equipped to resist it. However, the fact that the nagpa's spell save DC is so high makes it a barely plausible gambit against a high-Wisdom melee fighter who might shake off their paralysis at any moment.
- *Suggestion* and *detect magic* are not good uses of concentration, given what else the nagpa can do.
- *Protection from evil and good* is situational: A nagpa casts it only to defend itself against an aberration, celestial, elemental, fey, fiend, or undead of CR 6 or higher summoned by its opponents; or against two of CR 5, three of CR 4, four of CR 3, or six or more of CR 2.
- *Witch bolt* might be amusing to boost to 4th level if and only if the nagpa has nothing better to do with its concentration. Also, the amusement only lasts one round, after which *witch bolt* reverts to its base damage.

CONCENTRATION NOT REQUIRED

- *Feeblemind* takes an enemy out of the fight for good if they fail their saving throw. Since it calls for an Intelligence save, this one's bad against wizards and great against nearly everyone else. An irksome sorcerer, warlock, cleric, or druid casting evocation, transmutation, or necromancy spells is the ideal victim (unless they're a gnome—Gnome Cunning makes them a hard target).
- *Etherealness* is the nagpa's escape hatch. It has to be *very* careful, because it has only one 7th-level spell slot and one 8th-level spell slot. If it casts both *prismatic spray* and *feeblemind*, it has no more gas for its getaway vehicle.
- *Prismatic spray* is extremely strong—when the nagpa faces five or six opponents. Against four or fewer, it does no more damage than *fireball*, at much greater cost. And against seven or more—well, the nagpa *may* get lucky and hit more than six targets, but it shouldn't count on it.
- *Circle of death* wasn't included in the Paralysis discussion because it calls for a Constitution save, not a Strength or Dex save. It deals necrotic damage, the same amount as *fireball*, but over a *much* larger radius, so that it can potentially affect many more targets—a cool dozen, according to Targets in Areas. A nagpa facing a whole horde of foes breaks out *circle of death*.
- *Disintegrate*, on the other hand, is the big gun to pull out against a troublesome front-line fighter or skirmisher or an especially annoying support spellcaster. It deals no damage at all on a successful saving throw but an average of 75 damage on a failure, so the best target is one who's still struggling to shake off Paralysis or is restrained from being hit by *prismatic spray*'s indigo ray.
- *Dream* and *geas* both take 1 minute to cast and are therefore part of the nagpa's scheming kit rather than its scuffling kit.
- *Hallucinatory terrain*, which takes 10 minutes to cast, is the same.
- *Counterspell* is automatic against a 3rd- or lower-level spell that would require the nagpa to make a Dex or Con save. Against a 4th-level spell that would do the same, the nagpa upcasts it.

- *Charm person* is better used outside combat than in it. Corruption has the same effect (although it does last only one round), has three times the range, targets Charisma instead of Wisdom, costs no spell slot, doesn't require concentration, and uses a bonus action.

Paralysis plus *wall of fire* is the combo the nagpa is hoping to be able to set up, but if its opponents aren't in the right places to make it work when it's ready to kick off combat, it sucker-punches either the most threatening-looking enemy caster with *feeblemind* or (if there are too many threatening-looking enemy casters to choose from) the entire opposing side with *prismatic spray* or *circle of death*. If it chooses *prismatic spray*, it first positions itself where it can catch six or more enemies in the area of effect, or all of them if there are only five (if there are four or fewer, it doesn't bother with *prismatic spray* at all). It chooses *circle of death* only if there are at least a dozen enemy creatures in the area of effect.

After taking this action, the nagpa uses Corruption (bonus action!) to keep one of its foes from bothering it for a round. Since it targets Charisma, bards, paladins, sorcerers, warlocks, and snappily dressed rogues are bad bets, as are all elves and gnomes; barbarians, druids, rangers, and wizards are pretty good bets; and clerics, fighters, and monks fall somewhere in between. (A nagpa can tell the difference between spellcasting types at a glance.) Again, its top priorities are, primarily, to keep its opponents from casting spells that require Dex or Con saves, and secondarily, to keep them from hitting it with sharp or heavy things.

On subsequent rounds, it keeps maneuvering around until it can use Paralysis/*wall of fire* the way it wants to, taking the Corruption bonus action to temporarily neutralize an opponent whenever it can't use Paralysis. It doesn't cast *feeblemind* if it's already cast *prismatic spray*; it doesn't cast *prismatic spray* if it's already cast *feeblemind*. It saves *disintegrate* for a paralyzed opponent, but if its foes are taking too long to get into formation for Paralysis like they're supposed to, it casts *hold person* at 4th level against the three targets with the lowest Wisdom (with Intelligence 23, it knows who these are), to be followed up with *disintegrate* on its next turn. But it doesn't just cast *hold person* to make targets easier to hit, or to keep them from doing anything unneighborly. Having two or three enemies frozen in place makes it easier to bait the rest of one's enemies into position for Paralysis, and that's just what the nagpa does. If everyone lines up properly while the nagpa is preparing to cast *disintegrate*, it's happy to go ahead and cast that spell (action), use Paralysis while the window of opportunity is open (bonus action), and wait until its next turn to cast *wall of fire*.

The rest is all cleanup. The nagpa keeps *wall of fire* going for as long as there are at least two foes taking damage from it. When there aren't, it drops the spell and switches to *hold person* (if it hasn't cast that already) or *dominate person* (if it has). If a criterion for *protection from evil and good* is met, that spell trumps any other concentration-required spell except *wall of fire*. It casts *counterspell* against enemy magic as described above. Even against fewer than a dozen opponents, it doesn't mind using *circle of death* after showing off its Paralysis/*wall of fire* party piece, but first it takes advantage of any lingering paralysis to cast *disintegrate* (if it hasn't already) or *fireball* or to land auto-crits with its staff (only against enemies it doesn't have to walk through flames to get at).

Nagpas are both shrewd and prudent, and they have no particular desire to risk their necks. They cast *etherealness* and retreat when only moderately wounded (reduced to 130 hp or fewer). If *etherealness* is squelched somehow, they try *fly* (or Paralysis/*wall of fire*, if they haven't had the chance yet). If that's squelched, too, they keep fighting until they're seriously wounded (reduced to 74 hp or fewer), then flee, casting *witch bolt* (at 4th level if possible, otherwise at 2nd or 1st), *fireball*, *fire bolt* (3d10 fire damage), and, if truly desperate, *suggestion* to cover their retreat; and continuing to use Corruption to discourage their pursuers.

I. Yes, Arcana is normally based on a PC's Intelligence score—but it doesn't have to be. See *Player's Handbook*, chapter 7, "Variant: Skills with Different Abilities."

II. Not DC 18: Stealth vs. Perception is an ability *contest*, and ties preserve the status quo. See *Player's Handbook*, chapter 7, "Contests."

III. There's a typo in the Musket damage that at time of writing hasn't appeared in the *Mordenkainen's* errata: The average damage listed should be 8, not 7.

IV. People often say there's no facing in fifth edition D&D, but this isn't entirely true. By default, attacks can target anyone within reach, and line of sight does extend in all directions. However, the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, in chapter 8, does offer an optional facing rule that governs attack direction, though not line of sight. Also, just as general rules apply unless a specific rule overrides them, we can assume that real-world laws of nature apply unless a D&D rule—general or specific—overrides them. There's no rule that says a character can wield three weapons at once, one in each of their three hands—nor is there a rule that says they can't. That's because *we don't need to be told that humanoids have only two hands*.

In reality, people don't have 360-degree panoramic vision—and there's no rule that says they do in D&D. (In fact, there's a magic item, the *robe of eyes*, that explicitly grants this power, implying that it doesn't exist otherwise.) A character in combat achieves 360-degree awareness by constantly changing the direction

they're looking, not by looking in all directions at once.

Therefore, line of sight determines whether a creature *can be Seen*, not necessarily whether it *is Seen*. When a gish casts *misty step*, an opponent may know to look toward its starting position, but they have no idea and no way of knowing what its ending position will be. A Stealth-vs.-Perception contest is the most reasonable way to determine whether the opponent can reorient their awareness before getting whacked.

V. The jumping rules in fifth edition D&D are a stark contrast to the streamlined simplicity of the rest of the system. I strongly, *strongly* recommend that if you have any character—player or non-player—with the *jump* spell, you calculate both normal and spell-enhanced jumping distances *outside your play session*, and especially outside any combat encounter. Because I love you, dear reader, here are the numbers for the githzerai enlightened: Normally, it can make a standing long jump of 7 feet, a running long jump of 14 feet, a standing high jump of 2 feet, and a running high jump of 5 feet. With *jump* in effect, these values are tripled to 21 feet, 42 feet, 7 feet, and 15 feet. Of these, only the running long jump exceeds the enlightened's normal per-round movement, and with *haste* in effect, it still has movement to spare.

NPCs

APPRENTICE WIZARDS, BARDS, AND MARTIAL ARTS ADEPTS (v)

The new NPCs in *Volo's* fall into three categories: prospective boss enemies or boss lieutenants (the archdruid, blackguard, champion, kraken priest, war priest, and warlord), magic-using specialists (the abjurer, conjurer, diviner, enchanter, evoker, illusionist, necromancer, transmuter, and three warlock variants), and “other” (the apprentice wizard, bard, martial arts adept, master thief, and swashbuckler).

The **apprentice wizard** is exactly what you'd imagine—and why are you fighting this adorable yet mildly dangerous moppet, anyway? Assaulting Hogwarts is what the bad guys do, and that's not your PCs, right? Well, the apprentice wizard can be any alignment, so there's nothing that says they can't be apprentice to an *evil* wizard—or maybe one of the bullies, mean girls, or malcontents of their wizarding community. More likely, though, the apprentice wizard is fighting at your PCs' side.

With only 9 hp and unremarkable physical abilities, apprentice wizards shouldn't be fighting on the front line of any battle but rather taking cover somewhere. Because of apprentice wizards' merely average Dexterity, they should eschew ranged weapon attacks as well as melee; the dagger in the apprentice's belt is largely ornamental. If they're able, apprentice wizards attack with spells, and if not, they run and hide.

The apprentice wizard's spell repertoire is ultra-basic, and they have only two 1st-level spell slots—one for *burning hands* and one for *shield*. (The apprentice wizard mainly uses *disguise self* to appear older, taller, and more attractive.) As long as the apprentice wizard is behind cover, they stick with the *fire bolt* cantrip, which has a range of 120 feet, deals 1d10 fire damage, and ignites most flammable objects. In contrast, *burning hands* reaches only 15 feet, so the apprentice wizard casts this, as a self-defense measure, only when an enemy comes within range. They cast *shield* as a reaction the first time they're struck with a weapon attack.

When moderately injured (reduced to 6 hp or fewer), the apprentice wizard will Dash away. Despite their high Intelligence, the apprentice wizard doesn't have the martial training to know how to Disengage, and the opportunity attack(s) that Dashing away incurs could end badly for our little chum.

The **bard**, with high Dexterity, modestly above-average Constitution, and average Strength, can be a skirmisher if necessary but is better off sniping at range. Even “sniper” is too limiting a term, because like bard PCs, the bard NPC is essentially a *controller*, manipulating the battle to their allies' benefit.

The Song of Rest feature doesn't apply during a combat encounter (again, this is the sort of thing that comes into play if the bard NPC is accompanying the PCs' party), but the Taunt feature does. This is a bonus action, which means it can supplement the bard's action economy in any round except one in which they're casting *healing word*. Also, although it's limited to two uses per day, Taunt isn't a spell and doesn't consume a spell slot. Figure that the typical combat encounter lasts three rounds, and there's no reason *not* to use Taunt in any round in which the bard isn't casting *healing word* instead. (By round three, if the bard has already used Taunt twice, either their allies are romping, or they're definitely casting *healing word* on someone.)

Whom should the bard Taunt? Thinking defensively, any enemy that's coming for an ally who's less equipped than others to take an incoming blow. Alternatively, any enemy whose saving throws the bard wants to undermine.

Embracing the idea of the bard as controller of the battle, how can they do that?

- *Invisibility* has many uses, but the most bang surely comes from casting it on a rogue who can then perform a Sneak Attack. If there's a rogue among the bard's allies, the bard casts this in the first round of combat, so that the rogue

can go forth to strike a high-value target. If there's time for the rogue to get back to the bard for a re-up, they may even be able to pull this maneuver off a second time.

- *Shatter* is a horde-breaker spell, optimal against two or more enemies clustered together, especially squishy little ones such as kobolds, or ones that are made out of stone, crystal, or metal, such as gargoyles. Make sure not to catch any of the bard's allies in the area of effect.
- *Charm person* is most effective against an enemy without allies, one that hasn't yet been attacked by the bard or any of their allies. In a pinch, it may also be used to remove a key enemy from the battle. But the fact that it can be resisted with a Wisdom saving throw means it's not going to be as effective against spellcasters, who (except for sorcerers) tend to have decent Wisdom scores and may also have proficiency on Wisdom saves. If the target makes the save, that's a valuable action wasted, so it helps for the bard to know something either about the specific target or about that target's species in general. Another option is to Taunt (bonus action) to give a target disadvantage on saving throws, then cast *charm person* (action) against that Taunted target. This technique is known as "negging."
- *Healing word* is a bonus action, and a no-brainer anytime an ally is moderately or seriously injured. Will the bard boost it to 2nd level? Only if they're not going to have any reason to save their 2nd-level spell slots for *invisibility* or *shatter*, e.g., they don't have a rogue ally and are fighting a small number of stronger, more widely spaced enemies rather than a swarm of low-level ones. Keep in mind that if the bard casts *healing word* as a bonus action, they can't cast another leveled spell as their main action.
- *Heroism* is a nice buff for an ally who's likely to be a focus of enemy attacks. But it requires concentration, so it can't be sustained at the same time as *invisibility*. If the bard has a rogue ally, they prefer *invisibility*; otherwise, they cast *heroism* in the first round of combat.
- *Sleep* is another horde-breaker for use against swarms of weak enemies, and better than *shatter* if you're trying to be sneaky. Boost it only in those circumstances in which you'd also boost *healing word*.
- *Thunderwave* is the "Back off, man, I'm a rhapsodist" spell, used for self-defense against sudden melee invasion. It's not the kind of spell a bard is going to run right into the middle of a group of enemies to cast. Nor is the bard going to cast it at 2nd level, except in those circumstances in which they would do the same with *healing word*.
- *Friends* is a crude, rude manipulation cantrip that applies mainly to social interaction situations, not combat.
- *Mage hand* is good for playing the harp you left on the other side of the room when you don't want to get out of bed.
- *Vicious mockery* is a useful spell for the bard, for two reasons: First, being a cantrip, it can be cast in the same turn as *healing word*. Second, it includes part of the effect of Taunt, giving the target disadvantage on its next attack roll (but not ability check or saving throw), and also dealing a nominal amount of psychic damage, if the target fails its Wisdom saving throw. However, the bard should probably cast this cantrip only to blunt the attacks of a powerful enemy attacker, because it has no effect at all if the target makes its saving throw, and it does less damage than a shortbow. Though it seems like it might be redundant to combine Taunt with *vicious mockery*—and if the Taunt succeeded, it would be—*vicious mockery* is a decent backup if Taunt fails, since it targets a different ability (Wisdom instead of Charisma). But the bard should do this only for the aforementioned reasons, and only if there's no better spell to cast.

If the bard has a spell that's appropriate to the combat situation, they'll cast it. Only if there's no appropriate spell for the situation does the bard resort to a ranged weapon attack instead, targeting whoever seems to be doing the most damage or otherwise causing the most trouble. Most bards are canny enough to know that shooting a caster who's sustaining a spell may break that caster's concentration.

A bard retreats—and calls for their allies to do the same—when seriously injured (reduced to 17 hp or fewer). A College of Valor bard would probably know how to Disengage, but a College of Lore bard probably wouldn't—and Taunt seems to be a rebranding of the College of Lore feature Cutting Words. Either way, though, the bard is a team player (usually) and won't Dash away if their allies can't keep up, but rather will move away at full speed and either Dodge (action), cast spells, or shoot arrows while retreating.

The **martial arts adept** is a de facto level 5 Way of the Open Hand monk, without the Slow Fall class feature and without the Patient Defense or Step of the Wind ki features, but also with a d8 damage die instead of d6. Since this NPC's features are clearly geared toward melee combat, their ability score profile indicates a shock attacker.

The main choice we have to make with the martial arts adept is which Unarmed Strike effect to use on each hit. We can whip up a simple heuristic:

- Stun against any opponent with an Extra Attack, Multiattack, or bonus attack action.
- Drop item against any spellcaster holding an arcane or druidic focus or holy symbol, any opponent using a magic item, or a bard playing a musical instrument (then use their own free interaction to snatch it up before the opponent can).
- Knock prone as the first or second attack in a Multiattack (never as the third—the opponent will simply get back up on their own turn).

If an opponent meets more than one of these criteria, use the options in the above order, as applicable. If an enemy is already stunned, there's no need to knock it prone. If the opponent makes their saving throw against one type of attack, the adept can judge whether the opponent was lucky or just good, and use this information to inform its decision whether to try it again or move on to the next applicable effect.

For instance, say the adept is beating up on Epirotes the sorcerer, a fragile flower with Strength, Dex, and Con save modifiers of 0, +1, and +1. On the adept's first attack of the turn, they hit and try to make Epirotes drop his wand. Epirotes makes his saving throw, but the adept senses that this was a fluke: The sorcerer is frail, and he had only a 40 percent chance of maintaining his grip. On the second attack, the adept misses. Their plan was to try to knock Epirotes prone, since that effect would no longer make any sense on the third attack, but they've missed their window of opportunity. So on the third attack, when the adept hits, they try again to smack the wand out of Epirotes's hand.

Suppose instead that they're fighting Eofn, a feisty fighter with a polearm. Her Strength, Dex, and Con save modifiers are +4, +1, and +4. They know she'll probably resist any attempt to stun her, but since she's got an Extra Attack, they've got to try. Their first attack hits, and she makes her saving throw. No point in trying that again now; the next thing the adept does is try to knock her prone. Their second attack hits, and she fails her Dex save: She's on the ground. The adept makes their third attack with advantage, hitting easily, and what the heck, they may as well try stunning her again, since they can't knock her *more* prone, and her Extra Attack isn't going away. She makes the save again. Oh well, nothing ventured, nothing gained. In the meantime, it's worth noting, the adept has dealt $3d8 + 9$ damage to her—not too shabby for an unarmed attacker.

Of course, martial arts adepts need not confine themselves to fighting single opponents. If multiple enemies have engaged an adept in melee, they can aim blows at any or all of them, choosing additional effects suitable to the targets. The adept prioritizes targets the same way they prioritize effects, attacking opponents with robust action economies first, then attackers holding focuses or magic items, and finally anyone still standing up.

The martial arts adept retreats when seriously injured (reduced to 24 hp or fewer), using the Disengage action to ensure a clean getaway, thanks to their advanced training and exceptional speed.

SCOUTS AND SPIES

Scouts are spotters and lookouts. With proficiency in Perception and Stealth, they could be effective ambush attackers, but that's not their job. Their job is to gather information and return with it; combat is an undesirable complication. Consequently, if they attack at all, they prefer strongly to do so at range.

Eighty percent of the humanoids they encounter will have a speed of 30 feet. Of the remainder, most will have a speed of either 25 or 35 feet. Therefore, they don't position themselves any closer than 80 feet to their targets unless they absolutely have to, and if they have a good view, they're content to stay as far as 150 feet away. They can attack at these distances without disadvantage, but they're not assassins. They attack only in self-defense.

Whether they do even this much depends on the speed of any foe who sees and pursues them. If the subjects of their reconnaissance have a speed of 30 feet or slower, they take potshots (Multiattack, Longbow $\times 2$) at pursuers who are still more than 80 feet away at the start of the scouts' turn. If the pursuers are closer or faster, scouts Dash away. If more than one opponent manages to get within melee reach, or if they can't afford to take even a single hit, they Disengage—they have the training to do so.

Scouts only drop their bows and draw their swords when they're surrounded, with no avenue of escape. If they have no reason to think they'll be killed if they're captured, they may choose to surrender rather than fight.

Spies are like scouts, but more hands-on. Rather than simply observe from a distance, they often have to operate in their enemies' midst. Spies aren't assassins, either, but from time to time, if they're caught, they may have to fight someone to the death. To make this feasible, it's extremely important that they find or manufacture some source of advantage on each attack roll, so that they can maximize their damage via Sneak Attack, because they're not likely to have allies on the scene to distract their targets. If they can't do that, they need to head for the door.

Sadly, there's nothing in the spy stat block that enables a spy to blind, paralyze, knock prone, restrain, or stun an opponent. Nor does it include any sense that would allow the spy to see their opponent in darkness. This omission is easy to handwave: All you have to do is decide that your spy belongs to a race with darkvision. But this "solution" leads to a game world arms race in which only races with darkvision are spies, so I'm disinclined to go there.

One alternative is to get out of sight, then use Cunning Action to Hide as a bonus action, then Ready a Shortsword attack, counting on the enemy to pursue. But this isn't ideal, either. It costs spies the second melee attack they'd otherwise get by using Multiattack on their own turn, so that, at best, they deal $3d6 + 2$ damage (on average, 12) rather than $2d6 + 4$ (on average, 11). What they *really* want is a second Shortsword attack *and* Sneak Attack damage, and that can happen only on their own turn.

Ah, here's a loophole: The spy's Multiattack specifies "two melee attacks," not "two Shortsword attacks." That means spies can grapple and shove as part of their attack combos! Knocking an opponent prone, then grappling them—or vice versa—reduces the opponent's speed to 0, making them unable to get up. On their next turn, the spy can then stab with impunity—and advantage. Alas, there's a major downside: The spy's Strength is only 10, and they lack proficiency in Athletics. That doesn't bode well for the initial shoving or grappling attack. If it can be made to work at all, grapple/shove is preferable only if the spy doesn't *want* to kill the target—if they want instead to extract information under the *threat* of stabbing. (Which would be more effective if the spy had proficiency in Intimidation.)

Unless a spy gets exceptionally lucky, there's no way out of this mess. Not even Cunning Action offers spies a way to break line of sight, Hide, then attack at melee range in a single turn without being spotted again as they move in to strike. It looks like the only good application of the melee Multiattack/Sneak Attack combination is taking out guards in dim light, inasmuch as an already hidden spy can plausibly close the distance to their target without being spotted along the way. This maneuver deals 18 damage on average, 50 percent more than trying to do the same job from a distance with a hand crossbow.

No, if a spy is busted—and especially if a spy is busted by an entire party of player characters—their best recourse is to book it. Dodge isn't a good retreat action for spies: Their Armor Class is too low. They're better off Disengaging when engaged in melee with more than one opponent or when they can't afford to take a single hit, and Dashing when they *can* afford to take a single hit and/or their opponents are very likely to give chase. While retreating, they use Cunning Action to Hide as a bonus action as soon as they break line of sight, and they stay hidden as they complete their escape. Otherwise, they use their Cunning Action to Dash.

If they're cornered, however, spies fight to the death. Captured spies are nearly always killed, or at least tossed in nasty dungeons to think about what they've done for a long time, and the reputations of the organizations they belong to hang on their members' unwillingness to give up the secrets they've learned. This combination of factors produces a kind of zealotry that overrides their self-preservation impulses.

ARCHERS (v)

The stat block of the **archer** neglects the exceptional strength necessary to draw a longbow, but then again, so does fifth edition D&D as a whole, fancifully reducing archery to a matter of Dexterity alone rather than Strength and Dexterity together. It also exaggerates the prevalence of the longbow, a military field weapon whose size, range, and power struck terror into foes where they were deployed. The flavor text in *Volo's* mentions castle defense, hunting, and guarding caravans, but the bows used in all these instances would have been what D&D calls shortbows. (The *Player's Handbook* does at least draw the correct distinction of categorizing longbows as *martial* weapons.)

I know, we're playing a *fantasy* game, but I bring up these stubborn facts to highlight the nature of the NPC archer. Historians report that between six and eight thousand English and Welsh longbowmen loosed forty-two thousand arrows

per minute at the watershed Battle of Crécy in 1346—a rate of one arrow per archer every five to seven seconds. The NPC archer's Multiattack action allows it to shoot *twice* every six seconds, at much smaller targets than the French army. Moreover, without slowing down, they can use their Archer's Eye trait to add 1d10 to either an attack roll or a damage roll three times per day.

This NPC is a cinematic super-archer—Legolas, not John Bendbow, and certainly not the kind of caravan guard you can hire for 2 gp per month. None but the richest empire could afford to line a whole castle wall with them. (Also, Acrobatics +6? Yeah, definitely Legolas.)

Recognizing this fact, we should look at the archer's tactics as those of an individual marksman, not as a member of a whole unit of archers. For starters, their above-average Wisdom doesn't merely endow them with good Perception; it also makes them good at selecting targets and looking after themselves. This archer is a sniper, shooting from the best cover available and picking off key opponents. If there are hidden foes on the field who've out-Stealthed their passive Perception, an archer may forgo their Multiattack in order to take the Search action instead. When they spot a concealed enemy, they call out the enemy's position to their allies, then use Archer's Eye as a bonus action at the end of their turn, priming their next shot. Alternatively, rather than Search, they can Ready a Longbow attack and wait for the enemy to reappear by attacking or moving out into the open.

Archer's Eye offers a choice between improving to-hit chance and increasing damage. Increasing damage makes the bigger difference more often than not, but it depends on a successful hit, and in a battle that may be over quickly, *not missing* may be the more important consideration. Therefore, even though probability math favors adding the Archer's Eye die to damage against any target with AC 18 or less, the archer instead adds the die to their attack roll against any target wearing medium or heavy armor or possessing easily noticeable natural armor, in order to get their hit probability above two-thirds. Think of it as aiming for the soft, exposed spots rather than merely hoping to hit one of them with a long draw.

If the archer has advantage on an attack roll, they can afford to add the die to damage against moderately armored opponents—and even heavily armored ones, if they aren't carrying shields. If they have disadvantage, they always add the die to the attack roll. They use Archer's Eye whenever they're shooting at a target they perceive to be the most important on the field, which is generally the one that poses the most threat to the archer's allies, such as a boss creature, if an obvious one presents itself, or a hard-to-get-at spellcaster or commanding officer.



Even becoming a real-life, historically correct longbowman demanded lifelong training. The NPC archer, who's basically a superhero, values their awesome prowess far too highly to fight to the death. In fact, given the distance they keep from the action, if they take any damage at all, things are going badly. An archer retreats when only moderately wounded (reduced to 52 hp or fewer); if retreat isn't feasible, either because there's no path available or because their allies want to keep fighting, the archer drops prone behind cover and lies low until the heat is off. Although they have a Shortsword attack, which they're proficient with, an archer fights hand to hand only if the alternative is death. Given the opportunity to be taken alive instead, the archer surrenders.

MAGICAL SPECIALISTS (v)

Volo's includes stat blocks for 11 different magic-using specialists: wizards from eight different schools and warlocks of three different patrons. The wizards are all at least level 7; the warlocks, even higher. There are also a level 9 war priest, a level 10 blackguard (antipaladin), and a level 18 archdruid. Every one of these spellcasters has a different repertoire of spells. To come up with individual tactics for each of them would take fifty extra pages.

Rather than tackle each one separately, then, I'm going to share some rules of thumb for developing tactics for a spellcasting NPC.

BEGIN WITH ABILITY SCORES

Most spellcasters want to keep their distance from the action. I say "most" because I'm all about busting stereotypes; creating a beefy, brawny guy who's also the best dang transmuter in the duchy is exactly the sort of thing I'd do. But more typically, spellcasters—especially wizards—have low to average Strength and below-average to above-average Constitution, relying on a higher Dexterity to avoid taking damage and their spells to deal it out. Few of their spells require them to get up close and personal (that's more of a cleric/paladin thing), so they prefer to keep their distance. What distance is optimal? Somewhere between 40 feet and the range of their shortest-range combat spell.

CALCULATING SPELL DAMAGE

Spell damage depends on two things: number of targets and whether it's a spell attack or a spell that requires a saving throw. Based on the simplistic premise that the caster's spell attack modifier and the target's Armor Class will cancel each other out (I don't use this premise myself, but you can use it as a shortcut), the probability of hitting a target with a ranged spell attack is roughly fifty-fifty, so the expected damage is half the average damage on a hit. (For example, *scorching ray*, cast at 2nd level, deals 2d6 fire damage per ray, or an average of 7 damage. The spell's expected damage is therefore 10 for three rays.) Since spells that require saving throws usually do half damage on a success and full damage on a failure, multiply their average damage by three-fourths to calculate expected damage.

To calculate the damage of an area-effect spell, use Targets in Areas to figure out how many targets the spell *should* hit, then multiply the expected damage for one target by that number of targets. Assume that the spellcaster won't cast that spell unless they can catch at least that many targets in its area of effect.

Spell attack modifier and spell save DC are chained together, so you won't ever get a caster with an unusually high spell attack mod and an unusually low save DC, nor vice versa. Because of this, you're not going to end up with casters who either specialize in spell attacks or avoid them. You will see an overall preference for save-dependent spells among all casters, simply because such spells usually do *some* damage even when the targets make their saves, thus increasing these spells' expected damage by about 50 percent.

Generally speaking, a spellcaster brings out their biggest guns first—but there are exceptions. A particularly cocky spellcaster might prefer to expend as little effort as possible at first, ramping up the damage only when they realize that the opposition aren't pushovers.

TIME'S NOT ON YOUR SIDE

Fifth edition D&D assumes that a typical combat encounter lasts three rounds, maybe four or five. Spellcasters often have more spells than time to cast them. Therefore, it's important to identify their most efficacious spells before the encounter begins. You can feel free to cross off any spell that takes longer than 1 action to cast or that has neither a damaging effect, a defensive effect, nor a movement effect.

On the other hand, spells that enhance a character's action economy are worth their weight in gold. These are the spells that are cast as either a bonus action or a reaction, which means they can be combined with other actions (though leveled spells cast as bonus actions can't be combined with other leveled spells, only with cantrips). Paladins have a *lot* of these: *compelled duel*, *divine favor*, *shield of faith*, *magic weapon*, and all the *smite* spells. Clerics have *healing word* and *mass healing word*, *sanctuary*, *shield of faith*, *spiritual weapon* (this one is so good, you almost have to assume that any NPC who has it casts it before doing literally anything else), and *divine word*. Druids have *healing word*, *flame blade*, *grasping vine*, and the *shillelagh* cantrip. A bard may have *feather fall* or *healing word*. Wizards and sorcerers have *expeditious retreat*, *feather fall*, *shield*, *misty step*, and *counterspell*, and wizards additionally have *magic weapon*, which they should cast on their staves or daggers when an enemy gets within melee range of them. Warlocks have *expeditious retreat*, *hellish rebuke*, *hex*, *misty step*, and *counterspell*.

Any bonus action spell that's applicable to the situation, plus a damaging cantrip, is at least as good as a leveled spell that takes an action to cast. *Spiritual weapon*, I have to mention again, is truly spectacular, because it keeps going without concentration, providing a bonus action every turn, until the combat encounter ends. (Technically, until 1 minute has gone by, but that's a 10-round combat encounter. Relatively few encounters last that long.) And wizards and sorcerers should always keep spell slots in reserve for *shield* and *counterspell*.

THE VALUE OF SPELL SLOTS

I value spell slots not by their level but by their scarcity. The rationale for this is that a *fireball* cast using a 4th-level spell slot is approximately as good as any 4th-level spell. However, higher-level spells tend to have effects that lower-level spells don't duplicate. In other words, if all you want to do is hurt someone with fire, you can use *fireball*, or you can use *scorching ray*, or you can even use *fire bolt*. But if you want to become invisible and stay that way even if you're attacking or casting spells, you're going to have to cast *greater invisibility*.

A level 9 wizard has four 1st-level spell slots; three 2nd-, 3rd-, and 4th-level slots; and one 5th-level slot. That wizard will only use their 5th-level slot to cast a 5th-level spell, unless that spell is clearly inapplicable to the situation. Why? Because there's no other slot they can use to cast that spell. It's unique.

On the other hand, those three 4th-level slots can be used to cast 4th-level spells *or* 2nd- or 3rd-level spells boosted to 4th level. This is where expected damage calculations come into play, because, for instance, the 3rd-level *fireball* spell does more damage when boosted to 4th level than the 4th-level *ice storm* spell does. *Ice storm* is 4th-level because it produces an additional movement-impeding effect; if you don't need to impede movement, you may as well just boost *fireball* for the extra damage. Wizards tend to be smart cookies, and they know what their spells can do. They're good judges of which spell suits the occasion better.

The wizard won't waste a 4th-level slot on boosting a 1st-level spell, though. Those are simple, dime-a-dozen utility spells. There's rarely anything they can do, even boosted, that a higher-level spell can't do better. And the wizard's *four* 1st-level spell slots aren't good for anything except casting 1st-level spells. So anytime the wizard needs to cast a 1st-level spell, they'll use a 1st-level slot for it.

Note that warlock spells are always boosted to the caster's highest spell level, no matter what. Warlocks also have very few spell slots, so they have to make every leveled spell count.

SPECIAL FEATURES

Each NPC spellcaster archetype has a special feature related to their specialty. These I'll look at individually, because they affect the spellcaster's tactical decisions in different ways.

- The **abjurer** has Arcane Ward, a recharging magical barrier that soaks up damage that would otherwise affect them. The main effect of this ward is to allow the abjurer not to retreat to a safer distance if charged by a melee attacker. This ward, plus a high Constitution, lets the abjurer survive in the middle of the fray for longer than a spellcaster normally would.
- The **archdruid** has Change Shape. One word: mammoth.
- The **blackguard** has Dreadful Aspect, which affects every enemy within 30 feet. They therefore have a strong incentive to wade right into the middle of the fray. Combined with the high-Strength, high-Con ability contour of a brute, this feature suggests a pure tank style.

- The **conjurer** has Benign Transportation, allowing them to teleport up to 30 feet as a bonus action each time they cast a conjuration spell (marked in the stat block with an asterisk). Useful as a way of maintaining distance, but also useful for getting out of trouble by swapping places with a tougher ally.
- The **diviner** has Portent, a useful risk reducer, giving them a chance to change the outcome of an unappealing roll—their own, an ally’s, or an enemy’s—at a crucial moment. They can buy more uses of this feature for the cost of a spell slot and an action—which the stat block characterizes as “casting a divination spell,” except that none of the divination spells the diviner has is especially useful in combat, so the actual function of the spell ends up being somewhat superfluous.
- The **enchanter** has Instinctive Charm, a defensive measure.
- The **evoker** has Sculpt Spells, which lets them semi-safely cast damaging area-effect spells with allies inside the area of effect—kind of a big deal, especially since the evoker has a lot of those spells.
- The **illusionist** has Displacement, which they should be using all the time, especially considering that it’s a non-spell bonus action, so it can be combined with a leveled spell in a single turn.
- The **necromancer** has Grim Harvest, which gives them an incentive to rely on necromancy spells (marked in the stat block with asterisks) as much as possible—and also to keep attacking unconscious opponents in order to suck up their death saves.
- The **transmuter** has Transmuter’s Stone, which has one of several different effects, and it’s cheating to decide that it starts off with exactly that effect that will be most effective against your PCs. Pick one that suits the transmuter’s stats and personality. That being said, a transmuter with a speed boost stone uses it to Disengage from melee and maintain a safe distance from enemies; the other options won’t affect the transmuter’s tactics. However, since the transmuter can change the effect of the stone on the fly as a free action after casting a transmutation spell, they can make informed decisions once they see what the PCs are capable of. In a subterranean setting, against a party comprising only humans and halflings, it may make sense to choose the darkvision effect, then take out the lights. Against chargy melee fighters, the speed boost is helpful. Against one or more rogues, the Con save proficiency offers resistance against poison. Against a magic-user casting spells that do elemental damage, or against magic weapons that do the same, resistance to the appropriate element is de rigueur. The transmuter is intelligent enough that they can make an educated guess about the PCs’ predilections after one round of combat, without having to actually suffer damage from any of the aforementioned situations.
- The **warlock of the Archfey** has Misty Escape, a handy bailout measure, but also one that allows them to make a subsequent attack from a concealed location, an opportunity they should make the most of.
- The **warlock of the Fiend** has Dark One’s Own Luck. The time to use this is when the warlock is moderately wounded (reduced to 54 hp or fewer).
- The **warlock of the Great Old One** has Whispering Aura, a passive effect. Since it has a range of 5 feet and affects everyone the warlock wants it to affect—and since the warlock also has a high Constitution—they have every motivation to wade right into the midst of their enemies.

WHEN TO FLEE

It takes a lot of work to become a wizard, and that’s not an investment that wizards take lightly. They’re also, usually, fragile flowers. They need only be moderately injured (reduced to 70 percent of their maximum hit points or fewer) for discretion to seem like the better part of valor. They tend not to have great Armor Classes or move unusually quickly, so their best choice is to Dash away without further delay, unless they have some kind of spell or feature that can cover their escape, in which case they use that spell or feature, then Dash on their next turn.

Other spellcasters live closer to the edge (and also tend to be more durable). It takes being seriously injured (reduced to 40 percent of their maximum hit points or fewer) to induce them to run away.

SWASHBUCKLERS AND MASTER THIEVES (v)

The **swashbuckler** of *Volo’s* doesn’t bear much resemblance to the swashbuckler rogue archetype in *Xanathar’s Guide to Everything*, chapter 1. Instead, it has a passive trait, Suave Defense, that increases its Armor Class and an action economy—

enhancing trait, Lightfooted, that grants it either Dash or Disengage as a bonus action. (This trait is actually a slightly nerfed version of Cunning Action, which also allows the user to Hide.)

The swashbuckler is distinguished by an exceptionally high Dexterity; expert proficiency in Acrobatics, Athletics, and Persuasion; and a Florentine-style Rapier/Rapier/Dagger Multiattack. The Dexterity, combined with the melee Multiattack, indicates a shock attacker who deals a bunch of damage and then withdraws. (The dagger can be used as a ranged weapon, but a swashbuckler who does this forfeits two-thirds of that Multiattack.) How do we achieve this, given that the swashbuckler has only a normal 30-foot movement speed?

The trouble for the swashbuckler, whose Armor Class is high enough to make Dodge the standout choice of retreat action, is that Lightfooted only allows them to choose between Dash and Disengage. On the other hand, the swashbuckler isn't *fleeing* most of the time, but simply trying to minimize the opponent's ability to deal damage.

There are two possible cases: Either combat begins with the swashbuckler and their opponent within melee reach of each other, or it begins with them out of reach. If they're in melee reach, then the swashbuckler can Multiattack (action), then either Dash or Disengage (bonus action), then move. If they're out of melee reach, the swashbuckler must use some or all of their movement (move), Multiattack (action), either Dash or Disengage (bonus action), then make use of any remaining movement.

Let's stipulate that the swashbuckler's opponent has the baseline movement speed of 30 feet. This means that in order to keep an opponent from striking back, the swashbuckler has to get *more* than 30 feet away. The greatest possible movement the swashbuckler has in one turn is 60 feet, which requires Dash. If the swashbuckler is 35 feet from their opponent, they must both Dash *and* move to come within melee range, then have only 25 feet of movement remaining—not enough to get out of reach again. So a swashbuckler who's out of range to begin with doesn't have much incentive to come *in* range. Rather, swashbucklers should wait for opponents to come to them. (If those opponents insist instead on hanging back and shooting, that's a situation that calls for commencing negotiations from behind total cover.)

The second difficulty the swashbuckler faces is the provocation of an opportunity attack every time they move out of an opponent's reach, unless they Disengage. But Disengage doesn't give the swashbuckler enough movement to *stay* out of reach—for that, they have to Dash. That being said, if your opponent has an Extra Attack or a Multiattack, it always makes sense to risk *one* opportunity attack in order to avoid being targeted by two or three. Thus, against such opponents, the swashbuckler should generally prefer Dash over Disengage.

However, if the swashbuckler is engaged in melee with two or more opponents, that equation flips. Now it becomes a function of how many opportunity attacks they're subjected to while slipping out of reach and how many of those opponents are likely to pursue. If the number of opponents is greater than the total number of attacks the swashbuckler's *equally fast or faster* opponents can make as actions, the swashbuckler should Disengage. If it's equal or less, the swashbuckler should Dash. "Equally fast or faster" is important: A half-elf swashbuckler (speed: 30 feet) surrounded by hostile halflings (speed: 25 feet) can outpace them easily and should Disengage without a second thought.

Now, this all assumes level ground. But look at the illustration of the swashbuckler in *Volo's*, leaping around in ship's rigging. (And holding on to a rope with one hand, which will have to have an effect on that Multiattack, but that's a side issue.) If the swashbuckler can *climb* out of reach, rather than simply leg it, this opens up other options. Climbing speed is only half normal movement speed (more accurately, every 1 foot of climbing distance costs an extra 1 foot of movement—*Player's Handbook*, chapter 8, "Climbing, Swimming, and Crawling"), but on the flip side, unless opponents are both athletic enough and inclined to pursue, the swashbuckler doesn't have to go as far to stay out of reach: 10 feet is enough, rather than the 35 feet they'd normally have to cover. Apply the equation again, this time counting the total number of attacks that opponents *who can keep up by climbing* can make as actions, and Disengage may be a more promising choice than it would be otherwise.

Swashbucklers should always make maximum use of terrain to make pursuit difficult. If they can jump up, down, or through a terrain feature that opponents can't, they should.

Being a shock attacker, the swashbuckler doesn't play coy but rather charges in to land that triple Multiattack as swiftly as possible, then Multiattacks again on their next turn before retreating out of range. This *charge-attack, attack-retreat, charge-attack, attack-retreat* rhythm gives the swashbuckler good odds of dealing substantial damage while minimizing risk.

Swashbucklers value their pretty faces. If they're moderately wounded (reduced to 46 hp or fewer), they start looking for an escape route and take it at the next opportunity. They also keep a running patter throughout the battle, taunting the

opposition if it's weaker, dickering for an alternative to fighting if it's stronger.

The **master thief** is just that: a thief. They're *not* an assassin. A thief, ideally, wants to get what they came for with as little hassle as possible—high-speed, low-drag. They have every incentive to avoid combat, along with anything else that might interfere with a clean getaway. Thus, the master thief fights only to remove such interference as swiftly and cleanly as possible, to punish a rival, or if cornered.

With exceptional Dexterity and high Constitution, the master thief is a scrapper who'll have to remain engaged for a while to finish an opponent off if they can't do it immediately with a Sneak Attack. But again, the master thief doesn't want to remain engaged in melee, because it's a waste of time. Either the first strike eliminates the opponent, or it doesn't; either way, the master thief isn't strongly inclined to stick around for more.

The master thief is proficient in Acrobatics, Athletics, and Stealth, using the last of these to get around undetected and all three to get away. The Cunning Action feature grants Dash, Disengage, and Hide as available bonus actions; unless surrounded by opponents, the master thief mostly uses Dash and Hide. The combined effect of Evasion and Uncanny Dodge is to double their staying power. This NPC is hard to catch and harder to kill.

The master thief *always* wants to be the one to strike first, ideally from hiding, because the easiest way to gain advantage on an attack roll (the primary trigger condition for Sneak Attack) is to be an unseen attacker, and ideally from melee range, because the master thief's Multiattack grants *three* Shortsword attacks, whereas they can shoot a crossbow only once. Sneak Attack applies to the first hit; if all three attacks land, that's a total of $7d6 + 12$ stabby damage, about 36 damage on average.

That may not be enough to bring down an intermediate-level adventurer, however, so the master thief needs to decide quickly whether it's necessary to finish the opponent off or make a hasty exit. In most cases, the master thief errs toward exiting. Between a decently high Armor Class and the Uncanny Dodge feature, the master thief can choose Dash over Disengage without fear, because even if they're struck by an opportunity attack, the damage will be halved.

The master thief can Dash as both an action *and* a bonus action, *tripling* their movement. Alternatively, a master thief who's unexpectedly surrounded can use Disengage as an action and Dash as a bonus action (or vice versa), allowing them to move a full 60 feet without being subjected to a single opportunity attack.

The master thief doesn't need to be seriously or even moderately injured to flee: They flee *immediately* after striking that first Sneak Attack blow, except when taking one more turn to try to finish an opponent off. That being said, a master thief who's seriously wounded (reduced to 33 hp or fewer) while being pursued by opponents will *stop* fleeing, surrender to their pursuers, and try to cut a deal. There's nothing the master thief is willing to die for.

INTELLIGENT ENEMIES

It's a challenge that runs throughout D&D and every other roleplaying game that quantifies mental capacities: How do you roleplay a character or creature with greater intelligence, wisdom, or charisma than you yourself possess? (For that matter, how do you play having significantly *less*? I'm reminded of the one good bit in the otherwise god-awful Robert A. Heinlein book *Friday*, in which the main character, a covert agent, has to take an IQ test and hit a predetermined score exactly.) In social interaction skill checks, it can be handwaved—and often is—with a die roll in lieu of roleplaying. But combat, with its round-by-round mechanical decision making, requires something more.

With respect to Intelligence (the ability) in particular, it behooves us to think about what we mean when we talk about intelligence (in general), and one important aspect of intelligence is something we might call “quickness of apprehension”: the ability to rapidly recognize the importance of what one sees or hears. This quality is one we see in great detectives of literature, such as Sherlock Holmes, who hoovers up every visual detail at a crime scene in moments, or Nero Wolfe, who pounces on an out-of-place phrase in a conversation which signifies consciousness of guilt. Any detective of ordinary or slightly above-average intelligence could find the same clues, but it would take hours of examining the crime scene or poring over a verbatim transcript of the conversation, and most would give up long before then.

In a D&D combat situation, this manifests in a highly intelligent creature's being able to read the room. It can tell a fighter from a paladin, a wizard from a sorcerer, or a Life Domain cleric from a Light Domain cleric. It can get a sense of a character's Strength by observing the force of their weapon strikes, their Dexterity by watching them dodge attacks, their Constitution by watching them take hits, their Intelligence and Wisdom by listening to them call out to their allies. It notes who's got magical weapons and what they do. It pays attention to how badly injured its opponents are. It observes the opponents' positioning, notices when someone has made a blunder, and capitalizes on it. It's mindful of its own weaknesses and the need to avoid, neutralize, or eliminate opponents who might target those weaknesses.

If a monster possesses superhuman intelligence, i.e., Intelligence 19 or higher (and yeah, some player characters have ability scores this high, but let's stipulate that these PCs are basically superhuman themselves—the normal distribution of ability is and always has been 3 to 18), it's so perspicacious that it can glean precise information about an opponent's abilities at a mere glance, as if it were reading the opponent's character sheet or stat block. In other words, you as the DM can let it know anything and everything *you* know, as long as it *could* know these things by some plausible information vector.

A highly intelligent monster or villain also strategizes—and here we need to clarify the distinction between strategy and tactics, especially since a lot of the time, when I talk about monster “tactics,” I'm lumping strategies in along with them. In brief, strategy is an overall plan for what a creature wants and how, in broad strokes, it plans to go about getting it; tactics are the specific *techniques* it uses to get what it wants. For instance, a goblin's *strategy* for fighting in the outdoors is to avoid melee engagement, snipe from a distance, and make maximum use of cover in order to attack unseen. Shoot/move/Hide is the primary *tactic* it uses to carry out this strategy.

Strategy involves many different things, but most of these things boil down to comparative advantages and disadvantages—exploiting them and, when possible, creating them. While less intelligent monsters can “strategize” a little bit, it mostly boils down to instinctive use of their particular abilities. More intelligent monsters, in contrast, are aware of their weaknesses as well as their strengths and look for ways to compensate for them. This compensation may take the form of allies that, in rock-paper-scissors fashion, are well equipped to target the weaknesses of those who would attack the intelligent monster/villain's weakness. It may take the form of traps or protective magic. It may take the form of alarms and escape routes. It may take the form of defensible terrain or architecture.

In other words, highly intelligent monsters and villains don't fight on a featureless plain. They construct an environment that's favorable to them and unfavorable to foes. They tilt the playing field in their own favor.

If given the opportunity to engage the same opponent more than once, they also learn. My own players once followed the trail of a mind flayer that had established a lair in a cave near a string of small, isolated villages, whose inhabitants it had either dominated or pod-peopled using intellect devourers. Inside the lair, they found it had also somehow managed to put a beholder under a *geas* and posted it as a sentry. The fight with the beholder went poorly: Two of the five party members got petrified, and while the rest managed to finish the beholder off, they had to retreat in order to get help. When they returned, the mind flayer had completely reconfigured its security. Before, the mouth of the cave had been guarded by two dominated oni, but now there were two oni *and a semicircular ring of twenty commoners*, all facing outward, doing double duty as lookouts and hostages. In addition, three newly dominated ogres patrolled the cave's interior passages, alert for intruders.

Suppose the party goes up against a smart boss villain that's also a spellcaster, and both sides survive the first combat encounter. The next time the PCs meet this villain, it will remember how the first battle went, including whether and how the PCs got the better of it. It will recall which of its enemies posed the most serious threats. And in all likelihood, it will have taken the time to study a new spell or two, specifically intended for use against those particular PCs.

Creatures that act purely on instinct—or are simply stupid—tend to have one modus operandi that they use over and over again and to be unable to adapt if it stops working. Smart creatures, on the other hand, have contingency plans. To paraphrase Teddy the arsonist in the movie *Body Heat*, if you can think of even half of the ways a plan can go wrong, you're a genius. Conversely, if you are, in fact, a genius, doesn't that speak pretty well to your ability to anticipate ways a plan can go awry? As a DM, you can take advantage of your own knowledge of your players' go-to strategies and assume that your clever villain has already predicted that someone might try those things—or at least something like them, though maybe not *exactly* like them. Moreover, while a dumb brute only does one thing, a smart creature knows how to do *lots* of things. If its stat block doesn't contain lots of things it can do, then maybe its native terrain contains them, or its home base does, or its inventory does... you get the idea. And we're not necessarily talking Inspector Gadget-level technology, either. Medieval and Renaissance engineers knew well that you can achieve many things with simple machines.

Intelligent creatures recognize the value of information, and they try to acquire as much of it as they can. This means lore, but it also means news. Does your big bad spend most of its time in one location? Then you can bet it has agents in *other* locations sending reports back to it. Maybe it sries on potential threats or communes with supernatural entities for advice and warnings. Maybe it has spies embedded in organizations, friendly (or dominated) critters watching the terrain, the power of psychic telepathy. Alternatively, maybe it sees the value in staying on the move and gathers its own information under cover of stealth and/or disguise. Certainly any creature trying to stay a step ahead of its rivals is on the lookout for sources of powerful esoteric knowledge and wants to get its hands on them before others do, so when the PCs get wind of the existence of such lore, they'll have to race to get to it first—and may find themselves beaten to the prize.

So far, this discussion has mostly centered on individual monsters and NPCs, but what about groups? A smart commander knows the capabilities of its subordinates. To return to my mind flayer example, in its lair, it had a variety of minions: not just dominated commoners and that one beholder but also grimlocks, ogres, and a grell. It sent the grell against the halfling ranger/rogue because he was an archer, and the mind flayer deemed him the most dangerous threat; the grell could pick him up off the ground, restrain him, and potentially paralyze him, and he'd take falling damage if he struggled free. It sent the ogres after the barbarian to monopolize her attention, a mob of commoners after the paladin because he would have trouble bringing himself to fight them, and grimlocks after the other two PCs because nothing about them seemed exceptionally dangerous to it. None of these minions had much savvy regarding target selection, but the mind flayer did, and it deployed them accordingly.

Similarly, in a whole team of smart creatures, each knows what its allies can do and looks for opportunities to synergize with them. As an example, let's throw together some snaky types: a yuan-ti abomination, a yuan-ti nightmare speaker, several type 1 yuan-ti malisons, a spirit naga, and what the heck—let's say they've picked

up a medusa buddy along the way. The nightmare speaker and the naga can both cast *hold person*, and the malisons can descend on paralyzed targets to attack them with advantage and land automatic critical hits. The malisons can cast *suggestion* and say, “It would be foolish to split up; there’s safety in numbers!”—driving their foes to cluster themselves, the better to hit them with the nightmare speaker’s *bunger of Hadar*. With everyone properly positioned, the abomination can use *fear* to drive enemies toward the medusa, while the medusa—keeping herself concealed from the eyes of her allies—shoots a fusillade of arrows at targets paralyzed by *hold person* or restrained by the abomination.

In short, a very intelligent creature or NPC has the benefit of knowing more of what you, the DM, know—and, more significantly, what you know and your players don’t. That doesn’t mean it knows everything the PCs know, but it does make it fairly easy for your brainy villain to always stay one step ahead of them.

KRAKEN PRIESTS (V)

The **kraken priest**'s ability contour is highest in Constitution, second-highest in Wisdom, with Strength and Dexterity a good ways behind. This NPC is a spellcaster first and foremost, and arguably a support spellcaster first and foremost, rather than a spellslinger hiding way in the back. Charisma is also high; Intelligence, merely average.

Presumably through the kraken's influence, the KP has resistance to physical damage from nonmagical weapons and can breathe underwater. That's pretty much it in the way of distinctive passive features. Aside from spellcasting—which isn't all that unusual for, you know, a priest—the KP's only distinctive active features are the actions Thunderous Touch and Voice of the Kraken.

Voice of the Kraken recharges only after a rest, so it's a once-per-combat ability, with the effect of... frightening people. For up to 1 minute. That's it. And the DC is only 14, which the average adventurer has a fifty-fifty chance of meeting or beating. Granted, it can affect a *lot* of people at once—a radius of 300 feet, if you go by Targets in Areas, should affect somewhere in the neighborhood of sixty people, and if most of those are commoners who make their saving throws as a mob, only one in three will succeed, meaning anyone *not* frightened has to make their way past forty screaming, panicking bystanders. Other than that, the bulk of this feature's usefulness lies in its chance of imposing disadvantage on incoming attacks for a round, maybe two.

Thunderous Touch is a melee spell attack. Since the kraken priest doesn't routinely plow into melee, but rather hangs back a short distance behind other minions who *are* plowing into melee, this is more a get-away-from-me kind of attack. For that purpose, though, it certainly does the trick: An average of 28 thunder damage on a hit will certainly make an assailant question their decision.

The real meat of this stat block lies in the spells. Let's go down the list:

- *Evard's black tentacles* depends a lot on where the kraken priest is holding services. Out in the open, it's fairly easy to avoid and only worth using if the priest can drop it on at least four enemies at once. In a more confined area, like a shrine in a sea cave or aboard a ship, it's more powerful, though four enemies is still the minimum criterion for casting it. It requires concentration, which means it can't be used in conjunction with *call lightning*, which would have been a great combo. Unless you have *two* kraken priests working together, in which case... mwahahaha.
- *Call lightning* is a great spell overall, but even more so against front-line melee opponents who rely more on Constitution than Dexterity. In combat in an open area, this is a no-brainer—a far superior alternative to *Evard's*.
- *Control water* can be devastating against a ship. The KP can use the Flood option to smash it into a cliff or the Part Water option to cause it to plummet to the seafloor, as long as the water's less than 100 feet deep. Once the ship is destroyed, the KP switches to Whirlpool to torment the poor unfortunate souls whose vessel is now a pile of matchsticks. The Redirect Flow option is useful for making the tide flow *out* of the aforementioned sea cave, making it harder for intruders to row their way in, while Flood can fill it with water, forcing foes to engage in underwater combat. All kinds of good choices here, but again, it requires concentration.
- *Darkness*, for the KP, is most useful for blinding spellcasters, ideally at least three of them. And it requires concentration, leaving Thunderous Touch as the only effective means of dealing direct damage.
- *Water breathing* doesn't require concentration (yay!), but the kraken priest is Amphibious and doesn't need it (aww). Instead, the kraken priest casts it on up to ten of their minions, if it would be useful for them to be able to breathe underwater as well.
- *Water walk* is the alternative to *water breathing* to use on minions who'll be more effective on top of the water rather than under it. Both this and the previous spell can be applied to said minions before combat begins.
- *Command* is useful for the usual reasons—imposing the prone condition, provoking opportunity attacks, pulling an enemy into melee range—but depending on how much you believe the text of the spell limits you, you may wish to explore what happens when the kraken priest commands an opponent to “Dive!”
- *Create or destroy water* has one primary function in kraken priest combat: neutralizing a chunk of a *fog cloud*.

Unfortunately, the kraken priest's three best spells—*call lightning*, *control water*, and *Evard's black tentacles*—are all mutually exclusive, since each one requires concentration. The KP always leads with one of them and keeps it going as long as possible, but which one depends on the overall terrain of the encounter. *Control water* is for battles on open water,

especially against opponents on ships or in boats. *Evard's* is for indoors, particularly in tight quarters. *Call lightning* is for non-shipboard battles under open sky. If the KP's concentration on *call lightning* or *Evard's* is broken, they switch to whichever of these spells is next-most logical, depending on the circumstances. Everything else the kraken priest does depends on the needs of whatever minions are accompanying them.

Despite having a high Wisdom, the kraken priest is a fanatic who fights to the death.

CHAMPIONS AND WARLORDS (V)

If the NPC archer is a cinematic super-archer, the NPC **champion** is an even more cinematic super-fighter. The brief flavor text suggests that they may have learned to fight as a gladiator, but the NPC gladiator is CR 5. The champion is CR 9, so they're not simply a gladiator but the *all-time greatest* gladiator. Similarly, if they used to be a soldier, they're the soldier whose name all the other soldiers know, whose battlefield exploits are spoken of with awe. One-on-one, they're a match for all but the highest-level PC adventurers, and they could fend off a whole party of mid-level adventurers single-handedly.

Mostly, this prowess is a straightforward function of a triple Multiattack, a +9 bonus to hit, and the ability to reroll a failed saving throw twice per day. However, there are a couple of subtleties worth noting in the champion's stat block.

The first is the combination of their Wisdom and their Intimidation skill. Champions are good at sizing up their enemies—and they understand that fighting is folly if you can win *without* fighting. Having proficiency in a social skill allows them to open up an encounter by warning that combat is both unnecessary and likely to end poorly for their opponents. Champions who know they can beat their foes easily try to scare them off; those who realize that they might be outmatched themselves bluff. They've got ego, though, and they didn't get where they are in life by *not enjoying* combat. If a fight is likely to be a close match—a Hard-almost-Deadly or a Deadly-but-just-barely encounter, according to “Combat Encounter Difficulty” (*Dungeon Master's Guide*, chapter 3)—the challenge appeals to them, and they don't try to forestall it.

The second is the fact that their damage output drops off when they're reduced below half their maximum hit points (71 hp or fewer). The first time this happens, it's their cue to use Second Wind. No other time makes sense, because at no other time does this trait have the concrete effect of restoring attenuated damage to its previous full strength. The second time it happens, how the champion reacts depends on how the fight is going otherwise. If they're losing—especially if they knew from the get-go that they were likely to be beaten—they drop to their knees and yield, because it's not going to go any better from here. If they're winning, they know that the tide may well turn against them now, so even as they fight, they declare victory and tell their opponents that *they* should yield. Even though talk is free, action economy-wise, I'd still give the champion an Intimidation roll in this case—with advantage, if their opponents are getting clobbered, but with disadvantage if they've just landed a blow against the champion strong enough to suggest that the tide *is* turning.

With extraordinary Strength and high Dexterity and Constitution, the champion has a clear preference for melee over ranged combat. Given a choice, they always close distance and fight with their sword. They use their bow only when facing a charging enemy across a battlefield, in order to land a few hits before that enemy arrives, or when challenged to an archery contest.

The **warlord** is a legendary version of the champion. Intriguingly, in addition to their extraordinary Strength, exceptional Constitution, and very high Dexterity, they also have exceptional Charisma, and they're proficient in Persuasion as well as Intimidation. Now, not only do we have a parley at the beginning of the battle in which the warlord tries to get a significantly inferior (or superior) enemy force to yield, we have one in which the warlord tries to head off battle between closely matched forces as well, by meeting and talking terms. They may relish combat personally, but they have their troops to think about, too. On the other hand, their Wisdom, while above average, is slightly inferior to the champion's: They still choose their targets astutely, but they're less judicious about choosing their *battles*.

The champion's Second Wind becomes the warlord's Survivor: Rather than regain hit points just once per rest, the warlord regains them *every round*, if they're down to half their hit points or fewer. Also, while their Multiattack is reduced from three attacks to two, they also have Weapon Attack as a legendary action, which means they can attack up to *five* times over the course of a round! Those attacks don't have to be melee attacks, either. Although the warlord is more effective as a melee fighter, giving them a strong incentive to lead from the front, they can still land quite a few arrow shots from across the field before battle is joined.

Command Ally effectively transfers one of the warlord's Weapon Attack legendary actions to an allied creature; it also confers advantage on the attack roll. This last benefit is particularly pernicious if the warlord's ally happens to be a rogue with Sneak Attack, or has some other comparable feature that increases damage when attacking with advantage. Otherwise, unless the ally is one whose damage output is significantly higher than the warlord's own (a champion with at least half their hit points is an excellent Command Ally recipient), the main application of this legendary action is to increase the target's to-hit chance from less than two-thirds to greater than two-thirds, which occurs when the required natural die roll is between 8 and 12, inclusive. For an ally with +6 to hit, the opponent's Armor Class would therefore have to be 14 to 18. The warlord doesn't make such calculations consciously, but their battlefield experience grants them excellent intuition about them.

The Frighten Foe legendary action costs 2 actions, meaning it requires the warlord to forgo two weapon attacks. It has a chance of imposing the frightened condition on an opponent, thereby imposing disadvantage on all the opponent's attacks and preventing them from coming any closer. To make it worth giving up 40 percent of the warlord's own attacks against an opponent they're in single combat with, it needs to reduce the opponent's hit likelihood by 40 percent or more, which happens when the opponent's attack bonus is +8 or less.

On the other hand, such an opponent already lands hits at best 55 percent of the time; are they a threat worth spending two legendary actions on? Wouldn't it make more of a difference to frighten an opponent who's already hitting two times out of three or more, in the hope of reducing that to less than two times out of three? The zone for that is an attack bonus of +11 to +13 (which almost no one's going to have without the benefit of a magic weapon). However, the raw reduction in hit probability in that range is only 20 to 30 percent, with an effective penalty to hit of only -3 to -4, as opposed to -5 for an opponent with an attack bonus of +8.

A third way to look at this legendary action is as a bluff that the warlord uses against a single melee opponent whose attack bonus is equal to or greater than the warlord's own (+9)—effectively the opposite of what I said two paragraphs above. In this case, the warlord knows that the opportunity cost of using this legendary action is greater than the effect of the action itself but gambles that the frightened opponent will self-consciously hold back, making up some or all of the difference.

I'm not sure that any of these situations justifies the cost of Frightened Foe. I think we have to conclude that the warlord doesn't use this legendary action against an opponent they're engaged with already (although they might use it to keep another one from joining in). Instead, this action is more effective when the warlord is playing the role of unengaged commander, and the range suggests that it's most effective at either preventing more powerful foes (the +9ers of the previous paragraph) from engaging with the warlord to begin with or deterring would-be infiltrators from trespassing on the warlord's side. Imagine a rogue trying to slip behind enemy lines to deliver a Sneak Attack. If the warlord knows they're there and uses Frighten Foe against them (*"Don't even think about it!"*), their edge is blunted.

The warlord has an example of fearlessness to set for their troops, and between their already substantial hit points and the Survivor trait, they're not easy to kill. Even if they're seriously wounded, they won't stay seriously wounded for long unless their foes continue to press them. Consequently, no amount of damage causes them personally to retreat or surrender. As mentioned above, however, they have their troops to think about. When their side's numbers are reduced by 30 percent or more, a warlord takes stock of the situation and considers either pausing to parley or simply breaking off and coming back for more later, although they may decide against both of these courses, depending on the situation and their own objectives. When their side's numbers are reduced by 60 percent or more, the warlord calls a retreat, joining those of their allies who are less wounded to act as a rear guard for those who are more wounded.

MONSTROSITIES

KRUTHIKS (M)

Kruthiks are a refreshing change of pace: straight-up *monsters* that just want to eat, have babies, and otherwise be left alone. They come in various sizes, but all of them have in common a high Armor Class, burrowing and climbing movement, darkvision, tremorsense, and the features Keen Smell, Pack Tactics, and Tunneler.

Ordinary young and adult kruthiks have a balanced ability contour favoring Dexterity. This would normally indicate a bias toward ranged combat, but young kruthiks lack a ranged attack, and in adult kruthiks, the bias is slight, almost insignificant. Thus, they don't fit neatly into any one single combat profile. On the other hand, their Intelligence isn't high enough to indicate tactical flexibility. I'm going to interpret this to mean that they may *start* combat in any number of ways—brute melee fighting, ranged sniping, scrappy skirmishing, hard-and-fast shock attacks—but whichever of these they choose, they generally don't deviate from.

Because their ability contours offer so few clues about their fighting styles, the importance of their burrowing and climbing movement and their Pack Tactics and Tunneler features is magnified. Young kruthiks are disinclined to fight enemies they don't outnumber—at least three to one. Adult kruthiks don't necessarily have to outnumber their enemies, but they never fight in a group of fewer than three, and four or five is a more typical squad size. Since young kruthiks have only melee attacks, they have to swarm their enemies; adult kruthiks can combine melee Stab attacks with ranged Spike attacks and gain the benefit of Pack Tactics as long as at least one of them is engaged in melee with a foe.

Kruthiks' burrowing speed isn't fast enough to use to flee; a more interesting application of their burrowing and tunneling ability is to expand their tactical possibilities in the extremely limited milieu of tunnel fighting.

Kruthiks live in networks of tunnels no wider than they are, so how can they use Pack Tactics to gang up on intruders? Like this: An adult kruthik can bait enemies into following it, single file, into a tunnel. Other adult kruthiks can dig bolt-holes on either side of the tunnel, just deep enough for themselves, and Hide in them. Thanks to their climbing movement, they can even dig holes overhead. When the lead pursuer reaches their position, the retreating kruthik suddenly stops and turns on its pursuer, and it and its companions all attack at once. Another kruthik can then come up behind the previously retreating kruthik and supplement its allies' melee attacks with ranged Spike attacks; its target will have half meat cover, but the advantage the spike-throwing kruthik gains from Pack Tactics more than makes up for this. (A second kruthik would have a harder time, having to throw its spikes past *two* allies in the tunnel, which I'd say would provide three-fourths cover to the target. Attacking advantage isn't enough to make up for this penalty.)

A more open cavern can be dotted with tunnel mouths in every wall, in the ceiling, in the floor. When a combat encounter begins in an environment like this, adult kruthiks divide the labor fifty-fifty, half of them immediately moving to engage in melee, the other half hurling spikes while approaching to a distance of 15 to 20 feet. (At more than 20 feet, they can offset the disadvantage incurred by attacking at long range with the advantage they gain from Pack Tactics, but this isn't ideal. Rather, upon joining the fight, they move toward their target, then attack, and stop advancing only when they've reached their ideal range.)

Moreover, while they're fighting, they're chattering away in their own language, calling for reinforcements. In an environment like the one I just described, you can have waves of reinforcements pour forth from the tunnels, adding to the number of ranged attackers and maxing out at a ratio of two ranged attackers per melee attacker. If your desired combat difficulty demands even more kruthiks than this, some of the earlier-arriving ranged attackers switch to melee to maintain the two-to-one ratio.

Young kruthiks that have the numbers to stand their ground do so only in open areas that allow them to swarm. They're not necessarily mature enough yet to employ the trick of digging alcoves in a tunnel, waiting for a pursuer to pass by, and attacking them from all sides. If you have multiple young kruthiks fleeing down a tunnel—or one fleeing toward other young kruthiks—flip a coin to decide whether each one digs itself a bolt-hole or just keeps going. If a young kruthik should happen to dig its bolt-hole where none of its siblings have done the same, it digs as far as it can before its pursuer catches up, then simply Hides and stays still, hoping its pursuer will pass it by.

Even young kruthiks that stand and fight don't need to take much damage to discourage them. A moderately wounded young kruthik (reduced to 6 hp or fewer) Dodges and retreats, climbing up the nearest wall and burrowing through the ceiling. Adult kruthiks are more tenacious, Dodging and retreating when seriously wounded (reduced to 15 hp or fewer). They use existing tunnels where available and burrow upward through the ceiling otherwise. Retreating kruthiks aren't intelligent enough to Disengage, even when facing multiple melee opponents, but with their high Armor Class, Dodging will usually suffice.

All this describes the behavior of kruthiks that are defending themselves against intruders. Kruthiks on the hunt behave a little bit differently. Young kruthiks still require three-to-one numerical superiority to attack a Medium-size prey creature, six-to-one to attack a Large creature, such as a cow. When they reduce their prey to 0 hp, they don't stop attacking, but rather keep going until it's dead (technically, they're still making Stab attacks, but construe these as devouring their freshly killed prey). Adult kruthiks are bolder: If it's hungry enough, one alone will attack a Medium-size prey creature, although they'll usually prefer to double-team it, and two are also enough to attack a Large creature. They, too, keep attacking until they've picked the bones of their dinner clean. Alternatively, they may reduce it to 0 hp, instinctively making their last attack a nonlethal one, then drag it back into their lair to feed it to their hive lord, which likes its victuals *very* fresh.

A **kruthik hive lord** won't ever be found outside a kruthik nest. Unlike young and adult kruthiks, the hive lord is unambiguously a brute melee fighter. Even though it's invariably accompanied by a cluster of adult kruthiks acting as soldiers, it doesn't hang back behind them; it wades right into battle alongside them. Whenever it can, it uses its Acid Spray action to hose down two or more attacking enemies (avoiding other kruthiks, since they have no resistance to acid damage). Otherwise, it defaults to a Stab/Stab Multiattack.

Unlike other kruthiks, the kruthik hive lord has sufficient Intelligence and Wisdom to recognize when it's facing extraordinary opposition. Although its default combat mode is melee, it switches to hurling spikes at opponents using ranged weapons or especially threatening magic, while its soldiers run interference for it. It may even order a couple of those kruthiks to break away from melee to chase down such an opponent, so that it can gain advantage from Pack Tactics itself. But it's also got the horse sense to recognize when it's hopelessly outmatched and try to parley its way out of a potentially devastating fight. Mind you, it won't be an easy thing: Kruthiks speak only Kruthik, and while they're not aberrations, their physiology is alien enough to humanoid physiology that it may be extremely difficult to interpret their gestures. But a burst of vocalization, gestures, and floor-tapping, followed by the bodyguard kruthiks' arranging themselves in a protective formation around their hive lord while also relaxing their combat posture, should be a clear enough message that at least one PC can interpret it correctly. It may even be possible to negotiate a truce if the PCs can credibly pledge to provide a steady source of fresh food and respect for the kruthiks' territory.

Adult kruthiks in the presence of a kruthik hive lord fight to the death, if it comes to that, acting as a rear guard while the hive lord Dodges and burrows its way to safety. The hive lord withdraws when it's seriously wounded (reduced to 40 hp or fewer).

FLANKING

I never realized when I began writing about monster tactics just how big a hot-button issue flanking is. Personally, being a longtime player of not just D&D but also various war games, including quasi-war games like Sid Meier's Civilization series, I thought using the optional flanking rule in chapter 8 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide* was a no-brainer. Yeah, D&D is a game in which silly things happen on the regular, but given a choice, I still like to err on the side of verisimilitude, and it's a simple fact of life that if you're being attacked by someone in front of you *and* someone behind you, you're going to get the tar kicked out of you.

But after getting some negative feedback to my advocacy of the flanking rule (including one Reddit poster who went so far as to say that as far as he was concerned, it invalidated everything else I say!), I put some feelers out to learn why, exactly, some players are vehemently against granting advantage on attacks against a flanked enemy.

The rules of fifth edition D&D are written with considerable care and meant to be taken *absolutely literally*, so instead of glossing as I usually do, I'm going to reproduce the exact wording of this rule, in its entirety:

OPTIONAL RULE: FLANKING

If you regularly use miniatures, flanking gives combatants a simple way to gain advantage on attack rolls against a common enemy.

A creature can't flank an enemy that it can't see. A creature also can't flank while it is incapacitated. A Large or larger creature is flanking as long as at least one square or hex of its space qualifies for flanking.

Flanking on Squares. When a creature and at least one of its allies are adjacent to an enemy and on opposite sides or corners of the enemy's space, they flank that enemy, and each of them has advantage on melee attack rolls against that enemy.

When in doubt about whether two creatures flank an enemy on a grid, trace an imaginary line between the centers of the creatures' spaces. If the line passes through opposite sides or corners of the enemy's space, the enemy is flanked.

Flanking on Hexes. When a creature and at least one of its allies are adjacent to an enemy and on opposite sides of the enemy's space, they flank that enemy, and each of them has advantage on attack rolls against that enemy. On hexes, count around the enemy from one creature to its ally. Against a Medium or smaller creature, the allies flank if there are 2 hexes between them. Against a Large creature, the allies flank if there are 4 hexes between them. Against a Huge creature, they must have 5 hexes between them. Against a Gargantuan creature, they must have at least 6 hexes between them.

Some things to pick out here:

- The clear implication is that flanking only comes into play when using miniatures on a map grid. If you're playing "theater of the mind," there's no way to adjudicate flanking, so the rule doesn't apply and the advantage can't be claimed.
- You can't use flanking advantage to negate disadvantage from attacking an unseen enemy.
- "A creature can't flank while it's incapacitated" seems like a silly rule, since you can't *attack* if you're incapacitated, but the important implication is that your *ally* also has to be capable of taking actions to divide your enemy's attention. Otherwise, your ally isn't helping you flank—they're merely turning one space into difficult terrain.
- It's not enough to attack an enemy from the side for flanking advantage to apply: You must attack from *the opposite side*. The four-hex gap for Large creatures on a hex map is odd, because four hexes between in one direction is only three in the other. I'm not sure why the authors didn't just go with three.

- Flanking applies to melee attacks only. I assume this is because fending off a melee combatant is a very *active* process, whereas whether a ranged attack hits you or not depends much more on your attacker than it does on you. (The hex-map rule omits the specific mention of melee attacks, and this omission isn't corrected in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* errata, but I assume it still holds. It's certainly implied by the adjacency requirement, and as a DM, I wouldn't allow a player to argue that they could use the advantage gained from flanking to negate the disadvantage from shooting at point-blank range.)

In sum, we can infer that the flanking rule is meant to reflect the increased difficulty of defending actively against attacks that are coming from two opposing directions, and thus the increased ease of dealing damage with those attacks.

(A curious artifact of the wording of this rule is that if *three* melee attackers are focusing their assault on a single enemy from the north, south, and west, only North and South gain advantage on their rolls—West doesn't! This result is counterintuitive to me, and I think I'd say that *if* you're using the flanking rule, it should extend to all melee opponents of a single enemy as long as the necessary conditions for flanking apply to at least two of them. I know my players would agree.)

So why is this optional rule, which seems like common sense, hated by so many players?

The most frequently raised objection relates to a phenomenon called the “conga line” (to which more than one commenter applied the modifier “inevitable!”): an alternating row of PC, enemy, PC, enemy, PC, enemy, etc., which all the combatants gravitate to in order to gain flanking advantage.

I can see how such a thing could happen. On the other hand, I can't see how such a thing could happen without the DM's aiding and abetting it. First, it assumes that the enemies in question have the intelligence to understand flanking themselves—most likely, a case of meta-knowledge creeping in. Second, it assumes that they have no innate advantage that they'd use more instinctively than flanking. Third, it assumes that they're all brute brawlers with no tactical sophistication (the assumption that I created *The Monsters Know What They're Doing* in the first place to dispel) and ignores the roles played by non-brutes, especially those with ranged and/or area-effect attacks. Fourth, it assumes they can all get to their positions in the line.

The conga line is precisely the opposite of “inevitable.” It's like Scholar's Mate in chess: You can easily avoid it, even subvert it, by choosing not to play along. As a simple example, take the kobold, which has the Pack Tactics feature, giving it advantage on attack rolls when a non-incapacitated ally is within 5 feet of its target. Sure, kobolds could get in the conga line for flanking advantage. But using Pack Tactics is *easier*. A kobold doesn't have to be on the opposite side of its target from its ally to gain this advantage. The ally doesn't even have to be attacking the same target!

This segues into another objection to flanking, which is that it devalues other methods of gaining advantage by having no downside. I think it's shortsighted to say that flanking has *no* downside. For instance, if you're fighting toe-to-toe with a melee opponent, an archer in the enemy's back rank is effectively at -2 to hit you, because your opponent's body is partially blocking the shot. If you run around that opponent to flank it, the archer now has a clear shot. Anytime you venture into the enemy's territory, you're an easier target—and a more tempting one—than when you're holding the front line or sheltering behind it.

But let's look at some of the other common sources of advantage available to PCs:

- **Reckless Attack.** The downside of this barbarian class feature is that incoming attacks have advantage, too. It's already a situational ability that generally only makes sense to use if the barbarian PC makes at least as many attack rolls in a round as all of their opponents combined. Wading into enemy territory for flanking advantage is no less reckless, since it can only increase the number of attacks coming the barbarian's way.
- **Totem Spirit (Wolf).** This barbarian feature is like the kobold's Pack Tactics, except that it applies only when the barbarian is raging, and allies have to be attacking the same target. Positionally, this is still easier to set up than flanking, and barbarian rages aren't exactly uncommon occurrences.
- **Maneuvers (Distracting Strike, Feinting Attack, Trip Attack).** These Battle Master fighter features cost levels and superiority dice; flanking doesn't. On the other hand, why would a player choose the Battle

Master archetype and then not use its features? Battle Masters are quintessential tactics nerds. These set-'em-up-and-knock-'em-down combos are what we live for.

- **Spells.** *Faerie fire* was one such spell specifically cited. It's an AoE spell affecting a 20-foot cube, which can be reasonably expected to light up four opponents at once (Targets in Areas), conferring advantage on attacks against all four. You know who really digs this spell? The marksman with Extra Attack, who never gets to take advantage of flanking. *Invisibility* and *greater invisibility* are nice for advantage on attack rolls, but their chief benefit lies in being able to put yourself anywhere you want to be *before* you make that first attack. And then there's *bold person*, which I didn't see cited by any critic of flanking, and for good reason: Never in a million years is flanking, which merely gives two melee attackers advantage on their rolls, better than inflicting the paralyzed condition, which not only gives advantage on attack rolls but also incapacitates the opponent and turns every hit from no more than 5 feet away into a critical hit.

Now, it's possible that I'm cudgeling a straw man here, and that the critics' basic objection is not that it makes these features less useful to those PCs who possess them but that it devalues them by giving every other PC who *doesn't* have these features an equally good way of obtaining advantage at insignificant cost. But I see this as even a potential problem only when two specific conditions apply:

1. The PCs significantly outnumber their enemies (or enemy, in the case of a single monster).
2. Non-front-line PCs aren't playing their positions.

The second condition is embarrassingly easy to punish. There's a reason why marksmen and spellslingers are wise to keep their distance: They tend not to be durable. If they rush in to flank for cheap advantage on a melee attack, the consequences are theirs alone to bear. As for front-line fighters, skirmishers, and shock attackers, getting in close, maximizing their damage, and (in the case of the latter two) getting back out is what they *should* be doing, always. Giving them advantage on flank attacks isn't encouraging them to do anything they aren't doing already, if they're smart. It's just giving them a way to occasionally be even more effective at it.

Too much more effective? That's the essence of the third critique: That advantage, which can swing the expected outcome of an attack roll by as much as +5, is too great a benefit for flanking to confer. Let's be honest, though, and note that this mean bonus approaches that peak only when when the unmodified target die roll is between 8 and 14—for example, when a character with a +6 bonus to hit rolls against an Armor Class of 14 to 20. *On average*, it's closer to +4; at the ends of the spectrum, the effective bonus evaporates, because you can't improve on a natural 20, and a natural 1 will never improve on anything.

Some folks suggest adopting a house rule in which flanking confers a flat +2 to hit. Maybe if I were still playing GURPS I'd go for this, but fifth edition D&D has a different design philosophy—to streamline everything as much as possible, scraping away the barnacles that clogged up earlier D&D rule sets—which inclines me either to use the optional rule as offered or to forgo it entirely. The intention of fifth edition D&D is that you either have advantage on your attack, have disadvantage, or have nothing but your weapon and a smile.

That said, fifth edition D&D wavers from its own intention in one instance: cover. Half cover imposes an effective -2 penalty on an attacker; three-fourths cover, an effective -5. (Cover technically gives the target a bonus to Armor Class, but the effect is the same.) This exception is actually helpful in this debate, because it lets us ask whether the benefit that flanking confers is equivalent in magnitude to negating half cover, equivalent to negating three-fourths cover, or something in between. If it's something in between—but closer to negating three-fourths cover—then advantage is about right.

The fact that advantage varies with target roll, while a fixed modifier doesn't, is relevant. Advantage turns a fifty-fifty chance of success into 3-to-1, but if your chance of success is already 3-to-1, turning it into 15-to-1 (more precisely, turning a 75 percent chance into a 94 percent chance) is simply turning strong likelihood into very strong likelihood. The greater value is on the other end of the scale, where advantage turns a 3-to-1 chance of failure into 5-to-4—nearly, though not quite, even odds. In this case, my chances of hurting my foe in a

face-to-face showdown are weak, but with a friend behind it helping me double-team it, they improve to moderate. If my chances of hurting it are moderate, they improve to strong. Does this seem fair to you? It does to me.

Only a few people offered the critique that allowing advantage from flanking slows combat down too much, yet in my opinion, this is a stronger objection than the ones above. More rules, more problems. However, as DM, you're the master of ceremonies, and you have the right and the responsibility to impose a measure of discipline, such as not allowing players to discuss their tactics with others in the middle of a battle (verisimilitude again) and giving them a limited amount of time to declare their actions. On the flip side, shouldn't players be rewarded for working as a team and coordinating their actions and movements—especially if they can do so without discussion, just by anticipating each other's needs?

There's one critique of the flanking rule that I can't dispute: Other DMs used this rule, and these bad things happened to them. Maybe they shouldn't have happened, maybe they needn't have happened, but they did. Even if it hasn't happened at my table, it happened at theirs—which, if nothing else, is a strong argument for keeping this optional rule optional. If it works for you, use it. If you discover that it causes too many problems at your table, stop using it.

Speaking for myself, none of these arguments has convinced me that the optional flanking rule is a bad rule to opt into, and I'll continue to recommend using it. However, I'll do so with some caveats:

- Keep combat moving. Don't let players bog it down with tactical discussions that their characters could never have in the middle of a battle.
- Stick to the letter of the law. Remember that ranged attackers can't make flank attacks, and that melee attackers must be on *opposite* sides of a target—and both attacking that same target—in order to gain flanking advantage. Also remember that there's no flanking in theater-of-the-mind combat, period.
- Monsters are monsters, not metagamers. Have them fight the way *they'd* fight, not the way you or your players would fight.
- Trained and disciplined NPC warriors should close ranks against PCs who might try to flank them. Rather than settle into the conga line, they'll cut off access to the squares or hexes that PCs need to get to in order to flank—if not by blocking movement to those squares or hexes, then by occupying those squares or hexes themselves. And ranged attackers will pick off isolated characters who try to make an end run around the front line.
- A creature that's flanked will try to get unflanked, by the most effective means it has available. In the case of a Huge or Gargantuan creature, this may include trampling—or eating—a flanker.
- Bad positioning should result in logical consequences.
- Remember that, fundamentally, combat is about *objectives*. In general, the PCs' opponents are trying to keep them out of their territory, and the PCs are trying to get into it, or vice versa. If you, as the DM, lose sight of this, abuse of flanking advantage isn't the only bad thing that's going to happen.

STEEDERS

See “Duergar,” [pages 36–38](#).

SORROWSWORN (M)

In the Feywild, creatures spring into existence that are the manifestations of the feelings of mortals. In the Shadowfell, this happens, too, but only for the really bad feelings. These creatures are the sorrowsworn.

The intriguing thing about the sorrowsworn is that they *literally* feed off negative emotions. Doing violence to the Angry, for instance, makes its attacks more effective, while refusing to do violence to it reduces its effectiveness.

All sorrowsworn have 60 feet of darkvision—good for the gloom of the Shadowfell—and are resistant to physical damage from *any* type of weapon, not just nonmagical weapons, while out of bright light.

Lowest and weakest of the sorrowsworn are the **Wretched**. They live up to their name: Of all their abilities, only their Dexterity is average or better. They also have lamprey mouths, which aren’t wretched per se, just disturbing as all heck.

Because of their uncompensated low Strength, the Wretched should always outnumber PCs by at least two to one, preferably at least three to one. For this reason, despite their low challenge rating, they aren’t a monster to throw at beginner-level adventurers but rather should be saved for, say, level 4 to 6 (you *can* send them against level 2–3 PCs, but only if you want to strike fear into them).

Their Wretched Pack Tactics trait contains an interesting twist on vanilla Pack Tactics: They still get advantage on attack rolls when they have an active ally adjacent to their target, but when they don’t, they have *disadvantage* on their attacks. It may be suboptimal for, say, a kobold or a thug to persist in a solo engagement, but for the Wretched, it’s not merely suboptimal but almost pointless—*unless* a Wretched has latched on to its target.

Despite their weakness, the Bite of the Wretched is nasty. First, its damage die is a d10, which is big for a Medium creature, let alone a Small one; second, on a successful hit, the Wretched latches on, and as long as it’s not pulled off, it automatically deals just as much necrotic damage at the start of each of its turns.

The modus operandi of the Wretched, therefore, is to swarm. Three or more Wretched rush a target at once. They all attack with advantage, and as many of them as possible latch on. Once one is latched on, its target is especially attractive to other Wretched, not just to those attacking them already but also to those that have tried and failed to latch on to a more difficult target nearby. A Wretched pulled off by its target attacks and tries to latch on again on its next turn if any of its fellow Wretched have managed to latch on themselves. A latched-on Wretched detaches, however, if all the other Wretched attacking its target have been killed or moved on to other targets.

Evolutionary imperatives don’t work the same way in the Shadowfell, where many creatures manifest out of psychic energy rather than biological processes. The Wretched exist in almost infinite quantity and have nothing to live for, so whether they flee has nothing to do with how much damage they take. Rather, they flee when they no longer outnumber their targets by at least two to one.

The **Lost**, according to *Mordenkainen’s*, “are representations of the anxiety and fear that people experience when they can’t find their way,” and consequently this is when and why one of them appears. A single Lost is an appropriate challenge for a party of mid-level adventurers; multiple Lost are better saved for PCs of level 11 and up.

The Lost are multi-armed brutes, with very high Strength and Constitution; their Dexterity isn’t too shabby, either. And they have proficiency in Athletics, reflecting their predilection for grappling.

The Lost’s arms are tipped with spikes rather than fingers, and they can attack with these twice per turn. But their preferred attack action is Embrace, which deals approximately as much damage as their Multiattack plus a grapple that inflicts ongoing psychic damage on the target’s turn if the grapple isn’t broken. Not only that, if a Lost takes damage while grappling a target—either from that target or from an ally of the target—it punishes the target with even more psychic damage.

Unlike some grappling monsters, the Lost aren’t limited when grappling a creature to attacking that particular creature, although they can grapple only one creature at a time. They also don’t need to actively attack their grappled targets to continue to inflict damage upon them. Thus, a Lost’s first goal is to Embrace a target; once a target is Embraced, it uses its Multiattack to fend off those who’d rally to its target’s defense.

The Lost could attack anyone in a party, but it chooses whoever is most distressed by the party’s disorientation. It doesn’t flee, no matter how much damage it takes. And depending on how much you want to ratchet up the horror, you

can decide that the Lost doesn't let go of its Embraced target even after that target falls unconscious—instead continuing to hold on until the target is *dead*. It would be in character.

The **Lonely** is a boss monster for mid-level parties and a significant nuisance even for high-level adventurers. It zeroes in on emotional isolation, on PCs (or NPCs) who feel alienated from their companions. Alienation isn't the same thing as solitude, though: The Lonely is optimized not for stalking solo targets but for picking one or two targets out of a group.

To initiate combat, the Lonely must approach within 60 feet of its prey—30 feet, really, if it's going to be at all effective—as well as its prey's companions, since it has disadvantage on its attacks if it's not within 30 feet of at least two other creatures. Without proficiency in Stealth, it's not likely to get the jump on a party of PCs in dim light, even with disadvantage imposed on Perception checks (which PCs with darkvision won't have anyway), so the Lonely prefers to attack in full darkness if possible.

The Lonely's combat script is dictated by its rigid Multiattack: one Harpoon Arm and one Sorrowful Embrace. Harpoon Arm deals piercing damage and grapples; Sorrowful Embrace reels the target in and deals psychic damage. The passive feature Psychic Leech continues to deal psychic damage to grappled targets, even as the Lonely attacks other creatures.

However, once the Lonely has gotten the target(s) it came for, it has no reason to stick around; instead, it tries to walk off with them so that it can leech the life out of them in peace. It uses the Dash action as long as creatures other than its target(s) aren't attacking it, although because it's slowed by half, it can cover only 30 feet in its turn. If it's attacked while trying to leave, it uses the Dodge action instead. It doesn't let go of its target(s) as long as it's alive, and if one struggles free, it mechanically tries to grapple that target again. It never defends itself per se, although it has enough of a self-preservation impulse to drop its prey and retreat while Dodging if seriously wounded (reduced to 44 hp or fewer). But like the Lost, as long as it's got prey in its clutches, it keeps on leeching the life from its target(s) till there's none left.

The **Hungry** isn't one you'll run across too often, because PCs do usually have the presence of mind to feed themselves (and because many DMs don't bother to enforce the Food and Water rules), but if they're botching their Survival rolls while foraging in the Shadowfell, it might show up. It's a ferocious brute that you should throw at high-level adventurers only; mid-level adventurers can handle one only when fully rested, which is exactly the kind of time the Hungry *won't* show up.



The Hungry, an extraordinarily strong brute, pounces on the most famished person in the party (“pounces” may not be the right word, since the Hungry has nothing in the way of stealth; “lunges at” may be better) and Multiattacks with its Bite and Claws. Bite is a vanilla attack that deals piercing and necrotic damage; Claws, on the other hand, not only does damage but also grapples *and restrains* the target, setting the Hungry up to Bite with advantage on its next turn. It keeps chowing down until the target is dead—not just unconscious, but *dead*, i.e., devoured.

And that’s all it does—it doesn’t have the Intelligence to deviate from the script. If a target gets free, it chases that target down. Once it’s finished off a target, it moves on to the next one, until it’s eaten the whole party. It retreats by Dashing when seriously wounded (reduced to 90 hp or fewer).

The **Angry** is the most dangerous of the sorrowsworn, and the only one with enough Intelligence to adapt to a changing situation, but it’s still not especially sophisticated. Yet another brute, it charges directly into the fray, homing in on angry characters. This creature is one of the few in the D&D multiverse that *wants* to fight a high-level barbarian. In fact, because its Rising Anger feature imposes disadvantage on attack rolls after any round in which it hasn’t taken damage, it wants to bait out attacks from those most likely to hit it. (If it were smarter, it might try to bait out attacks from those likely to hit it but *not* likely to do a lot of damage to it. But it’s not.)

Its Multiattack consists solely of two Hook attacks. It has no other attack, so it just does this over and over again. But it does change targets, if and only if it becomes apparent that another enemy is hitting it more often, or with “angrier” attacks. What do I mean by an “angry” attack? Well, barbarian Rage, of course, but also a paladin *smite* spell, or a ranger with the Colossus Slayer feature, or a spell cast by a War domain cleric, or a 3rd-level-or-higher evocation spell—stuff like that. A *moonbeam* spell cast by a hippie-dippy druid wouldn’t qualify, nor would a Battle Master fighter’s Precision Attack, nor a weapon attack that did piercing damage when someone else was bludgeoning or slashing.

An Angry fights as long as its enemies keep fighting. But if its enemies refuse to fight it—if they go a whole turn not only without hitting it but without even *trying* to attack it—it roars, stamps its feet, and makes “Come at me, bro” gestures. If they go without attacking for *two* whole turns, it makes a huffy noise and stalks off.

CHITINES AND CHOLDRITHS (W)

The chitine and the choldrith are part-elf, part-spider abominations created by magic as servitors of the spider goddess Lolth, patron of the drow. Based on their descriptions in *Volo’s*, even though they’ve produced offspring for many generations, the manner of their creation and the strong connection to their demonic mistress’s will suggests that they haven’t evolved; rather, they remain much as they were when they were created. Which implies two things: that they don’t necessarily have the same survival instincts that evolved creatures do, and that they may occasionally behave in suboptimal ways.

Chitines—hairy bipeds with multiple additional arms and eyes—are the *more* humanoid of the monstrous pair. They’re also the weaker, with a challenge rating of just 1/2. Largely, they’re uncomplicated ambush attackers. Their Web Sense and Web Walker traits strongly suggest that they’re usually encountered in the company of creatures that spin webs, such as their choldrith cousins, giant spiders, or ettercaps; they may also be minions of a drow arachnomancer. But while spinning webs isn’t part of their combat repertoire, it is something they can do on their own time, according to the flavor text, so they don’t *need* these other creatures to have a webbed-up field to fight on. Fighting in webs *and* pitch-darkness gives them a big comparative advantage. Their Stealth proficiency and climbing movement suggest not only that they lurk in the dark, waiting to pounce, but that they lurk in the dark *above* their prospective prey.

With Intelligence and Wisdom of only 10, chitines aren’t particularly choosy about their targets. Their above-average Dexterity and Constitution suggest a preference for skirmishing, but really, Dexterity is both their primary offensive ability and their primary defensive ability, and they lean heavily on their Multiattack. Even when engaged with one melee opponent, they’re happy to ditch them to go after another who seems more vulnerable, judging by size, age, relative isolation, whether they seem to have a hard time seeing in the dark, and/or whether they’re under a debilitating condition, such as being restrained by sticky webs. They’re not quite smart or disciplined enough to know how to Disengage, so they’ll often provoke opportunity attacks against themselves while darting from opponent to opponent.

What about that double proficiency in Athletics? For the chitine, it primarily helps with climbing up trickier surfaces. Its usual application—grappling and shoving—is incongruous in a creature that relies so heavily on a Multiattack that includes nothing but Dagger attacks. A chitine can’t substitute a grapple or shove attack for one of its Dagger attacks; it can

only grapple or shove in lieu of the entire Multiattack. When a group of chitines are acting as minions of a more powerful drow, however, their ability to grapple makes them useful for capturing foes who might make good prisoners.

Chitines lack both flexibility and free will; once battle is joined, they don't run away, even if they're seriously wounded. However, a seriously wounded chitine will climb up out of reach, wait for one of its foes to drop their guard, then pounce when that foe's hands are full.

The **choldrith** is a spider-elf of a different color. More physically capable than chitines, with significantly higher Wisdom as well, choldriths have all the same features, minus the Multiattack. But in addition, they have the Web action, as giant spiders do, and they can cast spells, including some very strong ones: *hold person*, *spiritual weapon*, *bane*, and *healing word*. They may look like giant spiders with creepy hands, but they're actually back-rank battlefield clerics. And unlike chitines, they're *good* at picking their targets, they can adjust when events take an unexpected turn, and if any of the player characters speaks Undercommon, they'll even parley—although since choldriths' only "social" skill proficiency is Religion, their "parleying" consists mostly of monologuing about the divine perfection and supremacy of Lolth.

Sharing chitines' predilection (and that of drow in general) for ambush attacks, choldriths Web first—restraining targets so that their allies can Multiattack them with advantage—then cast *spiritual weapon* as a bonus action. Choldriths don't share chitines' predilection for melee; they prefer to remain at a distance of about 30 feet, just close enough not to have disadvantage on Web attacks.

After that first round, choldriths use Web when it's available and cast spells when Web is on cooldown. *Hold person* is the biggie, paralyzing a foe so that allies can attack with advantage and gain auto-crits; choldriths cast this spell against front-line melee threats and any shock attacker who tries to rush them, but also against back-line spellcasters that make particular nuisances of themselves. In a sense, when chitines and choldriths fight together, choldriths "direct" chitines to attack certain enemies by imposing conditions that will activate the chitines' opportunism.

Hold person is good against difficult individuals, but against a group in which no enemy stands out, a choldrith opts for *bane* instead. As for *healing word*, *sanctuary*, and *shield of faith*—all bonus actions, and therefore action economy enhancements, but also competitors with *spiritual weapon*—choldriths' use of these spells is colored by their zealotry and chaotic evil alignment. A choldrith doesn't cast *healing word* on a weaker ally, only on a revered higher-up; ditto *sanctuary*. As for *shield of faith*, it's most likely to cast this spell on *itself*, when an enemy blitzes it. Why would it drop *hold person* or *bane* in order to cast this spell? Not to save anybody's skin but its own.

The choldrith's cantrips all require its action to cast, so it uses them only when Web is on cooldown and it has no reason to cast *hold person* or *bane*. If it spends a combat round preach-parleying, since communication has no action economy cost, it casts *thaumaturgy* to make its exhortations more dramatic and impressive. But other than that—and casting *resistance* on a superior—it mostly doesn't bother with cantrips.

Choldriths rarely use their Dagger attacks. Exceptions include when they're charged by a melee attacker and don't have a slot available to cast *hold person*; and when they somehow have no reason to take *any* other action but do have an enemy between 10 and 20 feet away, preferably one who's blinded, paralyzed, restrained, or stunned, in which case they withdraw again after running up and stabbing.

Choldriths are zealots. They *always* fight to the death unless commanded not to.

GIANT STRIDERS

See "Firenewts," [page 21](#).

SHADOW MASTIFFS (C)

Shadow mastiffs are nasty, quasi-canine predators from the Shadowfell, valued as watchbeasts and hunting companions by the kinds of entities that would rather employ a monster for such purposes than pick up a nice puppy from the pound. Packs of them sometimes slip across the boundary between the Shadowfell and the material plane, roving and hunting for the joy of it.

With very high Strength and high Dexterity, shadow mastiffs are ambush attackers without the patience for a drawn-out fight. If they can't take down their chosen target in two or three rounds of combat, there's a good chance that they'll give

up and search for easier prey, and attacking from hiding is essential to their hunting pattern—they may not start a fight at all if they can't gain surprise on the first round.

Five of their features—Shadow Blend, Sunlight Weakness, Keen Hearing and Smell, darkvision, and resistance to physical damage from normal weapons while in dim light or darkness—create such an overwhelming incentive for shadow mastiffs to stay out of sunlight and other areas of bright light that their entire hunting strategy revolves around exploiting the gloom of night. And since their Intelligence isn't high enough for them to adapt to changing circumstances, lighting a torch or lantern or casting an illumination spell is an effective way for a target who survives their initial assault to get them to abandon their attack.

A shadow mastiff always begins combat invisible, having used Shadow Blend to hide in an area of dim light or total darkness (even if a player character has darkvision, dim light *is* enough!), and uses its Keen Hearing and Smell to detect prey. It's worth noting that to the shadow mastiff, which has darkvision, darkness is effectively dim light, which normally would give it disadvantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks—but only those that rely on *sight*. If the shadow mastiff relies on its ears and nose instead, disadvantage flips to *advantage*, giving it an effective passive Perception of 18. Most player characters, and nearly all low-level PCs, will have to actively use Stealth to slip past it, and it nearly always gets to surprise its opponents in round 1 of the combat encounter.

Like most predators, a shadow mastiff prefers an easy target: the young, old, weak, isolated, and/or oblivious. But there's a key caveat here: Bright light dispels its invisibility, so it's never going to attack someone carrying a light source, either magical or mundane—although it can and will attack a target in the ring of dim light around that light source. As long as it stays in dim light or darkness, the shadow mastiff stays invisible, and as long as it stays invisible, it doesn't have to meet or beat its target's Perception check in a skill contest to gain advantage on its attack roll. (It does, however, have to meet or beat that Perception check with its own Stealth for its target to be surprised. PCs can hear things, too.)

After attacking a target that isn't brightly illuminated, the shadow mastiff immediately uses its bonus action to vanish again with Shadow Blend, then exploits its invisibility to retreat a short distance away—generally just 10 feet, but occasionally up to 20—without provoking an opportunity attack. Instinctively, it moves in the opposite direction from the nearest light source; if there is no light source, it moves in a direction where it has an unobstructed path back to its target. Whenever possible, it ends its turn invisible and in an unpredictable location, so that opponents attempting to counterattack may aim at the wrong place and miss automatically.

The fact that the shadow mastiff is invisible doesn't mean its opponents have *no* idea where it is—it does, after all, make sound. But its Stealth modifier is impressive: +6, reflecting expertise rather than mere proficiency. Stealth is a way of life for the shadow mastiff, and consequently, you might consider invoking passive Dexterity (Stealth) to say that even when it's not taking the Hide action, it steps lightly, and passive Perception of at least 16 is necessary to pinpoint its location without Searching for it. Then again, you might decide that's too close to giving it a free Hide action and imposing unseen-target disadvantage on attacks against it is enough, in which case you can just say that a missed attack roll aimed at the wrong spot.

Its Bite attack includes a rider: A hit may knock the target prone. But DC 13 isn't a high number to beat, a prone target will most likely just get up again when its turn rolls around, the shadow mastiff doesn't *need* its target to be prone to gain advantage if it's already invisible when it attacks, and it doesn't have Multiattack. So we can safely disregard this aspect of its attack from a tactical standpoint. *Other* creatures fighting alongside one or more shadow mastiffs may be able to take advantage of a Bite that knocks the target prone, but the shadow mastiffs themselves gain only one meaningful benefit from it: an easier time running down a target who tries to get up and flee.

The shadow mastiff's Intelligence is very low, so its attack-vanish pattern never varies. Its above-average Wisdom indicates a solid self-preservation instinct and some ability to distinguish easier targets from harder ones; it prefers easier.

Predators often flee when they're merely moderately wounded, disliking when prey fights back, but the shadow mastiff is an otherworldly beast that's also neutral evil, giving it a measure of innate truculence that keeps it in the fight until it's seriously wounded (reduced to 13 hp or fewer). It's more likely to be driven off by bright light than by injury.

It's fair to assume that a shadow mastiff's targets will be surprised in round 1. It continues to attack in round 2 even if its target is brightly illuminated—unless the entire area is flooded with bright light, leaving it no area of shadow to retreat to, in which case it bolts. In round 3, it won't attack any target in bright light, and it retreats if this leaves it without any attractive target. If it hasn't taken out a victim in three rounds, it retreats in round 4. It always Dashes when retreating, turning invisible as soon as it's out of the light.

Ethereal Awareness is a bit of a nothingburger. It can see creatures in the ethereal plane, but that doesn't mean it can *attack* creatures in the ethereal plane. Maybe, however, there's something about opponents that approach via the ethereal plane (or who cast an evasive spell such as *blink*) that makes them more attractive to it. I wouldn't think about it too hard.

The variant **shadow mastiff alpha** differs in only one significant respect from other shadow mastiffs: Terrifying Howl, which it uses in round 1 for maximum effect. Like dragons' Frightful Presence, there's no reason to use it more than once: If it fails, it will never work, and if it succeeds, it won't work again once it wears off. It doesn't confer direct advantage (the frightened condition only makes it harder for affected creatures to fight back), so it doesn't change the tactics of the alpha or any other shadow mastiff in any way.

CAVE FISHERS (v)

You see a name like "**cave fisher**," and it doesn't register with you at first, and as you study the stat block, you come to realize that the name is almost a perfectly literal description of what the creature that bears that name does: It sits in lightless caves, casts a line, waits for a meal to come to it, then reels it in.

A relative, perhaps, of the giant spider, the cave fisher is a human-size, wall-crawling arachnid with crablike claws. A solitary predator, with double proficiency in Stealth, the cave fisher is pretty dumb and inflexible, but it has one good trick up its sleeve: an extremely strong, extremely sticky filament that it can use to yank victims toward it from as far as 60 feet away.

On top of that, it has Spider Climb, which allows it to move freely along walls and even across ceilings. This allows it to pull the dirtiest of tricks: hiding on the ceiling, then yanking its prey *up* to it, where, if said prey manages to wriggle free of the cave fisher's sticky strand, it has nowhere to go but straight down.

The cave fisher is a brute, with very high Strength and high Constitution, but even though it favors direct melee engagement, it would rather pull its foe to it than charge. Its Intelligence is extremely low, but its Wisdom is humanoid average: It has a normal self-preservation instinct, and it knows to target the old, the young, the weak, and the oblivious. Readers familiar with my set phrases will ask, "What about the isolated?" Ah, but that's the thing: Thanks to its Adhesive Filament, the cave fisher doesn't need to target an isolated creature. When the creature it wants to eat gets stuck, the *cave fisher* isolates it—by reeling it in.

However, this ability has a weight limit: 200 pounds max. Many Medium-size humanoids, even if they themselves are svelte, exceed this limit because of all the gear they carry. Also, the cave fisher's ability to assess the capabilities of its prospective prey is poor.

There are two ways you can determine which of multiple stuck creatures the cave fisher reels in with its Filament action. One is to say it judges simply on the basis of size: The smallest, weakest-looking target is the one it chooses. The other is to say it *doesn't* choose, *physics* chooses: When the cave fisher uses its Filament action, the target with the lowest total mass is the one that stays stuck while all the others drop off.

Imputing any more sophisticated target assessment ability to the cave fisher would be a mistake, as would having it make obviously ridiculous choices like trying to reel in the dragonborn fighter in splint mail. (Armor is beyond its understanding, but the *mass* of armor isn't.) In fact, it can probably tell from the force of a tug on its filament that an adhered creature is too heavy for it to reel in, and it won't even try. It may be dumb, but its evolved instincts aren't.

In reeling a target in, the cave fisher's goal is to eat them, and that's what it immediately goes about doing. Once it yanks an opponent up to it with the Filament action, it Multiattacks with its claws until the target is dead—not simply unconscious, but *dead*. If a target breaks free, drops to the cavern floor, and gets KO'd by the fall, the cave fisher throws out another filament and retrieves them, because, hey, free meal. This operation is not fast, however: Extending the filament (described under the Adhesive Filament trait) and reeling it back in (described under the Filament action) are *two separate actions* that the cave fisher can't take on the same turn. This fact is easy to miss, and I'm not entirely sure why the stat block was organized the way it is, because one might misread Adhesive Filament and fail to notice that it takes an action to extend, or conclude that because Filament is listed under Actions and Adhesive Filament isn't, the one action categorized as an action includes both extension and retraction.

Even so, the ceiling is still the best place for the cave fisher to wait for prey. Especially if its hiding place is 60 to 65 feet up, a fall from that height deals a lot more damage than the cave fisher can deal by making an opportunity attack against an escapee who's running away; plus, it's a sure thing, while an opportunity attack may miss. That being said, however, if the

choice is between a ground-level hiding place 60 feet from a traffic lane and a spot on the ceiling 30 feet above it, the cave fisher chooses the former, because the distance keeps it from being spotted by creatures with darkvision, and most subterranean critters in fifth edition D&D possess some means of seeing in the dark—if not darkvision, then blindsight or tremorsense.

Like other predators, cave fishers don't like it when prey fights back, and they retreat when moderately wounded (reduced to 40 hp or fewer), using the Dodge action as they move away. They also skitter away if charged by multiple foes who have the ability to reach it, although the first thing they do is go straight up the wall to the ceiling.

I haven't talked about their Flammable Blood, because, to be blunt, the Flammable Blood trait is goofy, and I don't want to dignify it. It's easy enough to say that it has no effect on their tactics, since (a) they're too stupid to have any way of knowing that their blood is flammable, (b) they attempt to flee before they're reduced to half their maximum hit points anyway, and (c) since they're vulnerable to fire only after they're that badly wounded, they'd have little opportunity to develop an instinctive fear of it—even more so since (d) they live in damp underground caves where they're never going to encounter a natural open flame.

Per the flavor text, cave fishers are solitary by nature. Multiple cave fishers will be found in a single location only if they've been drawn there by especially good hunting, and when one catches a morsel, the others try to snatch it away and consume it themselves. I suggest using only a single cave fisher if what you want is an actual combat encounter and using multiple cave fishers when you want them to be more of an obstacle—or if you want to mine the comic potential of having the halfling get helplessly yanked through the air by a bunch of albino spider-crawdads fighting over who gets to eat them while everyone else tries to figure out how to get them back down.

LEUCROTTAS (V)

The **leucrotta** appeared in the original Advanced Dungeons & Dragons *Monster Manual* along with a much handsomer illustration than it's given in *Volo's* but not nearly as hilarious a description. (*Volo's*: "A leucrotta is what you would get if you took the head of a giant badger, the brain of a person who likes to torture and eat people, the legs of a deer, and the body of a large hyena, put them together, and reanimated them with demon ichor without bothering to cover up the stink of death.")

I don't recall leucrottas' being associated closely with gnolls in the earliest days of the game, but in fifth edition D&D, the connection is explicit: They're another creation of the demon lord Yeenoghu. They're smarter than the average gnoll and even smarter than gnoll pack lords, though not quite up to the level of a gnoll Fang of Yeenoghu. But they're also less social, associating with gnolls mainly out of convenience and treating them as pawns when they do.

Leucrottas are large, fast, strong, and tough—brutes, but unusually swift ones. They're predators, but they lack proficiency in Stealth, which necessitates some creativity in their hunting pattern. How does a predator capture prey when it's not good at hiding?

Well, let's look at what the leucrotta *is* good at. Moving fast: Its base speed is 50 feet per turn. Hunting in the dark: It has your basic 60 feet of darkvision. Melee attacking: It has Multiattack, and its Bite attack deals three dice of damage on a critical hit rather than two. Keen Smell: It doesn't need to *see* you, or hear you, to know where you are. Rampage: Like gnolls and their ilk, it gets bonus movement and another attack when it takes an enemy down. Mimicry: It can imitate other creatures, including humanoids, with uncanny accuracy.

The solution I've come up with is very particular, but I think it works out. The central problem is that while the leucrotta can lure victims to it by imitating the sounds of an animal or person in distress, as soon as a victim got anywhere close to the leucrotta, they would immediately see the monster for what it was and hightail it. So how does the leucrotta avoid being spotted without proficiency in Stealth? It operates only in the dark of night, for one thing—but that only keeps it from being spotted by creatures without darkvision. What about creatures *with* darkvision, or with light sources? How does it get the jump on those? By exploiting another condition of heavy obscurity: fog. A foggy night is a leucrotta night.

Stealth and Perception are tricky, enough so that I devote a whole section to it in *Live to Tell the Tale: Combat Tactics for Player Characters*. The basics: If you win a contest between your Dexterity (Stealth) and an opponent's Wisdom (Perception), you're "hidden," i.e., both unseen and unheard, and your opponent doesn't know where you are; it may not even know you're there. Any break in line of sight—either a physical obstacle or an intervening zone of heavy obscurity—suffices to make you unseen, which imposes disadvantage on attack rolls against you, but it *doesn't* make you unheard.

Thus, a foe listening carefully can identify your location and aim an attack at you, albeit with disadvantage. Darkness heavily obscures an area for creatures with normal vision, but for creatures with darkvision, it only makes it a little harder to see (disadvantage on sight-based Perception checks). Passive Perception is on all the time and applies to all senses, so while you may have disadvantage on a passive check to *see* an enemy and fail, you may still be able to *hear* that enemy normally.

This combination of rules is what the leucrotta exploits. By hunting in fog, it ensures that even targets with darkvision will be unable to see it for what it is—and while they can hear it, thanks to Mimicry, what they think they're hearing isn't what they're hearing at all. Plus, even if a target is hidden—unseen *and* unheard—the leucrotta can still locate them by following its nose, and it has advantage on that check, meaning that its *olfactory* passive Perception is 18. Yes, heavy obscurity effectively imposes the blinded condition on the leucrotta—but it effectively imposes it on *everybody*, and while a blinded attacker has disadvantage on attack rolls, attacks against a blinded *target* have advantage, and this advantage and disadvantage cancel each other out. Thus, the leucrotta is nearly guaranteed the ability to attack with surprise in the first round of combat, charging when it scents prey within 50 feet of it.

Kicking Retreat is the odd trait out in the leucrotta's stat block. It seems not to be of much use for a creature whose ability contour clearly marks it as a brute attacker that wants to stay engaged in melee—and there's never any need to Disengage in pea-soup fog, because you have to be able to see a foe to make an opportunity attack against it. This trait only comes into play if the fog is dispersed (say, by *gust of wind*) or if for some reason a leucrotta is hunting on a non-foggy night. (Maybe it's found some convenient ruins with lots of fragments of ancient construction to block victims' view, or it's hunting in an old-growth forest with trees large enough for it to hide behind.) Since it's faster than almost anything that might fight back against it, it can begin its turn with a Multiattack, then use Kicking Retreat to Disengage as a bonus action and trot 40 or 50 feet away, returning on its next turn to brutalize its target some more. If you subscribe to the idea that leucrottas like to toy with their prey (I don't, personally), Kicking Retreat also works for this purpose.

Predators often retreat after taking only moderate damage, being dissuaded by prey that fights back, but the leucrotta is described as being more bloodthirsty than most of its peers. It cares about self-preservation, but it won't run away until it's seriously wounded (reduced to 26 hp or fewer), and it uses Kicking Retreat to Disengage when it does so.

TRAPPERS (V)

The **trapper** is a great deal like the cloaker, in that it hunts by wrapping itself around its victims' heads so that they can't see or breathe, but it lacks the cloaker's mobility. In its hunting strategy, it's more like a roper, slow but stealthy, using False Appearance to hide itself until prey comes within reach.

It has both darkvision and blindsight, making it most at home in total darkness—in other words, underground. The Spider Climb trait allows it to lurk on ceilings and walls as well as floors, whatever is most likely to put it within easy reach of a meal (if it's on a ceiling, it can wait for a creature to pass below, then drop before trying to smother it). On the ground or against a wall, it's stuck preying on creatures that walk right past it, but on the ceiling, it can hang out 30 to 35 feet up and easily detect creatures that pass directly beneath it, thanks to its blindsight. False Appearance ensures that it won't be spotted at these distances, even by creatures with darkvision.

Even if it didn't have an Intelligence of only 2, the trapper would still have only one method of attack: the Smother action. When it takes this action against another creature, that creature must make a Dexterity saving throw or be grappled, restrained, blinded, and “at risk of suffocating.” What does that last bit mean? It means, per “Suffocating” (*Player's Handbook*, chapter 8), that a creature that's out of breath can survive for a number of rounds equal to its Constitution modifier (minimum 1), at which point it passes out and has to start making death saves. Does a PC enveloped by a trapper get to hold its breath, allowing it to remain conscious for minutes rather than seconds? Not, I'd say, if it's surprised, which the target of a trapper nearly always will be. (Just as with the cloaker's Bite attack, the trapper's Smother action becomes a total non-threat if the target gets the chance to take a breath.)

The trapper is looking for a meal, and it's not equipped to drag that meal away to enjoy it someplace else, so it's going to keep its target enveloped until they're not merely unconscious but dead. However, it doesn't want that meal badly enough to risk its own life over it, so it releases its meal and slithers away if it's moderately wounded (59 hp or fewer). As slow as it is, its best escape plan is to Dash straight up a wall and along the ceiling.

It's probably clear by now that the name “trapper” is three letters too long. This beastie is an obstacle, not an enemy. Its function is to rob PCs of hit points that they'll wish they still had later on.

YUAN-TI (W)

The treatment of the yuan-ti in *Volo's* is heavily lore-focused, with a section, useful to DMs, on how to design a yuan-ti temple-city. From a tactical standpoint, the only additions are *five* new variants (!) and a brief subsection headed “Unusual Abilities.”

Unusual Abilities offers four traits that DMs can use to customize an individual yuan-ti or a group of them:

- Acid Slime gives the yuan-ti a corrosive coating, lasting one minute, that inflicts 1d10 acid damage against a grappled opponent or one who strikes it with a close-range melee attack. It's a bonus action, and yuan-ti don't get any other bonus actions, so this is a free supplement to the yuan-ti's action economy. It's all benefit and no downside, so the yuan-ti uses this feature on its first turn.
- Chameleon Skin is also a freebie: It's a passive ability that grants advantage on Stealth Checks. No tactical implication; it just makes the yuan-ti better at what it already does.
- Shapechanger, for the yuan-ti pureblood, comes with the same disadvantages as it has for the yuan-ti malison and yuan-ti abomination: a wasted action and a loss of clothing and gear. Skip it.
- Shed Skin is another all-benefit, no-downside feature, letting a grappled or restrained yuan-ti slip free without a skill or ability check. It costs only a bonus action, which is no cost at all, since the yuan-ti has no other bonus action to give up. A yuan-ti with this trait uses it anytime it applies.

Unusual Abilities also offers four additional action options:

- Bite is an alternative to the yuan-ti pureblood's Scimitar attack, dealing 1d4 piercing damage plus 1d6 poison damage. It does slightly more damage on average than Scimitar, so it's sensible to substitute this for one of the two attacks in the yuan-ti's Multiattack (it can't substitute for both).
- Polymorph into Snake¹ is a recharge ability usable against an opponent, which severely nerfs the damage they can deal, at least against yuan-ti. Although it's merely a temporary measure—an opponent polymorphed into a snake turns right back into their normal form as soon as the snake is “killed,” with most or all of the hit points they had pre-transformation—yuan-ti are generally more interested in capturing opponents for enslavement or later sacrifice than in killing them outright. They're also immune to the poison damage that constitutes most of the Tiny polymorphed snake's damage-dealing ability. However, Polymorph into Snake recharges only on a roll of 6, so there's a good chance that once a yuan-ti uses it, it won't become available again for the rest of the encounter. Therefore, target selection matters. It's a good effect to drop on an opponent who's casting spells or using an item that's significantly more powerful than anything the opponent can do on their own, since polymorphed creatures can't cast spells, and their equipment morphs with them.
- Snake Antipathy is a “go away” feature. Like the yuan-ti abomination's ability to cast *fear* once per day, it makes sense only as a way of driving trespassers away from sacred or otherwise important places, or of stalling pursuit when the yuan-ti is losing the fight.
- Sticks to Snakes costs one action and creates an ally that abides up to 10 rounds. Totally worth it, both tactically and for the ick factor. Since the yuan-ti doesn't have to be able to see the sticks it's transforming, and no range is specified, use it on the arrows in an archer's quiver to elicit a magnificent freakout.

The Monster Lore chapter mentions only two new variants, the yuan-ti anathema and the yuan-ti broodguard. But the writers were clearly having so much fun that they threw in three more in the Bestiary chapter: the yuan-ti mind whisperer, the yuan-ti nightmare speaker, and the yuan-ti pit master.

The **yuan-ti anathema** is a super-abomination with extraordinary Strength, Constitution, and mental abilities; a repertoire of potent spells, including a once-daily use of *divine word*; 30 feet of blindsight; and resistance to acid, fire, and lightning. Its six heads give it advantage on Perception checks and on saving throws against being blinded, charmed, deafened, frightened, stunned, or knocked unconscious. If the yuan-ti abomination is a fitting boss enemy for a party of mid-level adventurers, the yuan-ti anathema is the corresponding boss enemy for a high-level party.

The anathema is a brute melee fighter, and its Multiattack is cut-and-dried. The only decision required is which enemy to grapple, and the anathema prioritizes the same targets as an abomination does: strong and tough opponents, effective

ranged fighters, opponents dealing radiant or necrotic damage, and clerics and paladins of rival gods (out of spite).

Ophidiophobia Aura is a modified version of *fear*, used for the same reasons, and Shapechanger is as pointless for the anathema as it is for all other yuan-ti variants. This leaves the anathema's Innate Spellcasting as the feature that most sets it apart.

- *Divine word* is a coup de grâce, delivered in the third round of combat. Why the third? Because one of the premises of fifth edition D&D is that the typical combat encounter lasts three rounds, so if things are properly balanced, the third round should be the last round most of the time, and if it wouldn't be the last round otherwise, casting *divine word* makes it more likely that it will be. Plus, I'm assuming that you don't *want* to kill your players, and waiting past the third round makes it more likely that at least one of them will be down to fewer than 20 hp. This is an underhanded meta-analysis rather than an honest assessment of how the yuan-ti anathema would use this spell to maximum effect, but I'm going to retroactively rationalize it by noting that an anathema would expect to destroy or subdue most of its foes instantly, and if it hasn't managed to do so already after two rounds, it's going to decide that a more drastic measure is called for.

Combining the Polymorph into Snake action with the spell *divine word* results in a terrifying emergent property. Say a yuan-ti abomination or malison uses Polymorph into Snake against an enemy, who then fails their Wisdom saving throw. That enemy is transformed into a poisonous snake, assuming the stats of their new form, including hit points (most likely 2 hp, no more than 4) and Charisma (3, with a -4 modifier). Then the yuan-ti anathema slithers forth and casts *divine word* at them. Since succeeding on the Charisma save requires them to roll a natural 21, they fail. The unfortunate enemy "suffers an effect based on its *current* hit points" (emphasis mine). They have fewer than 20 hp. They *die*.^{II}

Yeah.

- *Darkness* is a concentration spell that's highly advantageous to the anathema, which has blindsight, but less so to its malison and abomination allies (except for the three yuan-ti malison variants in *Volo's*—see below—whose superior darkvision can penetrate magical darkness), which lose the advantage on attack rolls they'd get from Constricting their opponents. You might think the anathema wouldn't care, but it's a mathematical calculation: Cast when the anathema is encountered alone or with fewer than half a dozen of the aforementioned allies.
- *Entangle* is better than *darkness* when the anathema has allies who can take maximum advantage of its opponents' restrained condition. A 20-foot square area of effect means it should cast this spell when it can trap four or more enemies (Targets in Areas). Also a concentration spell.
- *Haste* turns the anathema's strongest lieutenant into a yuan-ti Cuisinart. (Not the anathema itself: Its action economy is too robust for it to risk losing a round of attacks if the spell is ended prematurely.) Also a concentration spell.
- *Suggestion*'s most promising application is to induce a low-Wisdom opponent to stand clear and mind their own business, since no suggestion that they turn on their allies is going to seem reasonable. Also a concentration spell.
- *Fear* is redundant to the anathema's Ophidiophobia Aura, with one exception: It makes targets who fail their saving throws drop what they're holding, which is handy for divesting them of magic weapons. Also a concentration spell.
- *Polymorph* for the anathema's own use is redundant to Shapechanger (unless it wants to fly for some reason), but used offensively, it primes the same nightmare combo with *divine word* that I described above. Also a concentration spell.

As a DM, you should figure out *before* combat begins whether situational factors are going to favor the use of *darkness*, *entangle*, *haste*, *suggestion*, *fear*, or *polymorph*, because the anathema can keep only one of these spells going at a time. Pick a plan A and a plan B.

The yuan-ti anathema is both fanatical and megalomaniacal, and its ritual of transformation has burned out any survival instinct its species possesses. However, it's also ageless and effectively immortal as long as it doesn't get itself killed, and that's a persuasive reason to stay alive. Split the difference: The anathema retreats when seriously wounded (reduced to 75 hp or fewer), choosing the Disengage action because of its discipline, its high base movement speed, and its ability to climb and swim.

Yuan-ti broodguards, in contrast, are dumb, instinct-driven berserkers that ferociously attack trespassers. They're the product of magical transformation, not evolution, so they have no survival instinct, only a protective instinct, and they fight to the death. They use the Reckless feature all the time; they're not smart enough to realize that it's a bad idea when your opponents' attacks outnumber your own. They're completely indiscriminate in choosing targets. No sophistication here: Just aim them at the PCs and let them go.

The final three variants—the **yuan-ti mind whisperer**, the **yuan-ti nightmare speaker**, and the **yuan-ti pit master**—are all slightly more powerful, spellcasting variants of the yuan-ti malison, and each is a malison of a specific type. In *The Monsters Know What They're Doing* (40–41), I express my strong preference for the type 3 malison (humanoid upper body, serpentine lower body), because of its tactically elegant ability to restrain foes with its lower body and attack them with advantage while holding them restrained, and my scorn for the silly type 2 malison (humanoid body with snakes for arms). According to the flavor text and illustrations in *Volo's*, the mind whisperer is a type 1 malison (humanoid body with snake head), the nightmare speaker is a type 3, and the pit master is a type 2. Does it have to be this way? Could you have, for example, a type 3 mind whisperer or pit master? I think you probably could; just use the nightmare speaker's Multiattack and Constrict actions and scimitar attack.

Each of the three variants has a twice-per-day 3d10 damage boost, usable on its first hit in a turn: the mind whisperer's Mind Fangs (psychic damage), the nightmare speaker's Death Fangs (necrotic damage), and the pit master's Poison's Disciple (poison damage). This is advantageous enough that there's no reason to save it rather than use it right away. Plus, after the yuan-ti uses it in rounds 1 and 2, your players won't necessarily know that the feature isn't available anymore on round 3, so it's a great scare inducer.

The yuan-ti mind whisperer has a passive feature, Sseth's Blessing, that gives it a pool of 9 temporary hit points whenever it reduces an enemy to 0 hp. For this reason, the mind whisperer favors targets who are already wounded—the more badly injured, the more attractive the target—and tries to finish them off. In some cases, this will look like single-mindedness; in others, opportunism.

In contrast, the nightmare speaker's and pit master's corresponding special abilities are single-use actions. The nightmare speaker's Invoke Nightmare is handy for both battering and repelling an enemy, but it's not that good once combat is under way: It affects only one target, and because it requires concentration, it prevents the use of sustained spells and is lost if the nightmare speaker's concentration is broken. Instead, a nightmare speaker should Invoke Nightmare from hiding, in order to preemptively weaken an opponent before the fight is initiated in earnest. The pit master's Meershaul's Slumber is also a great first-strike measure: a burst-incapacitation ability that can potentially drop every non-elven spellcaster within view. Even if the pit master doesn't enjoy the benefit of surprise, it takes this action in the first round of combat. Every round it waits is a potential incoming *fireball*.

These three variants have the same ability scores as a standard yuan-ti malison, so they share the same fast-and-furious assault style of combat, but they don't necessarily rush into melee. Because they can cast spells, they may choose to lead with these instead, if they can do more damage this way. And that's where we come to the analysis of their spell repertoires. It's worth emphasizing that these "priests" aren't clerics, nor are they wizards. They're warlocks, and they cast their spells at 3rd level, even if they're 1st- or 2nd-level spells; they also have only two spell slots, period. Since their spells are what set them apart from ordinary yuan-ti malisons, we can assume that they'll use at least the first round of combat to cast spells, assuming there's no compelling reason for them to do otherwise, before running in and filleting the opposition.

For the yuan-ti mind whisperer, the choice is easy: On its first turn, if it's fighting alongside allies, it opens with *hypnotic pattern*, which is both highly effective and thematically appropriate for the spellbinding yuan-ti. Other than that, *eldritch blast* is decent for landing solid damage at long range, but it's a ranged spell attack, so it doesn't always hit; may as well close in for the more damaging melee Multiattack instead and save the remaining spell slot for *fly* or *expeditious retreat*, or maybe *charm person* if the right opportunity presents itself.

The yuan-ti nightmare speaker has a wicked array of appropriately nightmarish spells, but most of the good ones require concentration, so it can use only one of them at any given time. *Hex* is best cast when the nightmare speaker intends to engage one foe in single combat while its allies deal with the rest of the opposition; it nerfs its foe's Strength or Dexterity, whichever seems greater, in order to impair its ability to escape being grappled. *Hold person* paralyzes a pair of foes, useful when the nightmare speaker's allies can gang up on them. *Hunger of Hadar*, if the nightmare speaker can nab four or more opponents in the 20-foot-radius area of effect, creates a freezing, terrifying void that deals cold damage and possibly acid

damage as well, and is useful either to keep opponents from passing through an area or—if in an enclosed space of the right size—to trap them in it. (The nightmare speaker must make sure, however, that neither it nor its allies are in that space or need to pass through it.) If it's fighting alone, or with a phalanx of archers, *arms of Hadar* turns the nightmare speaker into a walking bomb: It can charge into the midst of its foes, deal an expected 10 damage to each of them, then switch to melee fighting. It's worthwhile even if the nightmare speaker can get within 10 feet of just two of its enemies, but if there are more, so much the better. Like the mind whisperer, it's better off in melee than lobbing *eldritch blast* from a distance, especially since the nightmare speaker is a type 3 malison and therefore has the Constrict-Scimitar combo.

Except for *invisibility*, the pit master's spells are somewhat suboptimal, and it's better off leading with Meershaul's Slumber. On its second turn, it closes to melee range and fights hand to hand. After taking moderate damage (reduced to 61 hp or fewer), it casts *vampiric touch* to regain some of its lost hit points. If it's completely surrounded, it casts *misty step* to break the siege, and if an enemy spellcaster hurls *fireball* or *lightning bolt* its way, it snuffs it out with *counterspell*; this is the only thing it uses *counterspell* for, because its slots are scarce, and those are the only two spells of 3rd level or below that can do truly significant damage to it and its allies. Aside from these two circumstances, it saves its second spell slot until round 4 or later, and most likely uses it for a second casting of *vampiric touch* or a slippery getaway with *invisibility*.

These three variants all possess the normal yuan-ti survival instinct and retreat when seriously wounded (reduced to 35 hp or fewer), using the Disengage action if they have allies present and the Dash action if they don't.

GIRALLONS (V)

The **girallon** is a four-armed ape of below-ape-average intelligence. Its physical ability scores are all impressively high, allowing it to fight either as a brute (melee slugfest) or as a shock attacker (swift melee strike, retreat, strike again). Its Multiattack gives it *five* attack rolls per turn. Why should it do anything but charge and maul?

That's what I thought at first, but upon closer inspection, there are ways to juice girallons' effectiveness a little. Consider the following:

- Their speed is 40 feet, whether they're walking or climbing. The climbing speed means girallons are at home in three-dimensional environments—forests, rocky cliffs, ruins, and the like. The number means girallons are faster than most PCs in a straight chase.
- The Aggressive feature allows girallons, like orcs, to effectively Dash toward their opponents as a bonus action, meaning they can initiate combat from a distance of up to twice their movement—potentially beyond the sensory range of an opponent with darkvision.
- Girallons' darkvision is also capped at 60 feet, but they have Keen Smell, and in fifth edition D&D, the sense of smell isn't limited by distance. (Some real-world creatures, such as bears and elephants, can distinguish smells from *miles* away.) Also, most creatures with darkvision must roll with disadvantage to see a hidden foe within range in pitch-darkness, which for them is equivalent to dim light—but thanks to Keen Smell, girallons roll with *advantage* to detect other creatures. In other words, they can lurk at a distance of 65 to 80 feet from likely prey, completely invisible to them and inaudible as well (the maximum audible distance of a creature trying to be quiet, per the Dungeon Master's Screen Reincarnated, is only 60 feet), sniff them out, then come barreling in to attack with surprise.

Girallons have a predator's normal self-preservation instinct, but the Aggressive trait suggests that they may stay in the fight even if their intended prey fights back. However, a moderate wound (18 damage or more from a single attacker) seems like a good decision point at which a girallon might opt to behave more like a shock attacker than a brute, backing off temporarily to see what its prey does, then attacking again if they show any sign of weakness (that an animal might recognize). Lacking the Intelligence to Disengage, retreating girallons Dash away, upward if possible, easily outpacing most foes who might try to pursue.

If a girallon is seriously wounded (reduced to 23 hp or fewer), it retreats for real and doesn't come back.

BANDERHOBBS (V)

The **banderhobb**'s froglike appearance is a little misleading, since it's not amphibious, nor can it leap, although it can attack targets with its tongue. Instead, it's a deadly combination of powerful brute and relentless hunter, which stalks its prey in the dark.

And don't let the term "brute" fool you: Even though it possesses extraordinary Strength and Constitution, it doesn't lack Intelligence and in fact has a fairly high Wisdom, high enough for it to choose its battles and its moments. It's also expert in Stealth, and it has 120 feet of darkvision. These traits, plus its Shadow Stealth and Shadow Step features, indicate that it strikes from hiding rather than charging brazenly into battle.

According to the lore in *Volo's*, a banderhobb is the creation of a malicious mage or fey creature, called to serve as a thief, kidnapper, or assassin. It doesn't live very long and so, despite its high Wisdom, has no survival instinct to speak of; it exists only to fulfill its orders. If a party encounters one, it's on the hunt, its quarry either an NPC or one of the PCs themselves. (In rare instances, it may be hunting an object rather than a person.)

The banderhobb is strictly nocturnal; it has nothing to gain and everything to lose from operating in daylight. In addition to its basic movement, it has Shadow Step, which combines an attack action with up to 30 feet of teleportation into a place of obscurity, and Shadow Stealth, which lets it Hide as a bonus action.

Of these two features, Shadow Step is more tactically useful. Shadow Stealth adds to the banderhobb's action economy by allowing it to Hide as a bonus action in dim light or darkness, but it doesn't grant the ability to Hide in dim light without something else for it to hide *behind*, and if its target can't see it in darkness, it doesn't need to Hide to gain unseen-attacker advantage anyway.

The one way to combine Shadow Step and Shadow Stealth effectively is as a tactical retreat: Engaged in melee with an opponent, the banderhobb makes one last attack out of spite, then teleports away to a dark or dim space and Hides as a bonus action, so that its opponent gets no opportunity attack against it and has to go looking for it again. Outside this combo, as a brute, the banderhobb doesn't have many reasons or opportunities to use the Shadow Stealth bonus action.

The last thing to look at is its three attack options: Bite, Tongue, and Swallow. Really, we should list them as Tongue, Bite, and Swallow, because that's the order it uses them in.

Tongue is a melee attack with a 15-foot reach. A fully successful Tongue attack not only deals damage but also yanks the target adjacent to the banderhobb and grants it a Bite attack as a bonus action. Bite is a close-range melee attack; a fully successful Bite attack against a Large or smaller creature grapples and restrains its target. (The Difficulty Class to escape this grapple is oddly arbitrary, seeming not to be based on the banderhobb's Constitution, Strength, or Athletics skill; it seems to me that it should probably be 16 rather than 15. Not 18: Things you do with just your mouth don't really count as "Athletics.") Finally, Swallow, which includes a Bite attack, does just what it says. It can only be used against a target who's already grappled, which means that Tongue/Bite plus Swallow is a two-turn operation.

What the banderhobb does after it Bites and grapples a target depends on whether it's been sent to kill or to abduct. If it's been sent to kill, it straightforwardly repeats its Bite attack, with advantage, since the target is restrained. If it's been sent to abduct, it moves on to Swallow. This entails another Bite attack—again, with advantage—and a success means the target is swallowed. (Note that it doesn't work to use Shadow Step to Bite and then teleport as a grab-and-run technique, because Shadow Step doesn't bring a grappled target along. The target has to be Swallowed.)

Here's an interesting thing about being swallowed by a banderhobb: It doesn't kill you! A creature reduced to 0 hp by the banderhobb's digestion becomes unconscious but stable. In other words, once the banderhobb swallows its abductee, its work here is done, and it leaves, taking its alive-but-unconscious quarry back to home base. Is it smart enough to Disengage on the way out? Probably not, but then again, it doesn't need to: It can Shadow Step away to avoid opportunity attacks, and then just run. With Constitution 20, it can probably sprint longer than you can.

As for battlefield positioning, it neither shows nor requires much subtlety. As a brute fighter with a moderate Armor Class and a decent reservoir of hit points, it really doesn't care who or what gets up in its grille. All that really matters is that it's where it needs to be to chomp down on its designated target. It doesn't even bother attacking anyone else unless an enemy is preventing it from getting at that target. That's one situation in which it performs the "spite bite"/retreat combo described above.

No matter how much damage a banderhobb takes, it doesn't retreat until it's done what it was sent to do. Conversely, as soon as it *has* done what it was sent to do, it's out of there. It Shadow Steps if necessary to avoid opportunity attacks; otherwise, it simply Dashes back to its master. If it was sent to steal something, the encounter may be over and done with

before the PCs even realize what's going on: It materializes in the shadows, nabs the loot with its tongue, then skedaddles immediately.

CATOBLEPES (V)

The **catoblepas** comes to us by way of Latin *catōblepās* from Ancient Greek *katōbleps* or *katōblepon*, and its plural in Latin is *catōblepae*, while its Ancient Greek plural is either *katōblepes* or *katōblepones*. Of all these, I like “catoblepes” best—much more than “catoblepases.” I’m going with it. Also, the accent is on the *o*: *ca-toh-bleh-pahs*, *ca-toh-bleh-pee-z*. And that’s one to grow on!

The catoblepas is largely a scavenger, whose loathsome presence befouls the environment around it; I guess it likes its food somewhat pre-decomposed. The foul-tempered monstrosity extends this preference to any edible trespasser who wanders into its territory—thus its Death Ray feature, which inflicts considerable necrotic damage on its target, enough to kill a level 2 or 3 PC on a *successful* Constitution saving throw.

Catoblepes are classified as monstrosities, but they’re unaligned and have only beast-level Intelligence, around the level of a cat or dog. Their Strength and Constitution, however, are extraordinary, and their Dexterity is above average as well. Their darkvision suggests that they’re crepuscular and/or nocturnal; you’re not likely to run across one in broad daylight. They combine above-average passive Wisdom (Perception) with Keen Smell, giving them an effective passive Perception of 17 if you’re upwind of them.

And you don’t want to be *downwind* of them. The catoblepas’s Stench feature causes everyone within 10 feet who fails a Constitution save to be poisoned—I interpret this as uncontrollable retching—imposing disadvantage on all attacks and skill checks until the start of their next turn. (A successful save means the character has acclimated to the Stench and is no longer bothered by it.)

The catoblepas’s behavior isn’t complex: When it detects a trespasser, either by sight or by smell, it starts howling and bellowing and makes straight for them. As soon as it comes within 30 feet, it uses its Death Ray on the first interloper it sees. From this point on, it attacks that opponent and only that opponent until they’re unconscious or dead. If the catoblepas’s Death Ray recharges during this time, it uses it again on the same target. If not, it whomps that target with its clublike tail.

Once it’s dispatched its prey, what it would like to do is get down to eating, but if there are other trespassers around, it wants to get rid of them first. So it charges the next-closest enemy and continues to attack in the same way: Death Ray if it can, otherwise Tail.

Like most evolved creatures, the catoblepas wants to survive. It has a fairly good Wisdom score, so it’s not going to wait until it’s seriously wounded to retreat. Catoblepes are formidable attackers, and any foe formidable enough to hurt *them* is not to be messed with further. Once a catoblepas is moderately wounded (reduced to 58 hp or fewer), it turns tail and Dashes away—unless it’s protecting its young, in which case it Dodges and retreats at normal speed while its offspring Dashes to escape. Once the young catoblepas is safely away, the parent turns and Dashes.

Tlincallis (V)

The **tlincalli** (the name appears to be completely invented, not based in myth, but it looks Nahuatl to me, and in Nahuatl—unlike in Spanish—each *l* is pronounced as a separate *l*, so it’s *tlhin-kabl-lee*) is a centaurlike monstrosity with a humanoid torso topping a scorpoid body. Based on the illustration in *Volo’s*, its face is pretty awful as well, although details are hard to make out.

With very high Strength and Constitution and merely above-average Dexterity, tlincallis are brutes, unafraid of direct melee confrontation. Their Intelligence is below humanoid average, though not animal-level, while their Wisdom is above average, allowing them to pick out promising prey—the old, the young, the weak, the isolated, and the oblivious—as well as to realize when a particularly dangerous opponent needs to be taken out.

The combination of proficiency in Perception and Stealth indicates an ambush attacker; proficiency in Survival adds the ability to track, which is consistent with the flavor text’s characterization of them as nomadic hunters. Tlincallis hot on the trail of desirable prey pursue it aggressively until either they bag it or it fights back forcefully enough to deter them.

Darkvision gives them the upper hand at night or underground, but the flavor text characterizes them as desert dwellers and dawn and dusk hunters (desert nights being uncomfortably cold for activity). If you want to play it close to the lore, go ahead—they do at least have other ways of gaining advantage on their attacks besides having blinded enemies to bushwhack—but fighting foes without darkvision in dim light doesn't improve their attack rolls, only their chance of attacking with surprise.

They have their own language but no proficiency in any social skill, and their Charisma is below average. Parley is probably not going to be a feature of a combat encounter with tlincallis, except in the narrowest circumstances (e.g., a sorcerer using Distant Spell to cast *tongues* at a range of 30 feet), and even then, the tlincallis will be more surprised to hear another creature speaking their language than susceptible to persuasion or intimidation; they certainly aren't going to try to get *their* way by talking. They're evil creatures, so their default disposition will still be hostile.

Tlincallis initiate combat from hiding—the flavor text suggests that they bury themselves in loose sand—in order to gain surprise, along with advantage on their initial attack roll against targets who come within reach. The order of their attacks depends on how close their targets wander.

A tlincalli's Multiattack consists of one attack with either Longsword or Spiked Chain and one with Sting. Sting is by far its most powerful attack, dealing an average 20 damage on a hit with the potential of paralyzing its target on a saving throw super-fail. My intuition tells me that a hunting tlincalli wants to use Sting first, because the paralyzed condition is more devastating to the target than any other condition except being knocked completely unconscious, then wrap the target up with Spiked Chain and run off with it. It turns out, however, that using Spiked Chain before Sting slightly increases the chance of both hitting and paralyzing with the more powerful attack,^{III} so if the target isn't already paralyzed or restrained from a previous round's attacks, a tlincalli always leads with Spiked Chain, then follows up with Sting. If the target is already paralyzed or restrained from a previous round's attacks, it can use Longsword and Sting in any order; it doesn't make a difference mathematically. My personal inclination, based solely on vibe, is to Sting, then swing.

While a predatory beast usually flees when only moderately injured, preferring prey that doesn't fight back, beasts are usually unaligned. Tlincallis are neutral evil monstrosities, so they'll keep fighting awhile longer out of natural truculence, sticking with it until they're seriously injured (reduced to 34 hp or fewer). At that point, they use the Dash action to retreat.

FROGHEMOTHS (V)

Volo's describes **froghemoths** as “creatures not of this world,” who first emerged from “strange, cylindrical chambers of metal buried in the ground” (a callback to the classic *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* adventure *Expedition to the Barrier Peaks*—see “Vegepygmies,” [page 491](#)), but in an odd classification decision, they're categorized as monstrosities, not as aberrations. Then again, it may not matter much, since even aberrations behave as evolved creatures—they've simply evolved in conditions too alien for humanoids to comprehend. And monstrosities should always behave as evolved creatures unless there's some specific reason to think they shouldn't, such as being created through some kind of fiendish curse.

Pure brutes, froghemoths nevertheless have proficiency in Stealth, indicating that they're ambush predators. If at all possible, they hide underwater and strike with surprise. Once they've attacked, however, they overwhelm their opponents with their extraordinary Strength and Constitution.

I notice two details tucked into the top half of their stat block. The first is that they have proficiency in Constitution and Wisdom saving throws—two of the “big three”—but *not* in the third, Dexterity, and their Dexterity is above average but far from extraordinary. In general, therefore, they're not afraid of spellcasters per se. But a spellcaster slinging damaging Dex-save spells will annoy them greatly, and in particular (this is the second detail), *lightning bolt* or any other spell dealing lightning damage will alarm and enrage them, because of their Shock Susceptibility.

The froghemoth's attack pattern is surprisingly complicated. It has a conditional Multiattack: It gets two Tentacle attacks, plus *either* a Tongue attack *or* a Bite attack. The tentacle attack grapples on a hit, but importantly, it doesn't also restrain, which means grappled opponents suffer no disadvantage when fighting back (at least, not because they're grappled), and the froghemoth gains no advantage when attacking them. It also means they can still take any action that doesn't involve being someplace else—except Dodge, because being grappled reduces their speed to 0.

The Tongue attack pulls but doesn't grapple. In other words, it lets go as soon as the target is pulled up to the froghemoth's mouth, whereas the Tentacle attack holds on—and, it's worth noting, *doesn't* pull the grappled target, at least

not automatically. A grappling creature can drag a grappled target (*Player's Handbook*, chapter 9, "Grappling"), but this would involve either moving or using an action. In general, therefore, we have to assume that a target grappled by a frogheemoth tentacle is simply held in place.

However, it just so happens that the range of the Tentacle attack and the range of the Tongue attack are the same. So if a frogheemoth has a victim grappled by a Tentacle, it can then use Tongue to slurp that victim toward its mouth. And a successful Tongue attack also includes a bonus-action Bite. So really, it's not a choice between Tongue and Bite—it's a choice between *Tongue-and-maybe-also-Bite* and *Bite-and-nothing-else*.

Like a giant toad's, a frogheemoth's Bite attack swallows its target on a hit. Unlike a giant toad, a frogheemoth can digest two targets at a time. We can assume that doing this is its overall goal.

Frogheemoths are stupid, but they do have Wisdom 12, which we have to interpret as a level of survival instinct or animal cunning sufficient for it to recognize who's good prey and who isn't. The best prey, to a frogheemoth's limited understanding, is whoever has the least armor and the lowest Strength modifier, and the simplest way to rank your PCs and NPCs is to add these two stats together. Whoever's on the bottom is the frogheemoth's most favored ration.

Will a frogheemoth wait to attack until its preferred targets are in range, though? Not necessarily. While it may not necessarily want to eat a strong, armored-up character, it still gains some benefit from grappling them and holding them out of reach. Since it attacks from hiding with advantage—or at least expects to, since most prey won't notice it lurking—it strikes as soon as two or more opponents stray within Tentacle's 20-foot reach. It always grabs at the closest one first; whether it hits or misses, its second Tentacle attack is against whichever target in reach has the lowest AC + Strength mod, even if that's the same target it attacked first.

Now the heuristic gets complicated, as we have to use math to represent the frogheemoth's instinctive judgment. Its attacks have a two-thirds chance or better of hitting a target with AC 17 in one attempt or of hitting a target with AC 14 twice in two. It also has a two-thirds chance of reeling in a character with Strength 17 or lower with its tongue. (Dexterity modifiers? Saving throw proficiencies? Frogheemoth *no los comprende*. When you calculate AC + Strength mod, *do not* include a character's Dexterity modifier in their Armor Class, and use raw Strength modifier, not Strength saving throw modifier.)

If there's a character already within 5 feet of the frogheemoth, and they're wearing anything but plate armor (or chain mail or splint armor, if the character also carries a shield), the frogheemoth Bites that character.

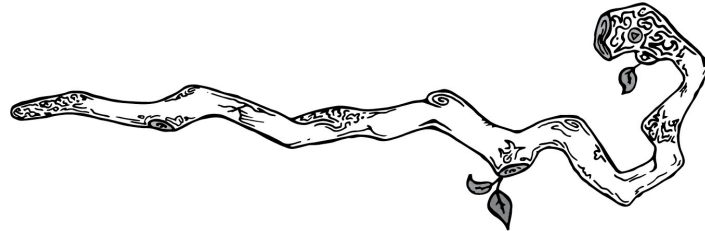
If the frogheemoth has one or more characters grappled, it makes a Tongue attack against the one with the lowest AC + Strength mod, *but only if that character's AC + Strength mod is less than or equal to 15*. (To make it easier on yourself, calculate the AC + Strength mod of every PC and sort them low-to-high before the gaming session starts.) If Tongue hits, it follows up with Bite.

Starting in round 2, the frogheemoth extends its attention to every character in the area. Including those it already has grappled, who's got the highest AC + Strength mod, and who's got the lowest? From this point on, the frogheemoth ignores the character with the highest AC + Strength mod (unless they're already grappled, in which case the frogheemoth simply holds on) but *pursues* the character with the lowest (unless they're already grappled, in which case the frogheemoth attacks only targets currently within reach). Remember that the frogheemoth isn't slowed to half speed if it's carrying a grappled opponent in one of its tentacles, because it's a Huge creature.

What if the frogheemoth has already caught the character with the lowest AC + Strength mod? Then it becomes a matter of whether it's easier to catch someone still running around or to simply swallow whomever it already holds in its tentacles. As I mentioned, a grappled target makes a good meal if its AC + Strength mod is less than or equal to 15. For a free target, the standard is even stricter: an un-Dex-modified Armor Class of 14 or lower for a character with Strength mod -2 or -3; 13 or lower for Strength mod -1 or 0; 12 or lower for Strength mod +1 or +2; and 11 or lower for Strength mod +3. (Again, do the math before your players show up. You'll be glad you did.)

Now, what about that lightning damage? Lightning staggers frogheemoths, denying them their Multiattack and halving their speed. A frogheemoth that's just taken lightning damage freaks out. If the character who dealt the damage is running loose, it drops *everyone* it's holding grappled, moves straight toward that character (at half speed), and tries to either bite it or grab it with a tentacle (the only action it gets). If the character is already grappled, the frogheemoth uses its movement to close the distance and Bite.

The frogemoth is debilitated for only one turn unless it takes additional lightning damage, but just that one instance rearranges its priorities. It's on a rampage now, and it's not going to be happy until whoever dealt the lightning damage is in its belly—*unless* that lightning damage reduced it to 73 hp or fewer. Actually, *any* damage sufficient to reduce a frogemoth to 73 hp or fewer will drive it away. Using the Dash action, it retreats into the water... oh, but I didn't say anything about its letting go of the folks it's holding in its tentacles, did I? It's so dumb, *it forgets to do that*, and it drags its grappled opponents into the water with it. Hope they can catch their breath and make their escape rolls before they drown.



GRAY RENDERS (M)

Everything **gray renders** do is either explicitly scripted or explicitly random. *Mordenkainen's* already gives you all the instructions you'll need.



ASTRAL DREADNOUGHTS (M)

The **astral dreadnought's** name tells you most of what you need to know: This fearless titan drifts through the astral plane, obliterating everyone and everything it comes across.

While its Strength and Constitution are epic, its Dexterity is dismal—a gargantuan beast like this doesn't turn on a dime. Nor does it possess Intelligence beyond animal level. Its Wisdom is high, however, and its Charisma is exceptional—perhaps reflective of its ability to command awe. Despite its extremes, this is a straightforward brute ability contour, indicating a creature whose approach is to close in and maul.

Its resistances and immunities aren't all that relevant, because (contra the flavor text in *Mordenkainen's*) its Intelligence is so low, it doesn't bother to distinguish between one target and another. However, its relatively high Wisdom indicates a prudent, instinctual self-preservation impulse. The astral dreadnought is a creature so unaccustomed to resistance that any prey that can inflict a moderate wound against it (reduce it to 207 hp or fewer—yeah, that number's not a typo) gives it pause.

That's not fear, mind you; that's just *surprise*. By itself, it's not enough to make the astral dreadnought retreat. Rather, it triggers an intuitive assessment of the situation, represented by the encounter difficulty measure in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* (chapter 3, "Combat Encounter Difficulty"). If the astral dreadnought constitutes a Deadly encounter for its opponents, it pushes obstinately on. If it's a Hard encounter, it backs off once seriously wounded (reduced to 118 hp or fewer); more on that later. If it's a Medium or Easy encounter, it backs off immediately. (Yes, it's possible for an astral dreadnought to constitute an Easy encounter. It takes a party of at least six characters of level 15 or higher.)

Running an astral dreadnought is a somewhat mechanistic affair, because its Intelligence is so low and because so many of its traits are passive (Astral Entity, Demiplanar Donjon, Magic Weapons, Sever Silver Cord—I call this one passive because cutting the silver cord is such a jerk move, there's no reason not to do it). The only decisions you need to make as DM are which way to aim its Antimagic Cone, whom to target with its melee attacks, and when to use its Legendary Resistance and each of its legendary actions.

The Antimagic Cone is interesting—and a bit of a catch-22 for the astral dreadnought. Its area of effect, a 150-foot cone, is humongous. But like all conical AoE effects, it's limited to a 53-degree arc. At great distances, this is all-encompassing, but once you get in close, it's easy to run rings around. That's the thing about a conical AoE: At a range of 100 feet, it covers a 100-foot swath, but at 10 feet away, it extends only 10 feet side to side. Thus, while the astral dreadnought can use its Antimagic Cone to shut down spellcasters from a great distance, it can't do anything else to them until they get closer—at which point they can fan out, making it harder for the astral dreadnought to shut them *all* down.

But Antimagic Cone isn't just for shutting down spellcasters. The effect suppresses the properties and powers of magic items, too, including magic weapons. And since it has resistance to physical damage from *nonmagical* attacks, it has a good reason to include magic weapons among the types of magic it wants to shut down. Which means it also has some tough choices to make once its foes rush in and encircle it—and not a lot of cognitive candlepower to expend on making those choices. Whatever it decides, it decides by instinct.

Really, there are only two criteria simple enough to apply: Either it aims its Antimagic Cone at the greatest possible number of enemy creatures, period, or it aims it at the greatest possible number of enemy creatures *who are doing magic things*. Does it possess any kind of sense that suggests that it can detect magical energy? Not that I see. So I think it simply has to do a raw count, making this one of the astral dreadnought's few weaknesses. However, I think it's fair to let the astral dreadnought count from farthest to nearest, because in the event of a tie, it seems silly for it not to aim the Antimagic Cone at foes who might plink it with magic arrows or ranged spell attacks. The ultimate power of Antimagic Cone, in the case of the astral dreadnought, is that it forces hostile creatures to come closer if they want to try to hurt it.

That being said, nowhere is it written that the astral dreadnought has to *stand still*. It aims its Antimagic Cone at the start of its turn, before it gets a chance to move, but since astral propulsion is a matter of will rather than physics, it can move any direction it likes, not just forward. And being Gargantuan, and having a speed of 80 feet, it can barge backward up to 40 feet through any number of foes in order to bring its Antimagic Cone to bear on them. It can also move *vertically* and reorient itself so that it's aiming its Antimagic Cone downward or upward, turning that cone into a circle or an ellipse as it crosses its enemies' plane.

However, the astral dreadnought is a brute melee attacker first and foremost. Maximizing the effect of its Antimagic Cone is not its end goal. Its end goal is eating people, and for that, it needs its opponents close.

Given that the astral dreadnought's eye and mouth are on the same side of its head, I have a strong sense that it should be able to Bite only in the same direction that its eye (i.e., its Antimagic Cone) is pointing. That doesn't constrain whom it's able to attack—it's very mobile—so much as it constrains its positioning before it attacks. And, as a side note, with its high Armor Class, I don't believe it pays any particular mind to the possibility of opportunity attacks.

The next question is whom to target with melee attacks, and that's easy: whoever's hurting it the most, and if nobody's hurting it, then whoever seems weakest, because that's what predators do. If these seem contradictory (why wouldn't it attack whoever seems *strongest?*), look at it this way: It wants to eat people. Weaker people are easier to eat, and it can eat them faster, with less hassle. But if its eating is being interrupted by Angus MacBash and his +2 claymore, well, that's a matter that has to be taken care of so that it can get back to the eating.

One distinction the astral dreadnought does make among its opponents is whether it's attacking them to eat or attacking them to remove a hindrance to eating. If it's simply removing a hindrance, it doesn't need to get closer than 20 feet from them in order to attack with its claws. If it's eating, then it wants to be no more than 10 feet away, so that it can finish its Multiattack with Bite. (Yes, the astral dreadnought can Claw twice, as part of its Multiattack, even if it isn't near enough to any target to use Bite.)

However, its opponents are trying to do just the opposite: The targets of Bite attacks will generally want to get as far away as possible, while those who are managing to hurt the astral dreadnought will want to keep doing it, which means staying within their own weapons' reach. Take the above, then, as a guide to how the astral dreadnought uses its opportunity attacks. If a prey-snack tries to move away, it Bites as soon as they start to move more than 10 feet away. If a serious combatant starts to move away, however, it waits until they get more than 20 feet away, then uses Claw to make its opportunity attack—or maybe doesn't even bother.

The astral dreadnought's Multiattack order is always Claw/Claw/Bite *unless* the first Claw attack reduces a target to 34 hp or fewer, in which case it Bites that target immediately afterward, or an incapacitated opponent is within reach of its

Bite, in which case it Bites that target first, then uses its Claws. If appropriate targets aren't within reach, it first moves to pursue its most effective attacker—or, if there is none, its most desirable prey.

An astral dreadnought's saving throw modifiers are fairly strong, but it does have its weak points: Intelligence most of all, but also Charisma and Dexterity. Intelligence saving throws are typically efforts to see through illusions; these aren't do-or-die rolls. Dexterity saves are for dodging damaging effects, but the astral dreadnought has a *lot* of hit points. Charisma saves—well, there are two things that account for about 80 percent of these, *bane* and *banishment*, and Astral Entity prevents it from being banished. On the other hand, it's not strategic—it's a creature of instinct. So I'm inclined to conclude that it uses its Legendary Resistance reflexively, every time it fails *any* type of saving throw against an effect it's not immune to, until it has no uses left.

The astral dreadnought has three legendary actions: Claw, Donjon Visit, and Psychic Projection. Donjon Visit costs 2 legendary actions, and Psychic Projection costs 3. It stands to reason that the bar to clear for Donjon Visit should be high, and for Psychic Projection, *very* high.

Let's look at Psychic Projection first. "Each creature within 60 feet"—so this is essentially a spherical area of effect with a 70-foot radius, since it emanates from the perimeter of the astral dreadnought's occupied space, not from its center. Per Targets in Areas, this radius would indicate 14 targets. That's too high a bar to clear. Let it suffice to say that it uses Psychic Projection as soon as it has all three of its legendary actions available and all its opponents are within 60 feet of it.

Even that criterion seems awfully steep, doesn't it? Well, yeah. Psychic Projection consumes all three legendary actions. Extreme cost demands extreme justification. But all right, I'm a softie: Let's say that it also uses this legendary action, if it can, as a reaction to being moderately wounded (as mentioned above, reduced to 207 hp or fewer) when at least two-thirds of its opponents are within range, and again as a reaction to being seriously wounded.

Donjon Visit is ideally suited for removing a bothersome belligerent from play—let's say, any foe within range who successfully deals the astral dreadnought 30 damage or more in a single turn. Because this effect is only temporary, lasting a round at most, I'm not going to be a softie and give it an easier criterion to meet. Two legendary actions is a high price to pay.

When to use Claw is easy: You hurt the astral dreadnought, it hurts you back. This legendary action is strictly retaliatory, used against foes who deal more than 0 damage but less than 30, or when the astral dreadnought doesn't have 2 legendary actions to spend.

That leaves the question of *how* the astral dreadnought retreats if and when it must. Because it's so fast (I'm counting only its flying speed here—why does a creature bound to the astral plane even have a non-flying speed?) and will always be outnumbered, its best option is to Disengage. But is it smart enough to know how to do that, even instinctively? I think not. The next-best choice, because of its high Armor Class, is Dodge; therefore, that's what it does as it retreats.

I. There's a confusing ambiguity in the wording of this feature: The target is transformed "*as if affected* by the *polymorph* spell" (emphasis mine), meaning it's *not* a polymorph spell, it only *affects its target* as the spell does. Thus, it may not require concentration and may be permanent instead of lasting only one hour, since only its effect is specified, not its duration. I doubt the writers intended this, and it's an overpowered feature if interpreted this way, but as of this writing, I've found no ruling that officially lays the matter to rest.

II. "Doesn't the *polymorph* effect just end?" Nope. Instakill. This matter *has* been ruled on.

III. Exception: Leading with Sting deals more damage if the target's Armor Class is 19 or higher. However, the chance to paralyze is still greater if a tincalli leads with Spiked Chain. This exception therefore doesn't constitute sufficient reason for the tincalli to change up its attack pattern.

DRAGONS

GUARD DRAKES (v)

Guard drakes, according to their flavor text, are explicitly not evolved creatures: They're created by a magical ritual and lack the ability to reproduce. Therefore, even despite having humanoid-average Wisdom, they lack the self-preservation instinct that evolved creatures possess, and they don't possess an independent sense of what kind of creatures make good prey. Instead, they attack whomever their handlers direct them to, or whoever ventures into territory their handlers have commanded them to protect.

With very high Strength and Constitution, very low Intelligence, no unique traits, and an unvarying Multiattack, a guard drake is a blunt weapon, aggressively and tenaciously attacking its target without ceasing for any reason (unless its handler commands it to). They're so simple that if they didn't have "dragon" in the second line of their stat block, they'd be completely unworthy of note. However, there are a few ways you can twist a guard drake encounter to make it a little more interesting.

One is to make the combat encounter not against the guard drakes but against one or more handlers who are waiting for guard drake eggs to hatch—turning the combat into not only a life-or-death struggle but a contest over who can get the hatchlings to imprint upon them.

Another revolves around the word that comes right after "dragon": "unaligned." Guard drakes aren't evil! They're merely trained watchbeasts. They're not evolved predators, either, which means they lack the instinct to be aggressive—they're aggressive because they're *trained* to be aggressive. Finally, they follow the commands of their handlers. What if a handler is absent? What if the handler is muted by a *silence* spell, or somehow enchanted to become unable to speak Draconic? A guard drake might simply sit tight, blinking derpily. Give your players clues that guard drakes might be effectively deactivated by disrupting communication between them and their handlers.

Finally, note the "Chromatic Guard Drakes" variant, which grants alternative movement abilities to different types. Black and green guard drakes can breathe underwater and swim, which means they don't necessarily stand guard out in the open; they may wait submerged in pools of water, or even guard underwater locations. Blue and white guard drakes can burrow, hiding themselves under sand or snow. And red guard drakes can climb, allowing them to survey an area from a high tree branch, ledge, or rooftop. While none of these special movement modes makes much of a difference once a guard drake is engaged in melee, they can at least provide an interesting surprise at the start of a combat encounter.

GIANTS

OGRES (M)

Ogres have no tactics. They're dumb, simple brutes. With many monsters, simply throwing them at PCs and having them go "Rrrraahhh, stab stab stab" (or in this case, "bash bash bash") falls far short of what those monsters are capable of at their best. With ogres, at least ordinary ones, it's all they're capable of.

Mordenkainen's includes several ogre variants that are, in fact, worth examining. However, these ogres are never going to appear on their own, nor solely in the company of other ogres. These are semi-domesticated ogres used by other species as trained warbeasts. They use their special features only when commanded to. Thus, it's the Intelligence of the trainer, not of the ogre, that influences how effectively they're used.

The **ogre battering ram** variant has two actions, Bash and Block the Path. Bash, a straightforward melee attack that also includes pushback, is the default. Block the Path is a situational action used to lock down chokepoints, forcing opponents to approach within the ogre's reach to get past it. It confers disadvantage on attempts to attack the ogre, but more important, once an enemy creature comes within reach of the ogre, it possesses a Sentinel-like ability to keep that creature from getting away, plus massive bonus damage on its opportunity attacks. You come at the ogre battering ram, you best not miss. (Curiously, despite the name, this variant appears to be more suited to defense than to offense.)

The **ogre bolt launcher** variant can attack with its fists or employ a ranged weapon attack that deals impressive damage from an impressive distance. The trouble is, even with its increased Dexterity, it's still a brute at heart. If a single, visible, unaccompanied enemy happens to come within the ogre bolt launcher's movement range, have it make a DC 10 Wisdom saving throw. If it succeeds, it stays on task. If it fails, it forgets its job, drops its weapon, runs at the enemy, and starts pummeling them.

The **ogre chain brute** is for area control, and its handlers have to be careful, because when it starts whirling its chain around, *every* creature within 10 feet of it has a chance of getting smacked. The preferred attack action, by far, is Chain Smash: It deals the most damage and can knock an enemy unconscious. But it recharges only on a 6, so it's kind of a waste to use it without setting it up first, and the way to set it up is Chain Sweep. On the other hand, Chain Sweep is kind of a waste if the chain brute can't hit at least two enemies with it. Finally, there's Fist, a simple melee attack that does marginally more damage, on average, against a single opponent than Chain Sweep does. But Fist puts the burden of proof on the attacker and does no damage on a miss, while Chain Sweep puts it on the defender and does damage even on a success.

If the chain brute's handler is none too bright, you can use these abilities however you like. But if it knows what it's doing, it commands the chain brute to use Chain Sweep only when it can strike two or more non-prone enemies with it and Chain Smash only when it can use it against a prone opponent, to maximize its chance to hit. Under any other circumstance, it commands the chain brute to attack with Fist. If the chain brute runs out of conscious enemies, it keeps pummeling the unconscious ones as long as it isn't commanded to move.

The **ogre howdah's** only weapon is its mace. This variant's unique feature is Howdah, which grants several Small creatures the ability to ride on its back and attack from three-fourths cover. As the illustration in *Mordenkainen's* suggests, these are most likely to be goblins, but other options include kobolds, derro, deep gnomes, grungs, and xvarts (although, personally, I think it would be out of character for grungs or xvarts to employ an ogre in this way). The riders can make ranged attacks from the ogre howdah's back, but the ogre wants to smash, so have it make a Wisdom save, as described above, to see whether it can resist the urge to charge. If the riders want to make melee attacks from its back, they have to use either lances or whips (they'd have disadvantage on attack rolls with heavy polearms), and they can't reach beyond the ogre

howdah's immediate vicinity. In this instance, they direct the ogre howdah where *they* want to go, and the ogre attacks opportunistically.

With a Wisdom of only 7, an ogre—even a trained one—doesn't have the good sense to run away when it's seriously wounded. Once it starts fighting, it keeps fighting until it's dead.

ELITE GIANTS (v)

In case your players are so jaded that they just shrug and say "Whatever" when you throw a giant at them, *Volo's* introduces a set of elite variations, one for each type of giant in the *Ordning*. Curiously, however, most of them don't offer any new tactical twists.

In fact, the **Mouth of Grolantor**, *Volo's* elite hill giant, manages somehow to be *less* tactically sophisticated than an ordinary hill giant, which is no Hannibal to begin with. Basically a weapon used by other hill giants against their enemies (and already, I'm having trouble imagining hill giants working together effectively enough to come up with such a plan), the Mouth of Grolantor's behavior is entirely random and mechanistic, with no DM discretion. Just wind it up and let it go. (It doesn't even have a vomit attack, which would have been thematically appropriate.)



Similarly, the **frost giant Everlasting One** is just an extra-tough frost giant, one that's eaten a troll (ew, gross) and thereby gained its ability to regenerate damage. It also possesses Vaprak's Rage, mostly a carbon copy of the barbarian class feature Rage, but with a fixed value for the added damage. If you want to make the encounter extra bonkers, you could spin up a version of the troll's Loathsome Limbs feature and give it to the Everlasting One, but aside from that... well, frost giants aren't that complex to begin with, being aggressive brutes ideologically motivated to fight to the death. Because of their aggressive ideology, they probably won't even be deterred by acid or fire damage, just more motivated to kill whoever inflicts it. "Rrrrahhhh, bash bash bash" is all there is to the Everlasting One.

The **fire giant Dreadnought** is stupid but exceptionally strong, a front-line defender employed by fire giants when they go to war. Dual Shields is a passive feature, but there's some small tactical potential in Shield Charge, especially if a group of fire giants is employing *multiple* Dreadnoughts on their front line. Their stupidity doesn't mean they lack fire giants' typical discipline: Dreadnoughts in a shield wall synchronize their use of Shield Charge and all plow forward together. This tactic is especially useful as a way of clearing away the enemy's front line in order to get to the soft, squishy foes behind it. Because a Dreadnought holds a shield in both hands, it probably won't bother to throw rocks; instead, it provides cover for the rock-hurling allies behind it. Charge forward, attack with shields, repeat until enemy is marmalade.

The **stone giant Dreamwalker** is a curiosity. A holy fool on a vision quest gone awry, it's driven by isolation, shame, and disorientation into a kind of schizophrenia. It's not likely to treat (or even recognize) PCs as enemies, but its irrationality makes it hazardous, because its Dreamwalker's Charm is a *passive* feature—it just happens to anyone within 30 feet, whether the Dreamwalker means it to or not.

A typical Dreamwalker encounter involves the giant wandering by, apparently aimlessly, and suddenly deciding that a PC—or something in the PCs' vicinity—is mystically meaningful, prompting it to come close enough for Dreamwalker's Charm to kick in. Then, if the person of interest is affected, the Dreamwalker uses Petrifying Touch on them, picks them up, and adds the unfortunate individual to its collection of flair. Afterward, it goes on its way—if the PCs allow it, which they won't.

A stone giant Dreamwalker is an evolved being, but not a *rational* one. If attacked, it may ignore the attack, or try to swat the attacker away with its club, without evincing any awareness that it's "in a fight"—just as we would never consider ourselves to be "in a fight" with a biting fly. It might whimsically throw a rock at someone, or at something, or at no one and nothing at all. As far as it's concerned, everything it's experiencing is some kind of hallucination anyway, and its only concern is whether it can make some kind of sense of it. Play the encounter for maximum oddity.

In contrast to these four elite giants, the **cloud giant Smiling One** and the **storm giant Quintessent** are tactically complex. In fact, the Smiling One is *so* complex that I can offer only general guidelines on how to run one. It's a trickster and manipulator, motivated by the pursuit of wealth (and remember, a cloud giant's definition of "wealth" revolves around quality and rarity, not the size of the pile), so as a DM running a Smiling One, you have to be just as crafty and opportunistic.

In addition to the usual repertoire of spells that cloud giants can cast innately, the Smiling One can also cast a variety of bard spells. Of these, the two with the most potentially effective combat applications are *suggestion* (powerful in either social interaction or combat, but because it requires concentration, it can be used against only one target at a time) and *Tasha's hideous laughter* (effective way to take a key opponent out of the fight). *Invisibility* is useful for tactical relocation, but all cloud giants can cast *misty step* without even spending a spell slot on it; *cure wounds* doesn't match the rest of the Smiling One's repertoire, but it will use this spell on itself if it can get a moment to breathe while it's moderately wounded (between 183 and 105 hp).

The Smiling One's other spells are, at best, more suited to social interactions than to combat encounters; at worst, there's *tongues*, which serves a purpose only if no one in the party speaks Common, and *disguise self*, which isn't going to make an 18-foot giant look like anything smaller than a 17-foot giant. A Smiling One can use it to make you think you're dealing with some *other* giant, I suppose, but why would it cast *disguise self* when it can Change Shape? (Though there's not much tactical advantage even in Change Shape, since unlike a druid's Wild Shape feature, it doesn't give the Smiling One a reservoir of extra hit points, nor does it enhance its movement.)

The key to the Smiling One's tactical effectiveness is buried in the small print: Both its Morningstar attack and its Rock attack inflict extra damage if it has advantage on its attack roll. Get it? The Smiling One has Sneak Attack! Or a variation on

it, anyway (it doesn't apply if the target is simply engaged in melee with an ally of the Smiling One). So rather than play it like a brute front-line fighter, you should play a Smiling One like a slippery rogue.

Okay, so how can a Smiling One gain advantage on its attacks? It has three ways built in: by casting *telekinesis* against an opponent, restraining them; by casting *Tasha's hideous laughter* and causing an opponent to fall prone; or by attacking while unseen, using *invisibility*. (*Fog cloud* won't do the trick, because the Smiling One's vision is just as impaired as the target's, negating its attacking advantage.) Any other effect that blinds, paralyzes, or stuns a target also works; the Smiling One doesn't have any of these in its spell repertoire, but it's ready to seize the moment if something else causes one of these debilitating effects. Smiling Ones are also more likely to cast *fly*, simply because it's fun, but mostly for quick, 60-foot-per-turn relocations, since it requires concentration and therefore precludes casting *suggestion*, *invisibility*, *Tasha's hideous laughter*, or *telekinesis* at the same time. It also allows a flying Smiling One to strafe-attack most melee opponents without incurring opportunity attacks, thanks to its 10-foot reach.

Although cloud giants can easily hold their own in any melee engagement, that's not the Smiling One's style; rather than merely bash away round after round, if it doesn't have advantage on its attack, it uses its turn to set itself up to attack with advantage the *following* round, using any of the means available to it, while evading its enemies' attacks as best it can. All things being equal, one attack roll with advantage is inferior to two attacks without, but the extra damage that the Smiling One gets with advantage makes things unequal enough that one roll with advantage is better after all. Also remember, while it enjoys deceit and mischief for their own sakes, its objective is usually to swipe some piece of exceptional treasure, and whatever else it does, if it can get its hands on the object(s) it wants, it doesn't hang around any longer after that.

As for the storm giant Quintessent, this is a legendary enemy we're talking about, with both legendary actions and lair actions. In pursuit of immortality, the Quintessent has essentially become a living storm, forming weapons and armor out of the elements and force of will. The form that PCs may encounter in combat is not the Quintessent's true form but rather a temporary corporeal form that can hold conversations and hit things.

Let's look at the lair actions first:

- Fog/murk cloud: Shuts down advantage and disadvantage within its area of effect by effectively blinding everyone. Depending on the Quintessent's posture—as a chaotic good creature, it may be fighting because it has to, not because it wants to—it may use this lair action simply to make combat less desirable for everyone, or it may judge that with its Lightning Sword's +14 to hit and 9d6 + 9 damage, it's heavily favored to win a fight with no tactical combinations allowed. (It can't use its Wind Javelin in the fog: That attack action requires it to be able to see its target.)
- Blast of wind/jet of water: Twice as wide as most linear attacks, this is solid against two or three opponents but best against four or more. Note that while it pushes opponents 15 feet back, it doesn't knock them prone. If directed through a fog cloud, it *doesn't* clear the cloud away, unless the Quintessent wants it to!
- Thunderclap: Deafens everyone in a 20-foot radius who doesn't make a Constitution saving throw. Deafness isn't an especially debilitating condition, so this is more for atmosphere. However, if there's a fog cloud in place already, and everyone in it is blind *and* deaf... well, let's just say that's every bit as scary as a 24-foot-tall behemoth swinging a lamppost-size sword at you.

The Quintessent can fly, and it spends its time between turns hovering 15 or 20 feet up in the air, swooping down to attack, then back up afterward, indifferent to opportunity attacks. With a 15-foot reach and a 600-foot ranged attack, and air superiority to boot, it can target whomever it wants, whenever it wants, Multiattacking with its Lightning Sword against targets it can reach and with Wind Javelin against those it can't. Wielders of magic weapons and slingers of Dex-save damaging spells are high-priority targets, as is anyone who can also fly.

The Gust legendary action is useful mainly for keeping dangerous melee foes armed with magic weapons at bay. Since it pushes its target only 20 feet, the Quintessent either moves back at the same time or uses it before the target closes to within its movement range.

Thunderbolt is a supplement to Wind Javelin, to be used against whomever the Quintessent finds most threatening—and this must be someone *genuinely* threatening, because it costs two legendary actions. A workable definition of “genuinely threatening” is anyone who can deal moderate damage—69 hp or more—to the Quintessent in a single turn. If such a foe exists and is beyond the reach of its Lightning Sword, the Quintessent makes sure not to use Gust more than

once per turn so that the legendary actions are available to use Thunderbolt. Moreover, it uses Thunderbolt *before* that enemy takes their own turn for the round, and may subsequently use Gust against that same enemy as well.

One with the Storm uses up the Quintessent's entire quota of legendary actions for the turn. A conflict-averse Quintessent may wish to use One with the Storm *immediately*, then try to harass trespassers into leaving using nonlethal methods such as the murk cloud in order to avoid conflict altogether. If it's decided to fight, it uses this legendary action if and only if it's somehow gotten backed into an untenable tactical position and needs to relocate, or if it genuinely needs to flee—but it takes more than the usual amount of damage to drive a Quintessent to flee. At 92 hp, it's seriously wounded, but only if reduced to 46 or fewer does it finally acknowledge the need to abandon its lair.

TROLLS (M)

The "Loathsome Limbs" variant in the *Monster Manual* is one way to take the off-the-rack troll and turn it into an entertaining encounter. *Mordenkainen's* offers a few more. None of them is quite as much fun as Loathsome Limbs—but all of them are even more fun if you layer Loathsome Limbs on top of them!

Each of these new types of troll is the product of a sort of magical homeopathy: Whatever doesn't kill them makes them mutate. The **venom troll**, for instance, is what you get when a troll takes a near-fatal amount of poison damage. Its mutation grants it the Venom Spray action, which recharges on a roll of 6 only, meaning it can expect to use it only once during a combat encounter. It takes this action the first moment it has three targets within a 15-foot cube in front of it, per Targets in Areas. If the feature happens to recharge, the venom troll uses it again as soon as the same criterion presents itself, but not before.

In addition, because the Poison Splash trait affects creatures within 5 feet of the venom troll, it has an incentive to move toward wherever its foes are most densely concentrated. However they happen to be arrayed, the venom troll tries to get within 5 feet of as many opponents as it can—ideally, with those opponents in front of it, in the Venom Spray cube. If it can't get that close to more than one, it satisfies itself with being within 5 feet of one of them (rather than place itself halfway between two but within 5 feet of neither).

When using Loathsome Limbs with the venom troll, apply the effect of Poison Splash only when an opponent of the troll hits with an attack on its body, not on a severed arm, leg, or head. Also, to use Venom Spray, the venom troll must have at least one arm to do the slashing, either attached to its body or no farther than 5 feet away.

Venom trolls Dash away when reduced to 37 hp or fewer.

The **rot troll** is a troll transformed by necrotic damage, granting it the Rancid Degeneration trait. Like Poison Splash, Rancid Degeneration encourages the rot troll to push into its enemies' midst—even more strongly, because the rot troll has no other unique trait to suggest an alternative position. When it can get close to only one opponent, it places itself on the side closest to the center of its opponents' formation.

When using Loathsome Limbs with the rot troll, you can declare that it applies only to creatures within 5 feet of the troll's body, or you can divide it up: 2d8 for the body and 1d4 for one severed arm or leg; 2d6 for the body and 1d4 for each of two severed arms or legs; 2d4 for the body and 1d4 for each of three severed arms or legs; and 1d4 apiece for the body, each arm, and each leg when all four limbs are severed. Note that dividing it up this way deals slightly more than base damage.

The rot troll, alone among its kindred, doesn't regenerate. It Dashes away when reduced to 55 hp or fewer.

The **spirit troll** is a troll that survived being bombarded with so much psychic damage that its body regenerated itself as energy rather than matter. It's a weirdie: Its unique trait is Incorporeal Movement, which allows it to chase its foes through walls and other solid objects. This trait doesn't alter its tactics at all—what it does is keep the physical environment from altering the troll's tactics, too. No matter how many obstacles exist around it, it acts as though they're not there. When you use Loathsome Limbs with the spirit troll, its severed limbs pass through other creatures and objects to get back to its body by the shortest path!

Spirit trolls, which have slightly higher Intelligence and Wisdom than ordinary trolls, know to focus their attacks on stunned targets. They act toward opponents who deal psychic or force damage or wield magic weapons the way regular trolls act toward opponents who deal acid or fire damage, and they Dash away when reduced to 38 hp or fewer.

What happens when a troll gets so hungry that it fights, kills, and eats another troll? It mutates into a Huge **dire troll**, with extra arms and eyes, among other things. These additions make the dire troll a sharper-eyed predator and a more lethal

combatant, with a fearsome 10-foot reach. Its Multiattack includes two more Claw attacks than a regular troll's, implying that it has four arms rather than two.

This implication is relevant to the Whirlwind of Claws action if you're using Loathsome Limbs. When one or more of its arms has been severed, subtract 2d10 from the slashing damage dealt by Whirlwind for each severed arm—and give it to the arm, which has only a 5-foot reach, because it thrashes and gyrates around its own center of mass rather than the dire troll's. Additionally, increase the slashing damage threshold to sever a limb from 15 to 20, and give its arms and legs a speed of 10 feet rather than 5 feet. Finally, on the d20 roll to determine which limb is severed, sever a leg on a roll of 11–13, an arm on a roll of 14–19, and the head on a roll of 20.

Dire trolls are a little more intelligent than ordinary trolls, and it's enough to make a difference. When a dire troll is engaged in melee by multiple foes, it divides its Claws attacks among those foes, using its Bite against the one who seems weakest. It uses Whirlwind of Claws whenever it's available, as long as it can reach at least two opponents with it. Rather than recoil from an enemy who deals fire or acid damage, a dire troll charges that enemy, heedless of opportunity attacks on the way, and attempts to shred them. It also knows that magic weapons hurt more and focuses its attacks on opponents wielding them, at least until it's seriously wounded (reduced to 68 hp or fewer). At that point, recognizing that there's not much more it can do to get the better of its foes, it Dashes away.

UNDEAD

DEATHLOCKS (M)

Pacts formed with supernatural patrons tend not to have escape clauses, and the penalties for breaking them can be unpleasant. Did you make a pact with an archfiend to do its bidding in exchange for occult powers and fail to uphold your end of the terms? No “till death do us part” in this vow—that archfiend owns you *after* death, as well. Congratulations, you’re a **deathlock**! Free will? No longer an issue. You’re undead now, and your compulsion is to serve your patron—and to do a better job of it than you did when you were alive.

A blog reader asked: “The deathlock only gets two spell slots. What does it do afterward? PC warlocks are built around recharging with a short rest every battle, but enemies rarely survive to return for a second battle, and with its pathetic stats, the only way it’s going to survive is by casting *invisibility*—and if it saves a spell slot for that, it’s down to one spell slot.”

Well, first of all, let’s look at whether the premises of this question are true. The deathlock’s ability contour peaks in Charisma and Dexterity, which is exactly what you’d expect of a spellslinger in general and a warlock in particular; its Intelligence is also above average. Its 36 average hit points (which you *can* nudge up, incidentally, if you feel like the deathlock needs more staying power) aren’t out of line for a CR 4 foe. Plus, it has resistance to physical damage from nonmagical, nonsilvered weapons, so unless you’re handing out magic items like candy, there’s a decent chance that your mid-level adventurers will do only half damage to it. (It’s also resistant to necrotic damage and immune to poison damage and the poisoned condition, but these are less significant.)

Now, about those two spell slots: Yes, warlocks’ Pact Magic dramatically limits how many leveled spells they can cast between rests. But this is a drawback only by comparison with Spellcasting as practiced by other classes, which budget their spell slots by the day rather than by the encounter. A monster with lots of spell slots, whose only encounter of the day is likely to be its first run-in with the PCs, can pull out all the stops—*if it has time*. But combat is assumed to last only three rounds, on average; sometimes it runs as many as five, but occasionally, it’s over in two. *Having* spell slots isn’t the same as *getting to use* spell slots, so warlocks are less handicapped by this restriction than it may seem at first glance. Finally, while I’m not privy to the designers’ intention, I think warlocks are meant to lean *very* heavily on cantrips in general and *eldritch blast* in particular, and they can use those as many times as they like.

But let’s look specifically at what the deathlock brings to the table:

- At will: *detect magic*, *disguise self*, *mage armor*. Note that while these don’t cost spell slots, they do take *time*. That being said, all of these are preventive measures that a deathlock is smart enough to cast in advance of any possible altercation, and *detect magic* is the only one of them that requires concentration.
- Cantrips: *chill touch*, *eldritch blast*, *mage hand*. Since the deathlock is a level 5 caster, its *eldritch blast* shoots two beams, not just one, for a possible 2d10 damage, while *chill touch* deals 2d8 necrotic along with temporarily suppressing healing.
- Leveled spells: *arms of Hadar*, *dispel magic*, *hold person*, *hunger of Hadar*, *invisibility*, *spider climb*. All of these are cast at 3rd level, because warlock, and *arms of Hadar* and *hold person* scale. In any given combat encounter, the deathlock gets to choose two of these spells to use once each, or one to use twice. This is the key situational decision.

In contrast, whether to use Deathly Claw vs. *chill touch* is a standing decision, and the decision is easy: Always use *chill touch* rather than Deathly Claw, except at melee range against a non-paralyzed target. *Chill touch* does the same damage on average as Deathly Claw, of the same type, but has a 5 percentage point higher chance to hit and carries the “No heals for

you!” rider, and if the target is paralyzed, a point-blank ranged attack gains the same benefits (advantage to hit, every hit a crit) as a melee attack.

Okay, so let’s look at those leveled spells and try to figure out what situations each one is right for.

- *Arms of Hadar* is an instantaneous, area-effect spell with a 10-foot radius, which emanates outward from the caster to deal (at 3rd level) 4d6 necrotic damage to each target; it also momentarily suppresses reactions, and the most commonly used reaction is the opportunity attack. Being a spellslinger, the deathlock would prefer to keep its distance from foes if it can. Per Targets in Areas, a spell effect with a 10-foot radius generally affects two targets. Thus, the purpose of *arms of Hadar* is to try to escape being engaged in melee by two or more opponents. However, the deathlock’s odds of succeeding at this aren’t necessarily great: *Arms of Hadar* calls for a Strength saving throw, an ability that melee attackers are usually well endowed with, and a save DC of 13 is fairly easy to beat. So let’s stipulate that the deathlock casts *arms of Hadar* when it’s trying to escape being engaged in melee by two or more opponents *and* no more than one of these opponents is a front-liner wielding a Strength-based melee weapon. It’s better for escaping finesse fighters and rogues.
- *Dispel magic* shuts down all persistent magical effects of 3rd level or lower on a single target. How many of these is a deathlock likely to need to worry about—like, really worry about? The only ones I can think of off the top of my head are *protection from evil and good*, *slow*, and maybe *faerie fire*.
- *Hold person* may actually be better for the deathlock when it comes to escaping a double-teaming situation than *arms of Hadar*, because it targets Wisdom instead of Strength and always affects two targets, thanks to Pact Magic. But it’s also very good against pesky spellslingers, as well as shock attackers with magic or silvered weapons. *Anyone* with a magic or silvered weapon, really, unless they’re a cleric, druid, monk, or paladin: Those classes are likely to beat the Wisdom save.
- *Hunger of Hadar* is like a *darkness* spell that’s harder to walk out of and that also deals damage—not a lot of it, but a nonnegligible amount. Primarily, it’s a control spell, to be used against four or more foes in an area with a 20-foot radius that doesn’t include the deathlock itself. This is the deathlock’s “Leave me alone, I’m working” spell.
- *Invisibility*, as my reader noted, offers limited utility, especially when it comes to escape. So let’s think of it not as a contingency spell but as one that has to fit into the deathlock’s overall mission plan, whatever that is. *Invisibility* requires concentration, so the deathlock doesn’t use it when it also needs *detect magic*. It’s good for a single ambush attack against a target it can take down in this way; however, the deathlock is no shock attacker, and it’s not going to kill a mid-level adventurer by dealing 11 damage in one turn. It also lacks proficiency in Stealth. My conclusion is that *invisibility* is a spell that the deathlock uses *before* combat to try to get its work done without being seen, in situations where it’s better not to be seen at all (*invisibility*) than simply to be mistaken for someone else (*disguise self*).
- *Spider climb* offers some interesting possibilities in the realm of being able to attack from range with *eldritch blast* and *chill touch* while remaining out of reach of melee attacks, but these possibilities are more interesting when the deathlock is on offense rather than on defense. In the latter case, being an unboostable 2nd-level spell that requires concentration, it feels like a waste of a spell slot.

I won’t delve into the strategies underlying all the patron-specific spell lists—you can figure them out yourself by looking at them the way I do above—except to note that each one has not just a different overall flavor but a different approach to combat. An Archfey deathlock is primarily interested in avoiding and confusing its opponents long enough to accomplish its goal and depart. A Fiend deathlock actively tries to hurt its opponents with fire using *fireball* and boosted *burning hands* and *hellish rebuke*. A Great Old One deathlock mostly acts as if its opponents aren’t even there, unless and until each one tries to hurt it.¹

Being compelled to serve their patrons, deathlocks have a short-circuited self-preservation instinct and make no attempt to save themselves no matter how badly injured they are, unless their patrons are actively observing and consider them more useful undead than dead. Somehow, though, I don’t get the sense that there’s any shortage of warlocks who’ve disappointed their patrons.

The much tougher **deathlock mastermind** (a bit of a misnomer, since its Intelligence is high but not exceptional—just one point higher than the deathlock’s, with no difference in ability modifier) replaces its *eldritch blast* cantrip with Grave

Bolts, which deal 4d8 damage—nearly twice as much as *eldritch blast*, on average, against one opponent, and more than three times as much against two. They also have a chance of restraining a target on a hit, requiring a DC 16 Strength save to resist. This save DC probably still isn't high enough to restrain a mid-level front-line warrior, but it's decent against everyone else. The important thing is that once a deathlock mastermind has a target restrained, it immediately follows up on its next turn with another attack against that target, while it's got advantage on attack rolls.

The deathlock mastermind's *chill touch* is no better than the basic deathlock's. Its Deathly Claw does another die's worth of damage, but it still falls short of Grave Bolts. Is *chill touch* worth casting anyway for the sake of healing suppression? Maybe, if the group has an obvious healer in the bunch (cleric, druid, paladin). There's not much reason to move in and take a chance on Deathly Claw, though. The deathlock mastermind is a spellslinger that prefers to keep its distance from enemies.

Looking at the deathlock mastermind's spell list, *hold person* is replaced by *hold monster*, which is a rip-off, because now it affects only one target (which can be the ranger's wolf buddy or the wizard's summoned dretch—big whoop); *spider climb* is replaced by *fly*, a modest improvement; *hunger of Hadar* is replaced by garden-variety *darkness*, an improvement because, and only because, the deathlock mastermind also has de facto Devil's Sight; and *blight*, *counterspell*, *crown of madness*, *dimension door*, and *poison spray* are new additions.

The basic deathlock has a functional enough spell list that it can be used by default, but the deathlock mastermind's list contains a number of trap choices. *Counterspell*, for instance, is an ace in the hole for most spellcasters but a costly use of a scarce spell slot for warlocks; *hold monster* is drastically inferior to *hold person*; and the other new spells don't scale, other than *blight*, which is nasty against a single target but offers nothing against more than one.

The thing about warlocks in general is that they *really* depend on the scaling effect of upcasting—otherwise, what's the point of casting a 2nd-level spell using a 5th-level slot? Thus, a spell like *crown of madness*, which is no better if cast at 5th level than at 2nd level, has too high an opportunity cost to even consider. Even *invisibility* becomes less attractive, because by the time you're casting 5th-level spells, you really ought to know *greater invisibility* and be casting that in combat instead. If you stick with the default spell list, a deathlock mastermind's spellcasting comes down to *arms of Hadar*, *blight*, *darkness*, *fly*, and—when it's time to go—*dimension door*. The one and only time to use *counterspell* is against another *counterspell* when the deathlock mastermind is trying to cast *dimension door*—and that's assuming the slot is available.

The patron-specific spell lists, on the other hand, pack some real punch. The Archfey list does include *greater invisibility*, along with *dominate person*, *hunger of Hadar* (which doesn't scale), and *sleep*. (This last spell doesn't scale as well as some do, but 13d8 will drop a whole mess of NPC bystanders, every guard in a noble's summer cottage in the country, or half of a party that's on the ropes.) The Fiend list—which includes *burning hands* (7d6 fire damage), *command* (five targets), *fireball* (10d6), *flame strike*, *bellish rebuke* (5d10), *scorching ray* (six rays), and *wall of fire* (7d8)—is so strong, it almost merits promoting the deathlock mastermind to CR 9. The Great Old One list includes *dissonant whispers* (7d6), *dominate person*, *Evard's black tentacles* (potential to restrain), *hunger of Hadar*, and *telekinesis*. Every one of these beats the default list.

That being said, a deathlock mastermind doesn't necessarily work alone—it's likely to have other deathlocks and/or deathlock wights (see below) under its command. Since deathlocks' default spell list is better than the deathlock mastermind's, it may let them pull the spellcasting weight instead and spend spell juice only when it absolutely must.

Deathlock masterminds use their magic to avoid detection while carrying out their schemes. If they can do this with just their innate spells and cantrips, they do, but they may occasionally need to use *invisibility* (or *greater invisibility*), *phantasmal force*, *seeming*, or—as mentioned above—*sleep* to accomplish a certain task. If they're encountered in the middle of one of these schemes, they may be a spell slot down, in which case they cast *dimension door* and skedaddle as soon as they can no longer stall for time using innate spells, cantrips, and nonmagical attacks. It's not because they have any more agency or any stronger a sense of self-preservation. It's because they represent a greater investment on the part of their patrons and are more useful to them. You don't just let people come along and wreck your mastermind.

A **deathlock wight** has the ability contour of a spellslinger, but it lacks Pact Magic. Instead, it has Multiattack (Grave Bolt × 2), Life Drain, and three additional innate spells that it can cast just once per day: *fear*, *hold person*, and *misty step*. Deathlock wights—unlike regular wights—still try to keep their distance from their enemies, but when the right opportunity presents itself, they close in and use Life Drain.

This opportunity usually arises when a deathlock wight isn't encountered on its own but with other deathlock wights or, even better, other deathlock wights *and* a deathlock mastermind. For one thing, more deathlock wights means more chances to cast *fear*, since each one can cast the spell only once. For another, a deathlock mastermind's Grave Bolts can restrain targets, giving deathlock wights an opening to rush them with a *misty step*/Life Drain combo.

Once a deathlock wight begins Life Draining a target, others join in, if they're present. In any given round, if the target escapes being restrained by Grave Bolts, one of a group of deathlock wights spends its use of *hold person* to keep them from getting free, while another casts *fear* to keep three or more would-be rescuers at bay. Any others join in the Life Draining fun.

At the start of combat, the deathlock wight relies on its movement to try to stay as far from its enemies as it can and its Multiattack to plink them down, starting with clerics, paladins, and the squishy types in the back. If it's on its own, once three or more enemies approach to within 30 feet of it, it switches on *fear*. Partly, this is to make its enemies keep their distance; partly, it's a test to see who fails their Wisdom saving throws. Foes who succeed on the first save and keep coming, if they look at all hale, are ones to avoid.

As this dance winds on, the deathlock wight watches for one of its foes (ideally, one who failed at least a couple of Wisdom saves) to show signs of being badly wounded. When this happens, it switches gears and casts *hold person* on that foe, then rushes toward them. When it reaches its target's side, it begins using Life Drain.

It seems like *misty step* would be a spell for the deathlock wight to cast when it's ready to vamoose, but deathlock wights don't vamoose (no self-preservation impulse, just the compulsion to serve), so there's no need for them to use *misty step* that way. Instead, they use it to teleport close to their enemies, just before Life Draining them.

Deathlocks and deathlock masterminds can go about during the day, though they prefer to work—and fight—in the dark. Deathlock wights, on the other hand, have Sunlight Sensitivity: They *must* work and fight in the dark, along with everything else they do. Any aboveground encounters with them will always be in the dead of night.

SWORD WRAITHS (M)

The sword wraith is a dandy example of a backstory-driven compulsion: a warrior, obsessed with glory, slain in combat in a manner much more in line with the reality of war than the mythology of it, and refusing to stop seeking that glorious victory despite being technically dead. It comes in two varieties: the rank-and-file **sword wraith warrior** and the higher-level **sword wraith commander**.

According to the flavor text, despite being evil-aligned, sword wraiths don't necessarily attack every living being who comes near. They're closer to ghosts, haunting the locations where they met their ignominious demises and grinding their emotional axes. They can be talked to. They can be flattered. They can be offended. (Boy, can they be offended.) Mostly, they want to be treated with the adulation they expected to receive for the valorous deeds they were very sure they were capable of performing.

Both sword wraith warriors and sword wraith commanders are melee-focused brutes, with exceptional Strength and Constitution. Sword wraith warriors have animal-level Intelligence and below-average Wisdom, while sword wraith commanders have more humanoid-typical Intelligence and above-average Wisdom, so while they play the same combat role, they assess situations differently.

Both types have Longbow attacks in addition to their Longsword attacks, but they use them only under very narrow circumstances: to take potshots at fleeing enemies they can't catch up with, if commanded to by a sword wraith commander, or if they were archers in their previous lives. (In the last case, it seems like either their Strength and Dexterity scores or their Strength and Constitution scores ought to be swapped.) The greatest glory comes from face-to-face combat, not from launching projectiles from a safe distance.

Martial Fury is a strange trait that grants sword wraiths an extra attack as a bonus action at the cost of advantage on incoming attacks. When should it choose to use this bonus action? Well, here's the thing: The sword wraith warrior lacks the Intelligence to exercise independent judgment. Whatever it does, it does instinctually and reflexively. And given its lore, there seems to be no reason why it wouldn't whip itself up into a state of Martial Fury *all the time*, even if that means leaving itself wide open to its foe's ripostes. Its notions of physical courage overwhelm its combat sense. It makes some sense that they do, since the sword wraith warrior is also resistant to physical damage from nonmagical weapon attacks. But if someone does come at it with a magic weapon, it can't adjust.

Should a sword wraith commander be able to exercise more control over its Martial Fury? I'd say yes except for one thing: Martial Fury seems to me to be the best mechanical expression of the sword wraith's compulsion. A sword wraith commander may be *smart enough* to know that it ought to restrain its Martial Fury under certain circumstances—say, if its opponent or opponents are making more than two attacks against it in a round, following the same rule of thumb I generally use for Reckless Attack—and yet be *unable* to restrain itself because it's undead. You could, as DM, decide that the sword wraith commander can make a Wisdom saving throw each turn to see whether it can muster the willpower to do what it knows it ought to, but to me, this seems like a complication without enough payoff to justify it.

The sword wraith commander also has the Call to Honor feature, which lets it summon backup once per day. The most mathematically sensible time to do so is the first round after it's taken damage, but for the sake of narrative, you may wish to wait until the sword wraith commander is moderately wounded (reduced to 88 hp or fewer). However, I recommend against rolling for the number of sword wraith warriors who appear. Use a predetermined number within the given range, based on how difficult you want the encounter to be. If you'd rather let it be random, make the roll in advance of your game session and jot the number down for reference. Keep them within 30 feet of the commander so that they can benefit from its Turning Defiance, and have them move as a tightly knit team.

With respect to target selection, sword wraiths are easily baited: They'll engage with the nearest opponent who's attacking them, and all other things being equal, they attack the most formidable of these foes in order to prove their prowess. Sword wraith commanders have a slightly better sense of what constitutes a strategically important target and will identify, for example, a support spellcaster who's buffing allies with a *bless* spell, or an Abjuration wizard projecting an Arcane Ward to protect their melee fighters, as a target who needs to be taken down. Rather than leave the front line, however, they direct a sword wraith warrior under their command to eliminate the asset, either by rushing them or by switching to Longbow, depending on how far off they are and how many other opponents are in the way.

All sword wraiths fight until they're destroyed—another manifestation of their death-before-dishonor compulsion.

VAMPIRIC MIST (M)

Alas, there isn't much to say about **vampiric mist**, which is what you end up with when the body of a vampire is destroyed but its essence isn't. With no way to form a new body, it floats around aimlessly, feeding off victims by employing a sort of necrotic vacuum effect to pull blood out of victims' pores and facial orifices.

I normally begin by looking at a creature's ability contour, but in this case, there's not much point. There's only one stat that matters, and that's its Intelligence, which is subsapient. Vampiric mist has no judgment, only instinct. Moreover, it has no attack action per se, only Life Drain, an effect that requires a saving throw to resist. Vampiric mist isn't so much a creature as it is a punishment.

Because of their Sunlight Sensitivity, vampiric mists come outside only after dark, and they don't mess around with civil, nautical, or astronomical twilight. It's nighttime or nothing.

Also, thanks to the Forbiddance feature, one is safe from vampiric mist as long as one is inside a residential building, either one's own home or someone else's. ("The mist can't enter a residence without an invitation from one of the occupants," but seriously, who's going to invite a grayish-crimson, foul-smelling cloud of vapor to come inside, especially one that can't even knock on the door or answer the question "Who's there?") Inns are a gray area: If you've ever read a zoning ordinance, you know that inns are commercial, not residential. On the other hand, a rented room at an inn can be an individual's primary place of residence and therefore, in a legal sense, their home. As DM, you make the call regarding whether a character has a permanent enough arrangement with an inn to construe their room as a residence. There's no ambiguity around monasteries and convents: As both permanent residences and hallowed ground, they're safe. But adventurers spend a lot of time on the road, and a bedroll is not a residence, period.

Anyway, vampiric mists are just out for blood, and they don't care where they get it. If they can't breach the perimeter of your boudoir, they'll zero in on some shlub out for a midnight stroll instead. Battlefields, full of bleeding wounded and impermanent bivouacs, are magnets for vampiric mists.

Once you've decided you're going to throw a vampiric mist at a group of characters who've left themselves vulnerable, there are no decisions of any consequence to make. Vampiric mists don't Dodge, Disengage, Hide, or do anything like that. They Life Drain, again and again, until they're defeated. They have no independent judgment and no ability to

communicate. Their above-average Wisdom gives them some ability to assess targets, but it doesn't extend far beyond picking on the already weakened and shying away when struck by a magic weapon.

Unlike a garden-variety predator, however, vampiric mists don't flee when they're wounded. They're driven by the compulsion to feed. Vampires, the regular walking-around kind, are smart; while they, too, are compelled to feed, they have enough enlightened self-interest to plan out how they're going to do that at minimal risk to themselves. Vampiric mists have no such intelligence, only the compulsion. Once they've started feeding, they don't stop until they're destroyed. Hurt them with damage they aren't resistant to, and they don't waft away—they only move to the opposite side of the battlefield. They aren't smart enough to know that opportunity attacks are a thing. Only one thing actually drives them away: sunlight, either natural or from a *dawn*, *sunbeam*, or *sunburst* spell.

ALLIPS (M)

The last vestige of a soul that's absorbed secrets too awful for a mortal consciousness to contain, the **allip** is a vaporous apparition that tries to alleviate its own suffering by offloading those secrets into the minds of the still-living.

It has a fast flying speed and very high Dexterity, Intelligence, and Charisma. Its Wisdom is also high, which seems inconsistent with a creature that stuck its hand in the Things Man Was Not Meant to Know box, but maybe it's the product of having learned from the experience. In any case, since the allip has no spellcasting ability but does have proficiency in Perception and Stealth, these scores produce a rare combat profile: the psychic assailant, which strikes its victims without warning and torments them until it encounters significant resistance, then takes its leave.

It's not easy to compel an allip to back off. It's resistant to acid, fire, lightning, and thunder damage, along with physical damage from nonmagical weapons, and it's *immune* to cold, necrotic, and poison damage. That leaves only psychic, radiant, and force damage, plus physical damage from magic weapons, as types of damage that one can count on to drive it away. However, despite being neutral evil and therefore hostile by predisposition, and despite being compelled to share the secrets that vex it, it's not especially tenacious in the face of significant damage. If an opponent gives it a reason to break off combat—especially if it's taken its Howling Babble action already—it doesn't hesitate, and it doesn't come back, at least not for a while.

With its high Intelligence and Wisdom, an allip seeks out a receptive target: one with a curious nature, smart and inquisitive enough to be tantalized by knowledge just beyond their understanding, misguided enough to pursue it. High Intelligence plus low-to-midrange Wisdom plus proficiency in Arcana and/or Investigation is the perfect combination. Allips often lurk in places where such individuals are likely to pass by—they're drawn to institutions of knowledge and learning, libraries especially, but also temples of the Knowledge and Arcana^{II} domains—but they may also be found haunting their former homes or the locations where they stumbled across their forbidden knowledge in the first place. Their favorite moment to unburden themselves is after dark, as their prospective victims are studying by the light of a candle or lamp, but if the pickings have been slim, they seize an opportunity when it presents itself.

The allip's default attack action is Maddening Touch. Howling Babble requires a roll of 6 to recharge, meaning the allip generally gets to use it no more than once per encounter. Rather than take advantage of its targets' stunned condition to go ham on them, the allip uses this action to cover its exit when it decides to retreat.

Whispers of Madness affects up to three creatures of the allip's choice, but while it deals direct damage on a failed saving throw, a portion of the feature's potential is wasted if a target isn't standing within reach of an ally that it can use its reaction to make a melee weapon attack against. ("Melee weapon attack," in this instance, *does* include an unarmed strike—as opposed to "attack with a melee weapon," which doesn't.) In other words, the targets of Whispers of Madness should be clustered together; none of them should be standing alone. This finicky precondition means the allip doesn't resort to Whispers of Madness often; the most likely use of this feature is to turn three melee opponents of the allip against one another instead.

When an allip is moderately wounded (reduced to 28 hp or fewer); takes any amount of psychic, radiant, or force damage; or takes any hit from a magic weapon, it uses Howling Babble (assuming it's not on cooldown) and flies away through the nearest wall or closed door that there's open space on the other side of. (An allip doesn't want to end its turn inside a wall. It hurts.) Even though it has only a modest total number of hit points, its inclination to retreat as soon as it feels threatened—combined with its brisk speed, its ability to pass through walls, floors, and ceilings, and its many condition immunities—makes chasing it down and destroying it laborious. It will probably take several encounters for a

party of PCs to finally succeed in doing so. An allip that knows it's being hunted is cautious, not coming back out to whisper its awful secrets to its chosen victim until they're alone or the heat is off.



However, the fact that an allip is undead—and therefore driven by compulsion—gives PCs a way to turn the tables on it. The allip isn't mute: It can speak the languages it knew in life. Moreover, it wants to communicate. It *needs* to communicate. It's just that normal, healthy, living people don't want to hear what it has to say.

If its foes are able to fool it, they may manage to entice it back out into the open on the pretext that they want to know its secrets after all. (Depending on how far the allip's chosen victim has been lured in by its insidious lore, this invitation may only be a ruse on the *other* PCs' part.) It's not a sap, so don't play it as one—but because of the nature of its undead curse, the allip may find the offer literally impossible to resist.

BODAKS (V)

Several years ago, I had to quickly build a last-minute encounter to fill a plot hole for my mid-level PCs. One thing I recalled from a class I took in fantasy fiction in college is that the suspense in horror fiction comes from not knowing what the heroes are up against or what that antagonist can do, so I needed an unfamiliar monster to build the encounter around. I found it in the **bodak**.

The bodak is a CR 6 undead creature, immune to lightning, poison, and being charmed or frightened. It's resistant to cold, fire, and necrotic damage, along with physical damage from nonmagical weapons. It's proficient in Perception and Stealth, has 120 feet of darkvision, and is hypersensitive to sunlight, so it's strictly nocturnal and/or subterranean. Its physical abilities are uniformly high; its Wisdom and Charisma are above average, but its Intelligence is low, so its behavior is mechanistic and compulsive.

It has an unarmed melee attack, but its real power comes in the combination of its distinctive features: Aura of Annihilation, Death Gaze, and Withering Gaze. Death Gaze and Aura of Annihilation in particular, are a nasty combination. Death Gaze hits at the beginning of an opponent's turn; Aura of Annihilation at the end of it.

Death Gaze forces anyone within 30 feet who can see the bodak's black, vacant eyes to make a DC 13 Constitution saving throw or take 3d10 psychic damage. If the opponent fails the save by 5 or more, they fall down mostly-dead on the spot, unless they're immune to being frightened. The effect can be avoided by shielding one's eyes, but of course this grants disadvantage on any attempt to attack the bodak.

Aura of Annihilation is a "toggle" feature that can be switched on or off as a bonus action, although there's no reason for it not to be on by default, nor any reason that I can see to turn it off. When it's on, any creature (aside from fiends and other undead) that's within 30 feet of the bodak when its turn ends (the creature's turn, that is, not the bodak's) takes 5 hp of necrotic damage from it. In other words, just being around the bodak is unhealthy.

Both of these effects take place on the *opponent's* turn, not on the bodak's, so the bodak is constantly doing damage, even when it's not taking any action. On its own turn, it has Withering Gaze, a ranged ability that deals 4d10 necrotic damage on a failed DC 13 Constitution save, half that on a success—quite a bit more than Fist, which deals only 1d4 + 2 bludgeoning plus 2d8 necrotic. Really, the only reason for the bodak to use Fist is when *it* can't see its opponents—e.g., when someone has dropped a *darkness* spell, which even its darkvision can't penetrate, or when they're invisible.

Given this constellation of features, the bodak's approach to combat, once it's under way, is "Come at me, bro." Attacking a bodak is like fighting a fire: You have to not only douse the flames but do so before you get burned to death yourself. Any and every foe that comes to dispatch it has to run the gantlet of its Withering Gaze, Death Gaze, and Aura of Annihilation.

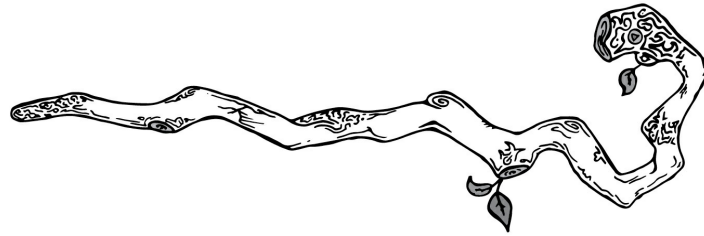
Thus, a bodak holes up in a dark lair, where it can keep its eyes on any path(s) of approach—being able to see all its opponents outweighs any other positional consideration. Because of this, it may even position itself against a wall, just so that no one can get behind it. Also, any approach(es) to its lair will be wide enough to pass through in single file only.

With respect to target selection, certain opponents are higher on its list of priorities: clerics and paladins who can turn or destroy the undead; berserker barbarians with the Mindless Rage feature (which grants immunity to being frightened); anyone with a magic weapon; and anyone who deals acid, thunder, force, psychic, or radiant damage. It focuses its Withering Gaze on these enemies first. If no one meets the criteria, it's opportunistic.

A bodak doesn't flee unless turned, and when the turning wears off, it comes right back. Its murderous compulsion is strong, and it won't be deterred by any injury that doesn't destroy it outright.

However, bodaks don't *always* stay in their lairs. They may, for instance, wander afield in search of victims, stalking them and wearing them down with their Aura of Annihilation and Withering Gaze (the flavor text ties them closely to the

demon lord Orcus and characterizes them as agents of his vengeful will, but I think they're also dandy merely as menacing spooks periodically preying on residents of a nearby settlement). A bodak that's moderately wounded (reduced to 40 hp or fewer) outside its lair Dashes back to it, if possible, so that it can enjoy the benefit of channeling its foes through a single approach. (It's not fleeing—it's strategically retreating.) If it can't do that, it repositions itself on the field of battle to give itself the best view of all its opponents and the lowest chance of being outflanked. It *never* stays out under open sky close enough to dawn to be caught by the rising sun. It always returns to its lair well before then. Particularly clever PCs may be waiting for it there when it gets back.



SPAWN OF KYUSS (V)

Both the flavor text and the ability contour tell us the same thing: The **spawn of Kyuss** is a largely mindless brute. Its Strength is very high; its Constitution exceptional; its Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma dismal. This is a creature without any flexibility or independent judgment, or even much of a self-preservation instinct.

The spawn of Kyuss is driven by the compulsion to spread its parasitic infection to other beings. This is all the spawn of Kyuss does; it's all it *can* do. Other than its attack actions, all of its traits are passive. One of its attacks, Claw, is an ordinary melee attack that happens to do some extra necrotic damage. The other, Burrowing Worm, is an attempt to infect another creature by propelling a parasitic maggot at them. If the target fails their saving throw, the Burrowing Worm continues to deal damage to them. The spawn of Kyuss's Multiattack action comprises two Claw attacks and one use of Burrowing Worm.

That's it.

These are wind-up-and-let-go monsters. They have no capacity to distinguish one opponent from another. They have no reason to stop doing what they're doing. They're not *beings* as much as they are *hazards*. No judgment on the DM's part is required. Just aim them at the PCs (or some NPCs in the PCs' vicinity) and let them do their thing.



ALHOONS AND MIND FLAYER LICHES (V)

The **alhoon** is an undead, spellcasting mind flayer that's almost a lich but not quite. Instead of becoming effectively immortal, the alhoon lengthens its life span through humanoid sacrifice, tacking on however many years its victim has lived. (It seems to me that the alhoon should get however many years the victim *has left*, but whatever; I'm not a necromancer.)

Alhoons have a daunting array of features, so strap in.

We'll begin with their ability scores, which, like those of the ordinary mind flayer, are weighted toward the mental end, with Intelligence 19 leading the pack. However, unlike ordinary mind flayers, they also have a very high Constitution, along with proficiency in Constitution saving throws. Their toughness, combined with *immunity* (not resistance!) to physical damage from nonmagical attacks and advantage on saving throws against spells from Magic Resistance, means

their chief vulnerability is to magic weapons, with spells that require Dexterity saves to avoid damage a distant second. And not just any Dex-save spell: They're also resistant to cold, lightning, and necrotic damage and immune to poison. *Fireball* is okay against them; *lightning bolt* isn't.

In addition to various intellectual skills, alhoons have proficiency in Perception and Stealth, disposing them toward ambush. The first things alhoons do when they know you're coming are turn invisible and Hide.

The next thing they do is try to size you up. In addition to 120 feet of truesight, they've also got 120 feet of telepathy if they need it. If you're coming for them, they want to know why (as if it's not already obvious), and they want to know how much of a threat you pose. If they have good reason to believe they're outmatched, they may never reveal themselves; they may even flee before you ever encounter them. Their Wisdom is 17: They're not blinded by arrogance. They fight the fights they can win and avoid the ones they'll probably lose. When they flee, they take their periapts with them.

Not many PC spellcasters can go head-to-head with an alhoon. On top of their Magic Resistance and damage resistances, they're also immune to being charmed, exhausted, frightened, paralyzed, or poisoned. In addition, they possess *counterspell*, with which they'll shut down any harmful incoming spell of 4th level or lower.

So what's left that an alhoon *does* have reason to fear?

- Pretty much any magic weapon, but especially those that inflict acid, fire, thunder, psychic, or radiant damage. Paladins, with their *smite* spells, may be better equipped than anyone else to take on an alhoon.
- Simple restraint. Alhoons can't be paralyzed, but merely restraining them confers advantage on attacks against them. They can also be stunned. Either condition also negates their advantage on Dexterity saving throws against magic, and there do exist physical, nonmagical means of doing both.

Alhoons have the same Innate Spellcasting abilities as mind flayers, which come with the same silly drawbacks: the inability to cast *dominate monster* and *levitate* at the same time, and the overall inadequacy of *dominate monster* as a practical form of mind control. *Plane shift*, however, retains its value as a method of escape. And their *learned* spellcasting is a whole other ball game.

At the apex of their spell list are *disintegrate* and *globe of invulnerability*. An alhoon doesn't lead with either of these, however, because it has only one 6th-level spell slot, and it doesn't know at the start of combat which spell to use it on. If a battle is going well for an alhoon, it uses *disintegrate* to take out a key opponent and consolidate its advantage; if it's going poorly, *globe of invulnerability* is its means of buying time. It usually waits until the third round of combat to make this assessment, although it may do so as early as the second round if the first round makes the situation obvious one way or the other.

A better spell to lead with is *wall of force*, with which it can shut down an enemy wielding a weapon it fears by dropping an impenetrable bubble over it. Alternatively, it can drop a flat wall to divide its enemy's forces however it pleases, placing itself on the side with the foes it wants to fight. The alternative 5th-level spell, *modify memory*, is to be used against prisoners, not combatants.

Between 2nd and 4th level, we have the pool of spells that can use one another's slots interchangeably. *Invisibility* is always useful (unless the alhoon is sustaining *wall of force* or some other concentration-required spell), *scorching ray* is worth boosting, *lightning bolt* is a good way to mock opponents who can't effectively do the same back, and *Evard's black tentacles* is a good way to hold four or more enemies down while pelting them with *scorching ray* and *lightning bolt*. But the star of this show is *counterspell*. An alhoon never uses its last 3rd- or 4th-level slot on anything else as long as its enemies include a spellcaster powerful enough to ram damage through its Magic Resistance. And then there's *mirror image*, which is cheap and has no downside except its opportunity cost. If the alhoon can afford to wait a round before casting *wall of force*, it may as well cast *mirror image* as its opening play, because that affords it a measure of protection against opponents wielding magic weapons.

Next, we have the 1st-level workhorse spells. *Detect magic* has no combat application, and *disguise self* is what the alhoon uses beforehand to keep combat from breaking out in the first place. (Note that *disguise self* doesn't allow an alhoon to speak a language it doesn't know, and telepathy can't be mistaken for ordinary speech. This spell is better for hiding in crowds than for impersonating a non-alhoon-type individual.) *Magic missile* isn't quite as good as *scorching ray*, except for the fact that it hits automatically, with a damage type that's rarely resisted. *Shield*, however, is a reflex action familiar to every arcane spellcaster, an automatic reaction against any attack roll of 15 to 19—*unless* the alhoon has reason

to fear an incoming spell more than a blow from a magic weapon, in which case it has to eat the damage and save its reaction for *counterspell*. Because of its high Constitution and fairly generous number of hit points, it can often afford to make this sacrifice. But while a blow from a +1 longsword is small potatoes, a blow from a weapon that stacks another type of damage to which the alhoon is susceptible on top of the regular bludgeoning, piercing, or slashing is one that the alhoon has to seriously consider casting *shield* to repel. Remember, the alhoon has Magic Resistance, which gives it advantage on saving throws; it has *no* resistance to a melee weapon attack with a *flame tongue* sword.

Finally, cantrips. Because the alhoon is a level 12 spellcaster, *chill touch* and *shocking grasp*, which deal 3d8 necrotic and 3d8 lightning damage respectively, plus other potential effects, are actually better than the alhoon's Chilling Grasp action, which deals only 3d6 cold damage and has no additional effect. Granted, most opponents who get right up in an alhoon's face will be mid- to high-level fighting classes or rogues, and that means either Extra Attack (multiple attacks per round) or Sneak Attack (4d6 or 5d6), compared with which a single attack for 3d6 or even 3d8 damage doesn't look all that impressive. At best, Chilling Grasp is the alhoon's way of showing its disdain for a melee opponent who didn't realize their mundane weapon wasn't going to do anything to the alhoon, and for this purpose, *shocking grasp* is superior. (*Chill touch*, despite its name, is a *ranged* attack, so an alhoon casting it at point-blank range would have disadvantage on the roll. The range, however, is a generous 120 feet, making it a potential finishing move against a fleeing opponent.)

Last, there's Mind Blast, illithids' stock-in-trade. While the alhoon doesn't want to use it unless it can catch at least six of its opponents in the 60-foot cone (or all of its opponents, if there are fewer than six), it targets an ability that many PCs use as a borderline dump stat, deals respectable damage, *and* imposes the stunned condition on a failed save, giving the alhoon an automatic hit if it casts *disintegrate*.

Here's the alhoon's overall strategy:

- First, from hiding, use Mind Blast if the minimum criterion (six opponents, or all opponents if fewer than six, in the area of effect) is met. Mind Blast is neither an attack nor a spell with a verbal component, so the position of a hidden alhoon *is not given away by this action*. That means it can follow up with, say, a *scorching ray* with advantage on the attack roll on the next round.
- Once its position is given away, use *mirror image* and/or *wall of force* to forestall any attack that might actually hurt.
- If Mind Blast hasn't been used already, or if it's already recharged, position oneself optimally and let 'em have it. Do this anytime Mind Blast is recharged and it's possible to meet the positioning criterion.
- Use *Evard's black tentacles* to hold as many opponents as possible in place (minimum four, unless there are only three opponents), then pelt them with *scorching ray*, boosted to 3rd or (preferably) 4th level if a slot is available—but always keeping one 3rd-level and one 4th-level slot in reserve for *counterspell*. (Note that *Evard's* requires concentration—as does *wall of force*. Cast *Evard's* only if *wall of force* is no longer needed.)
- Cast *shield* as a reaction to deflect attacks with magic weapons more powerful than a straight +1 to attack and damage (unless all they add is cold, lightning, or necrotic damage, against which the alhoon has resistance, or poison damage, to which it's immune) when the attacker rolls 15–19.
- Cast *counterspell* as a reaction to ward off harmful spells if the alhoon has already failed one saving throw against magic, which suggests a particularly powerful enemy spellcaster.
- Use *shocking grasp* (rather than Chilling Grasp) against melee attackers who've bitten off more than they've realized they can chew—especially ones wearing metal armor.
- If all nearby opponents are effectively neutralized, use *chill touch* to pick off any opponent who's fleeing.
- If the battle has swung decidedly in the alhoon's favor, take out a key enemy with *disintegrate*. (If they're stunned by Mind Blast, so much the better.) If the battle has swung decidedly against the alhoon because the opposition has better spellcasters, substitute *globe of invulnerability* for *wall of force*.
- The alhoon's primary positioning consideration is how to catch the most opponents in the areas of effect of its spells and Mind Blast. Engaging with, or disengaging from, a specific opponent or opponents is secondary.

Alhoons have a strong self-preservation impulse and will flee, or at least withdraw, after taking moderate-to-serious damage (reduced to between 49 and 72 hp), using the Dodge or Disengage action if they have allies on the field and the Dash action if they're alone. Whether they choose to Dodge or Disengage depends on how many melee opponents they're

engaged with: If more than one, Disengage; otherwise, Dodge. If they're seriously wounded (reduced to 48 hp or fewer), they *plane shift* out of there.

Next to the stat block of the alhoon is a variant rule for creating **mind flayer lich**s—rogue mind flayer arcanists who've *succeeded* in effecting their transformation, without trying to shortcut the process. It's slightly frustrating that there doesn't exist a single mind flayer lich stat block anywhere, only the lich stat block and this variant sidebar, in two different books. However, the behavior of the mind flayer lich is substantially similar to that of a regular lich (*The Monsters Know What They're Doing*, 303–15), with only a few differences.

Front and center, the mind flayer lich has a wider selection of useful combat actions other than casting spells. Its Mind Blast action is approximately equal in power to a 5th-level spell, placing it in the category of things it's willing to do to opponents without waiting to see how much of a threat they pose. Because the mind flayer lich, unlike the mind flayer, is immune to harm from nonmagical weapons, it's not as jumpy about letting opponents get within melee range of it; it uses Mind Blast against charging enemies just because it can, to soften them up and to show its dominance. It does, however, prefer to get at least six enemies in the area of effect—or all of its enemies, if there are fewer than six—and positions itself accordingly before taking this action. If getting into the right position is infeasible, no problem; it has spells it can cast instead.

Because it doesn't cost a spell slot and is such a quintessentially illithid thing to do, a mind flayer lich prefers to use Mind Blast on its first turn of combat, then cast *cloudkill* while that action is recharging. Alternatively, if its opponents get to act first and are correctly positioned, why should it even wait until its first turn when it can use Mind Blast as a legendary action? It costs 3 actions to do so, but the mind flayer lich starts combat with all its legendary actions to spend—and if it gets lucky, its regular Mind Blast action may recharge right away, allowing it to take that action *again* on its turn.

What if its opponents aren't positioned in such a way that a preemptive Mind Blast makes sense? In lieu of being able to cast a cantrip as a legendary action, the mind flayer lich can cast a leveled spell, with the action cost proportional to the level of the spell. Against a ranged attacker who gets a shot off before the mind flayer lich can act, this change is unfortunately a downgrade: Rather than shoot a supercharged *ray of frost*, it has to assail that nuisance with *magic missile*, which deals less than half as much damage on average and costs a spell slot. On the other hand, that damage is guaranteed, whereas *ray of frost* can miss (the likelihood is low, but it's not zero) and its damage type is more likely to be resisted, and depending on how many other opponents will get to act before the mind flayer lich does, it may be at liberty to spend additional legendary actions to cast *magic missile* using a higher-level spell slot.

When an opponent does get within melee reach of the mind flayer lich, it has a choice between Paralyzing Touch and Tentacles. Tentacles deals a good deal more damage than Paralyzing Touch does, and it targets Intelligence rather than Constitution, making it a stronger choice against most melee attackers. It doesn't paralyze, but it can stun—and if it does, it renders the target vulnerable to Extract Brain. The mind flayer lich also has legendary actions that allow it to use Tentacles and Extract Brain on other creatures' turns, making the brain extraction process much more efficient. Upon being engaged by a second or third melee opponent, the mind flayer lich reverts to normal lich responses.

A mind flayer lich has more freedom to cast *power word stun*, thanks to its ability to cast *dominate monster* psionically rather than by expending a spell slot. Since the kinds of opponents it can easily dominate are likely to be those who have difficulty recovering from a Mind Blast, the answer to the question of whether to use its 8th-level spell slot to cast *dominate monster* or *power word stun* is more often *power word stun*, especially if the troublesome spellcaster it targets is a wizard. However, if *dominate monster* is the mind flayer lich's preferred choice, it uses its once-per-day psionic power to cast it before expending the more broadly useful spell slot.

A mind flayer lich's innate ability to cast *plane shift*, on the other hand, applies only to itself. If it wants to banish an opponent to another plane of existence (rather than the Abyss, it sends its foe to the Far Realm), it has to spend its 7th-level spell slot to do it.

When the mind flayer lich would cast a spell of 5th level or below, it still casts *cloudkill* or a 5th-level *blight* or *fireball* (stunned targets fail their Dexterity saves automatically!) if the criteria for one of those spells are met. However, if Mind Blast is available and either those criteria aren't met or it's out of 5th-level spell slots, it uses Mind Blast. Before casting *mirror image*, if it's being rushed by a low-Constitution shock attacker and isn't concentrating on any other spell, it innately casts *levitate* to lift the nuisance off the ground where they can't hurt anyone.

A mind flayer lich defines “the biggest threat” differently from an ordinary lich. Because it has Magic Resistance—and because it’s had an entirely different upbringing—it’s not fixated on enemy wizards as rivals, nor is it contemptuous of Wild Magic sorcerers. It’s most concerned with enemies who wield magic weapons and/or deal psychic, radiant, or force damage; secondarily, it’s annoyed by acid, fire, and thunder. When it moves in to attack an enemy in melee, it uses Paralyzing Touch against a target with more Intelligence than Constitution, Tentacles and Extract Brain against one with more Constitution than Intelligence.

Since a mind flayer lich’s legendary actions replace those of an ordinary lich, Disrupt Life and Frightening Gaze are no longer options; instead, its choices are Tentacles, Extract Brain, Mind Blast, and Cast Spell.

The main application of the Mind Blast legendary action is to give the mind flayer lich a chance to use Mind Blast before its first turn rolls around. After the mind flayer lich has taken its first combat turn, spending three legendary actions to use Mind Blast makes sense only if its opponents are properly arrayed *and* it’s a direct and immediate reaction to something extreme, such as being dealt 41 damage or more all at once. Also, of course, it can’t have spent any of its legendary actions on anything else yet.

Casting a 3rd-level spell using legendary actions is extremely expensive. The mind flayer lich casts *fireball* this way only if it’s completely out of 4th- and 5th-level spell slots, its opponents are suitably clustered, and it’s getting desperate; it casts *dispel magic* this way only to snuff a *haste*, *slow*, or *spirit guardians* spell. (*Animate dead* and *counterspell* aren’t options for this legendary action.)

The mind flayer lich’s best trick employing the Cast Spell legendary action is to spend 2 actions to cast *invisibility* after being attacked at range by a foe whom it considers to be a major threat, or in melee by one too intelligent for engaging with Tentacles to be effective (Intelligence save mod of +6 or greater, or +3 or greater if something is giving them advantage on the saving throw). It can’t move until its next turn comes around, but you don’t need to remind your players of that. If provoked by a ranged attacker, it moves toward them on its next turn under cover of *invisibility*, then reappears behind them (for descriptive purposes only, not for any mechanical effect—it gains advantage on its attack roll from being invisible) and attacks with Paralyzing Touch or Tentacles. Against a melee attacker with a magic weapon, it starts its turn by withdrawing to a safe distance; since its attacker can’t see it, it provokes no opportunity attack.

Engaged in melee by an opponent it doesn’t consider a major threat, rather than turn invisible, it takes the Tentacles legendary action, or Extract Brain if it has the actions and a foe already grappled.

If no other legendary action makes sense, the mind flayer lich can toss a gratuitous *magic missile* at someone, or cast *mirror image* (another thing the mind flayer lich doesn’t consider itself too good for) if it has any reason to think its opponents have a chance of hitting it with multiple weapon and/or spell attacks. But beware of blazing through 1st-level and, especially, 2nd-level spell slots too fast. Just like a regular lich, the mind flayer lich needs to keep a 2nd-level slot in reserve for *invisibility* in case it has to slink away and lick its wounds, and *shield* is never entirely useless as long as an opponent is making attack rolls. Don’t spend more than one of these slots per round if you have any reasonable alternative.

Like a regular lich, a mind flayer lich doesn’t leave its lair if it can help it. Unlike a regular lich, a mind flayer lich is unlikely to have many living followers willing to do its bidding. Mind flayers who study arcane magic are outcasts, and while the world presents us with no shortage of evidence that many people are willing to ingratiate themselves to horrible individuals for selfish or ideological reasons, ingratiating oneself to a horrible undead alien individual with face-tentacles and inscrutable motivations would probably be a bridge too far for most. The few who’d take that bargain are probably, by and large, Great Old One warlocks, along with a handful of non-illithid aberrations.

BONECLAWS (M)

What if you’re a wizard with the ego, ambition, and power to pursue immortality through self-enrichment, and you start the grueling process but fail to pace yourself properly? You could end up as a **boneclaw**, the powerful undead servant of a random individual who certainly didn’t ask for one and may or may not have any use for it.

Considering that only the most brilliant mages even have a chance at becoming lichens, the boneclaw’s Intelligence 13 is surprisingly low, and I ascribe this to the trauma of failure. Something about the process of becoming a boneclaw damages the erstwhile wizard’s intellect, surely a sore spot. It’s not stupid by any stretch, just unable to soar to its previous heights of brilliance. Its Intelligence is now outshone by its extraordinary Strength and very high Dexterity, Constitution, and Wisdom.

Those latter three high stats are accompanied by proficiencies in their respective saving throws, meaning that the boneclaw possesses exceptional resistance to the vast majority of attacks that require saving throws to resist. It may not be able to perform the kind of magic it once did, but *your* magic isn't going to impress it one bit.

Proficiency in Perception and Stealth gives it the toolkit of an ambush attacker, and if we designate Strength as its primary offensive ability and Dexterity as its primary defensive ability, what we have is a nasty shock attacker that's going to strive to maximize its first- and second-round damage. It *can* stay in the fight longer, because of those great saving throw modifiers, its damage resistances, and its immunity to being charmed, exhausted, frightened, paralyzed, or poisoned. But its *preference* is for swift and deadly strikes.

It also prefers to strike at night. With 60 feet of darkvision plus the Shadow Stealth and Shadow Jump features, the boneclaw has no business going around in broad daylight. It's a nocturnal and subterranean predator.

The boneclaw has two actions to choose from: Multiattack (two Piercing Claw attacks) and Shadow Jump. Of these two, Shadow Jump is unambiguously an exit maneuver, since it inflicts necrotic damage on every creature adjacent to the boneclaw; there's no benefit in doing that on your way *into* a combat encounter. Therefore, the boneclaw always leads off with a Multiattack while unseen. Ideally, it does this while remaining in darkness, so that it can immediately use Shadow Stealth to Hide itself again as a bonus action; this way, it hopes to get its *next* attack while unseen as well.

Note that the reach on its Piercing Claw is an insane 15 feet. The boneclaw's target doesn't have to be adjacent to it—it can strike someone from *across a room*, then pull it to its own side. If an ally of the target rushes to their defense, the boneclaw gets a free hit as soon as they enter its reach, courtesy of Deadly Reach. If, instead, the target tears free and tries to run, the boneclaw can hit it with an opportunity attack, then overtake it with its 40-foot movement speed.

So when to use Shadow Jump? Well, if the boneclaw has only one adjacent enemy, it's probably focusing on tearing them to shreds. If it has two, it has at least a chance of grappling the second opponent as well, although it may or may not want to, depending on the will of its master. With three adjacent enemies, however, it's literally got its hands full. At that point, it makes a snap judgment about which of its grappled opponents it hates more and zops away to a better location, taking that opponent with it.

The biggest risk to this tactic is the opponent who cleverly decides to drench the boneclaw in light, denying it the ability to take advantage of Shadow Jump or Shadow Stealth. Each Piercing Claw attack deals an average of 20 damage on a hit, which isn't enough to improve the chances of disrupting a spellcaster's concentration (and is useless against *light* or *daylight* anyway, since these spells persist without concentration). Against an opponent holding a lantern, torch, or flare, the boneclaw could take advantage of the optional but highly satisfying Disarm action (*Dungeon Master's Guide*, chapter 9, "Action Options"), knocking the light source to the floor, but knocking the light source to the floor won't necessarily extinguish it or cast the boneclaw back into shadow.

Therefore, when it's engaged with multiple melee opponents, the boneclaw typically reacts to bright light simply by moving posthaste to the nearest place of shadow, wherever that may be, so that it can use Shadow Stealth to get out of sight again. It uses the Dash action if it must, and it doesn't give a hoot about opportunity attacks. If it has movement left, it uses that movement to keep going just in case someone shines a light on the place where it vanished.

However, while it may retreat, it doesn't *flee*. It has no reason to, ever, because thanks to Rejuvenation, it can't be killed unless its master is killed (or repents and renounces evil forever, which is less likely), and even then, it's so out of the habit of thinking about its own self-preservation that it won't bother to run away to save itself even if its master is killed. Instead, it hangs around awhile, waiting for someone to make the mistake of straying close enough to the shadows where it's hiding, and quietly tailing its foes if they proceed on their way.

Despite lacking a self-preservation instinct, the boneclaw does have a high Wisdom, which raises the question: For what? Probably not for deciding when it should parley, because Charisma is its dump stat. Probably not for hesitating before attacking a powerful group, because it's more about deadly nova strikes than sober risk assessment. Most likely, it's for target selection, assuming that its master allows it any leeway in this regard; for choosing the best place and time to strike; and for having a planned route of departure, which is not the same thing as running away. Rather, it's part of an attack pattern that's meant to inflict maximum damage at minimum cost.

After a boneclaw spends a couple of rounds brutalizing a victim, it's not interested in sticking around and dealing with that victim's allies. Starting in round 3, it follows its chosen exit path, taking its victim with it if it can. If the victim gets

away, then who knows—maybe that boneclaw comes back to play some more a few rounds later, or maybe it takes a few days. Either way, the PCs will certainly tire of this long before the boneclaw does.

EIDOLONS (M)

Eidolons are intriguing creatures, because despite being undead, they're not necessarily evil—they may even be *good*. Spirits honored by the gods for their zealous devotion, eidolons spend their afterlives guarding those gods' sacred places and protecting them from defilers. Their compulsion—which every undead creature must have—is to protect. Not necessarily a bad thing!

Even more intriguing is that eidolons can hop into inanimate objects and animate them for the purpose of carrying out their eternal mission. *Mordenkainen's* offers, as an example, a stat block for an animated statue.

But first, let's look at what an eidolon can do on its own. The flavor text says, "An eidolon has few methods for protecting itself beyond its ability to awaken its sacred vessels." How true is this?

It's true that a "loose" eidolon's physical ability scores are all poor. Its mental abilities, however, are robust, with an extraordinary Wisdom score leading the pack. But by reverse-engineering the eidolon, we can determine that it has a +4 proficiency modifier, which in turn tells us that its Divine Dread ability is driven by its *Charisma*, not its Wisdom; otherwise, the save DC would be 16 rather than 15. So there's a little dissonance there.

Mainly, the eidolon's Wisdom serves as a defense against any attempt to manipulate it through magic. It has proficiency in Wisdom saving throws and can't be charmed, exhausted, frightened, grappled, paralyzed, petrified, poisoned, knocked prone, or restrained. (That leaves blinded, incapacitated, and stunned as three conditions it *is* vulnerable to. Also deafened, but that's not nearly as much of an inconvenience as being blinded.) It also has advantage on saving throws against being turned.

As for physical damage, it's resistant to acid, fire, lightning, and thunder, along with physical damage from nonmagical attacks, and it's entirely immune to cold, necrotic, and poison damage. That leaves force and radiant. Yay, *sacred flame* and *magic missile*! You *are* valuable!

So the eidolon is pretty good at not getting hurt; what it's not good at is hurting anything back. Aside from animating a statue or other vessel, its only offensive ability is the Divine Dread action, which can impose the frightened condition and carries the common rider that frightened targets must hasten away. Not only is the save DC not all that difficult to hit—*someone* in the party is bound to make that save—the effect is temporary, lasting only one minute, and either success on the saving throw or expiration of the effect confers immunity to it. In the grand scheme of things, the only thing this feature does is buy the eidolon time to board its vessel.

While animating a sacred statue, the eidolon becomes a brute, with extraordinary Strength and Constitution (though its Dex is still pitiful). It retains all its damage resistances and immunities and most of its condition immunities, but it can be grappled, restrained, or knocked prone in its statue form.

As a brute, the statue has a choice between a Slam/Slam Multiattack and throwing a rock (or any other handy, heavy object, I'd say) from a distance. The Multiattack is the clear favorite, dealing an average of 86 damage (!) on two hits vs. 37 damage from a thrown object, although the latter still offers an excellent chance of breaking a caster's concentration on a crucial spell. I don't see the eidolon using its Rock attack for any other purpose, and an animated sacred statue has no other feature to make its tactics any more sophisticated than "Rrrrahhhh, bash bash bash."

Because of its compulsion, the eidolon won't flee or retreat as long as whatever place or thing it's protecting is threatened, no matter how much damage it or its physical vessel sustains. Note that the eidolon has one reservoir of hit points, and the sacred statue has a *separate* reservoir of hit points. When its sacred statue is destroyed, an eidolon no longer has a vessel to inhabit and is forced out, but if fighting as a statue has bought it enough time for Sacred Animation to recharge, it can hop into another vessel, provided one is available. If there are many such vessels, the PCs are confronted with a conundrum they must solve under pressure: how to dispatch the eidolon while it's out in the open, before it can take refuge in a statue again.

If there are no other vessels beyond its original one, the eidolon still has however many hit points it had before it entered that vessel. However, at that point, although there's very little its opponents can do to it, there's virtually nothing it can do to its opponents—especially if they're no longer affected by its Divine Dread. All it can do is linger, impotently shouting at

trespassers in whatever language(s) it knew in life, which has to be the saddest combat encounter dénouement of any officially published monster.

SKULL LORDS (M)

The **skull lord** is yet another high-CR spellcasting monster with a spellbook 3 inches thick. Sigh. Spells are all right, but if you ask me, the way to make a monster interesting is to give it interesting *features*. A plethora of spells just invites analysis paralysis.

So what makes a skull lord different from, say, a lich? Quite a lot, actually, but let's start with the lore. Liches are megalomaniacal wizards who became undead in the pursuit of immortality and boundless power. Skull lords aren't wizards but warlords—more correctly, *agglomerations* of warlords, former squabbling rivals now forced to share a single wasted body with three skinless heads. Here, it seems, the lore indicates two compulsions: to conquer and... to bicker. We're gonna have some fun with this one.

Looking at the skull lord's abilities, its Dexterity and Constitution are very high, more so than its Strength. These are equaled by its Intelligence, but they're surpassed by its extraordinary Charisma, which is also its spellcasting ability. These abilities form an unusual contour: a combination spellslinger/skirmisher. It upends most of the principles we usually follow, in several ways:

- With its abundant spell slots, ample Constitution, and immunity to a variety of debilitating conditions, the skull lord is the rare monster that *wants* to drag combat out. The baseline assumption of fifth edition D&D is that a typical combat encounter lasts three rounds, five at most. The skull lord, however, is content to take its time.
- Because Charisma is by far its highest ability stat, its preferred method of attack is spellcasting. However, if this were a PC, a Charisma-plus-Constitution contour would suggest a *support* spellcaster, like a bard—one that stays close to its front line. This contour is consistent with the skull lord's lack of a ranged weapon attack (although it does possess ranged spell attacks) and its former life as a commander of troops.
- Skirmishers need movement abilities to slip out of their enemies' melee reach. The skull lord has three of these—*baste*, *expeditious retreat*, and the legendary Move action—two of which conflict with each other, and one of which conflicts with another key ability.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. We've got some other features to look at. First of all, skills. Perception expertise (three heads are more numerous than one) plus Stealth proficiency equals excellence at ambush. The skull lord doesn't necessarily strike me as a master of subtlety, generally speaking, but it does possess the attributes of an effective bushwhacker.

Resistant to physical damage from normal weapons, plus cold and necrotic damage, and immune to poison, the skull lord knows that it has to deal first with enemies wielding magic weapons or casting spells that do acid, fire, lightning, thunder, force, psychic, or radiant damage.

It can't be blinded, charmed, or stunned, but it can be restrained or paralyzed. This is significant because, while the skull lord does have Legendary Resistance—three uses per day, as is customary—it can't count on the battle's being over quickly enough that it won't need any more than those three. Most monsters with Legendary Resistance use it whenever they fail a saving throw, because they *can* count on a three-round encounter, and because they possess outstanding saving throw proficiencies—at least two of the “big three.” The skull lord doesn't. In fact, it has *no* saving throw proficiency, just what it gets from its base stats. Thanks to Evasion, it also has effective resistance to any damage requiring a Dexterity save to avoid, but magic requiring a Con or Wisdom save poses a real threat. Thus, it has to save its uses of Legendary Resistance for the moments that matter most.

Above all, it will never allow itself to be paralyzed or restrained. Being undead, it also has a compulsion to avoid radiant damage, so it does use Legendary Resistance if it fails a save against that. Beyond those, it uses Legendary Resistance to avoid damage types that it lacks resistance to, but *only* if that damage comes from a spell cast at 5th level or higher, and only if the failed save isn't a Dex save (which Evasion helps with).

Master of the Grave confers advantage on undead allies of the skull lord when they're within 30 feet of it. This gives it yet another reason to play the “support” position, a short distance behind the front line.

Let's talk about those "undead allies." The skull lord's Summon Undead legendary action allows it to spam the battlefield with skeletons or zombies. Which to choose? Four times out of five, zombies. They're dumber than skeletons, they're less flexible, and their chance to hit is lower. On the other hand, their Undead Fortitude keeps them on the battlefield longer, and attrition is at the heart of the skull lord's strategy. The time to use skeletons rather than zombies is when the battlefield is spread out, enemy spellcasters are out of reach, and the skeletons' ranged attacks are needed to pick them off.

That summoning ability is a beaut—which is why it costs *all three* of the legendary actions a skull lord has available each turn. Sure, an immediate counterattack with Bone Staff or a cantrip is a nice retort to an impertinent attacker, but the real choice here is between Summon Undead and the Move legendary action, which equals a Disengage plus a Dash. The latter is key to making this quasi-skirmisher effective at skirmishing.

We're almost there (glossing over the Bone Staff attack, which is a straightforward melee wallop that includes a tranche of necrotic damage), but the last part is the annoyingly complicated one: the spell repertoire. As usual, I value spells by the number of slots available at their base level, meaning that only the skull lord's 3rd- and 4th-level slots are available for boosting spells, and only 2nd- and 3rd-level spells will ever get boosted.

- *Finger of death* deals an expected 46 necrotic damage (assuming a fifty-fifty chance of making the Con save) against a single target, with a potential maximum of 86. The Con save means it's for the back-line and buzzing flies, not for front-line fighters or supporters, and the amount of damage it deals, combined with the casting cost and the fact that it turns a corpse into a zombie, makes it less a first resort and more a finishing move against enemies who are already severely wounded.
- *Eyebite* requires concentration, which pits it against *haste* and *expeditious retreat* (see below).
- *Cloudkill* has the same benefit for the skull lord that it does for the lich: Because the skull lord is immune to all poison, it can cast the spell anywhere, without regard to whether it's in the area of effect itself. It has the drawbacks of requiring concentration and obscuring targets whom the skull lord needs to see in order to target with spells. The radius is 20 feet, so the skull lord has to make sure at least four enemies are within it (Targets in Areas). Against four enemies, *cloudkill* deals an expected 68 poison damage—but that's *per turn*. If said enemies can't (or don't) escape the poison cloud, it does more than that.
- *Cone of cold* is a monster, but one that's only justified if it can strike all the skull lord's enemies, or at least six, whichever is less. It's also less desirable if the skull lord has many allies on the field that will also get caught in the blast. Against six enemies, *cone of cold* deals an expected 162 damage. Holy snowstorm, Batman!
- *Dimension door* is an escape hatch, nothing more.
- *Ice storm* deals an expected 69 cold damage against four targets and reaches flying enemies. It's suboptimal if there aren't flying enemies, because its effect on terrain favors ranged attackers, who are more likely to be fighting the skull lord than aiding it, over melee attackers that have to traverse difficult ground.
- *Fear* requires concentration and seems to go against the whole idea of destroying one's enemies. You don't want them to run away. You want them to stay and let you kill them. Counterpoint: You also want them to drop their magic weapons, so *fear* is worth considering if a skull lord is up against three or more of those and its minions are in a position to snatch them up.
- *Haste* dramatically enhances the target's action economy, and unless the skull lord is accompanied by an undead ally much stronger than a skeleton or zombie, it targets itself. The concentration requirement rules out a number of other spells in the skull lord's repertoire, and the skull lord is out of commission for a turn if its concentration is disrupted, but you can't have high reward without high risk. The question is, if the skull lord is happy to drag combat out, does it need to rev itself up like this? Well, really, it's a win either way: Either the skull lord gets to crank out more damage in the brief time allotted to it, or it gets to crank out *even more* damage over additional rounds. However, the longer combat drags on, the more likely it is that the skull lord will have to miss a round, so if the opposition seems likely to cooperate with the attrition plan, the skull lord plays it safe.
- *Mirror image* is cute, but we have to ask about the opportunity cost: An action spent casting *mirror image* is an action *not* spent doing something else. That being said, it does have some potential to drag combat out.
- *Scorching ray* is the one spell, given my self-imposed rule about upcasting spells, that can be cast at higher than its base level, so we have three options: cast at 2nd level for three rays (average 21 total damage if all hit), at 3rd level for

four rays (average 28 damage), or at 4th level for five rays (average 35 damage). Not hugely impressive, and not as good as a Multiattack with the bone staff, but flexible, with a slightly better chance to hit.

- *Magic missile* is underpowered at the level of challenge we're looking at. Even if you cast it at 4th level, it still deals only as much average damage as *scorching ray* cast at 2nd level. Granted, every missile is an automatic hit—unless the target casts *shield*—but the skull lord's +10 spell attack bonus means the vast majority of its *scorching rays* will land. Looking past hit probability and damage, *magic missile* is a cheap way to force an opposing spellcaster to make a bunch of concentration checks. Beyond that, however, it's a desperation move at best; the skull lord is likely to cast *dimension door* and vamoose before it ever has to cast *magic missile*.
- *Expeditious retreat* offers extra movement (but not disengagement) at the cost of the caster's concentration. It enhances action economy, but not as well as *haste* does (albeit without the risk of exhaustion). It's a poor substitute for *haste* in situations where the skull lord's opponents hit so hard and fast that the skull lord can't drag the battle out the way it would like to. It's better on a larger battlefield against more mobile opponents.
- *Thunderwave* is an alternative to the Disengage action that also packs a bit of additional ouch. It's useful only when the skull lord is being double- or triple-teamed by melee attackers. Against two opponents, it deals an expected total of 14 damage—be still, my beating heart. Against three, however, it could be expected to deal as much as 51 damage if we broke my rule and boosted it all the way up to 4th level. Let's put a pin in that for the moment.
- *Chill touch*, *fire bolt*, and *ray of frost* all do respectable ranged dink damage, because the skull lord is a 13th-level spellcaster. On a hit—and remember, +10 spell attack bonus—they deal an average of 14 necrotic, 16 fire, and 14 cold damage. In addition, *chill touch* inhibits healing, while *ray of frost* slows the target. These are all inferior to a single Bone Staff hit, but they are ranged rather than melee attacks.
- *Poison spray* requires a Con save rather than an attack roll, with an average of 20 poison damage on a failure.
- *Shocking grasp* deals only an average of 14 lightning damage on a hit, and it inhibits reactions. This spell has exactly one use: allowing the skull lord to do a smidgen of damage, then retreat without risking an opportunity attack from its target, thus sparing it from having to use the legendary Move action. Alternatively, however, it could Multiattack for significantly more damage, then use that legendary Move action to retreat and avoid *all* opportunity attacks.
- *Mage hand* LOL.

All right, it's finally time to put it all together. By a mile, the skull lord's best opening play—if its enemies are appropriately clustered together—is *cone of cold*. In fact, *cone of cold*'s value decreases substantially the more allies the skull lord has on the field, and spamming the field with allies is going to be at the core of the skull lord's strategy, so it wants to cast *cone of cold* as soon as it can. If the pieces just aren't coming together for *cone of cold*, its next choice is probably to just march up to an enemy and whack them three times with its bone staff. (It's saving *ice storm* in case it has to deal with flying enemies, and *cloudkill* until it has skeleton or zombie allies on the field, which also happen to be immune to poison.)

Then it watches carefully and notes how its opponents react. If a melee opponent comes up to it and deals significant damage—let's say, at least 32 damage *after* resistances are applied—it uses its legendary Move action to back away from that opponent immediately, so that it doesn't happen again, and it repeats this action each time the same trigger occurs. Having already used Move at least once, it uses the last and (if applicable) second-to-last opponent's turn before its own next turn to burn off its remaining legendary actions with Bone Staff or cantrip attacks.

On the other hand, if it gets all the way through its opponents' turns without using the legendary Move action at all, it uses all three of its legendary actions to Summon Undead and bring a bunch of zombies or skellies onto the field. If the skull lord isn't already accompanied by allies, they form a line in front of it, so that it can do its own thing unmolested by melee attackers. If it already has a front line, it sends them to harass pesky skirmishers and back-liners. The skull lord is limited to five summoned zombie/skelly minions, but whenever they're picked off, it replaces them.

Once its opponents are tied up fighting undead minions, *that's* when the skull lord lets rip with *cloudkill*, so that now they face the ugly choice of either breathing toxic fumes or breaking formation and scattering themselves across the battlefield. Note that the skull lord has two 5th-level spell slots, so if it never gets around to casting *cone of cold*—if the proper circumstances never present themselves—it can play the *cloudkill* card twice.

After only a round or two, it will be clear to the skull lord which of its opponents it hates the most: some combination of wielding spells or a magic weapon, dealing radiant damage, and being generally good and pious. It directs the bulk of

both its minions and its own attacks at this opponent. Once they're reduced to 40 percent of their maximum hit points or fewer, it targets that opponent with *finger of death*.

Otherwise, its general approach is either to move in and deliver Bone Staff attacks or to hang back and lob *scorching rays* (although it still stays within 30 feet of its own front line). If it's bedeviled by melee attackers who are somewhat effective against it, it may take a turn to cast *mirror image*, but it knows better than to try that twice if its opponents are popping all its simulacra with Extra Attacks. In that case, it may cast *baste* to try to match its enemies' pace. On its opponents' turns, it uses the legendary Move action if it has to, Summon Undead to replenish its minions if it can. If it's at risk of running out of summoned minions, it's more likely to hang back, so that it doesn't have to use up its legendary actions disengaging. If it has four or five on the field, it's more likely to make melee attacks.

Does a skull lord have *any* self-preservation instinct? I'm not sure it does, given the nature of its compulsions and the manner of its creation. However, suppose it's created by some other being in order to do its dirty work. That's an investment. That other being doesn't want the skull lord to throw its undeath away. In this instance, and only in this instance, when the skull lord is seriously wounded (reduced to 42 hp or fewer), it casts *dimension door* (using a 4th-level slot if it still has one, or else that not-especially-useful 6th-level spell slot—the one that belongs to *eyebite*, which the skull lord probably isn't going to cast) and tries to kill its foes again sometime later. Otherwise, it fights until it's destroyed.

That covers the compulsion to conquer. What about the compulsion to bicker? Here's where you, the DM, can have some fun. The bickering doesn't necessarily alter the skull lord's tactics, but it can *flavor* the tactics. Give each of the three heads a personality—for instance, the “General,” the “Magus,” and the “Sneak.” Whenever it uses the legendary Move action, the General accuses the Sneak of being a coward. When it attacks with Bone Staff, the Magus demands to know why the General is engaging in such dull brutality instead of casting spells, while the Sneak berates the General for exposing itself to attack. When it casts spells, the General says it's bored and wants to hit something. When it uses Evasion to reduce damage on a Dex save, the Sneak pointedly says, “*You're welcome.*” The slapstick comedy of the skull lord's internal dissension will contrast memorably with the serious-as-a-heart-attack damage it dishes out and the seemingly innumerable minions it summons from the earth.

NIGHTWALKERS (M)

It took me a couple of tries to get through the flavor text on the **nightwalker** in *Mordenkainen's*, but here's what it seems to boil down to: If some schmuck is dumb enough to try to visit the Negative Plane, which has nothing to recommend it as a destination, the trade-off is that a nightwalker is released into the material plane, and the visitor can't leave the Negative Plane until the nightwalker is somehow persuaded to go back. How can it be persuaded to go back? “By offerings of life for it to devour.” How many such offerings are necessary? It doesn't say. What do nightwalkers want? “To make life extinct.” So the idea here is to convince a nightwalker to abandon the place where it has plenty of life energy to devour by giving it life energy to devour? Try throwing bagels to raccoons and see how quickly *they* go away.

As if this arrangement weren't bad enough for our traveler, *destroying* the nightwalker traps the traveler on the Negative Plane forever. In short, in an entire universe of bad ideas, going to the Negative Plane for any reason is quite possibly the worst. If you're creating a nightwalker encounter, though, *someone* went through with this execrable half-baked plan, and now your PCs are the ones who have to deal with the consequences.

With extraordinary Strength and Constitution, nightwalkers are brutes, but they're some of the nimblest brutes in the D&D menagerie: Their Dexterity is also extraordinary, though not quite as high as their Strength and Con. Their mental abilities, in contrast, are weak, with below-average Wisdom the highest of the three. They're indiscriminate in their target selection and operate on instinct, without any flexibility in their tactics.

They have a huge repository of hit points, and they're either immune or resistant to nearly every type of damage; the only exceptions are force and radiant damage, along with physical damage from magic weapons. They can't be exhausted, frightened, grappled, paralyzed, petrified, poisoned, knocked prone, or restrained—but *can* be blinded or stunned.

Nightwalkers have 120 feet of darkvision. Their name is meant to be taken literally. They don't go out during the day. There's no percentage in it for them.

Well, the *first* part of their name is meant to be taken literally. The second part, less so: Nightwalkers have a base movement speed of 40 feet but also a flying speed of 40 feet. This, combined with the illustration in *Mordenkainen's*, makes me imagine a creature that glides rather than walks—or that “walks” even when its feet aren't touching the ground.

In fact, it might be interesting to ratchet up the weirdness by having it glide without moving its feet when it's "walking" and make walking motions when it's flying.

Annihilating Aura and Life Eater are passive features. The one thing we can infer from Annihilating Aura is that, because it has a 30-foot radius, the nightwalker tries to position itself within 30 feet of all its potential victims (or at least six of them, if there are more than that) at the end of its turn. Now I'm imagining a constant gliding, wheeling movement pattern, in which the nightwalker never stops moving entirely but rather strikes its foes *en passant* on its way to its final desired position.

The nightwalker's Multiattack comprises either two uses of Enervating Focus, a melee attack, or one of Enervating Focus and one of Finger of Doom, a ranged attack with a long recharge. I said above that the nightwalker is indiscriminate in its target selection, but that's not entirely true. It doesn't distinguish between one life and another, but it does respond to position and condition. Finger of Doom has a 300-foot range, but the paralysis it incurs offers sweet synergy to the nightwalker, which has only until the end of its next turn to exploit it. Therefore, when it uses Finger of Doom, it targets a creature no farther away than 40 feet plus however many more feet of movement it has remaining on its current turn. If there's an opponent within this radius who's affected by Annihilating Aura as well, or against whom the nightwalker has advantage for some other reason, such as their being unable to see in the dark, that opponent is preferred.

The nightwalker uses Finger of Doom as part of its Multiattack whenever it has this ability available *and* has advantage against any opponent within this 40-foot-plus-remaining-move radius. If it can reach the target of Finger of Doom in the same turn, it uses Finger of Doom first. If it succeeds in paralyzing its target, it closes the distance and uses Enervating Focus against that target. If it doesn't succeed in paralyzing its target, it instead closes on another target nearby, preferably one it can attack with advantage, and attacks that target with Enervating Focus.

What if it can't reach its Finger of Doom target in the same turn? Then it starts moving in that target's general direction and uses Enervating Focus on some other target it doesn't have to go too far out of its way for—again, preferring a target it can attack with advantage.

If the nightwalker doesn't have Finger of Doom available, then it attacks with Enervating Focus twice. If there's only one opponent within 40 feet whom it can attack with advantage, it makes both attacks against this opponent. If there's more than one, it may attack one twice, or it may divide its attacks between two targets, but it always makes these attacks along a path toward the point where it can reach as many opponents as possible with its Annihilating Aura at the end of its movement.

Nightwalkers don't worry about opportunity attacks, except from opponents with magic weapons. They don't knowingly and willingly move within reach of these weapons—and usually don't have to, since their own melee attack has a 15-foot reach. If an opponent wielding one of these weapons charges a nightwalker and engages it in melee, it rises up into the air, out of that opponent's reach (potentially provoking an opportunity attack), and then focuses *all* its attacks on that opponent. If attacked by multiple opponents with magic weapons, it stays out of their melee reach; divides its attacks among them, using Finger of Doom against ranged attackers wielding magic weapons or ammunition first and foremost; and disregards opponents who *aren't* wielding magic weapons or casting spells that inflict force or radiant damage.

A nightwalker doesn't flee, regardless of how much damage it takes. It has no evolved origin and no survival instinct, and what flicker of sentience it possesses gets a kick out of knowing that its destruction will cause some poor idiot to be trapped on the Negative Plane forever.

I. If you're concocting your own spell list for one of the warlock patrons in *Xanathar's Guide to Everything* (chapter 1, "Otherworldly Patrons") or the *Sword Coast Adventurer's Guide* (chapter 4, "Otherworldly Patron"), consider the following: A Celestial deathlock is a scourge. It won't fight good characters, and it merely defends itself against neutral ones, but it tries to wipe evil characters off the map. A Hexblade deathlock doesn't just relish combat—it lusts after it. An Undying deathlock, the embodiment of irony, uses its spells primarily to underline the futility of standing in its way.

II. Divine domain from the *Sword Coast Adventurer's Guide*, chapter 4.

ABERRATIONS

NEOGI (W)

Neogi have the bodies of spiders, the heads of eels, and the hyper-hierarchical worldview of an 18th-century aristocrat. Nearly all their relations—with other species and with one another—revolve around power. Anything other than deference to the powerful and domination of the powerless is foreign to their way of thinking.

However, neogi are physically weak: Their power comes from their psychic abilities. In terms of their ability scores, a neogi's high Dexterity and Constitution, combined with its low Strength, indicate a preference for skirmishing and for outnumbering opponents. But neogi of equal status cooperate only under the command of a higher-status neogi; a lone neogi must fend for itself and strives to avoid any engagement in which it doesn't have a clear advantage.

Neogi have darkvision (the standard 60 feet) and proficiency in Perception, so it's to their advantage to engage either at night or underground. They also have proficiency in Intimidation; this proficiency plus their above-average Wisdom suggests that when they're outmatched, they try to bluff and bluster their way out of having to fight.

The neogi's Multiattack consists of a Claw/Bite combo. Claw deals straight slashing damage, but Bite deals substantial poison damage and also has a chance of imposing the poisoned condition. In fifth edition D&D, being poisoned imposes disadvantage on attack rolls and ability checks but is otherwise a relatively nonthreatening condition. Mainly, it helps the neogi prevent its target from fighting back effectively.

Once per combat encounter, a neogi can use its Enslave feature to try to take command of a target creature's mind. However, nothing else the neogi does can improve its chance of succeeding in the use of this feature (being poisoned doesn't impose disadvantage on saving throws). Neogi know better than to try Enslaving creatures with advantage on saving throws against being charmed, such as elves and gnomes.

A neogi's whole reason for fighting is to try to capture a creature it can then Enslave. Its most promising potential victims are those of weak will; fighters, rogues, sorcerers, and maybe bards are most likely to have made Wisdom their dump stat. Anyone else a neogi encounters is an obstacle to this goal. Starting with their most fragile opponents—and doing their best to avoid the tougher ones, making maximum use of their climbing movement to stay out of reach—neogi try to get as close as they can to their targets, then strike using their Multiattack. If they can't get close enough to a target to attack them, they use the Dodge action in the meantime.

A single neogi retreats when moderately wounded (reduced to 23 hp or fewer), again using the Dodge action until it's in the clear, then Dashing. But neogi fighting in a group stick around until they're seriously wounded (reduced to 13 hp or fewer). When more than half of a group of neogi have fled, the rest follow suit.

A **neogi master** isn't all that much more powerful than a regular neogi, but it has more than twice the hit points and can cast spells. It has only two slots to cast leveled spells with, and the runaway winner is *hold person*, which can immobilize up to three targets when cast using a 4th-level slot. Since *hold person* requires concentration, that rules out casting *fear*, *hunger of Hadar*, or *invisibility* at the same time, but that's okay, because *hold person* is the ideal way to shut down not only the poor sap the neogi master plans to Enslave but also the hard-to-kill, sword-swinging ruffians who may try to come to their defense.

If *hold person* doesn't yield the expected results, and the neogi master gets rushed, it can fall back on *arms of Hadar* to deliver 5d6 of nasty necrotic damage to everyone within 10 feet or *dimension door* to exit stage left. Otherwise, it's always got *eldritch blast*, with which it can fire two salvos of arcane force, each of which deals 1d10 + 4 damage on a hit. But its Multiattack is still better, on the whole, if it can get close enough to its desired target. *Eldritch blast* is more appealing to a neogi master that can hang back while other neogi minions do its dirty work for it.

Neogi hatchlings are even weaker than full-grown neogi, and they fight only in self-defense. If they're feeding on a great old master, they'll want to stay put and will Bite at any other creature that comes near; they'll neither flee nor pursue. But if there's nothing to keep them rooted in place, they Dash away, preferably straight up a wall and across the ceiling.

STAR SPAWN (M)

Star spawn are relatively new arrivals in the D&D universe. The name seems to be borrowed from H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos, but according to the Powers That Be, star spawn aren't native to the Far Realm specifically. Some of them are from the Far Realm, but others are associated with "Elder Evils" that inhabit other planes, such as the Shadowfell, the Gray Waste, and the Abyss. They understand and speak Deep Speech, which is not the same as Undercommon, but rather a language associated with the Far Realm; it's also spoken by neogi, mind flayers, beholders, and aboleths.



There's a variety of star spawn for every level of play, from the lowly grue to the boss-level larva mage.

The **star spawn grue** is a weak skirmisher. Its extremely low Strength is an indication that it will never be encountered alone, but rather with many others of its kind. If your run-of-the-mill high-fantasy campaign opens with a scuffle between the PCs and a patrol of goblins or kobolds, or your horror campaign begins with skeletons or zombies, your "maw of madness" campaign can open with a swarm of grues.

Star spawn grues come out at night (60 feet of darkvision) or dwell in subterranean pits. They have only two special features, one active and one passive, but one reinforces the other. Aura of Madness imposes disadvantage on saving throws against creatures within 20 feet, as well as attacks against non-grues. It seems odd that a creature should impose disadvantage on attacks against beings other than itself, but this makes grues useful auxiliaries to more powerful star spawn. It also renders enemies within range more vulnerable to the grue's Confounding Bite, which in addition to doing vicious piercing damage (two dice, rather than the typical one) also requires the target to make a Wisdom saving throw, or else other attacks against them have advantage for a round.

Star spawn are aberrations, but this doesn't mean they're not evolved creatures; they simply evolved under different conditions. Their Wisdom is more than high enough for them to have a self-preservation instinct, which means a star spawn grue retreats when seriously wounded (reduced to 6 hp or fewer). But rather than Dodge or Dash, a grue engaged with only one melee opponent simply uses its full movement to move away (potentially incurring an opportunity attack), then Readies a Confounding Bite against any enemy who pursues; while a grue engaged with more than one melee opponent instinctively Disengages before moving away.

For the middle-grade adventurer, we have the **star spawn mangler**, also a low-Strength skirmisher that never attacks alone. The mangler has proficiency on Dexterity and Constitution saving throws, two of the "big three"; that leaves Wisdom, which means that manglers aggressively home in on bards, illusionists, and any other enemy casting mental manipulation spells as soon as this ability becomes apparent and try to take them out of the fight ASAP.

Manglers are quick and can also climb, so they'll turn a fight into a three-dimensional affair if they can. They're ambush predators whose Shadow Stealth feature allows them to keep ambushing their targets as long as the lighting is poor and they have obstacles to hide behind. Combine this with the insane Flurry of Claws action, which allows *six* Claw attacks plus an additional turn's worth of movement *without provoking an opportunity attack at either end of that bonus movement*, and you can see where the mangler gets its name from. This is especially true in the first round of combat, when the Ambush trait grants it advantage on every attack it makes against an enemy who hasn't taken a turn yet, not just on the first one (which is all you get from being an unseen attacker—once you attack, you're no longer unseen). And since the mangler's Claw attack does bonus psychic damage when it has advantage on its attack roll, this means that if all its attacks hit, it can do an average of *93 damage* in a single combat turn, and a maximum of *144 damage*.

Flurry of Claws requires a recharge roll, but it's a generous one: It recharges not on the usual roll of 5–6 but on a roll of 4–6. That means that, on average, a star spawn mangler can use this attack action every other turn; even if it does nothing else, that's still better than using its no-recharge Claw/Claw Multiattack every turn (six attacks over two rounds, rather than four, plus the free movement).

So a pack of manglers are going to start combat from a place of hiding. They may have grues with them, but the manglers *must* strike first, with surprise if at all possible, because of Ambush; since grues have no proficiency in Stealth, they therefore have to hang back beyond encounter distance until the action starts, so as not to ruin the surprise. Ambush grants manglers advantage on every attack roll, and they use Flurry of Claws to exploit this benefit to the fullest. Then they immediately scuttle away to the nearest shadow, where on the following turn they can take cover, use Shadow Stealth to Hide again (with Stealth proficiency), and Ready a Claw attack against any pursuing foe who catches up to them. The next time the manglers attack, Ambush no longer benefits them, but if their targets stray within reach or they can close in while their targets are distracted, they still benefit from unseen attacker advantage on the first strike, plus psychic damage if it connects.

Now here's where we get into a fiddly mechanic about how recharge works. You roll for recharge at the start of each of a creature's turns, not at the moment it tries to use the action. So before the mangler does anything, you already know whether it has Flurry available to it or not—and in a sense, so does it. Thus, if Flurry happens not to recharge, the mangler *remains in hiding for a turn*. If it does recharge, it springs out and Flurries again.

Flurry of Claws is better than Multiattack as long as a mangler gets to use it at least once out of every three turns. Thus, if a mangler flubs two recharge rolls, two turns in a row, it springs out and attacks anyway, using Multiattack, because otherwise it will fall behind on its damage. In that instance, it has to remain out in the open, because it can't use a bonus action to get away without provoking an opportunity attack. But with 71 hp, it can take a couple of hits as it waits for Flurry to recharge.

The mangler retreats when seriously wounded (reduced to 28 hp or fewer), but it doesn't necessarily retreat right away. Rather, it retreats the first time it gets to run away as a bonus action as part of Flurry of Claws. As soon as it can, it Hides—and never comes back out of hiding.

For the mid-to-upper level range, we have the **star spawn hulk**, which as its name suggests isn't a skirmisher but a brute. This one's saving throw proficiencies are on Dexterity and Wisdom, but it hardly needs proficiency on Constitution saving throws, since it's already got +5 to those from its natural toughness. Nonmagical weapons do only half damage against it. It's a tank.

The hulk's most distinctive feature is Reaping Arms, an action that allows it to attack every enemy within 10 feet of it, potentially knocking them prone. Thus, the hulk not only rushes straight into melee as other brutes do but also has an incentive to wade right into the midst of its opponents. Most creatures, even brutes, try to avoid melee engagement with multiple enemies at once. The star spawn hulk digs it. The only time it refrains from using Reaping Arms (assuming it's not on cooldown) is when it can't reach at least two enemies. If it can move to a point where it can reach three or more, it does, even if this provokes one or more opportunity attacks.

When Reaping Arms isn't available, it uses its double-Slam Multiattack. It can divide this between two opponents, but if it uses both attacks against one, it does extra psychic damage, with potential to stun. This wrinkle provides a strong incentive for it to focus its attacks against a single enemy, and with its above-average Wisdom, it has a decent intuitive sense of which of its enemies is the most desirable target for it.

What makes a target desirable? The ability to do harm back to the hulk, which, most straightforwardly, probably means a magic weapon—although it may also mean spell attacks, if the hulk can get at the attacker. Since the star spawn hulk is a creature of melee—and not a very bright or flexible one—it's going to choose a target it can reach without moving over one it has to charge to get at. But if a ranged attacker gets its attention in a way that its melee opponent(s) can't, then it goes after that attacker. If multiple star spawn hulks are fighting together, a target knocked prone by one hulk is also a highly desirable target for any other.

The Psychic Mirror feature doesn't have any meaningful impact on the hulk's tactics, since it already has another incentive to stand in the midst of its enemies, in the form of Reaping Arms. But Psychic Mirror can affect the behavior of other monsters fighting *alongside* the hulk. When you get right down to it, "Psychic Mirror" is an inaccurate name: It should be "Psychic Amplifier," because for every x psychic damage the hulk would take, *every* creature within 10 feet of it takes x damage.¹

Suppose an attacking mind flayer uses Mind Blast against five PCs along with a star spawn hulk. First, each of the five PCs makes an Intelligence saving throw. On average, a PC takes 22 psychic damage on a failure, 11 on a success. But then the hulk makes its own saving throw, and its Intelligence is a wretched 7, so it has only a 20 percent chance of success—it's going to fail, and take full damage, four times out of five. But it's not the one who takes that damage! That damage is passed along to each PC within 10 feet of it—the *full amount*, even if a PC made their own saving throw!

Unfortunately for the hulk, while it passes the damage along, it doesn't get to pass along its own debilitating condition, so in the likely event that it fails its save, it's stunned by the Mind Blast and therefore can no longer make use of Reaping Arms. Thus, this may not always be the smartest play for the mind flayer—but one can imagine it working in particular situations.

A star spawn hulk does retreat when seriously wounded (reduced to 54 hp or fewer), but grudgingly, continuing to attack with Reaping Arms (if it's recharged) or Multiattack (if it's not) as it backs away, taking advantage of those attacks' debilitating effects to avoid opportunity strikes.

On to the **star spawn seer**, the lesser of the two boss-level star spawn. This one's ability contour heavily favors Intelligence and Wisdom, with Constitution showing third. If it were a PC, this would be a typical contour for a support spellcaster, so let's look for ways it can enhance the abilities of creatures (especially other star spawn) fighting alongside it. We can also examine it as a quasi-brute that uses its mental abilities, rather than Strength, to attack.

Like the star spawn hulk, it has proficiency in Dexterity and Wisdom saving throws, but not Constitution. Unlike the star spawn hulk, it doesn't have quite a high enough Constitution for this not to be a weakness, or at least a drawback. In other words, spellcasters and other enemies whose powers require Constitution saves are among the things the seer considers meaningful threats. It's immune to cold damage and to physical damage from nonmagical weapons.

Its Out-of-Phase Movement feature is similar to Incorporeal Movement, but unlike that feature, it deals damage to other creatures the seer passes through, an effect that the seer can use offensively. It doesn't do a lot of damage, but it does provide a small incentive to phase through opponents on purpose.

Jumping ahead to Bend Space, this reaction seems like just a jerk move, like the goblin boss's Redirect Attack feature. But the star spawn seer is very, very smart, and it won't use this reaction *just* to avoid damage. Instead, it looks for ways to use it defensively and offensively at the same time. For instance, it can move to a location where it will be surrounded by enemies, bait out an attack—then use Bend Space to swap places with a star spawn hulk, which can then use Reaping Arms on its own turn. Or it can pick an enemy that would make a good target for a star spawn mangler but that the mangler can't quite reach. Bait, swap, Flurry of Claws. Sure, Bend Space is useful as an escape hatch, but why just escape when you can also brutalize whomever you're escaping from?

The star spawn seer's big gun is Collapse Distance, which it will probably get to use only once in a typical combat encounter, since it recharges only on a roll of 6. For best effect, it should use Collapse Distance against a target that has at least two allies—the more, the better—within 10 feet of it, and it should also have someplace worth teleporting the target to, such as under a star spawn mangler or over a chasm. Finally, despite the feature's very high DC, it's still going to be less effective against high-Wisdom targets such as clerics, druids, monks, and rangers, so maybe aim it at someone else if possible? Then again, the presence of star spawn grues—whose Aura of Madness imposes disadvantage on all saving throws—can make this feature difficult for anyone to resist.

Finally, there are the direct attacks: one melee, one ranged. Whatever the target's evident preferred position, the star spawn seer takes the opposite. That is, against front-line fighters, paladins, and barbarians, it hangs back and chucks Psychic Orbs. Against marksmen and spellslingers, if it can get to them, it closes and attacks with its Comet Staff—two-handed, since it doesn't carry a shield. Its speed is only 30 feet per turn, but if it's accompanied by a fast-moving mangler, it can order its ally to charge the enemy; if the seer is then attacked by a formidable front-liner, it can Bend Space to swap positions with the mangler.

Also, since Psychic Orb is pure psychic damage—no accompanying physical damage to deliver it, as there is with the Comet Staff—the star spawn seer can lob one directly at a star spawn hulk that's surrounded by enemies, and the hulk will rebroadcast the damage out in all directions and suffer no harm itself.

If the seer is seriously wounded (reduced to 61 hp or fewer), it Dashes away using Out-of-Phase Movement, allowing it to depart the scene by the most direct route without being hindered by enemies, objects, walls, or floors. (Not the ceiling—it has no flying speed. But you don't have to be able to fly to fall.)

The **star spawn larva mage** is a legendary boss, the top of the star spawn pecking order. It's resistant to cold damage and to physical damage from normal weapons, and it's also immune to a variety of debilitating conditions. Most notably, it can't be paralyzed or restrained; if its foes want to stop it in its tracks, they'll have to incapacitate it.

The larva mage, like the star spawn seer, has a hybrid ability contour, with extraordinary Constitution and exceptional Intelligence and Strength; we can probably lump them together in the custom category "psychic brute." The point being, the larva mage has little reason to hang back. Its abilities are mostly short-to-medium-range, an incentive to get into the midst of its enemies, within 20 feet of as many of them as possible (ideally, four or more).

Its list of actions may make it appear that it has two primary attacks, but it has three, the third being *eldritch blast*, which it can cast at will at up to three targets up to 120 feet away. (I'll deal with *circle of death* in a moment.) Thus, if its opponents refuse to cooperate with its attempts to get next to as many of them as it can, it can still take potshots at them from a distance. Slam is a straightforward melee attack with the capacity to poison its target; note the 10-foot reach. Unless the larva mage is directly engaged in melee by an opponent, it may want to go ahead and cast *eldritch blast* against its target, since it can do more than three times as much damage this way; Slam is only useful in self-defense.

Plague of Worms is the larva mage's big gun, its counterpart to the seer's Collapse Distance, recharging only on a roll of 6. The larva mage wants to use this ability while standing within 10 feet of as many opponents as possible, because the effects are huge. So huge, in fact, that it almost doesn't want to give its opponents a chance to get into position before using

it—best-case scenario, it’s able to attack by surprise, drop right into the middle of the party, and Plague away. It doesn’t have proficiency in Stealth or even particularly high Dexterity, so it probably won’t get this chance, alas. Still, if its opponents are anywhere near one another, this is the larva mage’s opening play, no question.

But what if they’re not particularly near one another? *Dominate monster*, which the larva mage can use three times per day, is an interesting option. For starters, thanks to its save DC and the fact that it can cast this spell three times a day rather than just once, it’s actually a better mind controller than the mind flayer. Sure, the obvious use of *dominate monster* is to make PCs attack one another. But for the larva mage, it can also be the “C’m’ere, you!” spell. The catch is, it can dominate only one opponent per action, so it may take some damage before it can get everyone rounded up and drop a Plague of Worms on them.

But it can take that damage, for a couple of reasons. First, it’s got lots of hit points. Second, the Feed on Weakness reaction gives it 10 temporary hp when a creature within 20 feet of it fails a saving throw. If it needs to top itself up a bit, it just falls back on a Slam attack and makes its opponent save vs. poison. Feed on Weakness is also super-useful if the larva mage has hulks around forcing their own targets to make Con and Dex saves, even more so if there are grues to impose disadvantage on those saves.

The star spawn larva mage also has legendary actions, three per turn—although, mystifyingly, none of its choices costs any less than two of those actions, meaning it never gets to use more than one of them. Slam, by itself, offers very little for the cost,¹¹ so the larva mage uses this choice only when it needs to defend itself and replenish its temporary hp at the same time. Feed is a good choice anytime one or more opponents are restrained by Plague of Worms and it’s evident that Slam won’t be necessary. Cantrip (read: “Cast *eldritch blast* again”) is the fallback if the larva mage won’t benefit from either Feed or Slam.

Unlike all the other star spawn, the larva mage doesn’t retreat when seriously wounded—it keeps fighting right down to 0 hp. This is because of its feature Return to Worms, which gives it limited immunity to dying. When the larva mage is reduced to 32 hp or fewer, it places itself within 60 feet of all its enemies and casts *circle of death*, with itself at ground zero. Even if it fails its own saving throw, it still has a two-thirds chance of surviving this spell, while each of its opponents takes an expected 21 necrotic damage. If it does happen to blow its save and take enough damage to reduce it to 0 hp, it merely turns into a swarm of insects. As a swarm, it doesn’t continue fighting, but rather Dashes away to safety, skittering up the nearest wall and fleeing across the ceiling. With any luck, it will escape while its opponents are nursing their wounds, giving it a chance to re-form the next day.

BEHOLDER-KIN (W)

The *Monster Manual* lists two variants of the beholder: the death tyrant, a more powerful, undead variant; and the spectator, a less powerful, not-really-evil variant. *Volo’s* lists three: the gazer, the gauth, and the death kiss. Together, these are referred to as “beholder-kin.” All three variants are evil.

Gazers are tiny, truculent micro-beholders usually found in a cluster around a full-size beholder, though they’re sometimes found on their own. They are proficient in the Stealth skill, so they may hide among the darker recesses of their master beholder’s lair. They have few hit points and very little Strength, so they stay as far from enemies as they can (up to their Eye Rays’ maximum range of 60 feet) and take potshots from the shadows. If approached, they move away to a safe distance, using the Dash action if necessary, though usually they should be able to retreat, then use their Eye Rays again. They’re not smart enough to Disengage or even Dodge. They have the Aggressive feature, but given how totally unsuited to melee combat they are, they use this only if they must in order to get within 60 feet of a target. They flee, using the Dash action, if reduced to 5 hp or fewer.

The **gauth** is a weird little mini-beholder with the Stunning Gaze and Death Throes features and a unique Eye Ray, the Devour Magic Ray. In most respects, it behaves the same way a standard beholder would; however, its Intelligence and Wisdom are both lower, so while it can still hatch schemes and assess its enemies’ weaknesses with reasonable accuracy, it’s not an all-knowing mastermind.

The Death Throes feature simply deals damage to every creature within 10 feet when the gauth is slain, which doesn’t influence its tactics in any way. Stunning Gaze, however, is superior to the beholder’s Anti-Magic Cone in that it doesn’t inhibit the gauth’s Eye Rays—in this respect, it’s more like the death tyrant’s Negative Energy Cone. Consequently, the

gauth isn't shy about using it, and it takes effect at the beginning of every enemy creature's turn, unless that enemy has averted their eyes. (Of course, if you're averting your eyes from an enemy, you have disadvantage when you try to attack it.)

The Devour Magic Ray affects magic *items*, not players with magical ability. It also doesn't "devour" magic (except from charged items, such as wands) so much as it *suppresses* it. That is, if the gauth uses its Devour Magic Ray against a paladin wielding a *flame tongue* sword, the enchantment isn't stripped from the sword permanently—it's merely neutralized until the start of the gauth's next turn. You don't have to tell the player that, though! "One of the creature's eye stalks swivels to gaze at you, and the flames emanating from Purgator sputter out. You feel it go heavy in your hand, as if it were no longer guiding your blows." Let that player go to pieces until the sword roars back to life in the following round.

The other difference between a gauth and a standard beholder is that the gauth is less territorial and more survival-oriented. It flees when seriously injured (reduced to 26 hp or fewer), and it's smart enough to Disengage (action) before Dashing away.

The **death kiss** is the most powerful of the three, though not as powerful as a standard beholder. In lieu of ray-projecting eyestalks, its body is covered with long, waving tentacles that end in spines and toothy mouths. It has the extremely silly feature Lightning Blood (which I can't even type without laughing ruefully), which inflicts lightning damage against any opponent that strikes it with a piercing or slashing weapon. That's right: *Its blood is electrically charged*. This idea is ridiculous even for an aberration. I can almost buy the flavor text explanation, "A death kiss survives solely on ingested blood, which it uses to generate electrical energy inside its body," with the usual suspension of disbelief that D&D demands, but to suggest that *the death kiss's blood itself* is what carries the stored electrical charge, and not some other organ in the death kiss's body... whatever, man, I can't even with this. You hit it, you get shocked. That's what it says.

Anyway... extra-high Strength, extra-high Constitution, merely above-average Dexterity, so this is a melee-fighting brute we're looking at. Average Intelligence, slightly above-average Wisdom: unsophisticated tactics but somewhat selective about its targets and not reckless. Proficiency in Perception, of course (it has just the one eye, but that eye is *big*); immunity to lightning damage, of course; immune to the prone condition, of course, because it hovers.

Here's the important part: Its tentacle attacks grapple and restrain. It's important not only because a restrained target attacks with disadvantage, while attacks against a restrained target have advantage—the usual reason—but because the death kiss can use its Blood Drain feature against a grappled opponent. It has a Multiattack that includes three tentacle attacks, and it can substitute Blood Drain for any of these, once per grappled victim.

The combination is obvious: With a free tentacle, it swipes at an enemy. If it hits the enemy, it grapples it. If it has an enemy grappled, it follows up with Blood Drain, which not only damages the enemy but also heals the death kiss.

With no ranged attack, the death kiss has to close to melee range with its opponents; however, its reach is 20 feet, so it can still hover well out of its opponents' reach while it flails at them with its tentacles. Having it hover about 10 feet off the ground is optimal, as long as none of its opponents wields a polearm: This positioning lets it reach two squares or hexes away on a 1-inch-equals-5-feet map grid. If any opponent has a polearm, it hovers 15 feet up instead and can strike opponents only in adjacent squares or hexes. (At 20 feet of altitude, it can reach only creatures directly below it.)

The death kiss is a compulsive hunter, but one without stealth; it relies on overpowering its prey. It can attack multiple opponents at once, but I'm not sure it does, necessarily. I think the modus operandi of a predatory creature such as this one is more likely to involve attacking one victim and sucking it dry as quickly as possible. Also, the death kiss is capable of sizing up opponents. Therefore, I'd say, it tries to pick off the weakest member of the herd first, although if it can't get at the weakest, it'll settle for the weakest within its movement range. It then attacks that target with one tentacle; if that tentacle strikes and grapples, it uses Blood Drain next, then finally attacks with another tentacle. Each time it hits with a new tentacle, it uses Blood Drain an additional time. Once it has three tentacles wrapped around a victim, it uses its entire Multiattack for three uses of Blood Drain.

That's assuming that no other opponent engages it in melee—or comes within reach of it. Consider how opportunity attacks work: Whenever a creature is about to exit another creature's reach, the latter gets an opportunity attack. The death kiss's reach is 20 feet! Thus, an opponent could easily move into and out of a death kiss's reach without realizing it, and when one does, the death kiss uses its reaction to lash out with another tentacle. (It's got ten of them.) If it hits, that's another victim grappled. When the death kiss has multiple opponents grappled, it divides its uses of Blood Drain among them—the more tentacles around an enemy, the more blood drained.

The death kiss can fly with a grappled opponent in its grip, at its base speed if the opponent is Small, half speed if it's Medium, Large, or Huge. So if no enemy is within reach of its tentacles but one is taking potshots at it with a ranged weapon, it moves—toward that enemy, hoping to smack them down, if the death kiss is unwounded or lightly wounded (reduced to 113 hp or more), away from that enemy if moderately wounded (reduced to between 65 and 112 hp). If seriously wounded (reduced to 64 hp or fewer), it releases its prey and Dashes away.

CHOKERS (M)

Easy to confuse with similarly named and themed monsters like cloakers, lurkers, ropers, and trappers, **chokers** are described in *Mordenkainen's* as subterranean predators, but I don't see why, with only 60 feet of darkvision, they shouldn't also be encountered at night aboveground—especially since they lack proficiency in Perception, without which they could easily miss a victim attempting to be stealthy in total darkness. The fact that their Boneless trait allows them to slither through crevices just 4 inches wide does make underground cave complexes particularly appealing hunting grounds, but a crumbling castle or temple ruin might be just as good for them, if not better.

With very high Strength and high Dexterity leading their ability scores, chokers are shock attackers that ideally would like to render their prey unconscious in just one or two rounds and dead in one more. Unlike a fighter PC who saves their Action Surge for use as a finishing move or to run down a slippery opponent, the choker uses its Aberrant Quickness immediately after landing its first hit so as to deal as much damage as possible as fast as possible.

Their Tentacle attack has a 10-foot reach, which I'd combine with Spider Climb to allow them to hide motionless on a 12- to 15-foot-high ceiling, where hardly anyone ever looks, then reach down to snatch an isolated and/or oblivious passerby with unseen-attacker advantage. However, the flavor text recommends a different, highly specific tactic: lashing out from inside (or, possibly, the other side of) a crevice and yanking their prey against a wall. Either of these works, and if a choker can ensconce itself in a crevice in the ceiling, or reach down through a crack from a floor above, it can do both at once. Its lifting capacity is 480 pounds, and it can haul away an unconscious victim weighing up to 240 pounds (remember to count equipment, including armor) without even being slowed down. However, if it's reaching out of or through a crevice to get its prey, it can't very well drag its prey away with it, whereas if it's simply clambering across a ceiling, it can.

The choker has only one attack, Tentacle, which its Multiattack allows it to use twice in one action. Thanks to Aberrant Quickness, it can land a hit and immediately follow up with a second Multiattack, giving it four attacks in one turn—all with advantage, if the first attack is a hit, because a successful hit grapples and restrains. Its long limbs allow it to attack from out of its opponents' reach, if it's on the ceiling, or from three-fourths cover, if it's hiding in a crevice (and that's only if its tentacle-arms are out, wrapped around a victim; if they're not, it can retract them and enjoy total cover).

A critical hit with Tentacle prevents the target from breathing or speaking, which means proceeding immediately to suffocation (*Player's Handbook*, chapter 8). If the target can't get free within a number of rounds equal to their Constitution modifier + 1, they drop to 0 hp and fall unconscious. It's fairly likely, however, that the choker's tentacles will do them in before then, since they deal an average of 9 damage (bludgeoning and piercing combined) with each hit, and the choker enjoys one round in which it gets to make *four* such attacks.

Chokers are clearly designed to be used against low-level adventurers, so 36 damage in one round is serious business, and 18 damage the following round isn't shabby, either. Plus, since the choker's Multiattack comprises two melee attacks, if it brings its victim to unconsciousness in one turn, it almost surely kills them in the next turn (if not the same one) by pulling them close and dealing two automatic crits, thus forcing four failed death saving throws.

Once it's KO'd a victim, a choker clinging to a ceiling tries to make off with them, since it's not bright enough to consider that they could be brought back to consciousness with healing magic; its goal is to haul its prey to a safe place and *then* finish them off. However, a choker attacking from a crevice doesn't have that luxury. It has to kill its prey *all* dead, then deal with any remaining defender(s) so that it can emerge and enjoy its meal.

Being a predator and therefore disliking when prey fights back, it abandons its attack when moderately wounded (reduced to 9 hp or fewer), which in essence means taking just one solid hit. Between its Armor Class and its ability to position itself beyond reach and/or behind cover, it doesn't expect to take any damage at all. Anything more than a trifling scratch comes as enough of a shock to dissuade it and send it squelching away.

BERBALANGS (M)

When your PCs encounter a **berbalang**—an aberration named after and *very* loosely based on a ghoulish creature from Filipino folklore—they probably aren't encountering a berbalang at all but rather the Spectral Duplicate of a berbalang. That's because the one unique talent that a berbalang possesses is the ability to project its consciousness beyond its body, effectively creating a ghostly clone of itself that can act independently on its behalf. It can't be active in two places at once—when it creates a Spectral Duplicate, the berbalang itself is dead to the world—but the ghost-clone has all the same stats, including hit points, and if it's destroyed, the berbalang simply wakes up, as healthy as it ever was. Why would it risk its own skin when it can lie low and send its ghost-clone into danger instead?

Berbalangs—and their doubles—have low Strength and Constitution but very high Dexterity. Protracted melee combat is not something they're interested in at all. They also have very high Intelligence, vs. merely average Wisdom and Charisma. They're indiscriminate in choosing targets, but that's largely because they're not looking to pick fights; they use their teeth and claws chiefly for self-defense, deterrence, and the occasional hunt for food. They know better than to get in a scrap with anyone who looks like they *are* interested in melee combat.

Although their highest ability score is mental, their spellcasting ability is confined to *speak with dead* and *plane shift*. According to *Mordenkainen's*, they use the latter spell to prowl the planes of the multiverse in search of recondite knowledge and the former to extract that knowledge from any interesting corpses they find. *Speak with dead* isn't a combat spell; *plane shift* is often an escape hatch, but in this case, it's well within the realm of possibility that a berbalang has created a Spectral Duplicate and had it cast *plane shift* to go a-gleaning. When opponents encounter the berbalang's ghost-clone, it doesn't need to cast *plane shift* as an escape hatch, because it's not the real berbalang. They can kill it if they like; it's expendable. Alternatively, if the berbalang wants to leave them in a snit, it can dismiss the ghost-clone just before they destroy it.

A berbalang's Spectral Duplicate deals the same damage as the berbalang itself, except that its Bite and Claws attacks deal psychic damage rather than piercing and slashing. Since its primary usefulness to the berbalang lies in its ability to conduct reconnaissance, it may be willing to fight in order to drive interlopers away, to defend itself if harassed, or if it considers its reconnaissance mission either finished or insufficiently rewarding. If it still has information to gather, though, combat is a distraction. Therefore, if attacked by an enemy who's too well-armored or high-level, it Disengages and flies away. Even if it does fight, it doesn't care to keep it up for more than a round or two; after that, if its foes remain undeterred, it Disengages and flies away regardless.

If the combat encounter is with the berbalang itself, *not* its Spectral Duplicate, it Disengages and flies away without attacking unless it has an excellent reason not to, such as being cornered. Against obviously low-level PCs, it may stand and fight, but not against PCs of an intermediate or higher level. If it's moderately wounded (reduced to 26 hp or fewer) and has no other option, it casts *plane shift* and takes its chances, counting on its knowledge of other planes to keep it safe long enough for it to come back the next day. If it lacks *plane shift*—that is, if it's cast it that day already—then it has no choice but to keep Multiattacking until it can seize an opportunity to flee.

Despite their combat aversion, berbalangs are neutral evil and therefore hostile by default. This attitude doesn't mean they automatically attack upon encountering other creatures; it does mean that they aren't the least bit inclined to help those other creatures out. Their many knowledge skills and command of every language in existence mean they can be conversed with, but it will take a successful DC 20 Charisma (Deception, Intimidation, or Persuasion) check to get them to part with even a shred of useful information—unless they can be turned friendly or indifferent by either a suitably enticing bribe, as described in the flavor text, or a spell such as *charm monster* (see *Dungeon Master's Guide*, chapter 8, "Resolving Interactions").

MINDWITNESSES (v)

A **mindwitness** is what you get when a bunch of mind flayers abduct a beholder and bring it back to their elder brain for it to tinker with. A shadow of its former self, the mindwitness loses some Intelligence, significant amounts of Constitution and Charisma, more than half its hit points, and its Antimagic Cone (which, to be honest, isn't a beholder's most useful feature anyway). In exchange, it gains a decent Multiattack to use against enemies that get close to it, plus the Telepathic Hub trait, which turns it into a psychic broadcasting service.

Like a regular beholder, a mindwitness shoots its Eye Rays at random but chooses the targets of those rays mindfully. Each of its six Eye Rays targets a different ability, so there's something for everyone. The mindwitness's slightly damaged

Intelligence means that it can only conjecture about who has better or worse Dexterity, Charisma, etc.; it's not quick enough to reach accurate conclusions from just a round's worth of observation and has to rely on trial and error and educated guesswork instead. As a starting point, it aims its Aversion Ray and its Psychic Ray against front-line warriors, its Fear Ray against enemies lurking on the periphery, its Slowing Ray on front-liners and supporters, and its Stunning Ray and Telekinetic Ray on squishy types in the back line.

Unlike a regular beholder, the mindwitness doesn't try to stay out of reach at all times. If a single opponent tries to engage it in melee, it often floats down on its own turn and obliges, using its Multiattack to deliver attacks with Bite and Tentacles. It uses Tentacles first, because the mindwitness's target is stunned on a failed saving throw, which gives it advantage on a follow-up Bite. Any ally of the mindwitness will be eager to take advantage of the target's stunned condition while it lasts (although to use Extract Brain, mind flayers and ulitharids must have the target grappled in *their own* tentacles).

Being subservient, body and soul, to the mind flayer colonies they belong to, mindwitnesses don't flee no matter how much damage they take. However, if their colonies are wiped out and they go and hang out with other beings for a while, their sense of self-preservation gradually returns, eventually reaching the point at which they seek an exit from a combat encounter when only moderately wounded (reduced to 52 hp or fewer).

MIND FLAYERS (v)

The mind flayer, or illithid, has all the hallmarks of a terrific psychic archvillain except one: the power to effectively enthrall others en masse. That's because their sole mind-control feature, the once-per-day spell *dominate monster*—which affects one target for one hour—gives them just enough power to dupe a wealthy retiree into signing over their assets.

However, a lone mind flayer isn't supposed to be the *real* boss monster. Mind flayers usually live in colonies, not by themselves. The real boss monster is the elder brain.

Unfortunately, even the introduction of the elder brain in *Volo's* doesn't make mind flayers powerful enough to carry out their psionic schemes with any kind of efficiency. Efficiency is important, because if they have to live near humanoid settlements in order to harvest the brains they live on, yet also have to conceal their presence in order to avoid discovery not just by their prey but also by vengeful gith, they're going to need a decent number of minions.

Volo's chapter on mind flayer lore includes a nod to this:

A colony that desperately needs to increase its population concentrates on capturing humanoids to turn them into thralls and illithids. Operating individually or in small groups, its members use stealth and deception to infiltrate the humanoid community while keeping their presence secret. Lacking the numbers or the ability to overwhelm and dominate the entire population, a colony turns its research toward more effective ways to exert control, such as finding a way to amplify an elder brain's power to enable it to exert influence over a greater distance.

It's a smart strategy; the trouble is, even the stat blocks in *Volo's* don't fully reflect it. It's the “more effective ways to exert control” that are both badly needed and missing from both the *Monster Manual* and *Volo's*. In *The Monsters Know What They're Doing* (347–51), I proposed three alternatives to the mind flayer's *dominate monster* ability that might provide the necessary amplification of its psionic powers: Charm (as exemplified by the vampire), Enslave (as exemplified by the aboleth), and *geas* (either in its normal, ritual form or in an accelerated, single-action form). Any of these would also work for an elder brain, which also, inexplicably, has no method of mind control except the *dominate monster* spell.

“The process of transforming a creature into a thrall requires the entire colony's energy and attention,” *Volo's* contends. That's... unsatisfying. More to the point, it's unthreatening. To serve as proper villains, mind flayers need to be able to pull off an *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*-grade takeover. At a minimum, I think, a single mind flayer ought to be able to take temporary control of a single humanoid nearly effortlessly, and permanent control with some effort; a whole mind flayer colony should have no trouble bringing an entire village under its sway.

The **mind flayer psion**, presented in chapter 1 of *Volo's* as a variant of the mind flayer, goes partway toward meeting this standard by granting the spell *charm person* at a Difficulty Class that allows it to work against a commoner two-thirds of the time, but that's still weak and impermanent. Furthermore, the replacement of the standard mind flayer's Innate Spellcasting trait with an alternative version means the psion doesn't even have *dominate monster* anymore—or *plane shift*, or *detect thoughts*! In the area of cerebral larceny, this change is one half step forward, three steps back.

The main advantage of the psion over the standard mind flayer isn't that it's a more effective villain but that it's a marginally more interesting one, having a few more psionic tricks up its sleeve that it can pull out in combat. All those tricks, however, take time to play. A turn on which a mind flayer psion casts one of its innate psionic spells is a turn on which it can't use Mind Blast. If it's waiting for Mind Blast to recharge, though, and there's no enemy in range that it can attack with Tentacles, it has alternatives. It also has emergency measures it can take if its opponents have run its minion blockade.

Several of these are more cinematically "psionic" than the rest:

- *Telekinesis* seems like a promising way of dealing with a single pest—lift 5 feet in the air, hold helpless until bored—until you do the math and realize that it's a contest of the mind flayer psion's Intelligence against the target's Strength, which the psion has to *win*, not merely tie on, and the psion's Intelligence modifier is just +4. For the psion to have a two-thirds chance of success, the target's Strength mod can't be any greater than +0. This spell is a gamble, and the stakes are a 5th-level spell slot (not that big a deal, since the only competition for this slot is the 10-minute ritual spell *scrying*) and a turn's action (a much bigger deal). Also, even if the psion succeeds on its first contest, to keep the target held for more than one turn, it has to win this contest again, repeatedly. Ideally, it doesn't want to have to make this contest more than once.

One creative solution is to use this spell to move a target creature 30 feet upward and backward at a 45-degree angle—then immediately let go. With an initial velocity of 5 feet per second, the target is hurled 22 feet in the air, travels a total of 25 feet back (20 feet on the psion's turn, 5 feet more at the start of its own), takes 2d6 falling damage on its turn, and lands prone (*Player's Handbook*, chapter 7, "Falling"). To throw the target as far away as possible while still dealing damage, the psion can fling them at a 20-degree angle (11 feet up, 30 feet back, 1d6 damage); to maximize damage while still giving a little bit of a push, an 85-degree angle (33 feet up, 5 feet back, 3d6 damage).^{III}

Another option—simpler but far, far dirtier—is to have the mind flayer psion move a half-ton rock over an opponent's head, then drop both the spell and the rock. Give the opponent a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw to avoid 10d10 bludgeoning damage (*Dungeon Master's Guide*, chapter 8, "Improvising Damage," and chapter 9, "Spell Damage"), with no damage dealt on a success. Believe it or not, at a typical sedimentary rock density of 125 pounds per cubic foot, this rock would have a volume of only 8 cubic feet, so for a smaller rock, make the damage 2d10 + 1d10 per cubic foot.

Other applications include delivering an opponent into the melee reach of a powerful enthralled brute, shoving heavy objects around to cut off opponents' movement, and yoinking powerful magic items (including weapons) out of others' hands. To be safe, the mind flayer psion tries to disarm only those targets who are stunned or paralyzed (and thus will fail their saves automatically) or whose Strength modifiers are zero or negative. A strategic implication of this rule is that if it needs to pluck an item from an opponent with a positive Strength modifier, it aims a Mind Blast in their direction first.

- *Confusion* is never bad, as long as the mind flayer psion can target at least two enemies with it, per Targets in Areas.
- *Fear* is good if the mind flayer psion is being rushed by at least three opponents (again, per Targets in Areas) whom it can target in the conic area of effect, but it's even better if (a) the mind flayer psion simply wants its opponents to buzz off, and (b) it can target *all* its opponents with it. Additionally, this spell is another good way to divest stronger foes of magic weapons and other threatening items.
- *Meld into stone* should be cast in such a way that it appears that the mind flayer psion is walking *through* the wall, rather than merely into it. It's a fake-out that the psion uses when it would ordinarily flee, as a substitute for the *plane shift* spell it no longer has.
- *See invisibility* is the obvious retort to any opponent's turning invisible. Fortunately for the mind flayer psion, it doesn't require concentration. If there's a wizard, sorcerer, warlock, or bard among its foes, it casts this spell preemptively before battle starts—if it has time. If not, it waits until the need is proven.
- *Phantasmal force*, if the mind flayer psion's concentration isn't tied up with something more important, can do a decent job of stopping one enemy in their tracks. However, the psion knows not to try it against a smartie. This spell is for a foe who dumped Intelligence.
- *Charm person*, as mentioned, provides an hour of beguilement—but it's much less effective once combat is already under way.

- *Vicious mockery* only works because the mind flayer psion's sense of humor is so alien and inscrutable that the target gets a migraine trying to figure out what the insult actually meant. It's not practical—the psion's spellcaster level is 10, so the cantrip deals only 2d4 psychic damage, and it's got spell slots to spare—but it can provide a moment of comedy.

Except for *stone shape*, which is potentially interesting but situational, none of the rest of the mind flayer psion's repertoire of Jedi mind tricks is worth looking at. *Scrying* and *clairvoyance* take 10 minutes to cast; *crown of madness* is rarely better than any available alternative; *comprehend languages* is unnecessary for parley when telepathy is available; *command* is outclassed by the psion's other abilities; and *sanctuary* is out of character, unless the psion is using it to defend an elder brain.

Ulitharids are elite, extra-large mind flayers with better ability scores, a couple of additional traits, several extra psionic “spells,” telepathy that extends to a range of 2 miles, and moar tentacles. They work in conjunction with elder brains to extend the influence of mind flayer colonies over a greater distance. In fact, their Psionic Hub trait assumes and requires a connection with an elder brain, so without a mind flayer colony built around one, there's not much reason to write an ulitharid into your adventure.

An ulitharid's Strength and Constitution are significantly higher than those of a normal mind flayer, but these are still outweighed by its extraordinary mental abilities, which predispose it toward spellcasting and Mind Blast rather than melee attacks. However, since its Constitution is higher than its Dexterity, it's more willing than the average mind flayer to charge forward in order to make use of these psionic powers. An ulitharid leads from the front.

The one thing an ulitharid lacks that an ordinary mind flayer possesses is proficiency in Deception and Persuasion. As part of their mind-control schemes, mind flayers may try to tempt victims with rewards, either real or imaginary; ulitharids aren't about that. They're the muscle, not the face.

Creature Sense, by itself, is little more than prophylaxis against being surprised. However, in conjunction with Psionic Hub, it turns an ulitharid into a repeater for an elder brain's Psychic Link feature, extending its range by a couple of miles. Psychic Link targets only incapacitated creatures, and one likely cause of incapacitation where mind flayers are involved is Mind Blast. So Creature Sense adds value when you have an elder brain, an ulitharid at another location within 5 miles of the elder brain, and a target stunned by an illithid at a third location within 2 miles of the ulitharid but farther than 5 miles from the elder brain.

But you know what's a much more common cause of incapacitation? Nightly slumber—for lo, the unconscious condition includes incapacitation. When an ulitharid scans the vicinity for intelligent creatures and finds some, its elder brain needs only to wait until they go to sleep to establish a Psychic Link with one of them. The target knows they have a cerebral trainhopper as soon as they wake up, but it's tough to break free, and success is punished with a psychic wallop. Until then, whether they like it or not, the target is the elder brain's eyes and ears and is also vulnerable to its Sense Thoughts feature.

Now let's look at the ulitharid's extra psionic “spells” and how it can use them, keeping in mind that it can use each one only once per day, and also that a spell requiring concentration can't be cast at the same time as *levitate* or *dominate monster*:

- *Confusion* requires concentration, and its area of effect is not large—its radius is only 10 feet, meaning it can only be reasonably expected to affect two opponents. But two is a fairly typical number of front-line melee fighters to face off against, and unless one is a paladin, they're more likely to have a low Wisdom save mod than the spellcasters are.
- *Eyebite* requires concentration but can affect a new enemy each turn it's sustained. The general rule is, put a tough melee fighter to sleep, sicken a ranged attacker or skirmisher, and panic a spellcaster. Why? To cause maximum disruption to the opposing side. The advantage of using sleep against a front-liner is that any ally who can reach them can't spare the action to try to shake them awake; put a back-liner to sleep, and another back-liner can get to them to wake them without too much inconvenience. A frightened caster, on the other hand, Dashes away (hopefully) beyond the range of its spells, and once it finally turns around has to spend at least as many turns rushing back. There's no particular reason why skirmishers couldn't also be put to sleep, but I like sickening them because they're typically more skill-dependent than other combatants, and it hits them where it hurts.

- *Feeblemind* doesn't require concentration, but it's mainly useful against spellcasters, particularly non-wizards. Wizards, unfortunately, will have pumped up their Intelligence and therefore will be most likely to make their saving throws. Other spellcasters may be more vulnerable to the Intelligence save, and *feeblemind* shuts down spellcasting regardless of which spellcasting ability a character uses. It also makes them sitting ducks for intellect devourers.
- *Mass suggestion*, although its range is only 60 feet, is mainly useful for preventing a fight before it starts—or for manipulating opponents into placing themselves at a disadvantage—than it is within the combat encounter itself, since any damage to a target breaks the enchantment on them. “This is normal, move on, nothing to see here” is a good go-to, as is, “The real enemy is in that other room—you should go there and deal with it first” (where the “real enemy” is, say, a death tyrant).
- *Project image* requires concentration and is excellent for leading enemies on wild-goose chases to keep them from getting anywhere near the ulitharid's real location. During a combat encounter, it's 67 percent worse than *mirror image*.
- *Scrying* requires concentration and takes too much time to cast in combat, but since the ulitharid lacks Sense Thoughts, this is a good way to spy on creatures that it's sensed a couple of miles out.
- *Telekinesis* has the same applications—and the same drawbacks—for ulitharids as for mind flayer psions. Their one additional point of Intelligence modifier isn't enough to make a meaningful difference.

When a combat encounter ensues, an ulitharid gets out in front of other mind flayers (but still behind the front line of brainwashed meat puppets), since it can endure hits that they can't. Like regular mind flayers, it uses Mind Blast whenever it's available and usable against six enemies (or all of them, whichever is less), casting *levitate* or simply taking advantage of its greater height to aim the cone over the heads of its own allies. Otherwise, the ulitharid stands behind its thralls and uses Tentacles (reach: 10 feet) to attack past them. When a target is successfully stunned, it pushes its way forward and uses Extract Brain. If this kills its target, it lets go of the now useless corpse and falls back behind its line of thralls again; it also steps back if it takes light or greater damage (13 hp or more) while trying to suck the target's brains out, but it drags its target with it—all the way behind the line of thralls, if it can manage it.

The ulitharid husbands its uses of its once-per-day spells, saving them for opponents who are proving particularly irksome. A pair of doughty front-liners who are cutting through the ranks of the mind flayers' thralls get socked with *confusion*. A single difficult front-liner gets tranqed with *eyebite*; a skirmisher or shock attacker who slips past the mind flayers' defenses gets sickened. Problematic spellcasters get frightened with *eyebite* (wizards) or dulled with *feeblemind* (non-wizards).

Because of their lack of compunction against getting close to their enemies, an ulitharid is happy to deal directly with ranged attackers, who are the bane of the average mind flayer. A marksman within 60 feet can get the same *eyebite* treatment as a skirmisher, or the ulitharid may use *telekinesis* to drag them forward. If the marksman is farther than 60 feet away, the ulitharid may use *confusion* to disrupt the front line, in order to forestall opportunity attacks, then charge. Or, like a regular mind flayer, it may use *dominate monster* to take control of the marksman directly—or to control one of the marksman's allies and send them to do the job.

Both ulitharids and elder brains are jealous of the power they share within the colony, and neither is such a zealot that it's willing to die for the other. When an ulitharid is moderately wounded (reduced to 88 hp or fewer), it makes a quick Insight check to determine whether there's any value in attempting to parley; if not, it falls into a more defensive stance, recognizing that it's in some danger, and focuses its attacks on whoever dealt it the damage. When it's severely wounded (reduced to 50 hp or fewer), it uses *plane shift* to exit the scene.

Suppose the ulitharid does manage to initiate a parley—what then? Its goal is the preservation of a healthy colony (with or without the current elder brain!) and of its own life. Anything else is icing on the cake; this one goal is nonnegotiable, and if the ulitharid's opponents aren't willing to concede it, there's nothing further to talk about. An ulitharid may agree to certain constraints on the colony's activities, but at considerable cost, possibly in new thralls; plus, as soon as it finds a loophole in the agreement, that's pretty much that. The best-case scenario for the ulitharid's opponents is that it merely wants something bizarre, without any fathomable purpose.

And then there's the **elder brain**, a legendary monster complete with lair actions and regional effects. One of these regional effects is important enough to underline: “The elder brain can overhear any telepathic conversation happening within 5 miles of it.” Most PCs are content to converse using their mouthparts, but if you do have PCs who communicate

telepathically, for whatever reason, their doing so tips off an elder brain to their intentions. (It's aware of their presence no matter what, thanks to its Creature Sense feature, unless they're using magic to conceal their minds. *Invisibility*, even *greater invisibility*, doesn't cut it, nor does *pass without trace*.)

An elder brain is mobile, but barely so: It can move 5 feet per round on land, 10 feet per round in its pool. Anything with legs can outpace it. But that's okay, because mobility is wholly unimportant to its combat tactics, for three reasons:

- Its Dexterity is merely average, whereas its Strength is high, and its Constitution is extraordinary. It's a tank.
- Its tentacles have a *30-foot* reach, and they can grapple.
- Its physical combat abilities matter only because its devastating Mind Blast attack has to recharge between uses. Its Constitution is extraordinary, but so are *all* its mental abilities. If it had the choice, it would use Mind Blast all the time.

It can also hover, by casting *levitate*; doing so costs an action, however, so there's not much benefit to it unless it's taking a genuine beating from melee attackers and has room to rise out of their reach. It's more likely to *levitate* one of those attackers instead, if it has no better way to deal with them.

Legendary Resistance gives the elder brain free successes on three failed saving throws per day. Many other creatures that have this feature have such spectacular saving throw modifiers already, they may as well use it every time they fail a saving throw. For an elder brain, it's different, because it has a conspicuous weakness: Dexterity. Against DC 13, an elder brain has an 85 percent chance of making a Wisdom save (98 percent against spells and other magical effects, thanks to Magic Resistance) and a 65 percent chance of making a Constitution save (88 percent against magic), but its chance of making a Dex save is only 40 percent (64 percent against magic). Also, boss battles tend to run longer than other battles, meaning the fight probably won't be over after three rounds. Therefore, an elder brain conserves its uses of Legendary Resistance to ensure that it has them whenever it needs to make a Dex save, forgoing the use of this feature the first time it fails a Con save (first and second times, if the effects are nonmagical) or if it ever fails a Wisdom save.

Psychic Link is a long-distance opportunistic strike that you can use in combat encounters with minions of the elder brain before opponents ever get near the elder brain itself. It targets "one incapacitated creature" and reaches as far as the elder brain's Creature Sense—5 miles without enhancement, farther if it's amplified by one or more ulitharids. In the final encounter with the elder brain, Psychic Link is primarily a setup for its legendary actions, particularly Psychic Pulse.

Creature Sense can't tell the elder brain when a creature is incapacitated. But Telepathic Hub can, if the elder brain is conversing telepathically with the mind flayer that the foe is in combat with, or any other that's on the scene. The elder brain has to be the one to initiate this conversation, so decide in advance which ten of the elder brain's minions within that 5-mile radius are serving as its security cameras. Incidentally, as far as I can tell, an elder brain can maintain up to ten conversations through Telepathic Hub *plus* up to ten Psychic Links, so there's no need to be parsimonious. The target of a Psychic Link is aware of it as soon as they regain the ability to act, but the elder brain can use Sense Thoughts to brainwash the target into feeling chill about it, at least for up to an hour at a time.

In face-to-cerebrum combat, however, the elder brain has three choices: Mind Blast, a Tentacle attack, and whatever mind-controlling ability you've decided to give it (*dominate monster* being the default). It's not even a choice, really: The elder brain *always* uses Mind Blast unless that ability is on recharge, and unlike the mind flayer's Mind Blast, the elder brain's Mind Blast has a circular rather than conical area of effect, nailing every creature of the elder brain's choice within a 60-foot radius.

A hit from one of the elder brain's tentacles grapples, but it doesn't restrain, so it doesn't get advantage on attacks against its grappled foes. It does, however, inflict automatic psychic damage against each grappled foe at the start of their turn.

The bludgeoning damage that the elder brain's tentacle inflicts is substantial, so it usually favors this attack over taking control of an opponent's mind. But like mind flayers, elder brains are most vulnerable to ranged weapon attacks, and an archer or crossbowman who can deal out more than 20 damage in an average round (e.g., a ranger with Colossus Slayer plus an Extra Attack) is a ripe target for takeover. Not only does the proxy deal more damage than the elder brain could do with one of its own tentacles, it also does so on its own turn, adding to the elder brain's action economy.

Speaking of action economy, the elder brain has four legendary actions to choose from, plus its lair actions, which take place on initiative count 20. Three of the elder brain's four legendary actions require it to have an active Psychic Link:

Break Concentration disrupts concentration on a sustained spell and deals a small amount of psychic damage in the process. Psychic Pulse uses the target as a relay for the psionic equivalent of an electromagnetic pulse blast with a radius of 10 feet. Sever Psychic Link gives up the connection to the target but disorients the target in the process. The fourth, Tentacle, is a simple attack.

Psychic Pulse is a good choice if the linked target is within 10 feet of at least two other enemies of the elder brain. Break Concentration is the natural choice anytime the linked target casts a sustained spell that harms or weakens the elder brain and/or its allies, or buffs the target and/or their own allies. Sever Psychic Link is a funny one, since it gives up the condition that allows it to be used in the first place. Use it against targets that the elder brain has decided it's done with—because they're keeping their distance from their allies, aren't casting spells, and no longer need to be brainwashed to feel or believe anything.

Like certain other legendary creatures, an elder brain can't use any of its lair actions two turns in a row. Casting *wall of force* is a juicy one, because once it's cast, the elder brain can sustain it without having to use any further action, including lair actions, and keep it going for up to 10 rounds. It's got to have a good *reason* to cast it, though. Blocking off escape is one. Projecting a protective dome over itself is another, although while this lets the elder brain use Mind Blast against creatures outside the dome, it can't attack creatures outside with its tentacles. (But it *can* trap already grappled enemies inside the dome with it!) Subsequent uses of this lair action negate previous ones, because the elder brain can't concentrate on two *wall of force* spells simultaneously.

The “freeze!” lair action is a good way to preempt a threatening enemy from charging, and the elder brain uses it against the opponent who seems most likely to do so. The ally-inspiring action is a good way to make sure that the most critical moments of the battle go the elder brain's way.

Casting *plane shift* on itself is a good way for the elder brain to save itself if it's badly wounded, but it can't survive long outside its brine pool, and elder brains don't share. If it's going to *plane shift* out of its lair, it has to have another one to go to. If it doesn't, it may have no choice but to fight to the death. If it does have another, it vacates the premises when it's seriously injured (reduced to 84 hp or fewer). Its self-preservation instinct is powerful, but so is its narcissism: It takes that much damage to convince the elder brain that these meat puppets could actually beat it.

The mind flayer minions of an elder brain fight differently in its defense than they do in their own. As components of the colony's hive mind, they place the survival of the colony—and, by extension, the elder brain—ahead of their own. Thus, rather than flee when moderately or seriously wounded, they fight to the death in defense of their elder brain, and they run interference for the elder brain the same way they'd normally have their own minions run interference for them. (Of course, non-illithid minions serve this purpose even better, so they're the first line of defense; the mind flayers themselves are the last.)

BALHANNOTHS (M)

The **balhannoth** has one of the strangest stat blocks I've looked at, not necessarily because it has the most peculiar abilities—although a couple of its abilities are unique and quite interesting—but because it almost seems like two different monsters in one, each with a completely different *modus operandi*.

Going by its ability scores and its attack actions, the balhannoth is a straightforward brute, with exceptional Strength and Constitution. Its Bite action is a basic melee attack that deals a ferocious four dice of piercing damage at close range. Its Tentacle action does bludgeoning damage (which can be read as “squeezing” as well as “whomping”) and also grapples and restrains on a hit. Additionally, the grappled target “is moved up to 5 feet toward the balhannoth.” “Up to 5” includes zero, and this gives the balhannoth the option of either reeling a target in to Bite them or holding them at a safe distance, out of melee attack reach. A balhannoth can grab up to four targets this way.

Its Multiattack offers two choices: Tentacle/Tentacle/Bite (or Tentacle/Bite/Tentacle) and Tentacle × 4. If opponents are rushing the balhannoth, or if they're clustered too closely together, the latter lets it seize several of them at once. If only a couple of enemies are within reach, it can grab and Bite right away.

As a legendary creature, the balhannoth has three legendary actions, one of which is Bite Attack—a Bite on another creature's turn. This makes the quadruple-Tentacle Multiattack option more appealing, as the balhannoth doesn't have to forgo biting altogether simply because it wanted to snatch as many foes as possible in its tentacles. It can also Teleport up to 60 feet, which is useful for positioning, because the balhannoth is slow. (Although the illustration in *Mordenkainen's*

seems to suggest that it floats like a grell, it has no flying speed—just walking and climbing, both 25 feet.) I'll talk about its third legendary action in a moment.

If you knew nothing else about the balhannoth, you'd think it was basically an unusually vicious roper—a brute that snatches foes with its tentacles and holds them in place, restrained, while chomping down on them with advantage.

But then there's the other half of its kit.

The *raison d'être* of the balhannoth, a denizen of the Shadowfell, is to sucker lost wanderers into its lair by making it appear and feel like the answer to their deepest longings. It does this by way of its regional effects and lair actions. And here is where the balhannoth gets truly strange, because its lair actions—which take place on initiative count 20, like all lair actions—seem designed specifically to be used *outside the context of a combat encounter*, when there is no “initiative count 20” or any other initiative count.

Its regional effects work the way other regional effects do, out to a distance of 1 mile: The balhannoth can sense the desires of a humanoid wanderer and can implant in that wanderer the sense that the fulfillment of those desires is nearby. Next comes a circular zone with a radius of 500 feet: At this distance, the balhannoth can sense *anything*, thanks to its ridiculous blindsight, and can use a lair action to either kidnap a creature (this one doesn't have to be a humanoid, necessarily) or turn invisible to one creature. Inside this is a square zone, 500 feet on a side—in other words, a distance of 250 to 353 feet from the balhannoth—in which the balhannoth can use another lair action to create an ultra-detailed yet weirdly flawed illusion of a place that fulfills the wanderer's desires.

The fact that these lair actions take place “on initiative count 20” of a combat encounter that player characters may not even be aware they're in yet isn't the only strange part. The reality-distorting lair action also takes *10 minutes* to take effect.

Suppose the balhannoth senses the desires of Daria Hrast, a ranger, and starts to reshape the terrain of its lair into her dream campsite. Daria, with her keen sense of direction and harefooted step, immediately begins to zero in on the aberration's lair. Even if her base movement speed is only 30 feet and she doesn't Dash, she can still arrive at the balhannoth's lair nine rounds, or 54 seconds, after it begins remodeling. It's not even going to be *close* to done.

So the balhannoth has to be particular about the order in which it uses its powers. First, it has to sense its victim's desires, at a range of 1 mile or less, without alerting them that it's close by. Second, it has to use a lair action to design the set. Ten minutes later, once it's finally ready to show off its handiwork, *then* it can use its other regional effect to lure its victim in. Finally, it must wait for the victim to approach within 500 feet, at which point it can use another lair action to become invisible to that victim, followed by a third lair action to try to yoink them the rest of the way. Any alarm the abductee experiences is drowned out by the regional effect of the balhannoth's lair, from which the feelings of being near one's heart's desire are overwhelming at ground zero.

Of note here—aside from the incongruity of using lair actions entirely outside initiative order—is the fact that while the balhannoth can't use the same lair action two rounds in a row, the effects of its first and third lair actions are persistent. It can, and probably will, have both up and running at once, and it can use the second while the first and third are in effect.

What if the balhannoth fails to become invisible to its victim? Then it simply doesn't bother to yoink. What if the invisibility succeeds, but the yoink fails? Then it waits patiently for the victim to find their way to its lair on their own.

Can the balhannoth use a legendary action outside combat? Legendary actions can be used only “at the end of another creature's turn,” but lair actions can be used only “on initiative count 20,” and we're already playing fast and loose with the definition of combat time here—if we don't, then half the balhannoth's kit becomes completely worthless, because it will never be able to reshape its lair in time. By necessity, as long as the balhannoth's marks are still on their way to its lair, we have to construe that they're *taking turns*, in a sense. And the balhannoth, on one of these turns, uses the Vanish legendary action to turn invisible, not just to its victim but to everyone. That's where we'll stop bending the rules; from this point on, the balhannoth does everything by the book.

If it's lured just one victim to its lair, it gives the victim 30 seconds or so to enjoy and appreciate the rare feeling of being granted their fondest wish, followed by the dawning awareness that the cake is a lie. Having had that satisfaction, the balhannoth attacks. It can use its Multiattack flexibly, making two Tentacle attacks, then deciding whether to Bite (if it's grappled its victim) or make two more Tentacle attacks (if it failed on its first two tries). Because the balhannoth is invisible, it makes the first attack with advantage. (It may not make it with surprise, however. It lacks Stealth proficiency, and its Dexterity modifier is an infelicitous -1. If its Stealth roll doesn't equal or beat the victim's passive Perception, they'll know *something* is there, even though they can't see it.) It attacks to kill and doesn't let up unless its victim manages to moderately

wound it (reduce it to 79 hp or fewer) before it can moderately wound its victim (reduce them to 70 percent or less of their hit point maximum).

If the victim arrives under their own power, with an entourage, the balhannoth has to try to get within 10 feet of as many of them as possible and lash out with every limb, like the octopus who plays the drums. It gets the most value out of its attack advantage if it attacks a target with AC 15 or higher (AC 18 is ideal), but it can't read its opponents' stats, so it makes its first attack against the target with the most armor. That's as sophisticated as its target selection gets.

And now we're back in brute territory—not just brute territory but mechanistic brute territory, because the balhannoth's Intelligence 6 allows it no tactical flexibility. After taking its own turn, it uses its legendary actions as it's allowed to. It uses Vanish immediately after its last grappled victim escapes, preparing to reposition for another mass grab. It uses Teleport when it has an empty tentacle and no other way to get to the next target it wants to use it on, or to get away from an enemy who deals it 12 damage or more in a single hit. Otherwise, it uses Bite Attack to munch on one of its grappled victims. If it's grappled any of its victims at a range of 10 feet, it holds them there so that they can't close in and fight back while it Bites those nearer to it.

During combat, the reshape-reality lair action is useless, because it doesn't take effect for 10 minutes; by that time, the combat encounter is long over. Scratch that one off. The invisibility lair action is redundant and inferior to the Vanish legendary action, although it does have the upside of not costing a legendary action. The teleportation lair action may be useful for relocating a difficult and persistent enemy to a safer distance. The catch is that it can only be done once every other round, since the balhannoth can't use the same lair action two rounds in a row. Teleporting *itself* is more broadly useful. Moreover, a balhannoth can use Teleport to outpace its enemies and carry a victim away to a safe place where it can monch them to death. And why wouldn't it do that? Predators are generally content to take down a single prey creature. A balhannoth has no need to stick around and keep four foes restrained at once while it Bites just one of them.

Now, maybe the balhannoth is greedy. Maybe it wants to carry off and kill as many easy targets as it can. What's going to distinguish easy prey from difficult prey? Remember how I mentioned that it aims its first attack at a more armored target, for the best return on its unseen-attacker advantage? With +7 to hit, a balhannoth has a two-thirds or better chance of hitting an unrestrained target with AC 14 or lower, or a restrained target with AC 19 or lower. Anyone wearing plate mail and carrying a shield is difficult prey and not worth the trouble. Anyone wearing light armor or none, with no shield, looks like easy prey and gets whisked off. As for those in between, they're only worth trying to eat if the balhannoth can keep them restrained. If they manage to escape, it lets them go and makes no further attempt to grapple them, although it smacks them with a tentacle if they insist on pursuing.

Like most predators, the balhannoth doesn't care much for prey that fights back, but it also doesn't want to abandon its lair if it can help it. It flees when seriously wounded (reduced to 45 hp or fewer).

MORKOTHS (V)

What do you get when you cross a dragon, a kraken, and a beholder? You get a **morkoth**, a weird, paranoid, tentacled beastie that drifts through the planes on its own private island, which might be aquatic but might also be airborne, and hoards living beings as well as treasure.

By default, a morkoth's lair is immersed in water, although the morkoth can make that water clear and/or breathable at will—as well as the reverse. This water is just one of many advantages the morkoth has in its own lair, since it has a swimming speed of 50 feet, twice its land speed. It can breathe equally well in air and water, so the breathability (or lack thereof) of the water in its lair is an amenity it can offer to guests and a weapon it can use against intruders.

Morkoths, despite their many hit points and high Armor Class, aren't all that physically formidable. Their Strength, Dexterity, and Constitution are all modestly above average. Their standout ability is Intelligence, which is also their spellcasting ability, so while they do possess a respectable Multiattack that can also restrain one enemy, they'll reserve it for enemies who get right up in their beaky faces. They'd much rather attack with spells.

They're also not afraid of enemy spellcasters at all, and in fact are happy to have them in the fight, because these can be turned to their advantage with their Spell Reflection reaction. Their proficiency on Dexterity and Wisdom saving throws (Intelligence, too, but not many spells require that), along with their Armor Class, gives them a good chance of diverting roughly two-thirds of all incoming spell effects, which they'll gleefully redirect at the casters' allies. Their Achilles' heel is the Constitution save, which they don't have proficiency on and are most likely to fail. If an enemy spellcaster slings a spell

that calls for a Con save, the morkoth is likely to decide they aren't any fun anymore and move them to the top of its target priority list.

Morkoths have resistance to physical damage from nonmagical weapons. Magical weapons are another story. Any enemy with a magic weapon is an obvious threat, and eliminating this enemy will be a morkoth's top priority once combat ensues. If there are more than one, that's a good enough reason for a morkoth to stop casting spells for a moment in order to grab one with its tentacles and restrain them, at a safe distance, long enough to deal with the other(s).

Morkoths' skill proficiencies include Perception (a whopping +10) and Stealth; they also have 30 feet of blindsight and 120 feet of darkvision. This gives them a strong incentive to darken the water in their lair—a process that takes a full minute to complete, but they have Intelligence 20, so they can predict when something's about to go down, especially since no one can arrive on their islands or at their sanctums without their knowing. Total darkness (heavy obscurity for creatures without darkvision, light obscurity for morkoths and other creatures with darkvision) suits them just fine, since their +10 bonus to Perception checks easily overcomes light obscurity penalties. Thanks to their blindsight, they're even okay in the super-obscurity of a *darkness* spell, but this is a contingency plan, not the default.

Before I start going down the morkoth's list of spells, let's take a look at its Hypnosis action. It covers a 30-foot conic area, so based on Targets in Areas, we're looking at three enemies as minimum threshold for using that ability. Unlike a dragon's Frightful Presence, this is *not* an ability that either works on the first try or not at all: A character who succeeds on their saving throw has *advantage* on subsequent saves for 24 hours, but not *immunity*.

The Hypnosis action charms targets who fail their saves, and the charmed targets are drawn toward the morkoth. Why? Presumably to be noshed upon. Didn't we already decide, however, that the morkoth isn't all that interested in melee combat? Yes, we did. So why would a morkoth want to draw enemies into melee range? Three possibilities:

- It wants to shut down a spellcaster who's casting spells that force it to make Con saves.
- It needs to deal with a *ranged* attacker with a magic weapon or magic ammunition.
- There's an enemy who's somehow interfering with its own spellcasting, such as with *dispel magic* or *counterspell*, and it intends to put a stop to that.

However, in doing one or more of these things, it needs to be careful *not* to draw in any formidable *melee* fighter with a magic weapon. Before using Hypnosis, it repositions itself to avoid doing so, and its Armor Class is high enough that it can take a chance on an opportunity attack as long as it's not engaged with more than one magic weapon-wielding melee opponent. (Depending on initiative timing, it may cast *misty step* instead—see below.)

Okay, spells. We have four tiers here: 6th level, 1st level, cantrips, everything else.

The morkoth's only 6th-level spell is *chain lightning*. It uses its lone 6th-level spell slot solely for this spell, and it casts it as soon as it's aware that its foes are a genuine threat and need to be dealt with aggressively, which may be as early as round 1 and certainly no later than when it's moderately wounded (reduced to 91 hp or fewer).

Its 1st-level spells include *detect magic*, *identify*, *shield*, and *witch bolt*. Something's gone wrong if it's resorting to *witch bolt*, given the other weapons in its arsenal, so a morkoth uses as many 1st-level spell slots as necessary to cast *shield* against incoming attacks from magic weapons. (Remember, though, that the morkoth gets only one reaction per turn. It has to weigh *shield* against Spell Reflection, and it's more likely to choose *shield* if reflecting spells has proven ineffective, if there's no caster to reflect a spell from, or if the magic weapon in question is especially powerful—say, +2 or better, or +1 with an additional effect.)

For the same reason that a morkoth doesn't often cast *witch bolt*, it doesn't often cast a cantrip, either. But let's imagine a very narrow scenario: It holds an enemy in its tentacles, but it's also sufficiently separated from its foes that it can't see any of them to cast a spell at (in other words, they're more than 120 feet away from it). In such a situation, sure, maybe it could cast *shocking grasp* for 3d8 lightning damage on top of the free 3d8 + 2 crush/whomp damage its tentacles deal. But then again, rather than cast *shocking grasp*, it could also Bite its victim three times for 2d6 + 2 damage per hit, which is twice as good. The only benefit to casting *shocking grasp* is a slightly higher (net +3) probability to hit. (Either way, it has advantage on its attack roll against a restrained target.) So... yeah, not too much call for cantrips.

The real meat of the morkoth's spellcasting power is in 2nd through 5th level. Per my rule of slot scarcity, since the morkoth has three spell slots at each of these levels, I treat them all as being of equivalent value.

- *Geas* is normally a minute-long ritual. I've toyed with mind flayer builds that allowed them to cast *geas* in combat, but that's because they're specifically supposed to be powerful mind controllers. I don't see any compelling reason to give the same power to a morkoth.
- *Scrying* is a 10-minute ritual, so it isn't going to be used in combat.
- *Dimension door* is the morkoth's escape hatch. I'll talk about its retreat criteria down below.
- *Evard's black tentacles* is a good immobilizer that also happens to deal damage. It affects a 20-foot square, so looking again at Targets in Areas, our magic number is four. The morkoth wants at least four enemies clustered together in a single 20-foot square, and ideally, these are enemies that are neutralized by being restrained, such as front-line fighters and skirmishers. Being restrained doesn't impede a ranged attacker as much—although if they're lined up properly, it makes everyone lovely targets for *lightning bolt*.
- *Dispel magic* is best used against ally-aiding buffs, since baleful magic can be volleyed back with Spell Reflection. But because of its limited action economy, a morkoth doesn't bother dispelling dinky spells like *Bless*, only buffs of 3rd to 5th level. If it's trying to *dispel* a 4th- or 5th-level spell, the morkoth spends a 5th-level slot to cast it. Wanna know what its very favorite spell to *dispel* is? *Water breathing*. Mwahahahaha! Take that, landlubbers!
- *Lightning bolt* is a beaut if opponents are arranged in single file—four or more are ideal, but a morkoth settles for three if they have disadvantage on the save from being restrained. And if it can get at least four *and* it has a 5th-level spell slot available, it happily adds two more damage dice to the blast.
- *Sending* is irrelevant to combat.
- *Darkness* is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it creates a 15-foot-radius sphere in which no one but the morkoth can see a thing—and its tentacles reach to the edge of that sphere. On the other, it creates weird and complicated interactions with Spell Reflection. Spell attacks from within its 30-foot blindsight radius are more likely to miss, but since it can't see *beyond* this radius, spell attacks from farther away have a normal chance to hit—and it can't redirect them at anyone farther than 30 feet away. Enemy spellcasters can't target them with saving throw-required spells that require a visible target, but *fireball* works just fine, and again, if it succeeds on its save, it can redirect the spell only against targets it can sense with its blindsight. I think a morkoth probably saves this spell for when its enemies have caught on to its tricks and stopped casting spells at it.
- *Detect thoughts* isn't all that relevant to combat, but a particularly curious, less belligerent than average morkoth might use it to answer the question "Why are these people attacking me?" Then again, it could just *ask*, telepathically, without spending a spell slot. Personally, I see this spell being used on captives rather than combatants.
- *Shatter* is an intriguing spell in this context. Its base effect is to deal thunder damage (3d8 on a failure, half that on a success) in a 10-foot-radius sphere (i.e., to at least two opponents). It also does equivalent damage to nonmagical objects, such as weapons, armor, and exposed equipment that happen to be lying around. So far, so good. It can be cast with a 5th-level spell slot to deal 6d8 damage. So far, even better. Here's my question: What happens when you create a shock wave underwater? That effect isn't going to end abruptly 10 feet from its epicenter; it's going to propagate outward. It's my opinion that bystanders outside the 10-foot damage radius—say, out to a distance of another 20 feet, plus 10 feet per additional spell slot level—should have to make a DC 17 Strength saving throw against being knocked prone. Mind you, *this effect is not in the rules as written*. There's no official D&D rule regarding underwater shock waves. This is just me saying, *of course* anything that deals thunder damage underwater is going to produce a mini-tsunami.

Whether or not you agree that *shatter* should have an effect beyond its official radius, it's a good spell for the morkoth to lead with, especially if not enough of its enemies are positioned so as to make *Evard's black tentacles* or *lightning bolt* worthwhile. You're much more likely to see two front-line fighters standing shoulder to shoulder, with the rest of the party dispersed, and *shatter* suits this arrangement perfectly.

In addition to its turn, a morkoth in its lair gets a lair action on initiative count 20. It has four choices: Hypnosis, *darkness*, *dispel magic*, or *misty step*. None of the latter three costs a spell slot—but this also means that *dispel magic*, cast as a lair action, can't be boosted, so a morkoth uses this spell in this manner only to dispel a 3rd-level effect. If a morkoth can use *misty step* as a lair action to avoid an opportunity attack, it does. If it's the first combatant to act after count 20, it also uses *misty step* to enhance its normal-turn movement as needed. In general, a morkoth is more likely to use *misty step* than any other lair action. It casts *darkness* only if and when it would cast that spell anyway, and the same is true of Hypnosis.

Morkoths are chaotic evil, which means to me that they delight in preying on the weak. Generally speaking, therefore, the first opponents they attack non-opportunistically are the weakest—barring spellcasters, because spellcasters are their useful idiots. And by “weakest,” I’m talking mainly in terms of hit points, influenced somewhat by armor. So we’re most likely looking at archers, glass-cannon shock attackers like rogues, and supporters like druids and bards. These are the opponents who bear the brunt of the spells that a morkoth reflects. Morkoths don’t prioritize front-line attackers unless they’re wielding magic weapons; they show their disdain for front-line fighters with normal weapons by declining to pay them any attention.

(Incidentally, with their extraordinary Intelligence, morkoths know exactly which spells to redirect at whom: The supporters get to make the Dex saves; the rogues get to make the Wisdom saves, along with bards wielding finesse weapons; and the low-AC archers get to try to duck and dodge the ranged spell attacks.)

What compels a morkoth to retreat? That’s a toughie. On the one hand, a morkoth covets all its possessions, and its life is its most precious possession of all. Also, it’s got Wisdom 15, so it ought to have a pretty good sense of when discretion is the better part of valor. On the other hand, who gives up a private island willingly? I’d say, therefore, that a morkoth retreats at some point between being moderately and seriously wounded (reduced to between 52 and 91 hp), when it’s clear that it’s losing the battle—but *it doesn’t run away permanently*. Rather, it uses *dimension door* to bug out to a hiding place somewhere else on its island, where it can lie low, recuperate, and reemerge later to seek payback. It’s not over for a “defeated” morkoth. It’s never over.

NEOTHELIDS (v)

Neothelids are products of mind flayer reproduction gone awry. Mind flayers reproduce by hatching thousands of tadpoles and implanting as many as they can in the brains of living hosts. Unimplanted tadpoles must be killed, because if they’re left to their own devices, the tadpoles will grow out of control and dumbly devour every living thing around them, including other mind flayer tadpoles. As they feed and grow, their psionic power grows as well, but the intelligence needed to direct it—which normally comes from the host brain—doesn’t. You can see how this story ends: not well.

Gargantuan, clumsily thrashing brutes, neothelids have extraordinary Strength and Constitution but below-average Dexterity, subsentient Intelligence but high Wisdom (representing perception and survival instinct, nothing else). They have 120 feet of blindsight, suiting them to any environment but giving them the greatest advantage in subterranean places. They can also detect the presence of intelligent creatures up to a mile away, unless they’re masking their minds with magic.

The combination of high Wisdom and rock-bottom Intelligence indicates a sort of animal cunning, which isn’t the same as flexibility—the neothelid has none of that. Operating purely from instinct, it nevertheless can choose its moment to attack and avoid tangling with creatures of comparable or greater power. It can also detect—imperfectly—which of its prospective victims are weakest and go after them first. And if it’s seriously wounded (reduced to 130 hp or fewer), it recognizes the danger it’s in, breaks off fighting, and Dashes away.

Neothelids have Magic Resistance, but more important, they don’t even know what magic is (they don’t know what *anything* is, only that if it’s moving, they can probably eat it): two good reasons for them not to treat spellcasters any differently from anyone else.

Their two modes of attack are Acid Breath, which recharges, and Tentacles. In almost every instance, I deem recharge abilities to be favored over other attacks, but I find myself second-guessing that with the neothelid. The reason is, Acid Breath doesn’t do anything except damage. Is it self-defense? Is it a way of softening up food before they eat it? The flavor text says, “These creatures can spray tissue-dissolving enzymes from their tentacle ducts, reducing victims to a puddle of slime and leaving only the pulsing brain unharmed.” No. 1, ewww, and No. 2, those are some highly specific enzymes. But No. 3, it does suggest that despite its lack of debilitating side effects, Acid Breath is meant to be part of the neothelid’s digestive process. Let’s go with that. Since the area of effect is a 60-foot cone, let’s say that the neothelid uses Acid Breath anytime the ability is available and can strike all of the neothelid’s opponents or at least six of them, whichever is less (Targets in Areas).

The neothelid’s Tentacles attack—it gets only one per turn—inflicts both bludgeoning and psychic damage, then requires the target to make a Strength saving throw to avoid being swallowed. It has a two-thirds chance or better of swallowing any character with a +3 Strength save modifier or lower. It can identify which targets are probably easier pickings, but as you make this assessment from the neothelid’s point of view, consider that it can only take into account size

and mass, not *training*. Thus, if it's choosing between a wood elf fighter with Strength 16, whose Strength modifier is +3 but whose Strength *saving throw* modifier is +5 or greater, and a half-orc cleric with Strength 18 (+4 Strength modifier), it attacks the smaller but better-trained fighter without a second thought, saving the larger, stronger cleric for later.

A neothelid can cast *levitate* at will, although the tactic of hovering 15 feet in the air and using its reach to lash out at creatures on the ground strikes me as too sophisticated for its animal-level Intelligence, as well as further incentive to rely on ranged attacks against it. It also has one daily use each of *confusion*, *feeblemind*, and *telekinesis*. *Confusion* has a range of 90 feet but affects only a sphere with a 10-foot radius, meaning the neothelid will be lucky to catch more than two opponents at once with it. *Feeblemind* has a range of 150 feet but affects only one target. *Telekinesis* affects one creature or object within 60 feet.

With each of these spells, I have to ask, what *judgment* does the neothelid possess that would make it choose to forgo a Tentacle or Acid Breath attack—both of which relate closely to its ability to feed—in order to cast one of them? And on what basis would it choose its target(s)? It's not smart enough to think tactically, let alone strategically.

Let's come up with a heuristic. Is Acid Breath available, and are all of the neothelid's opponents (if there are six or fewer) or at least six of them (if there are seven or more) grouped within a 60-foot cone emanating from the neothelid, either before or after its 30-foot move? If so, the neothelid uses its Acid Breath. If not, is at least one opponent within the neothelid's 15-foot reach, and is that opponent's Strength modifier (unmodified by saving throw proficiency) +3 or lower? If so, it attacks that opponent with Tentacles and tries to devour it. If not, is there at least one such opponent within 45 feet of the neothelid? If so, it moves, then attacks.

Innate Spellcasting, therefore, is for those situations in which the neothelid can't hit enough of its enemies with Acid Breath, either because it's in the wrong place, they're in the wrong places, or the ability is recharging; and it also can't reach an opponent to strike with Tentacles, either before or after moving.^{IV}

The neothelid has a 15-foot reach and a 30-foot move, so we're now looking at cases in which an opponent is more than 45 feet from the neothelid at the start of its turn. Adding this distance to the range of each spell, we come up with three circular zones around the neothelid's starting position, like the rings of an archery target: from 45 to 105 feet away, from 105 to 135 feet away, and from 135 to 195 feet away. Continuing the metaphor, let's call these the red ring, the blue ring, and the black ring. (The bull's-eye is where the neothelid can reach an opponent with a tentacle attack.)

In the red ring, *telekinesis* is consistent with the neothelid's rudimentary, panphagic mentality. It moves as far as it can—30 feet—toward an opponent in the red ring, then casts *telekinesis* to try to pull that opponent 30 feet toward itself. The result of the pull is determined *not* by a Strength save but by a contest between the neothelid's Wisdom modifier (+3) and the target's Strength modifier. Therefore, the neothelid won't try this against a target with a positive Strength modifier—it's got to be zero or negative. If there is such a target in the red ring, then once the neothelid takes telekinetic hold of them, it maintains that hold until it comes close enough to make a Tentacles attack, then lands one successfully.

Confusion requires at least two targets within 20 feet of each other, each in either the red ring or the blue ring. A neothelid can make reasonably accurate guesses about a creature's Strength, but it has no way to assess a creature's Wisdom, so it's not picky about whom it targets with this spell, as long as they're properly situated. Of course, if it can get more than two targets in the radius of effect, it will. After casting the spell, it maintains it until it's landed a Tentacles attack on each affected target.

Feeblemind is the neothelid's last resort, cast only if *none* of the aforementioned criteria is met. It's an attempt to hobble a single target, who can be anywhere within the black ring or closer. However, there's not really any good target-selection basis that the neothelid would be aware of, since it can't tell one humanoid from another, let alone spellcasters from non-spellcasters, or other spellcasters from wizards. There's also the consideration that *feeblemind*'s range exceeds the range of the neothelid's blindsight. (In fact, its blindsight reaches only into the middle of the blue ring, at least from the start of its movement.) Maybe it lashes out at someone who's dealt damage to it from a distance, maybe it reacts to an attempt to flee, or maybe it just targets whoever's closest. Let's just hope that the circumstances are right for one of the neothelid's other attacks, and we never get this far up the decision tree.

If a neothelid is sustaining *telekinesis* or *confusion*, it drops the spell immediately when it takes enough damage to compel it to flee.

I. It's been hypothesized that two hulks within 10 feet of each other can reflect damage back and forth between them infinitely, straight-up killing any other creature in the radius—a frightening loophole, if it were true. However, since multiple simultaneous uses of the same feature don't stack (*Dungeon Master's Guide*, chapter 8, "Combining Game Effects"—missing from early printings), other creatures in range of Psychic Mirror don't take the reflected damage more than once, although any additional hulk can cause the amplifying effect to reach farther.

Here's one other glitch case, since there is a way in which it might conceivably affect the tactics of the star spawn hulk: Imagine that one star spawn hulk uses its Multiattack against a second star spawn hulk, and that the second star spawn hulk uses the Help action to *allow itself to be hit*, as a sort of anti-Dodge, granting advantage on the first one's attacks. Thus, the second hulk takes 2d8 psychic damage, which is then broadcast outward to every other creature within 10 feet of either one of them. It's weird and stupid, but according to RAW, it does seem to work.

Is it worthwhile, though? Only if Reaping Arms is on cooldown, and only if the damage is broadcast to seven or more enemies (the minimum necessary to exceed the damage that both hulks could do with separate Multiattacks), which isn't likely ever to occur. If the second hulk Multiattacks as well, it only requires four enemies to receive the damage to begin to make sense, but all those enemies should have an Armor Class greater than or equal to the hulks' AC 16. Otherwise, the hulks are trading away hit probability. They're also physically hurting each other. So I say again, weird and stupid, and of negligible value.

II. It's a better deal if you decide it costs one legendary action rather than two. It's been suggested that Slam was intended to cost only one legendary action all along, but the *Mordenkainen's* errata say nothing about it.

III. These figures assume that it takes the psion's entire 6-second turn to move the target 30 feet, but that's not necessarily a good assumption for a creature that's *casting a spell* rather than simply exerting force with its mind. For characters and creatures that actually cast the *telekinesis* spell, complete with verbal and somatic components, suppose they spend 4 seconds of a turn casting the spell, and the target is flung only in the last 2 seconds, giving their targets an initial velocity of 15 feet per second. In that case, you can get 13 feet of loft, 40 feet of horizontal distance, and 2d6 falling damage with a 25-degree throw, or 27 feet of loft, 30 feet of horizontal distance, and 3d6 falling damage with a 55-degree throw.

All damage counts horizontal distance as well as vertical distance from the peak of the arc, as if the target traveled in a straight line (hypotenuse distance). I'll do a lot of math for you, dear reader, but I draw the line at calculus. Bad memories.

IV. Or maybe there's one other trick we can pull, mechanistic enough that it can be plausibly rationalized as a function of instinct: If the ceiling is high enough, a neothelid that senses approaching prey quietly *levitates* 50 to 60 feet in the air, beyond audible distance, and waits for its prey to pass beneath it. When they do, it showers them with Acid Breath, then descends 20 feet. On its next turn, it descends another 20 feet, then begins trying to pick them off with Tentacles. Finally, it descends the rest of the way to the ground and reverts to its usual behavior. Maybe reserve this trick for the unusually gifted neothelid with Intelligence 4.

FIENDS

LESSER DEVILS (M)

There's not much to say about **nupperibos**, wind-up-and-let-go melee grunts with a lot of resistances but no flexibility, whose Hunger-Driven trait makes them obstinate pursuers of targets that try to escape them. The one thing I might allow them, because they have Wisdom 8 and not Wisdom 7, is that in the Nine Hells—and only in the Nine Hells, where they can be destroyed—seriously wounding them (reducing them to 4 hp or fewer) is enough to daunt them momentarily. If their opponent is retreating, they don't pursue, and if their opponent isn't retreating, they Dodge (lacking the intelligence or the discipline to Disengage) and move back. Either way, they howl pathetically. Alternatively, scratch out “8 (-1),” write in “7 (-2),” change “Perception +1” to “Perception +0,” make their passive Perception 10, and have them hurl themselves at your PCs until they're wiped out.

Looking at the **merregon**, I'm impressed by the idea that the souls of soldiers who served evil spend eternity fighting for the forces of hell without faces, only permanent iron masks. I can imagine Nazi foot soldiers being condemned to this fate, and I find the image satisfying.

Merregons are brutes, with exceptional Strength and Constitution; their Wisdom is above average, but their Intelligence is ape-level. They're immune to fire and poison; resistant to cold, to magic, and to physical damage from nonmagical, nonsilvered weapons; and mute. They can't be frightened or poisoned. The only language they understand is Infernal. They have 60 feet of darkvision, which isn't overwhelmed by the *darkness* spell, as darkvision usually is.

With their double Halberd Multiattack, merregons make effective, straightforward foot soldiers. But their effectiveness is increased dramatically when they fight in the presence of another fiend of CR 6 or greater—for instance, a bone devil, erinyes, pit fiend, or amnizu. The two Halberd attacks in the merregons' Multiattack become three, and if they're adjacent to their superior, they soak up attacks meant for it.

Thus, the merregon formation you'll see most often is a line extending up to 60 feet to either side of an infernal commander, with a semicircle ringing the commander itself. These merregons act as the commander's defenders, using the Loyal Bodyguard reaction to soak up damage for it, while those in the rest of the line gain an additional attack each from being inspired by their commander's presence. If they need to cover more ground, give the commander some lieutenants of an appropriate challenge rating (at least CR 6, but lower than the commander's). If there aren't enough merregons present to form a solid line, it's okay to space them out at 15-to-25-foot intervals, because their halberds give them 10 feet of reach. If a merregon falls, its allies spread out to keep the line intact, if they can; if not, the line retracts toward the commander.

Merregons have no free will. Even in the Nine Hells, they fight until they're destroyed. They obey their commander's instructions and stay in formation unless ordered to break it. They don't choose their own targets; their commander chooses targets for them. If all their superiors are killed, they keep fighting but fall out of orderly formation, attempting to finish off their current targets, then selecting new ones at random. Any strategic objective their commander might have had in mind is abandoned.

The first thing that leaps out at me about **orthons**—described in *Mordenkainen's* as “infernal bounty hunters”—is that they're proficient in all of the “big three” saving throws. Put these together with Magic Resistance, and the takeaway is that orthons are utterly unafraid of spellcasters. They don't even go out of their way to take spellcasters out quickly. They're *indifferent* to them, which, if anything, is scarier.

Orthons are called into play when an archdevil wants an enemy dealt with, dead or alive. They're brutes, with extraordinary Strength and Constitution, but their Dexterity and mental abilities are far from shabby. They're expert in

Perception, Stealth, and Survival—consummate ambush attackers. They're immune to fire and poison, can't be charmed, never tire, and are resistant to cold and to physical damage from nonmagical, nonsilvered weapons.

They have 120 feet of darkvision and 30 feet of truesight, so they prefer strongly to attack at night or in a darkened location. But even in daylight, they have the Invisibility Field feature, which lets them turn invisible as a bonus action. An orthon always uses this feature before launching an attack in anything less than total darkness—and even in darkness, if its target has darkvision. Thus, it can always make its first attack with unseen-attacker advantage.

As a rule, brutes prefer melee engagement over ranged attacks. The orthon has one melee attack, the Infernal Dagger, and one ranged attack, the Brass Crossbow. The Infernal Dagger does more reliable, raw damage, but the Brass Crossbow has a variety of interesting, highly specific side effects for the orthon to choose from. Fortunately for the orthon (and unfortunately for its target), with Intelligence 15, it's not locked into a single mode of fighting. It adapts smoothly and efficiently on the fly.



- The **acid** effect does a big blast of additional raw damage. This option is for the two outlier cases: the extremely tough, high-hit point target who needs to be worn down quickly (even though they probably have a high Constitution and a good chance of making the saving throw—half of 5d6 is still meaningful) and the fragile target who might be taken down in a single turn with a big enough burst attack.
- The **blindness** effect deals a small amount of damage but, more important, has a chance of blinding the target and all other creatures in a 20-foot radius. This is best used against a cluster of four or more opponents, and it has the greatest effect either when visibility is good to begin with or when those opponents have compensatory darkvision. It's limited to one use per day, an indicator of how powerful it can be under the right circumstances.
- The **concussion** effect is straight area-effect damage, best used against a cluster of four or more opponents when the aforementioned circumstances don't apply.
- The **entanglement** effect is reserved for the orthon's particular quarry, specifically when that quarry poses a flight risk. Perhaps they're already trying to flee, or perhaps the orthon is preemptively making sure that doesn't happen. In addition to restraining the target, granting advantage to the orthon's subsequent attacks, its sticky mechanic ensures that the target's friends can't easily come to their aid.
- The **paralysis** effect, as it says on the label, imposes the devastating paralyzed condition (with its "every melee hit a crit" effect) in addition to dealing a heap of lightning damage. It targets Constitution, whereas the entangle effect targets Dexterity. Thus, the orthon has an incentive to use entanglement against tougher, slower targets and the paralysis effect against nimbler, squishier targets. If the target is a high-Dex, high-Con skirmisher, the orthon errs on the side of paralysis, because that condition is more severe than mere restraint. The fact that it's limited to one use per day indicates how powerful it is.
- The **tracking** effect is the orthon's parting shot, when its quarry is about to get away and the orthon doesn't have a chance of catching up. Unlike entanglement, which the target might resist, the tracking effect is automatic.

Here's the picture that's coming together: The orthon likes melee combat, but what it likes even better is melee combat in which it enjoys every possible advantage. Therefore it initiates combat while invisible, to gain advantage on its attack and maximize the chance of catching its foes by surprise. If its prospective opponents, including its quarry, are clustered in a 20-foot radius, it leads with a crossbow shot at its quarry, plus the blindness effect. If they're not clustered, it opts for the paralysis effect against a shock attacker, skirmisher, marksman, or spellslinger; against a front-liner or support spellcaster, it opts for the entanglement effect instead. It makes this attack from as close as it can get without giving itself away, but no closer than 25 feet, because it doesn't want to get caught in its own blast radius. After attacking, it immediately uses its bonus action to turn invisible.

Once its target is blinded, restrained, or paralyzed, it moves in to attack with its dagger, which it can draw as a free interaction while still holding on to its crossbow in its other hand. Ideally, it can cover this distance in one turn's movement, but if it had to make its first attack from farther than 30 feet away, or if its quarry moved away, it may not be able to get within melee range. In that case, it simply makes another crossbow attack, with the concussion effect if four or more of its opponents are silly enough to have stayed in a cluster around the quarry, acid effect otherwise—and then turns invisible again.

There's no downside that I can see to the orthon's using its bonus action to turn invisible at the end of every turn. It has no other bonus action to compete with Invisibility Field, so *not* using it would be a waste of the orthon's action economy. Even if one of its enemies casts *see invisible* or *true seeing* or has some other means of seeing invisible creatures, that's just one enemy; its invisibility still gives it an edge over the rest of them. Aside from the quarry's being the one who can see it, the only other thing that might negate the value of Invisibility Field to the orthon is getting dinged with *faerie fire*—but the player character who casts that had better be careful, because it's an area-effect spell, not a targeted attack, and the orthon seeks to close quickly with its enemies, so "friendly *faerie fire*" is a real risk.

Once engaged in melee, the orthon does its best to maintain that engagement, and because of its ability to turn invisible and its wide-spectrum damage resistances, it doesn't worry too much about being struck by incoming attacks from other melee opponents. If the PCs want to be aggressive, the orthon is fine with that, because of its Explosive Retribution feature: a spiteful parting shot against everyone within 30 feet.

If the orthon finds itself no longer in melee, it's more probably because its foes have run away from it. What it does next in this instance depends on whether it still has advantage on its attacks, whether it can close the distance with its quarry

again, and how mobile its quarry is. In order of preference:

- **Paralysis** if this effect is still available, even if the target is a fighter or barbarian. Neutralizing the action economy of a target with Extra Attack (which the orthon will have observed by now) is too good a payoff not to take the chance.
- **Blindness** if this effect is still available and at least three other opponents are within a 20-foot radius of the target.
- **Tracking** if, given observable facts, the target is likely to escape on its next turn.
- **Entanglement** if the target's Con save modifier is greater than its Dex save modifier.
- **Close to melee range again** and attack with Infernal Dagger if the target is within 35 feet (the orthon has a 30-foot move) and the orthon will have advantage on the attack.
- **Acid** if the target is either seriously wounded or completely unwounded.
- **Concussion** if at least three other opponents are within a 20-foot radius of the target.
- **Acid** (again) if none of the other criteria above are met.

The orthon is single-minded, duty-bound, and effectively immortal on any plane except the Nine Hells. It doesn't flee, even when seriously wounded, but it may, er, *tactically vanish* if it's seriously wounded *and* there's no way it can get close enough to its quarry to make good use of Explosive Retribution. By "good use," I mean that, ideally, the 30-foot radius around the orthon (*not* around the quarry) includes both the quarry and either all its allies or at least five of them, if there are more.

If it can't get enough of its foes with Explosive Retribution, the orthon aims a tracking shot at its quarry, uses its bonus action to turn invisible, retreats to a safe distance, and doesn't appear again until it's had a chance to heal up. If none of its opponents can see it, however, rather than take advantage of its invisibility to flee, it may instead take advantage of its invisibility to slip into their midst and self-detonate after they think it's gone.

GREATER DEVILS (M)

Narzugons are the spirits of evil paladins who've struck deals with devils and been pressed into leading legions of infernal troops. They ride nightmares, bound to their service by *infernal tack*, a magic item described in *Mordenkainen's*. Such nightmares "must respond to summons and commands from the wearer of the spurs," according to the flavor text.

Does this mean the nightmares are always controlled mounts (*Player's Handbook*, chapter 9, "Mounted Combat"), or does it mean they're independent but always act in ways that benefit their riders? I'd say the latter, for two reasons. First, there are only three actions a controlled mount can take: Dodge, Dash, and Disengage. Being controlled would preclude a nightmare from attacking with Hooves and from using Ethereal Stride to bear its rider onto and off of the field, which can be highly tactically advantageous. Second, intelligent mounts are always independent, and nightmares have Intelligence 10 and can understand two languages—all the evidence we need, as far as I'm concerned. However, unlike most independent mounts, a nightmare subjected to *infernal tack* takes its turn on its rider's initiative count, providing all the timing benefits of a controlled mount yet still allowing the nightmare to use its actions as an independent mount.

Narzugons are brutes, with extraordinary Strength and exceptional Constitution. They also have extraordinary Charisma, but since they can't cast spells and have no proficiency in any social skill, this ability has little application beyond their Terrifying Command action, other than providing some resistance against *banishment*. Their Intelligence and Wisdom are both high: They can plan, assess, and target enemies' weaknesses, and they choose their battles with care. Being zealots, however, once they commit to a fight, they stay in it to the end, even on their home plane.

Narzugons have proficiency in Dexterity, Constitution, and Charisma saving throws (yeah, you're *definitely* not going to banish these guys)—but not Wisdom saves, although they do have Magic Resistance. Thus, even though spellcasters trying to manipulate them with Wisdom-save magic don't pose *much* of a threat, they still pose a greater threat than other spellcasters do, so a spell such as *bold monster*, *eyebite*, or *Otto's irresistible dance* draws their attention—and their wrath—to a degree that other spells don't.

They have several offensive actions available to them, but only one of these is a weapon attack: Hellfire Lance. Lances, as a class of weapon, have a couple of special properties. Unlike polearms, with which they share the Reach property, they're poor against targets *inside* that reach: Attack rolls against a target only 5 feet away have disadvantage. Also, if the wielder isn't mounted, they require two hands to wield. Although the narzugon's stat block doesn't explicitly include these

restrictions on Hellfire Lance, let's imagine for the sake of verisimilitude that it functions like any other lance, aside from its supernatural effects. Would a narzugon drop its shield in order to fight with a lance at ground level? Clearly, no—not if it had any other choice—but neither would it drop that lance. Therefore, a narzugon never dismounts to fight, and if it's unhorsed, its first priority is to get back on its steed.

If it can't do that—say, if it's grappled, or if the nightmare has been destroyed—the narzugon stops fighting itself and instead rallies its infernal minions, including the nightmare if it's still around, to surround it and fight in its stead. It holds on to its Hellfire Lance as long as it can, but it no longer attacks with it; instead, it takes the Dodge action to avoid any attacks still aimed its way. Only if its foes have destroyed its steed, broken its line of minions, and engaged it in melee does it abandon its shield (taking an action, and reducing its Armor Class to 18) and use its lance two-handed to defend itself.

The narzugon's Multiattack comprises three Hellfire Lance attacks and one use of either Infernal Command or Terrifying Command. Infernal Command is situational but short-term; Terrifying Command is all-purpose but, like a dragon's Frightful Presence, good only the first time it's used against any given foe.

Ideally, the narzugon uses its Terrifying Command at the earliest opportunity in which it can affect all its foes or a dozen of them, whichever is less, and won't need to re-up it later. But if it does need to use it again to affect targets it missed the first time around, it does.

Infernal Command is sort of a fill-in-the-blanks ability, since so many devils are already immune to either the charmed or the frightened condition but so few are immune to *both*. It's also somewhat unnecessary unless the narzugon's foes have already demonstrated an ability to cast spells that impose those conditions. However, it costs nothing to use Infernal Command except the opportunity to use Terrifying Command instead, and if that's already taken care of, the narzugon may as well use Infernal Command whether it knows it needs to or not.

As a commander of troops, the narzugon has to think about the big picture: What's the strategic goal of its side? Does it have a specific mission to carry out? Is it attacking or defending? What's the makeup of its troops, what weakness(es) do they have, and who among the opposition is likely to be capable of targeting those weaknesses? Can it gain advantage from any feature of the terrain? Do its troops include a couple of capable myrmidons (barbed devils, erinyes, etc.) that it can bring along when its nightmare mount uses Ethereal Stride? Allow it to make use of as much intelligence as it may reasonably have gathered.

The narzugon's first priority is to eliminate the greatest threat(s) to its own side, and its second priority is to strike the most painful blow at the other. If it's attacking someone on the opposing front line, it times the nightmare's turn to occur right before its own. The nightmare charges in at its full flying speed, "galloping" through the air and making an attack with its Hooves, after which the narzugon strikes. On the other hand, if the narzugon is attacking an enemy *behind* the front line, rather than use its movement, the nightmare takes the Ethereal Stride action to bear the narzugon (and, if applicable, its myrmidons) directly into its opponents' midst. For extra-amazing effect, since narzugons aren't often going to get to stage unexpected attacks with all the troops they lead, on one turn you can have the nightmare fly-gallop forward toward its opponents, then use Ethereal Stride to vanish, and on the next turn you can have it reappear within the opponents' ranks and deliver the narzugon to its objective.

The narzugon boldly sucks up hits from opponents who can't hurt it significantly—those who are whacking or shooting at it ineffectually with mundane, nonsilvered weapons—but anytime a foe manages to land a blow that actually hurts (deals 12 damage or more), it has its nightmare steed Ethereal Stride it away the next chance it gets. If the damage came from magic, the narzugon reappears shortly thereafter behind the caster who hurt it and begins hurting them back.

A hit that deals 12 damage is only a light wound for a narzugon, but it can't take chances. It's got only 112 hit points, which aren't that many for a CR 13 creature, even one with so many resistances and immunities. Anyone who can hurt it *at all* is a threat to be eliminated. It does have Healing, a one-time action that lets it restore 100 hp to either itself or an ally. I have a hard time imagining an evil creature, even a lawful evil one, using such an ability to top up anyone or anything of lesser power and rank, so the narzugon reserves Healing for itself, unless it's on the field in the service of an archdevil that's also present and taking major hits. Either way, the threshold for Healing is when the recipient is seriously wounded: in the narzugon's case, when it's reduced to 44 hp or fewer, and in the case of a superior devil, when it's reduced to 40 percent of its hit point maximum. If the devil's starting hit point maximum is 167 or greater, this restores 100 hp; if it's 166 or less, the devil is fully healed back up. If both the narzugon and its superior are seriously wounded when its turn comes around, it heals its superior. That's what makes it *lawful* evil.

If the name “**amnizu**” reminds you of “amnesia,” that may be intentional, because amnizus’ abilities revolve in large part around tampering with opponents’ minds. Diabolical commanders and sentries who guard the Stygian approach into the Nine Hells, they’re also responsible for indoctrinating the newly arrived dead into how things work in this corner of the afterlife, and some arrivals require more adjustment than others.

Amnizus have the odd “psychic brute” profile seen in only a handful of other stat blocks: extraordinary Intelligence and exceptional Charisma paired with very high Constitution but Strength and Dexterity that fall short. They don’t mind being engaged in melee, but that’s not the primary way they’re going to fight back.

With proficiency in all of the “big three” saving throws plus Charisma, and Magic Resistance on top of that, amnizus are nearly spell-proof; casters don’t impress or concern them at all. Their skin is as tough as hot-rolled steel, making them equally fearless of weapons, even though they take full damage from ones that are silvered or magical. There’s no one thing (with the possible exception of a druid’s *tsunami* spell, which is resisted by Strength) that hurts an amnizu badly enough for it to single an opponent out as a particular threat. To get the better of an amnizu requires multiple opponents to work together to give one another advantage on their attacks and/or impose disadvantage on its saves. *That’s* what an amnizu recognizes as a genuine threat: cooperation.

For this reason, and because of the Devil’s Sight trait that they share with most other rank-and-file devils, amnizus *love* magical darkness: It quashes their opponents’ efforts to gain advantage against them while leaving them completely unimpeded. Oddly, though, they along with most other devils have no ability to cast *darkness*. Black and blue abishais can (see below), making them highly desirable draft picks for an amnizu’s accompanying forces. Alternatively, an amnizu may contract with an arcanaloth—or, if they’re tasked with guarding the River Styx per the flavor text in *Mordenkainen’s*, a merrenoloth—to stand by and cast *darkness* on demand. Barring these scenarios, an amnizu can only hope its opponents commit the blunder of casting it themselves.

Despite the length of its stat block, the amnizu has only three primary action options: Multiattack, Forgetfulness, or casting a spell. The last of those options can be divided into two suboptions: enchantment or *fireball*. (I’ll get to *feeblemind* in a moment.)

Multiattack, having unlimited availability and the broadest effect, is the default. It comprises Poison Mind, a Taskmaster Whip attack, and a Disruptive Touch attack. Although Poison Mind has a 60-foot range, the amnizu usually prefers to use it from 40 feet or even 20 feet, because it can use its 40-foot flying speed to strafe opponents and hang out in the air, out of melee reach, between turns. By using Poison Mind first, choosing targets with lower Wisdom save modifiers (+4 or below—and the amnizu has the Intelligence to know), it can potentially blind one of its targets. Between two targets, it’s a good bet that one or the other of them will fail that saving throw, which is the one it then chooses to target with Disruptive Touch—because it can fly away from a blinded target without provoking an opportunity attack. As for Taskmaster Whip, the amnizu can use it more flexibly and opportunistically—or to keep whaling on the blinded one, if it seems necessary or desirable.

Lower-Wisdom opponents are the best targets for Poison Mind and Disruptive Touch. For opponents with higher Wisdom save mods and lower Dexterity save mods (again, +4 or less), there’s *fireball*. If at least four opponents are clustered within 20 feet of a central point, and those four disproportionately include those with better Wisdom and worse Dex—relative to the group as a whole—it’s time to grill them Pittsburgh-style.

Once an amnizu recognizes that its opponents are working together effectively against it, it brings out *dominate person* and *dominate monster* to break up the relationship. Again, the goal is to target the weak link, which means the member of the unit with the weakest Wisdom save mod. If that happens to be a nonhumanoid creature, then *dominate monster* is necessary, but an amnizu usually reserves this spell for a monster with some oomph, such as a conjured elemental, fey, or celestial or a summoned greater demon, not simply an opponent’s mount (unless the opponent is exceptionally good at mounted combat). It would amuse an amnizu to force a beast companion to turn against its ranger master, but work comes before amusement; it can get more bang for its buck by casting *dominate person* on the ranger and getting the beast companion as part of the package. Only if the ranger and the beast are the *entirety* of the team effectively messing the amnizu up does it spend *dominate monster* to turn the beast, in order to pit them against each other. If and only if none of the aforementioned targets is present, an amnizu will cast *dominate monster* on a Wild Shaped druid. Why would it hesitate? Because once the beast or elemental form is destroyed, there’s still a humanoid druid left to deal with—and the druid’s allies, knowing this, won’t hesitate to mow it down as quickly as they can.

Charm person is for the social interaction stage before fighting breaks out; since it has only one target, an amnizu asks a group to send forth its “chosen representative” for negotiation, counting on them to emphasize Charisma rather than Wisdom. If they fall for the ploy, it puts the whammy on them. If they don’t, it refrains, not wanting to tip its hand. The only opponent an amnizu casts *charm person* against in combat is one with a Wisdom save mod of +1 or lower—but if it’s stooping that low, it may as well cast *dominate person* instead.

And then there’s Forgetfulness, which can hit like a wet noodle if its workings aren’t examined closely. First, it has a different saving throw DC than the amnizu’s other features: 18 rather than 19. Second, the target gets a new saving throw every turn. For the action to take its full effect, the target must remain stunned for a full minute, meaning they have to fail *ten* of these saving throws. Even an opponent who dumped Intelligence and has a -1 save mod has only a 35 percent chance of whiffing that many saves in a row. Third, Forgetfulness recharges only on a roll of 6. If the amnizu takes this action once, there’s a good chance it won’t get to do so again before the encounter ends.

Enter *feeblemind*. The target only has to fail *one* saving throw, against DC 19, for their Intelligence to be knocked all the way down to 1. That’s a -5 Intelligence saving throw modifier (not counting save proficiencies), which would make it mathematically impossible for the target to make *any* of their saving throws against Forgetfulness. The amnizu can cast *feeblemind* once per day; it can use Forgetfulness, five times out of six, only once per combat encounter. Why wouldn’t it pair them together?

The usual application of *feeblemind* is to counteract a non-wizard caster—non-wizard because wizards tend to have too good an Intelligence save mod for it to work against them, caster because being rendered unable to cast spells is the most grievous consequence of the spell. Since it turfs Charisma as well as Intelligence, Charisma-based casters suffer the heaviest blow from it, so bards, paladins, sorcerers, and warlocks are top candidates. But that’s just for *feeblemind* alone. The amnizu doesn’t do anything without a reason, and the reason it’s casting *feeblemind* is to soften the target up for Forgetfulness, so the real question is which opponent it needs to make forget whatever they’ve recently learned—or which one stands out as such an exceptional threat that they must be neutralized immediately. If neither of those criteria applies to anyone in the enemy group, *then* it has the luxury of simply abusing someone, preferably someone with an Intelligence save mod of, you guessed it, +4 or less.

In short, when the amnizu wants to use its Forgetfulness action, it first uses its action to cast *feeblemind*. If the spell works, it follows up with Forgetfulness on its next turn. If it doesn’t, maybe it uses Forgetfulness opportunistically sometime later, or maybe it doesn’t bother to take this action at all, depending on what else it has going on.

The amnizu’s Instinctive Charm reaction is another cudgel to use against its lower-Wisdom opponents. Since it applies only to (a) weapon or spell attackers (b) within 60 feet, the set of enemies it can be used against is limited. If it contains only one member, then the timing and targeting are obvious, but if it contains two or more, the amnizu has to choose one. It has no control over whom the target attacks instead of itself, but it is smart enough to survey the field and note who’s closest to whom. Once again, if multiple enemies are coordinating against it and setting up tactical combinations, it tries to disrupt the harmony of that group by choosing the one with the lowest Wisdom save modifier *who will also then attack another member of the group*. If no such coordination is going on, then as per usual, it falls back on the one with the greatest chance of failing its Wisdom save.

Amnizus are “unfailingly loyal,” according to *Mordenkainen’s*, which I think overrides their survival instinct, driving them to fight to the death even in the Nine Hells.

If you’re using the Devil Summoning variant, a barbed devil is always at least as good as, and often better than, two bearded devils. Note that, unlike other fiend summons, this one works 100 percent of the time! Even so, my advice regarding summoning always applies: Don’t leave it up to chance. Decide in advance how many summoned devils you want to include in your encounter, then have them show up on cue.

ABISHAIS (M)

It would be lovely if abishais, a kind of devil-dragon hybrid, followed a nice, regular pattern of features, as dragons do, but unfortunately, they’ve inherited their fiendish progenitors’ all-over-the-place-ness. There are certain things all abishais have in common, though:

- Impressive natural armor, with Armor Classes ranging from 15 up to 22.

- Brisk flying speeds.
- Above-average abilities across the board, with peaks varying according to type.
- Resistance to physical damage from nonmagical, nonsilvered weapons, along with cold damage (except for white abishais, which are fully immune to cold).
- Immunity to fire and poison damage, along with the types corresponding to their draconic progenitors' breath weapons (this means that red and green abishais don't get an extra type), and immunity to being poisoned.
- Long-range darkvision and telepathy.
- Devil's Sight (the ability to see through magical darkness), Magic Resistance, and Magical Weapons.
- At least two attacks per Multiattack action, along with additional elemental damage when they Claw or Bite.

So here are a few things we can already infer about abishais in general: fearlessness toward most other beings; tactics built around aerial attacks (since opportunity attacks pose little threat to them); and a strong preference for operating at night, in artificial darkness, or in underground caverns or complexes spacious enough for them to fly around in.

The **white abishai**, like its draconic progenitor, is at the bottom of the abishai pecking order. It's a brute, with high Strength and exceptional Constitution, but not a stupid one—its Intelligence is average and its Wisdom above average. It has the fiendish ancestry to thank for that.

Although it's feasible for the white abishai to hold station in the air between turns, flying down to attack and then flying back up out of reach of its enemies' melee weapons, it does have one incentive to remain engaged. That's its Vicious Reprisal action, which allows it to use its reaction to counterattack an adjacent enemy when it takes damage. Additionally, it has the Reckless feature, allowing it to attack with advantage at the cost of conferring advantage on its enemies' attacks as well.

Vicious Reprisal is good for only one counter-Bite per turn, and if you do the math, it's immediately obvious that Reckless is good if and only if outgoing attacks equal or outnumber incoming attacks. For both of these reasons, a white abishai is willing—eager, even—to engage an opponent in protracted melee on the ground, but *only* one. If its foes try to double- or triple-team it, it's right back to hanging out in the air between turns, using Vicious Reprisal when an enemy strikes it with an opportunity attack.

The white abishai's Longsword/Claw Multiattack is its best attack option; its second choice is Bite, offering a tiny extra half point of average damage on a hit over its other individual attack options, plus the ability to partially bypass the resistance to physical damage afforded by a barbarian's Rage.

White abishais aren't brilliant at target prioritization, but attacks that bypass their damage resistances and immunities grab their attention, and they'll bend their efforts to destroying the foes who deliver them. This includes spells that require Dexterity or Wisdom saving throws and any spell or weapon that does acid, lightning, thunder, necrotic, radiant, force, or psychic damage.

The **black abishai** is a finesse fighter, less sturdy than the white abishai, with exceptional Dexterity but merely above-average Strength and Constitution. It has proficiency in Stealth and Perception and a high Wisdom, plus the Shadow Stealth feature, which lets it Hide as a bonus action in the tenebrous conditions it already prefers. This beastie is a shock attacker that prefers to ambush its foes, and it has the perfect feature to complement this fighting style: Creeping Darkness.



Not only can the black abishai see in magical darkness, it can *create* that darkness and rule the roost while within it. In fact, it has little reason not to use this action to initiate combat, even if its environment already provides it with sufficient darkness to hide in, unless all its enemies are oblivious to its presence. If it simply attacks from hiding, its first attack gives its position away, denying it advantage on its second and third—but if it attacks from magical darkness, it gains unseen-attacker advantage on its entire Multiattack. Additionally, it denies opportunity attacks to its opponents when it retreats after striking.

This feature is so advantageous to the black abishai that, depending on its orders and who issued them, it may choose to abandon combat entirely if its opponents manage to neutralize it, such as by casting *dispel magic* or *daylight*. Abishais are lawful evil, though, so a black abishai aborts its mission only if it appraises its chances and concludes that without Creeping Darkness, its chances of success are slim to none.

The **green abishai** is a skirmisher and a master manipulator that resorts to combat only if chicanery fails. Spies and negotiators, green abishais use the bulk of their spell repertoire to do their masters' bidding, keeping *confusion* and at least one use of *fear* in reserve for when a fight breaks out.

The green abishai has a unique Multiattack that allows it to cast one spell in addition to making a Claws attack, so its first action in combat is to cast *fear* or *confusion*, depending on how its opponents are arrayed, then to slash up an enemy who makes their saving throw (passing up dwarves and dragonborn with green Draconic Ancestry, on whom it knows its poison doesn't work well). On its second turn, it switches to its Longsword/Claws Multiattack.

Why not cast another spell? Two reasons: First, most of its spells require concentration, so it can cast only one of those at a time. Second, except for *alter self* and *major image*, they all require Wisdom saving throws. If one doesn't work, the others aren't likely to, either.

Of all the types of abishai, the green abishai is the only one whose saving throw proficiencies include none of the "big three." Thus, despite its Magic Resistance, spellcasters pose a heightened threat to it, and it knows it. Its Armor Class and hit points, on the other hand, are *great*. For these reasons, spellcasters—especially clerics, druids, and rangers, who have the best resistance to the green abishai's own spells—are at the top of its target priority list.

Green abishais aren't into protracted melee engagement. They hang out in the air between turns, fly down to attack, then fly back up. No other style suits them, and if it's not working, they bail out.

The **blue abishai** is a mastermind and versatile spellcaster, with extraordinary Intelligence and Wisdom and exceptional Charisma and Constitution. Despite its having above-average Strength and Dexterity, its mental abilities are so superior that it resorts to melee fighting only if it's getting nowhere with magic.

- *Teleport* is a powerful escape hatch, though it may be overkill if the blue abishai has a safe base that it can reach using *dimension door*.
- *Chain lightning* is murder in a can, dealing an expected 135 lightning damage in a single casting. The blue abishai won't use its 6th-level spell slot for anything else.
- *Cone of cold* is spectacular against squishies, dealing an expected 162 cold damage—but only if the blue abishai can catch six enemies inside the area of effect. Against four or fewer enemies, *chain lightning* is better. Against five, it's a tie. But this is *ceteris paribus*, assuming that the targets have equal chances of making a Dexterity save or a Constitution save. The blue abishai knows which of these your PCs' party will have a harder time making, because you'll do the math on its behalf before your session begins. It then casts *chain lightning* against a party more likely to botch Dex saves, *cone of cold* against one more likely to botch Con saves.
- *Wall of force* puts annoying ranged attackers in time-out so that the blue abishai can get on with the business of melting the melee fighters.
- *Dimension door* is an escape hatch that the blue abishai may or may not need, depending on where the fight takes place.
- *Greater invisibility* lets the blue abishai wreak havoc wholly unseen, even as it attacks and casts spells.
- *Ice storm* does only 69 expected damage, less than that against a Raging barbarian. Boosting it to 5th level increases this expected damage by only 14, for a total of 83. The blue abishai is probably better off using a 4th-level spell slot to boost *lightning bolt*, unless it can't get its foes to line up.
- *Dispel magic* is dandy for debuffing PCs and for shutting down their attempts to impose magical constraints.
- *Fear* is situationally useful, but the blue abishai would probably rather sustain *greater invisibility* or *darkness*.

- *Lightning bolt* deals 21 expected damage per target if cast at 3rd level, 24 at 4th level, and 26 at 5th level, and it's always possible to target at least two opponents. Ideally, though, the blue abishai would like to target at least three, to make it competitive with *ice storm*, and four or more would be best.
- *Darkness* is nothing but win for an abishai of any sort. Its utility is slightly reduced for the blue abishai, though, because most of its attacks require saving throws rather than attack rolls, and being blinded doesn't impose disadvantage on saves, not even Dex saves. Illogical? Maybe, but that's the way it is. Suppose, though, that there's a particular enemy who's showing an irksome resistance to the blue abishai's magical attacks. In that case, the blue abishai has the option of dropping a *darkness* spell on them and delivering a few melee attacks before returning to its default modus operandi.
- *Mirror image* is useful if and when the blue abishai's attempts to cast *greater invisibility* and *darkness* have been thwarted and enemy melee fighters and marksmen are overperforming, most likely because they have magic weapons.
- *Misty step* is one of only two ways a blue abishai can enhance its action economy, the other being *expeditious retreat*. Unfortunately, it also precludes casting any other leveled spell in the same turn. Thus, a blue abishai always combines it with a melee Multiattack (*shocking grasp* isn't good enough to compete).
- *Chromatic orb* is subpar compared with the rest of the blue abishai's repertoire. It will probably flee before reaching the point where this spell is the best it can do.
- *Disguise self* is a noncombat spell, which may cost a slot if a blue abishai has used it before combat breaks out.
- *Expeditious retreat* has the same drawback as *misty step*.
- *Magic missile* is better than *chromatic orb*, but not by much; it can, however, force a spellcaster to make a string of concentration checks.
- *Charm person* is a noncombat spell.
- *Thunderwave* is okay if the blue abishai gets triple-teamed, or worse. But remember that the area of effect isn't centered on the caster but rather *adjacent* to the caster, so its three assailants must all be attacking from the same direction.

A blue abishai is very, very smart. It could lead with *darkness*, and maybe, under certain circumstances, it will. But it also knows that an enemy party of any substance is likely to have *dispel magic* or *daylight*, making *darkness* a waste of time, so in most cases it leads with the higher-level *greater invisibility* instead. If that spell is nullified, it may switch to *mirror image*, but more likely it accepts that the fight is going to have to take place out in the open and casts *cone of cold* to freeze its opponents or *wall of force* to split them up. It then works its way down through its spells, trying to maximize its damage with each action. Once it's out of uses of *lightning bolt* and *ice storm*, it switches to its melee Multiattack rather than cast *chromatic orb*, *magic missile*, or *shocking grasp*. It always remains in the air unless forced down, hovering out of its enemies' melee reach between turns.

As for target prioritization, it knows that it's most likely to take damage from enemies who deal acid, thunder, force, psychic, radiant, or necrotic damage and/or cast spells that require Dex saves, so these are the ones it tries to take out first.

The **red abishai** is a brute, though "brute" understates the case. A "devastation" may be more apt, since a red abishai is in fact more formidable than an adult red dragon—especially if it's got allies with it.

Its Multiattack includes a Claw attack, a Bite attack, a weapon attack, *and* a use of Frightful Presence. The thing about Frightful Presence, though, is that it works either on the first try or not at all, so you may as well forget about it after that initial use.

As a brute, the red abishai favors melee engagement, although it still employs the tactic of hovering between turns, flying down to attack, then flying back up out of reach, simply because it can. Unlike the blue abishai, it can't "read" its opponents' abilities to know what they're capable of; it doesn't know until it sees for itself. But when it does observe that an enemy attacks with a magic weapon, especially one that deals acid, lightning, thunder, force, psychic, radiant, or necrotic damage, it singles out that enemy for special attention.

The real power of the red abishai emerges when it has strong allies around it. Its Incite Fanaticism action grants advantage on attacks and immunity to being frightened to four of its allies for 1 minute, effectively an entire combat encounter. To justify the opportunity cost of forgoing its Multiattack, each of the red abishai's allies must be able to inflict at least 37 average damage per turn, but if they do, there's no reason for it not to make Incite Fanaticism its very first action in combat. Once its allies are empowered, it can begin smacking enemies down itself.

The last action available to the red abishai is Power of the Dragon Queen, which straight-up lets it charm a dragon—even an *enemy* dragon, and even a metallic dragon, although chromatic dragons are more susceptible to it. Power of the Dragon Queen is another “first try or not at all” ability, but it’s also a lot more powerful than your run-of-the-mill *charm person*: “While charmed in this way, the target regards the abishai as a trusted friend *to be heeded and protected*” (emphasis mine). That means it believes what the red abishai tells it, follows its orders, and defends it against other attackers. It’s not domination, but it’s the next best thing. The possibility of taking a dragon that’s neutral or allied to the PCs and turning it against them threatens an enormous swing in the balance of power, so of course the red abishai uses this feature if it’s able.

Different types of abishai have different responses to taking damage. If a green is moderately wounded (reduced to 130 hp or fewer) and it can think of a way to follow its orders without further combat, it stops to parley. The same is true of a black (40 hp or fewer), blue (136 hp or fewer), or red abishai (178 hp or fewer) fighting in the Nine Hells, where it can be permanently killed. If *any* abishai is seriously wounded (reduced to 27 hp or fewer for a white abishai, 23 hp or fewer for a black abishai, 74 hp or fewer for a green abishai, 78 hp or fewer for a blue abishai, and 102 hp or fewer for a red abishai), it asks itself whether it might have a better chance of fulfilling its orders if it retreats now and returns later, and if it decides it does, it Disengages and flies away (or *teleports* or *dimension doors* away, in the case of a blue abishai). Otherwise, especially outside the Nine Hells, it stays and fights to the last.

LESSER DEMONS (V/M)

Maw demons (V), creations of the demon lord Yeenoghu that travel with gnoll war bands, have above-average Strength and Constitution but low everything else. They’re brutes, but they’re not especially formidable ones. Rather, they’re lumbering inflictors of Bite damage that look scarier than they really are, except to entry-level adventurers. They bumble across the battlefield, chomping on whatever they happen to bump into until someone or something kills them.

The **rutterkin** (M) is reactive, more hazard than monster, with very high Constitution, high Strength and Dexterity, and paltry Intelligence and Charisma. Its Dex is slightly higher than its Strength, but it has only a 20-foot movement speed and no mobility-enhancing feature, so I’m not certain what that Dex score is supposed to represent—maybe a twitchiness that makes them hard to hit.

In any event, lacking the toolkit to fight as skirmishers, they’re brute melee attackers by default. More accurately, according to the flavor text, they’re *swarm* attackers, which compensate for their slowness by causing their victims to freeze with fright. Even so, a victim has to wander within 30 feet of three or more of them and make a *very* unlucky saving throw roll for that to happen.

To get any decent use out of rutterkins, what you probably want to do is scatter them across an area that your PCs have to cross. Three rutterkins per 3,000 square feet (10 squares by 12 squares on a 5-foot-per-inch grid) are enough to ensure that one is within 30 feet of three of them most of the time, but if you want your PCs to have any meaningful chance of blowing their saving throw, double that density to force them to roll with disadvantage, because one successful save is enough to inoculate someone against Crippling Fear for 24 hours. Be aware, however, that despite their lower challenge rating, rutterkins numerous enough to be scary are numerous enough to kill the heck out of your PCs. Use the Multiple Monsters tables in *Xanathar’s Guide to Everything* (Chapter 2, “Encounter Building”) to limit how many rutterkins you throw at them.

Until they smell fear, rutterkins wander aimlessly, but when a character fails their save, every rutterkin in the area starts to home in on them, Dashing if they’re more than 20 feet away, moving in and Biting if they’re closer. Once this happens, the softhearted approach is to say that the only way to drive them off is with large amounts of psychic, radiant, or necrotic damage—enough to kill at least 60 percent of their total number—while the hard-hearted approach is to say they keep attacking until they’re destroyed, period.

A rutterkin’s Bite can inflict the poisoned condition, and if a target is reduced to 0 hp while poisoned by a rutterkin’s Bite, they become an **abyssal wretch** (M), a tagalong abomination with no tactics to speak of other than “If rutterkin Bite, me Bite too.” For this reason, you may want to sprinkle a number of already existing abyssal wretches in among your rutterkins, but again, watch your encounter balance.

In a way, the **bulezau** (M) is the inverse of the rutterkin. It also has a very high Constitution, but its Strength is marginally higher than its Dexterity—and yet it has a lively 40-foot movement speed and the ability to leap 20 feet horizontally or 10 feet vertically without a running start. However, the flavor text in *Mordenkainen’s* confirms it as a brute

melee fighter with a violent temperament, lusting after battle, so the chief upshot of its mobility is that it can close with an enemy that much faster. Though it does imply something interesting about *where* you might encounter bulezau: difficult terrain (loose gravel and rock, spongy swampland, tangled vines and briars), vertical terrain (tall structures with open atria, cliff ledges), or terrain with a lot of large obstacles (boulders, fragments of fallen buildings, charred tree stumps) or discontinuities (open fissures in the ground, rivers of lava or acid). In short, ground that a bulezau can jump across and most adventurers can't.

The terrain has to be interesting, because the bulezau's tactics aren't: All it does is leap directly toward the nearest opponent and stab at them with its Barbed Tail upon arrival. Its target selection is indiscriminate, although if two opponents are equidistant from it, it picks on the one that seems weaker; it's not great at analyzing its opponent's capabilities, though, and judges primarily on the basis of size, observable strength and toughness, and amount of armor. Its vicious nature doesn't allow it to stop fighting as long as it still has hit points to spare.

If your players encounter a **babau** (V) on the material plane, it will probably be in the context of an encounter with a lamia, another of Graz'zt's devoted creations. Perhaps the babau serves as one of her minions, albeit one that won't appear until things are already getting hairy, since lamias would rather not fight until they've exhausted all avenues of deceit.

Babaus are an awesome physical presence, despite being only Medium-size: With very high Dexterity and Constitution and extraordinary Strength, they're part brute, part shock attacker, all melee. With proficiency in Stealth and expertise in Perception, they're optimized for ambush attack. They can't be poisoned and are resistant to cold, fire, lightning, and physical damage from mundane weapons. They have darkvision out to 120 feet, but not blindsight; this fact complicates their use of the *darkness* spell, which they can cast innately, since it interferes with their Weakening Gaze feature. Their spell save DC is also nothing to write home about, so *dispel magic* and *levitate* are to be favored over the other spells in their repertoire.

The best way for a babau to enter a combat encounter, it seems to me, is for it to lie in wait until combat has already begun, then attack from hiding with advantage. In doing so, it tries to take out a spellcaster or shock attacker—someone relatively fragile who can nevertheless put out a lot of damage. It aims to finish this enemy off, then to deal with any melee opponents who come running to their rescue.

A babau's Multiattack includes two melee attacks *and* a Weakening Gaze attack. It can either Gaze/melee/melee or melee/melee/Gaze, but it can't melee/Gaze/melee. It's not clear to me that the order really matters, except in one instance: Against a Battle Master fighter with the Riposte maneuver, it would be desirable to weaken the target before striking. But the babau's Intelligence and Wisdom aren't high enough for it to be able to "read" an opponent and infer whether they have this ability, so I wouldn't sweat the order.

There's an irony about Weakening Gaze: Its save DC is rather low, but it's only useful against enemies who primarily employ Strength-based weapon attacks, and they're likely to have high Constitutions (and maybe even proficiency in Con saves) as well. Shock attackers such as rogues and monks tend to use Dexterity, not Strength, as their melee weapon attack ability. Unfortunately, the babau has to keep using Weakening Gaze over and over against the melee opponents it engages with, hoping that they'll flub a roll. For what it's worth, though, its best chances of succeeding are against paladins and fighting clerics, who may have robust Constitutions but who at least don't have proficiency in saving throws with that ability. Given a choice, therefore, it aims its gaze at these classes—thinking that it's doing so because they're so irritatingly *holy*.

Whether it uses Spear or Claw is a six-of-one, half-dozen-of-the-other matter: Both attacks deal the same damage, and there's no functional difference between slashing and piercing. If it wants to deal with a pesky marksman or spellslinger, it can hurl a spear, but most likely, those targets will be more than 20 feet away, imposing disadvantage on the attack roll. It would rather engage in melee.

Dispel magic is good for nullifying the good guys' buffs. With a Difficulty Class of only 11, *fear* is too likely to fail; there's no good reason to waste an action on it when the babau can spend that action to make two highly effective melee attacks *and* use its Weakening Gaze. The same holds true for using *levitate* against an enemy, and lacking a melee attack with a reach of greater than 5 feet, it has little reason to cast *levitate* on itself. As mentioned before, *darkness* messes with Weakening Gaze, but if Weakening Gaze isn't doing the job, the babau could do worse than fight under a sphere of *darkness*, since it doesn't rely on advantage or disadvantage to take care of business—and its opponents might.

Heat metal is an interesting option. On average, it deals just over half the damage of two successful Spear or Claw hits; it also requires concentration. In a situation where the babau has no good target for its Weakening Gaze, it may instead choose to cast *heat metal* on one of its melee opponents. It will inflict a little less damage in the first round, but in the second, if its concentration hasn't been disrupted, the babau gets to make its two Claw or Spear strikes *and* use its bonus action to inflict another 2d8 fire damage *and* throw a Hail Mary on its Weakening Gaze. If it manages to keep *heat metal* up for a third round, that's yet another 2d8 of bonus fire damage. Basically, it's spending one melee weapon attack in the hope of recouping two or even four attacks' worth of equivalent damage in subsequent rounds. That's a good investment. And in this instance, the low DC is almost a feature rather than a bug, because the target is more likely to hold on to their weapon and keep taking damage rather than drop it!

Babaus are bloodthirsty fiends, and they can't be killed outside the Abyss, so whenever they're not on that plane, they fight to the death. While in the Abyss, they retreat when seriously wounded (reduced to 32 hp or fewer).

The **dybbuk** (M) originates in Jewish folklore as a malicious spirit (דיבבוק *dibbūq*) that "adheres" to living people and possesses them. In some tellings, the spirit is a demon; in others, the ghost of a deceased person. *Mordenkainen's* classifies the dybbuk as a demon, but its modus operandi is similar to the dybbuk of folklore, a major difference being that it can possess only corpses, not living beings. (Another major difference is that an unadhered dybbuk appears as a "translucent flying jellyfish.")

Dybbuks have extraordinary Dexterity, very high Constitution, and a 40-foot flying speed with hovering capability; these traits, plus a raft of damage resistances, make them mobile skirmishers that fly from target to target without worrying unduly about opportunity attacks. They also have very high Intelligence, but their spellcasting ability is Charisma, which is the lowest of their mental abilities, so they generally favor their Tendril attack over spellcasting if they're really trying to hurt someone.

Usually, a group of PCs will encounter a dybbuk when it's already possessing a corpse and acting out through it in impertinent ways. As I read its stat block, it has no access to its Innate Spellcasting while possessing a corpse, nor does it have its Magic Resistance or any of its damage resistances, so if it's attacked, its first recourse is to try to scare its attackers off using its Violate Corpse feature. But this feature is another of those, like a dragon's Frightful Presence, that either work the first time or never work at all, and that no longer work once a target shakes them off; it also has a low saving throw DC. So there's a good chance that, against a group of PCs, it won't have the effect the dybbuk desires.

Its second recourse, then, is to run. It doesn't care all that much about the body it's possessing, so even though it has the Intelligence to Disengage, it doesn't bother; it just Dashes.

Alternatively, if you've constructed this as a Deadly encounter, it may decide it can take the party head-on, in which case rather than try to run away, it ditches its counterproductive corpse body (bonus action), regains access to all its resistances and immunities—and its Innate Spellcasting—and lashes out with a necrotic tendril against the nearest unarmored or lightly armored opponent. It then flies 20 feet, ideally upward out of reach. Knowing how low its spell save DC is, it doesn't try to cast *fear* or *phantasmal force* against a group of PCs unless it notices after a round or two that none of them has tried to use any kind of magic against it. (Mostly, it reserves these spells for commoner NPCs.) A dybbuk forced out of its body, either because the body is destroyed or because it was expelled using magic such as the Break Enchantment option of *dispel good and evil*, follows the same tactic, relying on tendril attacks and staying out of melee opponents' reach between turns.

Dybbuks are loath to give up their mischief—or their corpses. If a dybbuk is moderately wounded (reduced to 25 hp or fewer), it flies down to the corpse it previously possessed, snatches it up, and casts *dimension door*, taking the corpse with it! Once it's safely away, it uses Possess Corpse again at the earliest opportunity. (If the corpse was destroyed, the dybbuk doesn't bother to take it along—it can find another.)

Dybbuks can be—and should be—a real pain in the neck. As soon as any encounter turns significantly against them, they *dimension door* away and either reinhabit the same corpse or find a new one, therein to commit further indecencies. As long as the PCs are looking for them, they have the sense to lie low and—if they're in a new host body—act normal, using their expertise in Deception to maintain their disguise until their hunters have gone away. Then they're right back to their old tricks.

One **armanite** (M) alone is a challenge for a party of mid-level PCs, but armanites generally aren't encountered alone. Performing the role of demonic cavalry, they could reasonably be expected to appear in troops of two dozen or more at a

time. These numbers, however, are too great for a party of even top-level PCs to go up against unless they're leading an army of their own. More reasonable scenarios might involve encountering an armanite patrol or trying to capture one armanite that's gotten separated from its troop and gone rogue.

Armanites are brutes, but they're fast-moving brutes, combining the speed of a warhorse with the power of a mounted lancer, juiced up by abyssal magic. Their Strength and Constitution are extraordinary, their Dexterity *merely* exceptional. They're a little slow-witted but not bestially stupid, and they're good at identifying which targets they need to trample—primarily, wielders of magic weapons, especially those that deal psychic, radiant, or necrotic damage, and spellcasters whose witcheries and theurgies do the same.

It's a weird and disappointing aspect of fifth edition D&D, especially in the context of mounted combat, that momentum does nothing whatsoever to increase weapon damage or even to bowl targets over. Warhorses can knock opponents prone with their Trampling Charge feature, but their riders' lances only ever deal 1d12 damage—slightly less, on average, than a greatsword. Even a whole troop of armanites slamming into a group of enemies... don't *slam* at all. They just show up, albeit impressively quickly, then begin employing their melee attacks and Lightning Lance.

As a result, armanite combat isn't tactically sophisticated; it boils down to positioning, target selection, and whether to use Multiattack or Lightning Lance. That last question is fairly easy to answer: An armanite uses Lightning Lance whenever it can strike at least four targets (per Targets in Areas, for a double-width linear effect), which is easier to achieve than the precise alignment required by *lightning bolt* owing to Lightning Lance's 10-foot-wide area of effect. Because Lightning Lance recharges, it's a "use it whenever you can" ability, and the armanite accordingly positions itself as needed to hit the necessary number of targets.

When Lightning Lance isn't available or the opposing side just won't line up properly for it, the armanite uses its Multiattack. It usually focuses all its attacks on the same target, but if there are two or three targets within reach whom it considers high priorities, it may divide its attacks among them. Fighting two targets who are 10 or 15 feet apart, it closes with the higher-priority target and attacks them with Hooves and Claws, then lashes out at the other with Serrated Tail, which has a 10-foot reach. It may also use Serrated Tail to perform an opportunity attack—free drive-by slashing before arriving at the foe it wants to kick and claw. Fighting three, it uses Serrated Tail against its highest-priority enemy, Hooves against the second, and Claws against the third.

Unlike many demons, armanites aren't resistant to damage from nonmagical weapons, nor are they especially well-armored, so they're *not* indifferent to opportunity attacks. Once they're engaged in melee, they circle around their opponents rather than leave their reach; they don't incur opportunity attacks merely to improve their Lightning Lance targeting. If their opponents just aren't properly arranged for them to do what they want, or if they find themselves engaged with a melee opponent they consider less important than some other foe, they Disengage (action) and gallop out of the scuffle (movement), then come back from a better angle on their next turn. Remember that Disengage confers immunity to *all* opportunity attacks for the entirety of the armanite's turn, not just those from the opponent it starts the turn engaged with.

Armanites are so aggressive, not only do they not flee no matter how injured they are, they're even reluctant to leave the field when commanded by a higher-ranking demon to retreat. They're the last to go, Disengaging and moving away only after every one of their allies has already pulled back.

Maurezhi (M), according to *Mordenkainen's*, are demons formed from the corrupted souls of elves to lead packs of ghouls and ghosts. The connection to elves is interesting, because as I note in *The Monsters Know What They're Doing* (273), whether or not their claw attacks have a paralyzing effect on elves is a key feature distinguishing ghouls from ghosts. (Ghouls' claw attacks have no paralyzing effect on elves; ghosts' claw attacks do.)

Upon consuming the corpse of a humanoid it's slain, a maurezhi has a brief window of opportunity during which it assumes their appearance and can convincingly pass as that person, with the help of its proficiency in the Deception skill. Almost immediately, however, this body begins to rot away, and after just a day, something is clearly not right; within a few days, the maurezhi sheds it, like a skin it's outgrown. The ideal maurezhi encounter therefore takes place very soon after it's assumed a new appearance, and any delay is going to have an effect on its strategy.

Maurezhi have high Charisma, but this doesn't figure into any of their attacks, only their Deception skill. Combat-wise, they're shock attackers, with exceptional Dexterity that functions as their primary ability for both defense and offense. Since ghouls and ghosts are also shock attackers, and since maurezhi are typically encountered leading packs of them, there

should be enough baddies to go around for an entire group of protagonists; the ghouls and ghouls go straight for the ones they want to eat, while the maurezhi zeroes in on any other opponent who might present an obstacle to that and tries to take them out in a round or two.

Because of their Magic Resistance; their resistance to cold, fire, lightning, and necrotic damage; and their immunity to being charmed, maurezhi are good at taking out spellcasters and often go after these enemies first. Immunity to poison damage and the poisoned condition also makes them good for neutralizing rogues. They have 120 feet of darkvision, which is common among subterranean creatures. They absolutely prefer to initiate combat underground or at night, not in sunlight.

Raise Ghoul is a recharge ability, which suggests that the maurezhi will use it whenever it can—provided that there's a dead ghoul or ghoult to use it on. Aside from this action, the maurezhi has a Multiattack action that includes one Bite attack and one Claws attack. The Claws attack works similarly to a ghoult's, with a paralyzing effect (and no exception for elves). Because attacks against a paralyzed creature have advantage and melee hits are automatically critical, the maurezhi uses Claws first, then Bite. The Bite attack "can drain a victim's sense of self," sucking away points of the target's Charisma, and reducing a Charisma score to 0 results in instant death and eventual ghoultification. This effect offers no tactical advantage (except against a bard, paladin, sorcerer, or warlock—which a maurezhi may or may not have the life experience to identify), but its distinctiveness suggests that it's something the maurezhi wants very much to do.

Since everything about the maurezhi seems to revolve around procuring victims for ghouls and ghouls and making new ghouls out of the victims who don't get eaten, I think we can conclude that the main thing a maurezhi does with its false appearance is try to lure unsuspecting dupes into ghoul/ghoult dens and trap them there. Despite being a shock attacker, the maurezhi isn't unusually fast, so these dens should have enough room for it to maneuver around freely without being so large that it can't reach its desired targets in a single move—probably around 40 to 60 feet in each linear dimension.

While the ghouls and ghouls paralyze and feast on whomever they can, the maurezhi goes around playing a cleanup role, using its own Claws/Bite Multiattack (in that order) to disable any opponent whom the ghouls and ghouls aren't having any luck with. If all opponents are occupied, it joins a ghoul in trying to take down a strong target. When a ghoul or ghoul goes down, the maurezhi takes a break from its own activities to raise it again. It doesn't worry a great deal about opportunity attacks: Its Armor Class is middle-of-the-road, but its resistance to physical damage from nonmagical weapons is enough to make the difference. After being struck by a magical one, it exercises more caution.

Being demons, maurezhi don't need to worry if their physical vessels are destroyed: Their souls will bamf back to the Abyss, and their bodies will re-form there. However, they don't keep fighting if the ghouls and ghouls they're with have had enough. When the last ghoul or ghoul decides it's done fighting, either because it's wounded or because it has a paralyzed victim and is hauling them away, the maurezhi covers their retreat, continuing to Multiattack against any opponent who attempts to pursue, Dodging instead if no one does.

The **draegloth** (v) is part demon, part drow, sent by high priestesses to wreck face in their houses' names. Strong and tough, it possesses some spellcasting ability, but that's mostly peripheral to its vicious physical combat ability.

Brutes with extraordinary Strength, exceptional Constitution, and above-average but not otherwise remarkable Intelligence, draegloths are melee machines. With proficiency in Perception and Stealth, they possess decent ambush capability, but their real strength is their ability to engage enemies and keep fighting until the job is done. They're resistant to cold, fire, and lightning, giving them extra staying power against unimaginative enemy spellcasters who reflexively resort to these damage vectors first.

As the flavor text acknowledges, "Most are too impatient to bother with complicated tactics"; even if they had more patience, they lack the features and traits that would invite the use of more sophisticated techniques. But one aspect of their Innate Spellcasting caught my attention.

Most drow have the innate ability to cast *darkness*, *dancing lights*, and *faerie fire*—it's the standard drow package. Usually, *darkness* and *faerie fire* are once-per-day spells, while *dancing lights* is castable either once per day or at will. The draegloth is different: It can cast *dancing lights* and *faerie fire* once per day (also *confusion*, but I'll get to that later), but it can cast *darkness* at will, suggesting that it relies on this spell more heavily. And the draegloth, with its many hit points and fierce triple Multiattack, is exactly the kind of creature that a straight fight—with no way to gain advantage or impose disadvantage—favors to win.

For a creature like the draegloth, the only real drawback to *darkness* is the time it takes to cast: a whole action. Now, the draegloth isn't in a hurry. It's a big, tough brute, entirely at home in a battle of attrition. But it also needs a *reason* to take the time to cast *darkness* when it could be clawing and biting instead, and it's smart enough to know that.

So let's sort out a priority order for the draegloth's actions, the most important of which are Multiattack (hidden), Multiattack (normal), *darkness*, *faerie fire*, and *confusion* (I can't imagine that the draegloth would use *dancing lights* as anything but a lure). For starters, note that all the draegloth's spells require concentration, so it can only ever use one of them at a time.

When should a draegloth cast a spell rather than Multiattack? When the spell will give it a benefit that makes up for the opportunity cost of passing up a round's worth of attacks. In the case of *darkness*, that means that the draegloth's opponents are trying to get a leg up by gaining advantage on their attack rolls or imposing disadvantage on its attack rolls or saving throws. In the case of *confusion*, it means there are at least two of them (preferably more—the more, the better) within a 10-foot-radius sphere in range, so that the draegloth can keep them from working together to stop it. In the case of *faerie fire*, it means there are at least four opponents (again, the more, the better) within a 20-foot cube *and* the draegloth has no other source of advantage. But especially against medium-to-high-level adventurers, *confusion* is strongly preferable to *faerie fire*, because those who belong to martial classes have Extra Attack, and *confusion* has an 80 percent chance of denying the use of that feature to a target who fails their saving throw.

ALL CATS ARE GRAY IN THE DARK

The spell *darkness* is widely understood to be a double-edged sword, since even creatures with darkvision can't see through it. Even if the caster has a trait or feature, such as blindsight or Devil's Sight, that allows them to see through magical darkness, their allies usually don't, so dropping *darkness* in the middle of a fight tends to make those allies turn to the caster and say, "Dude, what the heck?"

While thinking about how the draegloth would employ *darkness*, especially considering that it often has drow allies fighting alongside it (or at least behind it), I finally realized what the heck. The function of *darkness*—its *intended* function, I think—is to be an equalizer.

Within the area of effect of the *darkness* spell, all combatants who lack any special sense beyond darkvision are effectively blinded. Attack rolls against blinded creatures have advantage, while their own attacks have disadvantage. Attack rolls by unseen attackers also have advantage, while attacks against them have disadvantage. In other words, everyone whose ability to see is shut down by *darkness* has both advantage and disadvantage on attack rolls—meaning they all have *neither*.

Furthermore, since advantage and disadvantage both apply to every single attack roll made by one combatant under magical darkness against another, it's impossible to gain advantage or disadvantage by any other means. It's all preemptively canceled out, neutralizing many of the most common ways of gaining an edge over an opponent. *Every* attack roll by a combatant who can neither see nor be seen must be made straight. This leveling of the playing field is a big benefit to the superior raw melee combatant.

Even ranged attackers who aren't blinded themselves but are attacking *into* the sphere of magical darkness are affected. They have advantage, because their targets are blinded, but also disadvantage, because they can't see their targets—therefore, they have neither, and there's no way for them to change that, short of making the magical darkness go away.

So *darkness*, which superficially seems like such a waste of an action, can in fact be significantly helpful to a combatant with a particularly large reservoir of hit points, a high attack bonus, heavy damage-dealing capacity, and/or no easy way to gain advantage on attacks or impose disadvantage on opponents' attacks. Naturally, it's a huge boon to any creature capable of seeing through that darkness. Only if a creature depends wholly on having advantage on its own attack rolls or imposing disadvantage on its targets' rolls is *darkness* a major drawback. Rogues hate it, perhaps more than anyone else—even more than spellcasters, who usually have at least *some* spells that don't require them to see their targets.

The same considerations apply to *fog cloud*, another spell that creates an area in which vision is heavily obscured and both advantage and disadvantage are thereby nullified. *Fog cloud* works even against creatures that can see through magical darkness, it can be sustained much longer, and when cast using a higher-level spell slot, its area can be increased. However, it does have two drawbacks relative to *darkness*: A moderate or strong wind clears it away, and it can be cast only on a fixed point in space, whereas *darkness* can be cast on an object, allowing it to move with the caster (though not the target, unless they pick the object up after the spell is cast).

Hunger of Hadar and *stinking cloud* heavily obscure vision as well, but they also deal damage to every creature inside them, so no, really, *don't* cast either of those spells where your friends are.

Unless a draegloth has had a chance to observe its foes or has received advance intelligence on their capabilities, it probably won't know whether they have means of gaining advantage against it or not. So the priority order ultimately comes out looking like this: Multiattack (hidden), *confusion*, *faerie fire*, *darkness*, Multiattack (normal).

The draegloth drops *confusion* when it becomes obvious that it isn't achieving the desired goal of disrupting enemy operations, and it drops *faerie fire* when its opponents counter with other features or spells that negate its advantage against them or give them advantage against it. Also, of course, it can't recast them if its concentration is broken, so it moves on to the next action whose criteria are met. When the draegloth casts *darkness*, it centers the spell where it can envelop three or more enemies—preferably including as many enemy spellcasters as possible—then rushes into the sphere to join in the fun.

Draegloths are relatively indiscriminate when it comes to target selection, unless there's someone they've been instructed to target. But they're not dumb, and if a particular opponent is giving a draegloth particular trouble, it singles that opponent out for particular attention. In the absence of any other tiebreaker, it picks on whoever seems weakest.

Draegloths' semi-demonic nature motivates them to keep fighting as long as there's any fight left in 'em, but it also makes them dangerous to their own handlers. If a draegloth is moderately or seriously wounded (reduced to 86 hp or fewer) and the highest-ranking drow on the field is also seriously wounded, it turns against them, mauling them to death before Dashing away to live its dreams.

Shoosuvs (v) are also creations of Yeenoghu that function sort of like a ranger's beast companion, except for gnolls that have distinguished themselves in battle with exceptional ferocity. (Such gnolls will almost necessarily be unique Fangs of Yeenoghu of your own creation: The CR 8 shoosuva far outclasses the CR 4 off-the-rack Fang, to say nothing of the CR 2 gnoll pack lord.) They're big and brutish, with exceptional Strength and Constitution and high Wisdom, indicating some shrewdness in target selection. They're proficient in all of the "big three" saving throws. Although their low Intelligence indicates a lack of adaptability and a reliance on instinctive behavior, they can *speak*, both normally (in Abyssal and Gnoll) and telepathically. A chaotic evil monster that can speak is a monster that taunts. Going up against one of these should *terrify* your players.

The shoosuva's basic attack is a Bite/Tail Stinger Multiattack. Bite is a straightforward melee attack, but one that does unbelievable damage—like being bitten by a mouthful of glaives. Tail Stinger deals base damage more in line with what you'd expect from a Large creature, but it also delivers a venom that paralyzes targets who fail their saving throws, and it has a reach of 15 feet, allowing it to strike a second enemy farther away.

The flavor text in *Volo's* indicates that biting one foe and then stinging another is its standard behavior. Despite its low Intelligence, I think its Wisdom is high enough to allow some variation, especially when you consider that intelligent evil creatures love to prey on the weak. Let's posit three basic approaches:

- The shoosuva engages a strong, front-line enemy in melee and strikes it with both Bite and Tail Stinger. In this instance, the shoosuva uses Tail Stinger *first*, because if it succeeds in paralyzing its target, the follow-up Bite attack has advantage and is an automatic critical hit if it succeeds.
- The shoosuva engages a strong, front-line enemy in melee but uses Tail Stinger to strike a weaker enemy within reach—preferably one who looks like it might fail its Constitution save.
- The shoosuva engages a strong, front-line enemy in melee but uses Tail Stinger to deal with any pesky skirmisher who thinks they can take advantage of its distraction.

In fact, not only does the shoosuva use Tail Stinger to deal with auxiliary threats, this is more or less how it behaves itself with respect to its gnoll master: While the gnoll focuses on fighting its primary foe, the shoosuva engages all others who try to insert themselves into the duel.

Like other creatures in the gnoll family, the shoosuva has Rampage, which lets it move up to 20 feet and make a Bite attack against another creature anytime it finishes one off on its own turn. However, as worded, it can use this feature only against an enemy who's already within that radius—it can't simply run 20 feet toward an enemy that it can't reach to engage in melee. Besides, it never strays far from its master's side.

Being a demonic creature, not an evolved one, and a manifestation of fiendish ideology at that, a shoosuva never flees, no matter how much damage it takes.

GREATER DEMONS (M)

It takes a special sort of someone to consider a demon worthy of worship, summoning as a servant, or aligning oneself with in any respect, really, but the greater demons in *Mordenkainen's* are such as to make even that kind of person say, "Mmmmm, yeah, no thanks, I'll pass."

The **alkilith** is a brilliant and terrifying concept: a blob of demonic ooze that, if not eradicated, can literally transform into an interplanar portal, through which other demons can then pour forth. Fortunately, that transformation isn't likely to occur in the middle of a combat encounter. Unfortunately, for slime creatures, alkiliths are shockingly fast.

With extraordinary Constitution and Dexterity, alkiliths are skirmishers, and their Foment Madness feature and Tentacle attack give them a neat way to play this combat role, which I'll get to in a moment. Their Achilles' heel is their low Charisma, which makes them susceptible to *banishment*; Magic Resistance gives them advantage on the saving throw, but against the spell save DC of any opponent likely to take one on, that's probably not going to equate to any more than +3, probability-wise. Any attempt to cast *banishment* on them that fails makes them go berserk on the caster. Aside from that, they lash out indiscriminately at anyone within reach.

When an alkilith is lying low, patiently scanning cosmic frequencies until it stumbles across the abyssal channel, its False Appearance causes others to mistake it for a natural, if disgusting, substance—but anyone who comes within 30 feet of it is troubled by an irritating droning sound, bothersome enough to distract or even disorient them as long as they remain close.

Trying to scrub away the mystery slime provokes the alkilith to attack. It's no smarter than an ape and acts mostly by reflex, but it can sense whether or not another being is affected by Foment Madness. Anytime it's within reach of no more than one opponent wielding a magic weapon who's unaffected by Foment Madness, it retreats—chancing one or more opportunity attacks—to a distance of 15 feet from its nearest foes (it can't climb, unfortunately, but it can slither through openings as narrow as 1 inch wide), then lashes out at them with its triple-Tentacle Multiattack. If it's within reach of two or more unmaddened opponents with magic weapons, however, it instinctively Disengages and retreats its full 40 feet of movement, moving from one room to another if necessary.

However, once it's goaded into fighting, it knows dimly that those who've discovered it are a threat, and it defends itself as long as the risk isn't too great and it's not too badly hurt. Thus, if (a) it's still strong enough to fight, (b) there aren't at least two magic weapon-wielding foes unaffected by Foment Madness, and (c) it doesn't have any opponent within reach of its own pseudopods, it moves *closer*, to a distance of 15 feet from its nearest foes, and Multiattacks.

Unlike many demons, an alkilith isn't belligerent by nature; what it wants is to survive and be left alone until it can become an abyssal gateway, and sometimes the best way to achieve that is by running away. In addition to retreating from multiple unmaddened opponents with magic weapons, an alkilith also Disengages and flees when seriously wounded (reduced to 62 hp or fewer). When fleeing for its life, it seeks out the darkest place it can find, then holes up until dusk, when it steals back out under cover of night to find a new window or door someplace else to settle in around.

Wastriliths inhabit bodies of water, causing the water around them to become foul and toxic, potentially even capable of deranging or possessing anyone who drinks it or remains immersed in it too long (note that this effect is optional and described in the wastrilith's flavor text, not in its stat block).

Their ability contour is unusually high and flat, with extraordinary Strength, Constitution, and Intelligence and exceptional Dexterity; their Wisdom and Charisma are also above average. This contour, along with the wastrilith's remarkable 80-foot swimming speed, gives the wastrilith considerable flexibility, especially underwater: It can either home in like a torpedo on a chosen target or use its Grasping Spout action to yank them toward itself, and either way, it can use Undertow to keep opponents it doesn't want to engage with from getting anywhere near it.

This flexibility comes at a price: A wastrilith has to come up with a plan, one that gives careful thought to target selection. It's fully capable of this, of course, but it means that you, as a DM, have to do a fair amount of calculation both in advance and on the fly.

So what are its target selection criteria? They're in tension, a little bit. Like chaotic evil creatures in general and demons in particular, wastriliths revel in preying on the weak. On the other hand, like all highly intelligent creatures, they know it's important to counteract whatever opponents, abilities, and items threaten them with the greatest harm. The result is a composite strategy built around *hurting* weaker opponents while *hindering* more powerful ones.

A wastrilith has a high enough Intelligence to assess an adversary's strengths and weaknesses at a glance, so before your game session begins, tally up the following for each opponent it will face:

- AC 16 or less: -1 point
- 73 hp or fewer: -1 point
- 62 hp or fewer: -1 point (in addition to previous)
- Each active debilitating condition (blinded, etc.): -1 point
- Constitution saving throw modifier +3 or less: -1 point
- Strength saving throw modifier +7 or less: -1 point
- Strength saving throw modifier +2 or less: -1 point (in addition to previous)
- Strength, Dexterity, or Constitution modifier +4 or greater: +1 point each
- Wielding effective underwater weapon (crossbow, dagger, javelin, shortsword, spear, trident): +1 point
- Wielding magic weapon: +1 point per point of bonus
- Resistant to poison damage: +1 point
- Immune to poison damage: +2 points
- Immune to poisoned condition: +2 points
- Swimming speed 30 feet or greater: +1 point
- Swimming speed 60 feet or greater: +1 point (in addition to previous)

The opponent with the lowest point total is the wastrilith's preferred target. If its opponents are spread out, it uses its swimming speed to reach its target, then Multiattacks; if they're clustered, it approaches to a distance of 60 feet from the target, either above or below their horizontal plane, then yanks the target 50 feet toward itself with Grasping Spout. Any opponent with a positive point total is considered a threat, and the wastrilith tries to stay as far away from them as possible while using Undertow to make itself more difficult to reach. For an opponent with a swimming speed, each foot traveled within 60 feet of the wastrilith will cost 2 feet of movement; for an opponent without a swimming speed, each foot traveled will cost 3.

As combat proceeds, the wastrilith reassesses its opponents based on what it's observed that they can do. During your encounter, add the following, no more than once per bullet per opponent, if and when they come up:

- Invisible: +1 point
- Casts a spell targeting Wisdom, with save DC 14 or greater: +1 point
- Casts a spell targeting Charisma, with save DC 15 or greater: +1 point
- Hits with a spell attack: +1 point
- Deals acid or thunder damage with weapon or spell: +1 point
- Deals necrotic, psychic, radiant, or force damage with weapon or spell: +2 points
- Deals 16 damage or more in one turn: +1 point
- Deals 48 damage or more in one turn: +2 points (in addition to previous)

In addition, deduct points if an opponent's hit points fall below the thresholds listed above or they become subjected to a new debilitating condition; give points back if they're healed or a condition wears off. If the opponent with the lowest prior point total still has the lowest total, the wastrilith keeps attacking them, using its Multiattack now that they're within its reach—yet, mockingly, remaining just outside *their* reach (unless they wield a polearm or whip, but wielders of these weapons attack with disadvantage underwater). If a different opponent now has the lowest total, it switches its attacks to them, leaving the previous target behind without any concern for opportunity attacks; it usually won't be within that target's reach anyway, but maybe they're plucky and try to fight back.

This pattern works in most cases, but if a threatening opponent is hurting the wastrilith effectively from a distance, it has to break the pattern to go deal with that threat. As before, it swims to reach its target if they're isolated; if they're not, it uses Grasping Spout to pull them out of position and into reach. Either way, it seeks to get that long-distance attacker within reach of Corrupt Water and its Bite and Claws. If the attacker is using a ranged weapon, the wastrilith closes the distance between them to 5 feet, rather than 10, before Multiattacking. With Undertow, an entire 30-foot swimming move will get the target no more than 15 feet away—just enough distance to grant the wastrilith an opportunistic Bite before it closes in again.

A wastrilith can fight on land, but it's much worse at it: Its speed is reduced to 30 feet, and it can't use its Corrupt Water or Undertow features. Knowing this, no wastrilith will ever come more than 30 feet ashore. If a fight breaks out while it's out of the water, the very first thing it does is use its movement to dive back in, then swim 10 feet away from ship or shore. The second thing it does is use Grasping Spout to pull its chosen victim into the drink—and under. After that, its opponents will have to play by *its* rules.

A wastrilith on any plane other than the Abyss fearlessly fights until it's destroyed, knowing that it can't truly be killed. In the Abyss, however, it flees when seriously wounded (reduced to 62 hp or fewer), Disengaging if engaged in melee by multiple opponents, Dashing otherwise, and continuing to use Undertow to discourage pursuit.

Nabassus are gluttons for the souls of mortal creatures, making them particularly dangerous summoned servants: Unlike most demons, which fight being yoked with every fiber of their being, nabassus volunteer for the job, watching for any opening they can exploit to kill their summoners and go on an unhindered soul-gorging rampage.

With extraordinary Strength and Constitution, nabassus are fast, flying brutes, but all their ability scores are high; they have no weakness to attack. On the other hand, they don't have a highly flexible kit of features. At the core of their strategy are the Devour Soul trait, which allows them to consume the soul of a creature they've recently killed but takes 10 minutes to complete; the Soul-Stealing Gaze action, which feeds off a target's hit point maximum; and a nasty melee Multiattack. Since Devour Soul is more of an ugly dénouement to a combat encounter than a tactic to use during the encounter itself, we're left with the decision of whether to use Multiattack or Soul-Stealing Gaze.

What about the Demonic Shadows trait? It's a weird one, isn't it? It allows the nabassu to surround itself not with darkness but with *dim light*. There's nothing in its stat block that makes any use of dim light. Dim light doesn't prevent it from being seen. It doesn't employ stealth, so it doesn't care that much about being noticed. What's the point?

If we look at the nabassu in isolation, I don't think there is one, except for atmosphere. However, *other* monsters can exploit this trait, particularly those with features such as Shadow Stealth, Shadow Jump, and Shadow Jaunt. In particular, shadow demons seem like they might naturally be drawn to nabassus' side and act as their flunkies. To what extent a nabassu appreciates their presence is an open question; it certainly doesn't want them stealing its kills.

That, by the way, is the implication behind Devour Soul: A nabassu wants to *kill*, and just like the wastrilith, it preys on the weak first, because they're easier. Its definition of "weak" differs from the wastrilith's, partly because its features are different, partly because it's not as expert at sizing up foes as wastriliths are. With Intelligence 14, it can't read numbers off an opponent's stat sheet; it has to observe and judge. Its judgment is good, but it's not instantaneous or penetrating. A nabassu's criteria look more like this:

- AC 18 or less: -1 point
- Strength, Constitution, or Charisma modifier +4 or lower: -1 point each (note that these are ability score modifiers, *not* saving throw modifiers—the nabassu can observe general characteristics, but not special abilities until they're used)
- Under a debilitating condition: -1 point each
- Wielding a magic weapon: +2 points
- Hits with a spell attack: +1 point
- Deals acid or thunder damage with weapon or spell: +1 point
- Deals necrotic, psychic, radiant, or force damage with weapon or spell: +2 points
- Invisible: +1 point
- Deals 20 damage or more in one turn: +1 point
- Deals 58 damage or more in one turn: +2 points (in addition to previous)
- Succeeds on Charisma saving throw: +1 point

Before the end of the first round of combat, it can take only Armor Class, Strength, Constitution, and active conditions into account. After the first round, it can account for the other items.

At the beginning of combat, a nabassu remains airborne, out of its opponents' reach, and uses its Soul-Stealing Gaze to target whomever it initially perceives to be weakest. It can't read hit points—current or maximum—precisely, but it does have a nose for when a target has passed a certain threshold: 30 hp. At that point, on its next turn, it dives down upon its target and Multiattacks, in most instances dealing enough damage to reduce them to 0 hp.

Its next objective is to kill its target. As long as they remain unconscious, one more Multiattack is enough to do that, inflicting two critical hits and therefore four death save failures (with +11 to hit *and* advantage against an unconscious opponent, a miss would be incredible).

However, to use Devour Soul on the target, the nabassu has to either fly off someplace safe with its prey (which it can do only if the total weight of the corpse, including attached gear, is 330 pounds or less) or keep the target's friends away. If it can't carry off its kill, or if it has some reason not to, it returns to the air again, but now with the primary goal of preventing anyone from rescuing its victim; creating more victims is secondary. It still uses Soul-Stealing Gaze against the opponent it now considers weakest, but against anyone else it Multiattacks, because this action sends the stronger message. Its target is whichever of its ambulatory opponents is closest to its victim. After attacking, it flies back up out of reach, willingly provoking an opportunity attack—chances are, an opponent getting in its face with a melee weapon has Extra Attack, and it's prepared to risk one attack to prevent a second, third, or fourth—but it keeps its face toward its enemies and its back toward its victim. When it gets an opportunity attack of its own, it Bites.

Once a nabassu is out of the Abyss, it doesn't want to go back—not when there's an all-you-can-eat soul buffet out here. Thus, when it's seriously wounded (reduced to 76 hp or fewer), it looks for a way out, Disengaging if it's within melee reach of more than one enemy, Dodging otherwise, and flying away at full speed.

Like all demons, **sibriexes** are fiends, but there's also something distinctly aberration-like about them. Partly, it's their Lovecraftian body-horror appearance; partly, the fact that they move only by floating; and partly, the fact that their mere presence is toxic to living things.

Their ability contour is bizarre: extraordinary Constitution and mental abilities alongside merely average Strength and almost nonexistent Dexterity. From this we can conclude that they're heavily dependent on magic and make no effort to avoid attacks—"psychic brutes," if you will. We've seen this before in a small number of other monsters, most notably the githzerai. Githzerai, however, are highly mobile. The sibriex is a slow-moving juggernaut.

Despite their extraordinary Wisdom and Charisma, sibriexes don't have much reason to stay and chat, nor do they have proficiency in any social skill that suggests what kind of conversation they might engage in. Therefore, I'd say, a sibriex that weighs the odds and finds itself outmatched simply never bothers to engage. The upshot of this is that a sibriex encounter should always be Deadly (*Dungeon Master's Guide*, chapter 3, "Combat Encounter Difficulty"); throw in a handful of minions if you need to. When it does engage, it uses its telepathy to tell the PCs what it's going to do to them, in nasty, dripping detail.

Sibriexes have resistance to physical damage from nonmagical weapons, along with cold, fire, and lightning, and they're fully immune to poison. They also have both Magic Resistance and Legendary Resistance, so they have little to fear from spells that require saving throws. Of the small handful of things that make them the slightest bit nervous, one thing stands out: clerical magic—which often deals radiant or necrotic damage, to which they're *not* resistant—delivered directly through weapon or spell attacks. This kind of damage makes a sibriex sit up and take notice.

Contamination is a passive damage feature that requires a sibriex to be within 30 feet of its foe(s). It turns the ground around it into difficult terrain, making it harder for them to get away. Ideally, somehow, a sibriex would like to be able to drop right on top of one of its enemies. Given its 20-foot movement speed, this maneuver is going to be hard to achieve unless its opponents come to it. Once they do, however, even its slow movement is enough for it to stay on top of them. Hold this thought: It's a piece in a puzzle that we're still putting together.

The sibriex can cast certain spells at will, and a couple of them work nicely in conjunction with Contamination. *Command* can compel another creature to approach. *Hold monster* can pin one in place, possibly long enough for the sibriex to close with it. *Charm person*, on the other hand, has a range of only 30 feet, and it's broken as soon as the sibriex's aura of corruption causes poison damage to it, so the sibriex can use this spell effectively only on opponents who've already been exposed to its Contamination, made their saving throws, and gained immunity to it—or are immune to poison damage to begin with.

Three times per day, a sibriex can cast *feeblemind*, which targets a creature's Intelligence—a common dump stat for non-wizards in fifth edition D&D. Moreover, with its own supernatural Intelligence, it can pick out which of its enemies have low or merely average Intelligence as if it were reading their character sheets. A bard, cleric, or paladin is an ideal target for this spell, but with its spell save DC of 21, a sibriex has a two-thirds or better chance of overpowering most targets' resistances. Not many PCs have an Intelligence saving throw modifier of +6 or better—although those who do are mostly

wizards, who also have proficiency in Wisdom saving throws and therefore may have a decent chance to resist *charm person*, *command*, or *hold monster* as well. Casting *feblemind* on a fighter, barbarian, rogue, or monk would be a waste, since the spell's chief benefit is that it shuts down spellcasting.

Sibriexes have two melee attacks, Chain and Bite. Chain has much greater reach and also does greater expected damage than Bite, so the only reason to use Bite is if a target has some kind of resistance against physical damage, specifically piercing damage. (I'd think a chain would do bludgeoning damage rather than piercing; the sibriex's chain must be spiky, I suppose. *Mordenkainen's* doesn't say.) Bite would be good, for instance, against a Raging barbarian—and a sibriex would know this fact. But there aren't many PC features or items that confer resistance to physical damage and not other types of damage, and there especially aren't many that confer resistance to one type of physical damage and not another. So Chain is the rule, and Bite is the exception.

Squirt Bile is a ranged attack, and it's a saving throw ability, so the onus is on the defender to resist it. In this case, the DC is 20 rather than 21 (presumably because it's biological, and therefore Constitution-based). It always targets a single creature, so there's no need for fastidious positioning. Warp Creature is also a ranged feature with a DC 20 saving throw, and it targets up to *three* creatures. This ability is murderous, because of its tremendous range (120 feet, which it shares with Squirt Bile) and because it imposes levels of exhaustion. One or two levels of exhaustion aren't a big deal, but three or more can be catastrophic. Not only that, a sibriex can use Warp as a legendary action on *other creatures' turns*.

The fact that Warp Creature, if it reaches full potency, turns another creature into an abysmal wretch—a weak minion demon—screams out that this is the feature the sibriex wants to use more than any other. But only up to a point: An initial successful save is enough to render a target immune to any further uses of Warp Creature, whereas it takes six failures to reach full potency. So even though it's got a two-thirds or better chance of initial success against an enemy with a Con save modifier of +5 or lower, its enemy has to fail that save more than once—preferably, six times in a row.

What does it take to accomplish that? At least an 89 percent chance that the target will fail *each* saving throw, which means a Con save modifier of +1 or less.¹ On the other hand, to have a two-thirds chance that their target will merely fail their first saving throw, then fail five more times while succeeding no more than twice, the sibriex needs only a 79 percent chance of failure, and that means a Con save modifier of +3 or less, which is a little more promising. However, against a target with a Con save modifier of +2 or +3, the sibriex needs to let its initial success do all the work, because if it uses the Warp Creature action against that target again and the target succeeds on their save, all its work is undone.

Anyway, the sibriex knows the odds (Intelligence 25, after all), so while it initiates combat by using Warp Creature on whichever three PCs have the lowest Con save modifiers—and uses its Warp legendary action to accelerate the process, piling on additional levels of exhaustion—when any given PC gains immunity, it stops using Warp against that individual. It *tries* using Warp on everybody present, working its way up the Con save ladder, just for the side benefits of the poisoned and exhausted conditions, and the risk that a single opponent will get perma-warped if battle goes on long enough is nonnegligible. But the sibriex isn't going to get its hopes up.

Once combat is initiated, it drifts inexorably toward its targets, and this is where all the pieces of the puzzle come together, because in order to stop the sibriex, they'll have to either run up and attack it or lob spells from afar. The sibriex is likely to shrug off spells requiring saving throws. Melee attackers will get up in its ugly mug only to discover the contaminating effect of standing next to it—then struggle to get away. Ranged weapon and spell attacks that do any significant amount of damage to it (say, 15 points or more) are answered with sprays of bile.

The sibriex uses Warp Creature both on its own turn and as a legendary action as long as there exist three or more targets who haven't made successful saving throws against it yet. When it's down to two such targets, it uses Warp Creature on its own turn but uses its legendary actions for other things. At zero, it abandons Warp Creature entirely and Multiattacks if it has one or more targets within reach of its chains; otherwise, it uses Squirt Bile or casts a spell. An exception to this pattern is if a cleric or paladin lands a ranged weapon or spell attack that deals radiant, necrotic, or some other type of damage it's not resistant to, in which case it casts *feblemind* against that enemy at the first available opportunity—including as its action, if it doesn't have any legendary actions left.

In general, it uses *feblemind* against higher-Wisdom, lower-Intelligence opponents; *hold monster* against lower-Wisdom opponents with Extra Attack or Sneak Attack; *command* against other lower-Wisdom opponents; and *charm person* specifically against lower-Wisdom opponents who've already made their saving throws against Contamination (and only if it has nothing better to do, because the charmed condition is a cinch to clear).

I haven't talked about *dispel magic* yet. Cast innately, it's always cast at its lowest possible level, which is 3rd. But to neutralize spells of 4th level or higher, the sibriex gets a +7 to its ability checks, against a DC from 14 to 19. That gives it a two-thirds chance of nullifying a 4th-level spell and a 50 percent chance of nullifying an 8th-level spell. It can cast *dispel magic* at will, but it does have to consume either its action or a legendary action to do so.

I'm going to posit that a sibriex only bothers to *dispel* two types of spells, but that when it encounters one of them, it always tries:

- Concentration spells that directly hurt or impede it and that it can't use a saving throw to overcome. (These are usually environmental control spells, such as *wall of fire*.)
- Spells that offer direct protection against its own abilities, such as *enhance ability* and *holy aura*.

It's unusual that PCs will encounter a sibriex on the material plane or anywhere else except the Abyss. If they do, it shows no fear of death—it will re-form in the Abyss if it's destroyed—and does its thing until the PCs take it out. But in the Abyss, it *can* be killed, and it retreats when it's seriously wounded (reduced to 60 hp or fewer). Its Armor Class is high enough that even though it has the Intelligence to Disengage, it doesn't bother; rather, it Dodges as it rises directly into the air, vertically, until it's out of sight. If pursued by a flying PC, it uses its legendary actions (which it still gets) to spray them with bile—or, if it's at least 40 feet up, to cast *hold monster*, causing the PC to fall out of the sky. Oops.

VARGOUILLES (V)

So imagine that you're talking to someone, and as you're talking to them, their face sprouts horns, their mouth sprouts fangs, and their ears transform into bat wings that start flapping, and their head tears right off their body, turns around, and starts drinking the blood that's fountaining from their former neck-place. You've just witnessed the birth of a **vargouille** (most commonly pronounced *var-gweel*, but my francophone sources tell me they'd pronounce it to rhyme with "ratatouille"), a silly and horrible little fiend that's the extraplanar personification of cooties.

Vargouilles are stupid and possess an underdeveloped survival instinct. Though birthed in solitude, they flock together as quickly as possible for the safety of numbers. They can drag themselves along the ground only feebly, but they can fly faster than the average humanoid can jog. They're resistant to cold, fire, and lightning damage and immune to all forms of poison, including the poisoned condition. They have 60 feet of darkvision and detest sunlight (although it doesn't hinder them to the extent that it does, say, kobolds or drow).

With above-average Dexterity and Constitution (and nothing else), vargouilles are skirmishers; moreover, they're flying skirmishers, which means they'll often keep station 10 or 15 feet in the air, fly down to attack, then fly back out of reach. This tactic subjects them to opportunity attacks, which should matter, but with a Wisdom of only 7, they're not prudent enough to try to avoid them.

The vargouille's basic melee attack is Bite, which deals a surprising amount of damage for such a low-level critter. However, it has two basic desires—to feed and to make more vargouilles—and the way it accomplishes the latter is through its "kiss." The Kiss action transmits the vargouille's curse to a recipient who fails their saving throw; however, the target has to be incapacitated.

Here's where the Stunning Shriek action comes in. Anyone who fails a saving throw against it is frightened; any creature frightened by it is stunned; and a stunned creature, by definition, is also incapacitated.

Stunning Shriek, like a dragon's Frightful Presence, is one of those effects that either work on the first try or won't work at all. Unlike immunity to Frightful Presence, immunity to Stunning Shriek lasts only for an hour. Within the context of a single combat encounter, however, it may as well be permanent.

Since Stunning Shriek is what enables the vargouille to use Kiss, this action is what it leads off with. It begins by flying into the midst of a group of potential victims—within 30 feet of at least six of them, or of the entire group if there are fewer than six—and letting loose its shriek. (If it's just sprung from the head of its former body, it has no interest at first in anything except feeding, but it immediately launches into its combat routine, beginning with Stunning Shriek, if its feeding is interrupted.)

What it does next depends on whether its shriek worked on anybody. If one of its targets is now frozen with fright, it zeroes straight in and uses Kiss on them, then flies up into the air. If the shriek affected more than one target, it simply goes

for the nearest one. Vargouilles have no targeting heuristic beyond which victim they can get at first. They also have no time to Kiss more than one victim, since the effect of Stunning Shriek wears off at the end of a vargouille's subsequent turn and can't be renewed.

If no one is affected by Stunning Shriek, or if the vargouille has already Kissed its first victim, it switches to dive-bombing Bite attacks, choosing its first target largely at random and afterward attacking whoever's attacked it most recently, unless and until it's moderately wounded (reduced to 9 hp or fewer). Vargouilles don't expect that their victims will fight back in any meaningful way, and when one does, they panic and split, using the Dash action to fly away at double their speed (which may expose them to opportunity attacks).

Vargouilles follow this pattern even when they're in a flock. Their behavior isn't affected by their being surrounded by others of their kind. They all let loose their Stunning Shrieks at once, they'll opportunistically Kiss a victim stunned by another's shriek as often as one stunned by their own, and they fly away based solely on their own condition, not on the conditions of others in their flock.

TANARUKKS

See "Orcs," [page 24](#).

HOWLERS (M)

Howlers are pack-hunting predators from Pandemonium, a peril suitable only for top-tier adventurers to deal with. That's because, according to the lore in *Mordenkainen's*, these CR 8 fiends never appear alone. Either they're accompanied by others of their kind, or they're trained to the service of a more powerful fiend or other evil master and fighting by its side.

Theirs is a nasty ability contour: very high physical ability scores across the board, with an extraordinary peak in Wisdom. This outlier score both powers their Mind-Breaking Howl action and gives them keen hunting senses. (Although it's not listed in the *Mordenkainen's* errata, with a Perception modifier of +8, their passive Perception should be 18, not 15, as published.) However, since they lack spellcasting ability, their primary attack is Strength-based, and their top non-Wisdom scores are Strength and Dexterity, I'm going to classify them as shock attackers. Move fast, hit hard.

Howlers have darkvision and therefore attack between dusk and dawn. They're resistant to cold, fire, and lightning damage, along with physical damage from nonmagical attacks, so they're not going to pay particular attention to a spellslinger who doesn't think outside the box. Acid or thunder damage gets their attention, but necrotic, radiant, psychic, or force damage is what really draws their ire.

A fiend with trained howlers by its side always travels with at least two, if not more; an independent pack of howlers comprises no fewer than four, allowing them to split up and still use Pack Tactics against two targets if need be. Still, be *very* careful about sending more howlers than party members at your player characters, because one howler is enough to put up a decent fight against even a 20th-level PC. I'd place the ceiling at one howler per PC, plus one additional howler per magic weapon, and that's assuming they're the only foes on the field.

Despite their Wisdom score, howlers are bloodthirsty creatures that won't shy away from a fight if they have *any* chance of victory. However, they do have a nose for target selection. My stock formula for a predator is "the young, the old, the weak, the isolated, and the oblivious," and these criteria are their starting point, to which they add one other: the frightened, i.e., those who've failed their saving throws against Mind-Breaking Howl. They deviate from these criteria only when they take damage of one of the types listed above.

Mind-Breaking Howl is a recharge ability—in other words, rationed, and therefore the powerful action they should lead with. But since Mind-Breaking Howl recharges only on a roll of 6, it's most likely a once-per-encounter ability. Being pack hunters, howlers have an instinctive understanding that they shouldn't all use it at once. Maybe, in fact, their dominance order is also the order in which they use their Howls.

The effect lasts only until the end of the Howling howler's next turn, and a successful saving throw confers immunity, so the idea is to try to use it repeatedly against those opponents who fail their saves. Once every opponent has succeeded, there's no more point in taking the Mind-Breaking Howl action, but I'm not sure howlers have the Intelligence to recognize that it's no longer having an effect; I think it's practically a reflex. If a howler's Howl recharges, it uses it, unless there's a higher-status howler whose Howl has also recharged, in which case it defers for the current turn. Before using

Mind-Breaking Howl, a howler instinctively positions itself to encompass at least six opponents—or every opponent, if there are six or fewer—within its conical area of effect.

When Mind-Breaking Howl is on cooldown, or when it's not a particular howler's turn to use it, howlers Multiattack, always attacking in concert with one another to take advantage of Pack Tactics. They're uncommonly tenacious: If they're tearing apart a victim, running up and hitting them won't make them stop, unless the attacker wields a magic weapon or, as mentioned before, deals one of the types of damage that cheeses them off. In this case, the one struck turns against whoever attacked it, as does one other. Any howler remaining continues to attack its chosen victim unless it's the only one left doing so, in which case it joins its fellows.

Their truculence is so intense that it overcomes their self-preservation instinct as long as they have even one ally present. Only when a howler is the last creature standing on its side does it retreat, and even then, it retreats only if it's at least moderately wounded (reduced to 63 hp or fewer). It uses the Dash action as it flees—unless its Mind-Breaking Howl happens to recharge, in which case it wheels around and uses that action against its pursuers (whether or not they've all succeeded on their saves against it) before resuming its exit.

DEVOURERS (V)

Don't let the neotenic proportions in the illustration in *Volo's* fool you: **Devourers** are big and mean enough to pick you up and stuff you inside their own rib cages. Which they do. It's a thing.

Fiends, though not technically demons, devourers seize humanoids and consume them body and soul, transforming them into undead creatures of power proportional to what they possessed in life.

Devourers have extraordinary Strength and Constitution; their Charisma is also very high, but they're melee-oriented brutes first and foremost. With above-average Intelligence, they're fairly good at guessing who's going to be susceptible to which of their abilities, though these guesses are by no means infallible. With 120 feet of darkvision, they're not creatures you're ever going to encounter in broad daylight—strictly at night, indoors, and/or underground. According to the flavor text, they aren't even found on the material plane all that often.

Since their Multiattack includes a use of Imprison Soul or Soul Rend in addition to their melee attacks, and since Soul Rend's area of effect is centered on them, there's no reason for them not to charge straight into combat. In fact, Soul Rend synergizes with melee combat, punishing opponents for engaging with it toe-to-toe. Despite its slow Recharge (only on a roll of 6), the devourer has every incentive to use it whenever it can—if it can affect at least four opponents within the 20-foot radius. Fewer than that, not worth it, and its Armor Class and damage resistances aren't quite good enough for it to be willing to risk more than one opportunity attack to reposition itself just to affect a fourth enemy with Soul Rend. Five or six? Play it by ear.

Imprison Soul is easy to misconstrue and requires a couple of close reads to understand what it does. “The devourer chooses a living humanoid with 0 hit points”—in other words, this ability functions only against opponents who have already been knocked out. It has no effect on an opponent who's wounded but still fighting. Therefore, the devourer's first priority is to get an opponent down to 0 hp.

For this reason, once the devourer picks an opponent, it single-mindedly focuses *all* its attacks on that one opponent. When making its initial selection, it goes for the softest humanoid target it can easily get at, ignoring nonhumanoids completely. It doesn't have any special movement ability, so it may have a hard time reaching a squishy spellcaster in the back line—although if one has thoughtlessly mispositioned themselves within easy reach, you're contractually obligated as the DM to punish that PC's mistake.

A devourer can't “read” PCs' stats the way extraordinarily intelligent monsters can, but you can assume it can tell the difference between a PC with a Constitution of 16 or more and one with Con 10 or 12, and between one with Con 10 or 12 and one with Con 7 or 8. You can also assume it knows that dwarves are somewhat tougher than other humanoid PCs on average, and of course it knows that heavy armor is hard to hurt someone through.

As an example, let's look at a party I was DM for at one point:

- A human barbarian with Con 17 and no armor.
- A halfling ranger/rogue with Con 9 and light armor.
- A human paladin with Con 12 and heavy armor.

- A dwarf druid with Con 15 and medium armor.
- A human bard with Con 16 and light armor.
- A dwarf ranger with Con 13 and light armor.

Out of this lineup, the devourer would immediately rule out the barbie (clearly much too tough), the pally (too well-armed), and the druid (just a little too difficult in too many ways). Of the remaining three, the halfling looks like the easiest target, followed by the dwarf ranger and the bard. But the bard is a supporter, while the halfling is a sniper and the dwarf ranger is a skirmisher. The devourer would probably find the bard easiest to get at; if so, it would target him, despite his high Constitution, rather than the halfling or the dwarf ranger.

Having chosen a target, the devourer beelines for them and immediately Multiattacks, Clawing twice. If there are at least four enemies within 20 feet—or if there are fewer than four enemies altogether, and they’re all within 20 feet—it also pops Soul Rend immediately. If not, it holds off on Soul Rend until that criterion is met (or until three turns have gone by without its coming to pass).

On its next turn, it continues to viciously Multiattack the same target (with Soul Rend, if applicable) until its target is reduced to 0 hp. At this point, it now knows roughly how much damage it had to deal to take its target down. It doesn’t want to *kill* the target before it can use Imprison Soul against it, but if it can safely make another Claw attack in order to force its target to fail a couple of death saves before getting sucked into its torso, it does, because that makes its job easier. Thus, if the target had 100 hp or more at the start of the combat encounter, the devourer makes one more gratuitous Claw attack against them (advantage, auto-crit on hit). Then it uses Imprison Soul against the target and moves on to deliver any remaining Claw attack(s) against whoever is its next priority.

Imprison Soul is an *automatic* ability: There’s no roll to hit and no saving throw against it. The death saves take place on the target’s turn, and—this is crucial—*there’s no way to get the target out of the devourer*, aside from, implicitly, destroying the devourer. There’s also no way to reach the target to deliver a touch-required healing spell.

What if an ally uses, say, *healing word* against the target? As far as I can infer, they’re revived—but still trapped inside the devourer’s body. Can the devourer reach inside itself with its claws to attack a revived prisoner? Based on the illustration (and with nothing else to go on), I’d say yes, but since the stat block says nothing about the imprisoned creature’s being restrained, the devourer doesn’t have advantage on this attack, and I’d say the prisoner probably even has half cover from the devourer’s own ribs. However, Soul Rend definitely affects any imprisoned creature, conscious or not, and you should count the imprisoned soul toward the four-opponents criterion for using this ability.

When the victim fails their last death save, the devourer *immediately* regains 25 hp and the use of Soul Rend, although it can’t use the latter until its turn comes around. At that point, it vomits out its victim, who has now become a wight (if you’re throwing a devourer at PCs of level 5 or lower, you’re guilty of DM malpractice). Thoroughly cheesed off that its erstwhile allies let this happen to it, it takes out its resentment against an opponent whom the devourer passed up as too hard a target. The devourer also gains an additional action—which can be another Multiattack, *including the refreshed Soul Rend*. This is a cascade failure situation for the devourer’s opponents. Seriously, don’t throw a devourer at your PCs unless you’re confident that they have their act together enough to head off a total party kill. In fact, maybe wait till they’re at least level 11 to even consider it—and give them some advance warning in the form of lore about what devourers do, so they know how seriously to take the threat.

Devourers are both fiends and fanatics. Even though they don’t respawn in the Abyss upon being destroyed on another plane, as demons do, they’re not going to run away, no matter how much damage they’ve taken.

YUGOLOTHS (M)

The lowest-level of the yugoloths in *Mordenkainen’s* is the **merrenoloth**, and it’s something I haven’t come across elsewhere: a low-level monster that nevertheless has lair actions with regional effects. Merrenoloths normally pilot ferryboats on the River Styx (canonically, Charon is the head of their guild), but they can be summoned and hired to captain vessels on other planes. When a merrenoloth accepts such a contract, the vessel becomes its lair.

The lair actions don’t do much to protect the merrenoloth itself; rather, they protect the vessel under its command, allowing the merrenoloth to restore hit points to a damaged vessel, speed it away from pursuers (or toward another vessel it’s pursuing), or interfere with flying attackers. The merrenoloth itself, in fact, would rather not fight at all—it would

rather just do its job. Consequently, it never comes to the aid of another *creature*. It engages in combat only if threatened directly.

When it is threatened, it defends itself partly by spellcasting and partly by striking with an oversize oar, which it seems to wield as a finesse weapon, judging by its attack bonus and damage. Its ability contour is interesting: part spellslinger, part melee shock attacker. But it doesn't have much in the way of damaging ranged spells; its strongest offensive gambit is *gust of wind*, which it can use to try to shove enemies overboard. I say "try to," because its spell save DC of 13 is not impressive; even low-level fighting classes will beat it at least half the time. On the other hand, it affects an area 60 feet long and 10 feet wide, so it's usable against several foes at once, at least one of whom is likely to fail their save.

Without strong spells to lob from a distance, the merrenoloth has to find a combat sequence that allows it to do a bunch of damage, then skedaddle. Its Teleport trait helps with this, allowing it to bamf 60 feet in any direction *as a bonus action*. This addition to its action economy is crucial, granting it extra mobility to accompany its attack. How much? Enough to carry it to almost any location on the deck of the ship depicted in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, appendix C—which would be a sailing ship with two ballistae and no mangonel, according to the naval combat rules in *Ghosts of Saltmarsh*, appendix A—or the sample sailing ship in *Saltmarsh*.

The merrenoloth's first priority is to protect its vessel, and its second is to protect itself; there is no third priority. To protect its vessel from boarders, above all else, it must maintain control over the helm and the mainmast. Therefore, its first action in combat is to cast *darkness* at the fore edge of the quarterdeck, engulfing most of the rear half of the ship in blackness. Darkvision doesn't penetrate it—but the merrenoloth has blindsight, suckas! (On the three-masted *Saltmarsh* sailing ship, it has to center the spell 5 feet ahead of the edge of the quarterdeck. On the warship, the helm is too far back to include the mainmast along with it, so the merrenoloth obscures the helm and the mizzenmast instead.)

To complete its turn, it uses Teleport as a bonus action: If it's outside the sphere of *darkness*, it teleports inside, and if it's already inside the sphere, it transports itself 10 feet from its current position to some other point inside it, so that anyone trying to attack the square they last saw it in will connect with nothing but air.

During combat, for the most part, the merrenoloth is content to defend itself. It targets those who've attacked it, leaving others be. As much as possible, it does its fighting within the sphere of *darkness*; if its concentration on that spell is broken somehow, it casts it again as soon as it can. Otherwise, it uses its Oar attack against a melee opponent within reach (with advantage, natch, since it can sense its opponent but its opponent can't see it), then its Fear Gaze, which it uses first against melee foes and then against anyone attacking it at range. Finally, as a bonus action, it Teleports again to another point in the sphere, just to mess up opponents who aren't tracking its position by listening for it.

Darkness, incidentally, doesn't shut down its ability to use Fear Gaze—its blindsight allows it to "see" its targets without actually *seeing* them. However, being frightened of the merrenoloth in the area of a *darkness* spell is a funny thing. The darkness itself imposes disadvantage on the frightened foe's attack rolls, but being frightened doesn't, because the foe can't see the merrenoloth! (They still can't willingly move closer to it, though, because they can *bear* where it is—even if they're not paying close enough attention to use that sensory input to direct their attacks.) The upshot is, Fear Gaze is primarily prophylaxis: a way to keep imposing disadvantage on incoming attacks even if *darkness* is dispelled.

The Oar/Fear Gaze Multiattack, combined with Teleport, is solid, but what the merrenoloth really wants is to perform its *pièce de résistance* combo, which begins with *gust of wind*. All the time it's fighting, the merrenoloth watches carefully for the chance to blow at least four of its enemies down (along with no more than one or two of the crew of its own vessel). When they're fortuitously arrayed, the merrenoloth gets into position (via normal movement if it can, Teleport if it must) and casts *gust of wind* to knock as many of them overboard as it can. Most likely, one or two foes will stand firm, and the merrenoloth will just have to continue smacking them with its oar. But if it gets lucky and manages to blow four or more opponents into the water, it follows up on its next turn with *control water*, creating a Whirlpool beneath them. Then, if it's managed to clear the deck of all its enemies, it uses its strong wind lair action to sail away. Bon voyage!

A merrenoloth's ship never sinks, "even if its hull is breached." But if the ship is smashed to smithereens and the merrenoloth falls in the water—well, for one thing, it's released from its contract, because there's no longer any ship to captain. It also has a 40-foot swimming speed, superior to its walking speed, which allows it to flee effectively from any pursuers. As it flees, it uses Fear Gaze to further dissuade any especially good swimmers before switching to the Dash action. As long as its ship remains seaworthy, however, it fights to the death.

That being said, a merrenoloth can tell *very* quickly if a fight is hopeless, and since its chief obligation is to guide its vessel safely to its destination, it promptly calls a halt to combat and offers to parley if there's any chance at all that it can bargain or buy its way out of the situation rather than fight its way out.

Dhergoloths are the riot cops of Gehenna, fiends with a unique knack for mowing down mobs. Creatures of instinct, they show little independent judgment and no flexibility; if you start them up, they never stop.

Their exceptional Strength and Constitution stand out among their other, very unexceptional ability scores. They're brutes, and they wouldn't make ranged attacks even if they had any ability to do so. Their bodies are organic riot gear, resistant to physical damage from nonmagical weapons, cold, fire, and lightning, and fully immune to acid and poison. They have 60 feet of darkvision *and* 60 feet of blindsight, which, as we'll see, is key to their approach to combat.

Dhergoloths can cast *darkness* and *fear* at will. *Darkness* works well for them indeed, since they have blindsight. *Fear*, however, can be problematic if you want to kill your foes rather than simply make them go away. Given that both *fear* and *darkness* require concentration, and thus can't be used at the same time, *darkness* is nearly always the better choice for dhergoloths—and they don't have the Intelligence to recognize situational exceptions. They cast *fear* only if ordered to, and not always then.

They also have three uses per day of *sleep*. By the time PCs are capable enough to fight a dhergoloth—we're looking at level 5, minimum, and probably level 11 or higher if the dhergoloth is one of a group of foes—an innately cast *sleep* spell, which can't be boosted and therefore affects only an average of 22 hp of creatures, isn't likely to take down even a single PC (unless they're already badly injured). This weakness is disappointing, because if a dhergoloth were capable of putting any meaningful number of PCs to sleep, it would make a couple of scary attacking combinations possible.

Dhergoloths have two offensive actions, a simple Claw attack (its Multiattack lets it Claw twice) and Flailing Claws, which recharges. Note well the wording of Flailing Claws, which includes, "The dhergoloth moves up to its walking speed in a straight line." In other words, this is a Dash action that also deals damage, with the limitation that it can't change direction once it starts moving. When it uses this action, it still has its entire regular, nondamaging movement in addition to the damaging movement it gains from Flailing Claws.

Unlike a lot of damage-dealing actions that require saving throws to resist, Flailing Claws deals no damage on a successful save, only on a failure. Its DC of 14 isn't terribly hard to beat: Most mid-to-high-level adventurers can do so a little more than half the time. So when should a dhergoloth use it? Normally, per Targets in Areas, a 30-foot linear effect shouldn't be expected to include more than one opponent—in this case, two, since it's effectively two 5-foot-wide linear effects side by side—so anything more than that is dandy, right? Except that you also have to account for the likelihood that roughly two out of three targets will succeed on their saves. Therefore, I'd say a dhergoloth doesn't use Flailing Claws unless it can plow through at least six opponents along its path; that way, it has a reasonable chance of carving up at least two of the six. Alternatively, if it has fewer than six opponents, it refrains unless it can charge through all of them. If this requires some repositioning beforehand, it uses its movement to do so, and it doesn't worry about opportunity attacks unless and until it's been struck by a magic weapon.

Now, in the hypothetical scenario in which a dhergoloth could actually make *sleep* work, the unconscious victims would automatically fail their Dex saves, and Flailing Claws would hit all of them (though not crit, since Flailing Claws technically isn't an attack). But *sleep*, unboosted, has a hard ceiling of 40 hp; by level 11, even most wizards will have that, while barbarians often have that many hit points by level 4. Unless you're intentionally going for a shamefully unfair TPK against a party of low-level patsies, *sleep* is only good for use on innocent bystanders, or to bring a hard fight to an early finish.

Wait—did I say "a 30-foot linear effect" up there? That's only true if the dhergoloth's base speed is unmodified. If the dhergoloth is subjected to an effect that increases its speed—say, a *haste* spell, which doubles it—that effect increases the range of Flailing Claws by the same amount, making it more likely that the dhergoloth can reach the threshold number of targets.

When Flailing Claws is on cooldown, the Claw/Claw Multiattack is the default. This is where *darkness* comes into play, because being inside the sphere of unholy murk grants the dhergoloth advantage on its attack rolls and imposes disadvantage on those of its opponents, unless they have some means of seeing through magical darkness (and that possibility is too advanced for a dhergoloth to contemplate). Once cast, *darkness* can't be moved—it could be if a dhergoloth cast it on an object, but alas, they're not smart enough to try that unless instructed to by a smarter commander—so it's more helpful in confined spaces than in large, open ones.

Darkness takes an action to cast, can be sustained for up to 10 minutes, and requires concentration. These points suggest that a dhergoloth uses it to initiate combat and get the drop on its targets, exploiting their confusion. Anytime *darkness* is knocked down—e.g., with a *daylight* spell, or by breaking their concentration—the dhergoloth’s next action is to cast it again.

In addition to their various damage immunities and resistances, dhergoloths have quite a few hit points. For a hit to register as painful, it has to deal at least 12 damage *after* any applicable reduction. When this happens, a dhergoloth uses Flailing Claws if it’s available, regardless of the number of targets it can strike, to simultaneously retaliate and relocate—but if Flailing Claws isn’t available, rather than Multiattack, the dhergoloth Teleports to another location, ideally another location within its sphere of *darkness*. (Teleport takes it to “an unoccupied space it can see”; blindsight allows it to “see” through *darkness*, well enough for it to count for the purposes of the feature.) When a dhergoloth uses Flailing Claws after a hit that deals 12 damage or more, it doesn’t worry about how many opponents it can get; it mainly wants to hurt the enemy who hurt it, and collateral damage is nice but not necessary. If engaged in melee by two or more foes who can inflict damage that it’s not immune or resistant to, it Teleports away—preferably next to a weaker foe whom it can abuse with impunity.

When dhergoloths aren’t busily engaged in melee, they aggressively pursue foes who try to run away. If their movement alone won’t allow them to keep up, they’ll use the Teleport action to jump into a foe’s path—within their 5-foot reach, so that if the foe tries to turn and run back the way they came, they’ll be subject to an opportunity attack.

Like all yugoloths, a dhergoloth destroyed outside its home plane isn’t killed, only driven back to that plane to re-form.^{II} However, dhergoloths aren’t bright enough to think about the implications of what plane they’re on (or, possibly, even to *know* what plane they’re on), and their normal self-preservation instinct kicks in when they’re seriously wounded (reduced to 47 hp or fewer), wherever they happen to be. That instinct moves them to Teleport 60 feet away—the maximum possible distance—and keep going with the remainder of their movement.

Canoloths are quadrupedal, weirdly doglike yugoloths whose function, like that of many other dogs, is to stand guard. They have expertise in Perception and Investigation, 120 feet of truesight, and immunity to surprise (unless they happen to be incapacitated), and their very presence suppresses teleportation out to a radius of 60 feet. Good luck sneaking up on these beasties.

They have exceptional Strength, Constitution, and Wisdom, but their Wisdom influences only their senses, not their combat abilities; they’re not spellcasters. Really, therefore, they’re just brutes that happen to have exceptionally high Perception—and, perhaps, a particular knack for knowing how much threat an enemy or group of enemies poses. However, with their low Intelligence, they can’t do much with this information; it’s not going to have a meaningful effect on how they act.

Normally, the modus operandi of a brute is to charge and engage, but if it were so easy to entice a fairly stupid guard fiend away from whatever it was guarding, it wouldn’t be much of a guard. Thus, rather than leave its post to charge intruders, a canoloth lashes out at them with a spiky, prehensile tongue—with a 30-foot reach!—and yanks them into melee range.

The canoloth doesn’t distinguish between enemies. It simply attacks whichever one is the first to get too close to it. When a trespasser wanders into its 30-foot zone of control, it Multiattacks, choosing the Tongue/Claws combination. On a hit, the Tongue attack grapples and restrains its target and pulls the target up to the canoloth. Since the target is restrained, the canoloth then makes its Claws attack with advantage.

As long as it’s grappling a foe with its tongue (it can hold only one at a time this way), it continues to Multiattack that foe, switching to Bite/Claws once it’s holding them adjacent to it, and continues to have advantage on its attack rolls as it does so. What if allies of its target rush in and try to distract it? They can’t. Like a terrier worrying a rat, it keeps attacking whichever foe it has its tongue wrapped around and doesn’t let up for anything. If the target manages to escape (the DC is 15, pretty doable for mid-to-high-level PCs) and tries to get away, it makes an opportunity attack with Bite. (Tongue is a ranged weapon attack, so it has no reach and therefore can’t be used to make opportunity attacks.)

However, that’s if no one else has closed in to engage it in melee. Then it has to decide whether to seize its fleeing quarry or deal with the more immediate problem. The basis for this, as with the dhergoloth, is whether an opponent can hurt it badly enough with damage that gets past its immunities (acid, poison) and resistances (cold, fire, lightning, physical damage from nonmagical weapons). If a melee attacker successfully deals 12 damage or more to a canoloth, it switches its attention

to them, using a Bite/Claws Multiattack; if more than one melee attacker deals 12 damage or more, it attacks whichever has dealt the most. If no melee attacker deals 12 damage or more but a ranged attacker does, and that ranged attacker is within 30 feet, it tries to snatch them with Tongue/Claws. If the ranged attacker is out of reach, or if no melee attacker manages to do enough damage, it picks a melee opponent at random. A canoloth taking damage from a ranged attacker more than 30 feet away which has no melee opponent within reach howls in frustration and telepathically tries to summon help—but it still doesn't leave its post. No matter how much damage it takes, it never flees, not even on its home plane.

On rare occasions, a canoloth may be ordered to seize and hold a trespasser rather than kill it outright. When so ordered, a canoloth still follows its normal combat heuristic—it doesn't know any other, and this one works—but it makes its final blow nonlethal.

On to the **hydroloth**, a toadlike denizen of the River Styx that presumably shows up from time to time in the water features of the material world. Hydroloths are technically Amphibious, able to breathe both water and air, but they have very little reason ever to want to come out of the water, because that's where all their advantages lie.

Hydroloths have an unusual ability contour: extraordinary Dexterity (first) and Intelligence (second), with very high Constitution coming in third. What to make of this? It seems like first and foremost they're designed for fast melee assault, since they don't have any ranged weapon attack that could take advantage of that Dex. Secondly, they rely on magic, in the form of Innate Spellcasting and Steal Memory. Finally, if they need to tank it out for a bit, they have the Constitution to do that; they prefer to settle a fight quickly and decisively, but they'll settle for an attrition battle if they must. They're extremely good at assessing the specific weaknesses of their opponents—good enough to read stats off a character sheet—but with a Wisdom of only 10, they tend to be indiscriminate in their target selection and slow to figure out when they're outmatched.

Hydroloths are immune to acid and poison and resistant to cold, lightning, and physical damage from normal weapons. They're vulnerable to fire, but creatures fully immersed in water have resistance to fire damage (*Player's Handbook*, chapter 9, "Underwater Combat"), so fire deals normal damage to them underwater; even so, they dislike and avoid it. Like dhergoloths and merrenoloths, they have overlapping darkvision and blindsight, making *darkness* (which they can cast at will) particularly advantageous for them. They have Magic Resistance, and therefore no particular fear of spellcasters, and they're immune to the memory-wiping effects of the Styx, as well as to mind reading.

They have an unusual and interesting Multiattack that gives them a choice between two melee attacks (Bite/Bite does marginally more damage than Bite/Claws or Claws/Claws, so unless the target is wearing *armor of vulnerability* that provides resistance to piercing damage but vulnerability to slashing damage, I can't think of a reason not to choose Bite/Bite) and one melee attack plus a spell. The latter option is appealing, given that we're looking at a creature that's probably a hybrid of melee fighter and spellcaster, but to exceed the opportunity cost, the spell has to offer something more than a second Bite attack would. What are the choices?

- *Control water* is especially potent if the hydroloth's enemies are adjacent to water rather than in it: By raising the waterline with the Flood option, the hydroloth can turn a large area into its own preferred turf. The Part Water and Whirlpool options are useful in other circumstances, but when it comes to storming the beach, Flood is the hydroloth's jam. A caveat: Because it requires concentration, the hydroloth can't have *control water* going at the same time as *darkness* (which is going to be a recurring theme).
- *Crown of madness* compels an opponent to switch sides and deal damage on the hydroloth's behalf. However, an opponent with a Wisdom saving throw modifier greater than +1 has too good a chance of succeeding on the initial save, and an opponent with a Wisdom save mod of +1 or +0 has a decent chance of shaking it off in round 2. Also, the hydroloth has to use its own actions to maintain control of the charmed opponent, so this doesn't add anything to its action economy; if anything, it detracts from it. Why do it, then? A couple of possibilities: *Crown of madness* has *very* long range—120 feet—and therefore allows a hydroloth to deal melee damage indirectly without being anywhere near the fight. Not a bad way to soften one's enemies up before engaging oneself. Also, if the charmed target is capable of dealing more damage in one turn than the hydroloth is—unlikely, but possible—using its action to force the opponent to attack is better for the hydroloth than using its action to make attacks of its own. Like *control water*, *crown of madness* requires concentration to sustain.
- *Fear* requires concentration as well, and it drives opponents away when the hydroloth probably wants to keep them around to make melee attacks against them. It does have one magnificently dirty application, though: It causes its

targets to drop what they're holding if they fail their saves. If the hydroloth is being attacked by a foe with a magic weapon—which deals full damage to it—casting *fear* has a chance of making the foe drop it. And if combat is taking place in the water, the dropped magic weapon doesn't just clatter to the ground: It sinks into the depths, whence the hydroloth can go fetch it later, when it's convenient. Against two or more opponents in the area of effect who are wielding magic weapons, this application alone makes *fear* quite appealing. (It also suggests that any PC willing and able to dive for a hydroloth's loot stash should find at least a couple of nice magic weapons in it.)

- *Phantasmal killer* is a trap option. A spell save DC of 16 isn't high enough to nullify the two fundamental flaws of this spell, which are (a) that it does no damage when it's first cast, merely imposes the frightened condition, and (b) that just one successful saving throw shuts it down. The damage the spell deals on a failed save—4d10, or an average of 22—doesn't arrive until the end of the target's turn, and only if the target fails two saves in a row. For a target to have at least a two-thirds chance of failing a DC 16 Wisdom save twice in succession, it would have to have a Wisdom saving throw modifier of -2 or worse. Granted, if you have a -2 or worse Wisdom save mod, the hydroloth knows it, and if you have a -1 or better, it knows that, too; it's not going to blow this opportunity on the wrong target. But for the DM, the easiest course of action is simply to rule this spell out and never think about it again.
- *Suggestion* has its uses, most of which lie outside the boundaries of a combat encounter with a hydroloth. Against most creatures, the *suggestion* has to be made telepathically. And, again, it requires concentration.
- *Darkness* is powerful for the hydroloth, which can cast it at will. Because it has blindsight, *darkness* imposes no penalty at all on the hydroloth's attacks and in fact gives it advantage on attacks against any target who doesn't have some ability to penetrate the magical blackout, while imposing disadvantage on those targets' own attacks. This is a good deal anytime, but it's especially good anytime a hydroloth finds itself in the unpleasant circumstance of having to fight on land. It's less spectacular underwater, where the hydroloth already has advantage on all its attacks, but giving your opponents disadvantage is still better than not giving them disadvantage. If it's casting *darkness* as part of a Multiattack, the hydroloth casts the spell first, then attacks its blinded target.
- *Detect magic* requires concentration and is better cast before combat than during. Just assume that the hydroloth has cast it already as routine reconnaissance and knows what kind of juju the PCs are packing.
- *Dispel magic* does *not* require concentration, making it a spell that the hydroloth can cast flexibly whenever it needs to, whatever else it's doing; the hydroloth can also cast it at will. "Any spell of 3rd level or lower on the target ends." *Water breathing* is a 3rd-level spell. Who feels like drowning today? There are any number of other excellent buff spells that a hydroloth might want to snuff out (*baste, enlarge/reduce, invisibility, protection from evil and good, magic weapon*), but *water breathing* is at the top of the list.
- *Invisibility*, which requires concentration, is somewhat redundant to *darkness*: Both have the effect of concealing the hydroloth from foes it can see, giving it advantage on attacks against them, and giving them disadvantage on attacks against it. Moreover, *invisibility* terminates as soon as the hydroloth casts a spell or makes an attack; *darkness* doesn't. So why cast *invisibility* instead? Well, a commonly observed problem with *darkness* is that, unless it's filling an entire enclosed space, targets can simply walk out of it, provided they know which direction to go. Also, unless it's cast on a moving or movable object, its area of effect is stationary; *invisibility* goes wherever the hydroloth goes. So I'd say whether to cast *darkness* or *invisibility* is mainly a function of three things: How confined is the battlespace (*darkness* the more confined it is, *invisibility* the less confined it is), is the hydroloth's posture aggressive (*darkness*) or defensive (*invisibility*), and does it need the effect to last through attacking and spellcasting (*darkness*) or not (*invisibility*)?
- *Water walk* seems at first to be more dead weight. Why does a hydroloth want to hop around *on top of* water when it has advantage on attack rolls while *submerged in* water? But the hydroloth doesn't cast *water walk* on itself. It gives this ability to allied creatures so that they don't suffer memory erasure from falling into the Styx. For the right price, it might even sell this service to your PCs.

In addition to its spells, the hydroloth has two non-attack actions: Teleport (60-foot range, otherwise self-explanatory) and Steal Memory. Steal Memory is the unique and interesting one. Usable only once a day, and therefore only against one opponent, it inflicts 4d6 psychic damage and potentially wipes their memory, taking away all their proficiencies, spells, and capacity to communicate. This action is the closest thing the hydroloth has to a ranged attack. It sounds like quite a bit of

damage, but it's not, really: On average, it comes out to 14, no better than a simple Claws attack. The other stuff is what matters.

The hydroloth knows all this. The thing is, though, it isn't a particularly disciplined creature, and as I mentioned before, it's indiscriminate about its target selection—mostly. Once again, we're looking at a save DC of 16, which is decent but not outstanding. Against a target with a +1 or lower Intelligence save modifier, it can be expected to work at least two-thirds of the time. Against a target with a better save mod, it starts to look like a waste of an action.

I resolve the matter thusly: The hydroloth uses Steal Memory against whoever has the poorest chances of resisting it. That much, it can tell. It has no other criteria. It doesn't say, "Oh, it would be really useful to take *this* person out of the fight for reasons *x*, *y*, and *z*; I should give Steal Memory a shot against them." Nah, it just looks around, sizes its opponents up, decides whether any of them seems mediocre in the IQ department, and hits 'em with it. If there's no good target, then it probably doesn't bother.

Taken together, these features and traits form an incoherent package. To make sense of it, we have to figure out what the hydroloth's priorities are. Is stealing memories the main goal or just a means to an end? The flavor text offers a clue, suggesting that hydroloths aren't independent agents at all—that they have masters that they serve, and that they deliver the stolen memories to those masters. But it also suggests that they contract out to attack ships or seaside settlements. So I think we need to begin with the premise that they have two main jobs, each with a different modus operandi. Possibly three main jobs, actually, since attacking a ship and attacking a fishing village are tasks that call for different approaches.

If the job is to steal memories, the hydroloth's abilities make it almost unfairly easy. Using *invisibility* to approach within 60 feet of a promising target, the hydroloth uses its Steal Memory action against them... then leaves. Steal Memory technically isn't an attack or a spell, so using this feature doesn't break the hydroloth's invisibility. The target is left with a splitting headache, a mere fraction of their former brainpower (if they fail their saving throw), and no explanation. The hydroloth doesn't even need to fight if its target's allies don't immediately start scouring the area for it. We can't even call this a combat encounter, really: It's a MacGuffin, a hook that sends the party off on a quest for answers and a cure.

A hydroloth attacking a ship can't try to demolish the ship directly, the way, say, a kraken can, but it can attack the ship indirectly, by using *control water* to Part Water or create a Whirlpool underneath it. Part Water, over 100 feet of depth or less, is an *extremely* dirty trick: First, it causes the ship to fall to the bottom of the trench, where it topples over on its side because it can't balance on its keel. Once that's happened, the hydroloth can simply drop the spell and let the water pouring into the trench fill the ship up so that it no longer floats. (Does the descent deal falling damage to the ship and everyone on it? I'd say no: The water beneath the ship parts; it doesn't *vanish*. As the water parts, the ship slides down into the part, rapidly but not so rapidly that it would result in free fall. Both ship and crew might take falling damage from the ship's subsequent toppling, but that would amount to only about 20 feet's worth.) Over deeper water, or if you feel like this stunt is too unsporting, you can use the Whirlpool option instead and deal 2d8 bludgeoning damage per round to the ship's hull. That's not going to make much of a dent in a 300 hp sailing ship, though. The Flood option doesn't work against most ships: They're too large to be capsized by the wave.

Aside from making players' jaws drop, the chief advantage of the Part Water maneuver is that it forces all the hydroloth's opponents into the water, where it has Watery Advantage, a 40-foot swimming speed (compared with the 15-foot speed that most humanoid opponents will have), and no need to either hold its breath or employ magic to avoid drowning.

Before it does any of this, however, the hydroloth approaches the ship under cover of *invisibility*, situates itself directly underneath, then switches to *detect magic* to do a sweep for magic weapons, buff spells, and other arcane effects of note. When that's done, it switches back to *invisibility* (gotta love those at-will Innate Spellcasting spells!), moves 40 feet away from the ship, then switches to *control water* to open the trench.

Once the hydroloth's enemies are in the drink with it, the real hostilities commence. Normally, it just zeroes in on the most isolated enemy within movement range and Bites twice. But there are a few exceptions: If its sweep revealed one or more magic weapons, it follows a path that lets it cast *fear* (area of effect: 30-foot cone) on those wielding them, in an attempt to make them drop them; it does this as the first part of its Multiattack, then closes to melee distance and Bites as the second part. If the sweep revealed a troublesome buff on the enemy it's going after, it casts *dispel magic* first, then closes to melee distance and Bites. If at least three of its enemies are all within 15 feet of a central point, it casts *darkness* to envelop them, then closes and Bites. And if at least two enemies who've managed to hold on to their magic weapons engage it in

melee, it Bites first, then casts *invisibility*, denying opportunity attacks, and slips away from them; on its next turn, if those enemies have Wisdom saving throw modifiers of +3 or lower, it tries *fear* on them again, and if they don't, it pursues an easier target. It uses Steal Memory if and only if it has a suitable target in range and can't reach any melee opponent.

Fighting on land differs from fighting in the water in a couple of ways. First, the hydroloth doesn't bother to come ashore to reconnoiter for magic stuff, because the *fear* stunt doesn't have the same effect as it does in deep water. Instead, it leads with *control water*, immediately Flooding the shore. Second, it can't use *invisibility*, *darkness*, *fear*, or *crown of madness* while fighting onshore, because all these spells would require it to drop concentration on *control water*. Now, if its concentration on *control water* is *broken*, that's another matter. A beached hydroloth summons another Flood if it can, but once it's out of uses of *control water*, it casts *darkness* or *invisibility* instead. If it's using *darkness*, it casts the spell as the first part of its Multiattack so that it can gain advantage on its attack roll in the second. If it's using *invisibility*, it attacks first and casts the spell second, so that it can avoid opportunity attacks and remain unseen between turns. While fighting, it tries to keep its back to the open water, not because it means to flee that way but to try to bait its opponents into following it there. If they do, it can try to trap them there with a *control water* Whirlpool (if it has any use of that spell left).

In fact, a hydroloth anywhere other than Gehenna, Hades, or the Styx itself doesn't flee at all—it knows its essence will re-form if its physical vessel is destroyed. But like other yugoloths, a hydroloth can be killed on its home turf, and if it's seriously wounded (reduced to 54 hp or fewer) in one of these locations, it Teleports as far away from its enemies as it can, then swims away at top speed.

The **yagnoloth** is bonkers. What's more, it's a very particular and distinctive kind of bonkers—so much so that I was sure it must be the invention of a particular fifth edition writer until I did my due diligence and found that it dates back to the AD&D *Monster Manual II*.

Yagnoloths are daemonic contract lawyers and commanders of lower-level yugoloths. Although they're Large creatures, they possess asymmetrical, mismatched arms, one of them Medium and the other Huge. Ability-wise, they have no real weakness: The nadir of their ability contour is their Dexterity, which is still well above humanoid average. Their Strength and Constitution are highest, making them brutes, but they also possess exceptional Charisma and very high Intelligence. They cast their spells from the front line.

They're as potent in social interaction as they are in combat, with Deception, Persuasion, and Insight modifiers equal to their attack bonuses, and they shamelessly use *suggestion*, which they can cast innately and at will, to try to compel other parties to accept less-than-favorable terms. Like most yugoloths, they're immune to acid and poison damage and resistant to cold, fire, and lightning damage, along with physical damage from nonmagical weapons. They have advantage on saving throws against magic, they can't be poisoned, they have overlapping blindsight and darkvision, and unless you speak Abyssal or Infernal, they talk directly into your thoughts.

Lots of creatures have Teleport as an action, but the yagnoloth can include Teleport in a Multiattack, a rare combination that I've seen only once before, in the nycaloth. This Multiattack combo, of course, allows it to appear right behind an enemy and clout them with its Massive Arm (LOL) or, conversely, make a Massive Arm attack and then blink away.

The yagnoloth has an unusually great number of possible orders of attack, making it not only useful but necessary to examine each one individually, then compare and contrast them.

- Multiattack A: Massive Arm plus Electrified Touch. On average, if both attacks hit, deals 50 damage plus a chance to stun. At least one target must be immediately adjacent to the yagnoloth. The yagnoloth doesn't have to attack the same target twice, but if it does, it uses its Massive Arm first, since successfully stunning the target grants advantage on the follow-up Electrified Touch attack.
- Multiattack B: Massive Arm plus Teleport (order doesn't matter). On average, deals only 24 damage on a hit plus a chance to stun, but allows immediate relocation (up to 60 feet) before or after the attack. Target can be up to 15 feet from the yagnoloth.
- Life Leech: On average, deals 36 damage on a hit *and* grants the yagno 18 temporary hp. If we think of combat as an effort to continually increase the difference between one's own hp and one's enemy's, the average result of this attack action does so by 54 hp. The target can be up to 15 feet from the yagnoloth but must also be incapacitated; the yagno can choose incapacitated targets opportunistically, but more commonly, it's going to *create* the incapacitated

condition by stunning the target with a Massive Arm hit. Thus, Life Leech is nearly always preceded by a Massive Arm hit.

- **Battlefield Cunning:** Forgoes attack in favor of allowing *two* allied yugoloths to attack. This feature tells us two things. First, yagnos don't travel alone. This action is wasted if the yagno isn't accompanied by at least two other yugoloths. Second, for Battlefield Cunning to be a better choice than Multiattack A, the accompanying yugoloths must be strong enough that they can deal a total of at least 50 damage, on average, by making one successful attack each. But there are only two types of yugoloth that meet this criterion: the canoloth and the more powerful oinoloth, which is going to *command* yagnoloths, not follow them around acting as their bodyguards. Moreover, even the canoloth doesn't quite cut the mustard, since its attack bonus is only +7, vs. the yagno's +8; that 5 percentage point reduction in the likelihood of a hit means two canoloths fall just shy of the necessary total damage. These two facts don't invalidate Battlefield Cunning as a useful attacking feature, but they do place a condition on it: A yagno uses Battlefield Cunning only when it doesn't have targets within reach of its Massive Arm *and* its Electrified Touch, *and* Life Leech isn't available to it, *and* it's not recharging.

All that being said, aside from the fact that they shut down all teleportation within 60 feet, canoloths seem to be the best sidekicks for a yagnoloth; no other lower-level loth deals nearly as much damage with a single attack. If you want them to do the most damage, they need to deviate from their usual behavior and move within melee reach of enemies (or potential enemies) more than 15 feet away from the yagno, so that they can use their reactions to Bite. (If one has no foe within reach of its teeth, the reaction is wasted.) Alternatively, they can stay by the yagno's side and use their Tongue attack on their own turns to yoink enemies from between 20 and 30 feet away to within the yagno's reach, as well as grapple and restrain them for advantage on subsequent attack rolls.

- *Darkness* deals no damage, but it creates an overwhelmingly advantageous combat environment for the yagnoloth and its allies *if* its enemies can't simply walk out of the murksphere.
- *Lightning bolt*, to be used to best effect, requires at least four opponents to be lined up just so, in which case you can expect it to deal a total of around 84 damage (assuming a 50 percent chance of success on the save). Two are trivially easy to line up—any two points define a line—but three or four are harder to get. Since the yagno can cast *lightning bolt* only 3 times per day, and since striking two enemies rather than four deals only 42 total expected damage, less than Multiattack A, the yagno would prefer not to waste this spell against just two and does so only when it's getting desperate—say, it's already moderately wounded (reduced to 102 hp or fewer)—and doesn't have a better option available.
- *Dispel magic*, because it's cast innately, can't be boosted beyond its base level, so its effect against spells of 4th level and above is uncertain. It opposes them with a Charisma check, using its +4 modifier against a DC of 10 plus the spell's level, so unless it can somehow gain advantage on the check, there's no way to improve its chance of success above 55 percent—and that's only against a 4th-level spell. But have you already realized that the Help action can confer advantage on this check? All the yagno needs is an ally that can also cast *dispel magic* (the mezzoloth, nycaloth, hydroloth, merrenoloth, and oinoloth can all do this) and can afford to forgo its own attack in order to take the Help action instead, and *dispel magic* becomes a not-stupid countermeasure against a spell of 4th through 6th level. That said, how many such spells are worth forgoing *two* attack actions to dispel? A few possible candidates that come to mind are *circle of power*, *greater invisibility*, *confusion*, *hold monster*, *dispel evil and good*, *holy weapon*, and *globe of invulnerability*, and the more such spells are cast on a single target, the more appealing the stunt. Generally speaking, though, the only spells worth the two actions it costs to dispel them—not to mention the chance of failure—are ones that significantly weaken the yagnoloth or its allies or significantly strengthen the opposition (e.g., by giving extra damage or protection against fiends) and that the yagnoloth can't simply Teleport past.
- *Detect magic* isn't really a combat-oriented spell, but since the yagnoloth treats social interaction as if it were a form of combat, just assume that when you first meet a yagno, it's got *detect magic* on and keeps it on all the time. You think you can enter a negotiation with a yagno and get away with giving yourself a little magical edge? Nice try, meat. Once it's confirmed that the other party isn't trying to pull any arcane tricks, it may let *detect magic* drop in order to try to gain an unfair edge over *them* with *suggestion*.

So here's how our order of battle is looking, from strongest to weakest direct-damage attack:

- *Lightning bolt* against three or four targets.
- Life Leech (target must be incapacitated; stunned includes incapacitation; Massive Arm can stun).
- Multiattack (Massive Arm, Electrified Touch) against one target 15 feet away or closer and one 5 feet away or closer.
- Battlefield Cunning (two canoloths).
- *Lightning bolt* against two targets.
- Multiattack (Massive Arm, Teleport).

Darkness is at least as good as Battlefield Cunning if the battle takes place in a confined area, and *dispel magic* is at least as good as Multiattack B if there's magic that really needs dispelling. Even though it deals less damage, the yagnoloth favors Multiattack B over *lightning bolt* vs. two targets, because *lightning bolt* is limited-use, and Multiattack isn't. Only if there's no enemy within reach of its Massive Arm *even if it Teleports* does it fall back on *lightning bolt* against just two.

With respect to target selection, a yagnoloth is a good problem solver, and combat, at its core, is a problem to solve. It looks for the linchpin among its opponents, the one who holds the team together. This might be the strongest fighter, most powerful spellcaster, or most selfless healer, but it also might be the bard who's giving everyone buffs or the paladin with the protective aura. It strikes not at the most vulnerable individual per se but at the point where the *group* is most vulnerable. It also distinguishes between the deed and the doer: If the bard's buff spell is providing the party a key advantage but the bard himself doesn't have much power beyond that one spell, negating the spell will suffice, and the yagnoloth can then move on to a different target. It doesn't need to keep abusing the bard.

Mind you, a yagnoloth, despite being evil to the core, probably isn't going to pick a fight. Fighting is work, and that's not the job it's getting paid to do. (Unless it *is* the job it's getting paid to do.) Especially for a clever and charismatic fiend, talking is easier than fighting—*much* easier. With Wisdom 15, it's not going to let itself get taunted into a fight, either. If the punks who are taunting it are weaker (i.e., the encounter is Deadly), it may give them a tap with its Massive Arm to teach them some humility. But if it seems likely that they're stronger (i.e., the encounter is Easy, Medium, or Hard), it doesn't take the bait. Most of the time, a yagnoloth fights only in defense of itself or the yugoloths under its command.

Once it does deign to fight, its persistence depends on where it is. Outside its home plane, it has no reason ever to retreat: If its physical vessel is destroyed, its soul returns to its home plane for a new one. But when a yagnoloth is on its home plane, it has to mind its skin more assiduously. Being moderately wounded (reduced to 102 hp or fewer) on its home plane puts it in a mood to parley—but remember, yagnoloths have read *Getting to Yes* cover to cover and are exceptional dirty tricksters. Being seriously wounded (reduced to 58 hp or fewer) on its home plane will induce a yagnoloth to surrender—on the most favorable terms it can get its foes to accept.

Mordenkainen's talks about "**oinoloths**," e.g., "Oinoloths bring pestilence wherever they go." But various (mostly older) sources, including the third edition *Manual of the Planes*, refer to "*the* Oinoloth," a singular individual, and even give the Oinoloth a name: Anthraxus, a highly apropos name for a lord of disease, though maybe not the most creative. (Also worth noting: The Oinoloth's seat of power, the Wasting Tower of Khin-Oin, was situated originally in Hades, later in the Blood Rift, which begins in the Abyss and runs across the lower planes to the Nine Hells.)

Fifth edition D&D seems to dispense with all that. The oinoloth's listing in *Mordenkainen's* refers to this fiend only in the plural and gives it a challenge rating of 12—exceeded by ultroloths' CR 13. This profile hardly seems like that of an arch-ruler of yugoloths. Like the capital-*M* Minotaur, which D&D turned into a species of lowercase-*m* minotaurs, it appears that the capital-*O* Oinoloth has become a species of lowercase-*o* oinoloths—perhaps descendants of an earlier Oinoloth, although who'd want to produce offspring with an avatar of pestilence is a question probably best left unanswered.

The practical reason for considering this question is that if the oinoloth were a unique being, you'd only ever find one in any given combat encounter. But since fifth edition oinoloths seem not to be unique, not only is it possible to run into multiple oinoloths at once, at very high levels of play it seems downright probable.

Even more than the yagnoloth, the oinoloth is a fiend without a weakness: Its Strength and Charisma are extraordinary, and its lowest ability score is its very high Wisdom. It's a brute by default, but it can play any position it needs or wants to. The thick of battle is a good place for it, however, because of its Bringer of Plagues trait, which creates a 30-foot-radius area of blight that poisons creatures within it if they fail a saving throw.

Or is it? If this trait is taken literally, other yugoloths—including *the oinoloth itself*, as well as any other oinoloth on the field—would do well to stay out of this radius: Although they're universally immune to the poisoned condition, they're *not*

immune to the necrotic damage that the trait deals on a failed save. This creature feature isn't the first I've stumbled upon in *Mordenkainen's* that I think may not have been fully thought through, and a clarification from the Powers That Be would be welcome. I'd be inclined to stipulate, at the very least, that oinoloths themselves are immune to this effect; other yugoloths, perhaps, as well. Alternatively (and, I think, preferably), the trait might be rephrased to indicate that only poisoned creatures take the necrotic damage.

Without one of these tweaks, the oinoloth could end up taking necrotic damage (which it's neither immune nor even resistant to) from its own effect, and therefore it would be foolish not to hasten out of its blighted zone as soon as it created it. It also means it can't plonk down a blight zone and sit tight in the middle of it, daring foes to come at it, because of the risk of randomly taking necrotic damage from time to time. If it's not immune to its own plague, it has to keep moving around to stay out of its blight zones.

I'll come back to this trait and to the oinoloth's Innate Spellcasting in a moment, because how Bringer of Plagues works is key to figuring out its overall strategy. For the time being, let's look at its actions. It basically has three to choose from on its turn: Multiattack (Transfixing Gaze plus Claw \times 2), Corrupted Healing, and Teleport. Unlike the nycaloth and the yagnoloth, the oinoloth has to use its entire action to Teleport. Corrupted Healing is a recharge ability, but it recharges only on a 6, so the oinoloth needs to wait for the right moment to use it, because there's a good chance that it will get only one opportunity. Multiattack, therefore, is the go-to, with Corrupted Healing to be used only when the stars align.

The Claw attack alone is ferocious; two are savage. And that's without Transfixing Gaze, which, if successful, charms and restrains the target, giving the oinoloth advantage if it chooses to Claw them. The effect lasts until the end of the oinoloth's next turn, allowing it to Transfix a target, Claw at them with advantage twice, then, on its next turn, Claw at them with advantage *twice more* while attempting to Transfix someone else. And if *that* Transfixing Gaze succeeds, it can move on to the new target for a double-Claw-with-advantage on the following turn, and aim *another* Transfixing Gaze elsewhere... and so on.

Because of the power of chaining its Multiattacks like this, a good time to consider using Corrupted Healing is immediately after Transfixing Gaze has failed because the target succeeded on their saving throw. The side effects of Corrupted Healing—one level of exhaustion and a reduced hit point maximum—are of no consequence to a yugoloth ally, but if for some strange reason an oinoloth is fighting on the PCs' side (either because it was paid to do so or because it was summoned with *planar ally*), just remember, oinoloths are neutral evil and couldn't care less about informed consent. Their definition of "willing" is a "yes" to the question "Do you want me to heal you and remove that debilitating condition?"

Since Corrupted Healing heals *all* damage and removes a debilitating condition as well, an oinoloth doesn't squander it on an ally that's just suffered a few scratches. Also, yugoloths are all immune to the poisoned condition, and being deafened isn't that big a deal compared with being blinded. So I'd say the minimum standard for Corrupted Healing is a target that's either reduced to 40 percent or less of its hit point maximum, reduced to 70 percent or less of its hit point maximum and blinded, or reduced to 90 percent or less of its hit point maximum and paralyzed. That goes for the oinoloth as well; it's always willing and within 5 feet of itself. If it meets one of the first two of those criteria before any of its allies does, it uses Corrupted Healing on itself.

The oinoloth does, in fact, have a functional combo that includes Teleport, and that's to combine it with Bringer of Plagues, which is a *bonus* action. Using its swifter-than-humanoid-average 40-foot movement speed, an oinoloth can swoop into the midst of a group of enemies, drop a plague zone, then Teleport out—or vice versa, Teleporting in and strolling back out, depending on whether the center of its desired blight zone is more or less than 40 feet from its current position. It's not as satisfying as allowing the oinoloth to hold court in the center of its plague zone, but it definitely works.

Its at-will spells—*darkness*, *detect magic*, *dispel magic*, and *invisibility*—work the same way for the oinoloth that they do for the yagnoloth, with the exception that an oinoloth won't be involved in as many social situations and thus won't have as many opportunities to scope out foes with *detect magic*. The real items of interest are its once-per-day spells: *feblemind*, *globe of invulnerability*, *wall of fire*, and *wall of ice*.

The oinoloth's Intelligence isn't quite high enough for it to be able to "read" enemies' abilities at a glance, but it's more than smart enough to judge, based on a round or two of observation, which of its foes are *hommes sages* and which are *hommes singes*. Wizards (Intelligence too high) and melee meatwads (can't cast spells) are both poor targets for *feblemind*; the ideal candidate is a bard, cleric, sorcerer, or warlock with merely average brainpower, although a paladin or ranger will

do in a pinch. Aside from low-to-average Intelligence, the key deciding factor in target selection is that the target is actually causing the oinoloth significant pain or inconvenience.

Globe of invulnerability is useful and powerful enough that the oinoloth may seriously consider casting it right away, as its first action. To affect it with a spell of 5th level or lower, an enemy spellcaster will have to come inside the globe, meaning within 10 feet of the oinoloth. There's no downside to that, aside from the fact that concentrating on *globe* means not concentrating on *darkness* or *invisibility*. No squish wants to get that close to an oinoloth. There are too many insensitive things it can do to them, from Transfixing Gaze to Claw attacks to Bringer of Plagues to *wall of fire*.

There's a trick I'm particularly fond of in which a monster that's immune to fire damage, such as an efreet, casts *wall of fire* in a ring around itself with the flames pointing inward, grilling every enemy within 10 feet of it. This trick works less well for the oinoloth, which is merely resistant to fire damage, not immune; it can reasonably expect to take just 8 damage per turn it's in the flames, but that's still 8 damage it doesn't need to take, even if its opponents are taking twice that. A more likely play for the oinoloth is to take advantage of terrain and obstacles and cast *wall of fire* or *wall of ice* to trap enemies inside a blight field. *Wall of ice* obstructs movement completely until characters bash through it; *wall of fire* simply forces an unpleasant choice between fire damage and necrotic damage. This trap is easier to set up if you rule that the oinoloth doesn't take necrotic damage from its own blight field, because it can use Bringer of Plagues and cast a *wall* spell in the same turn without having to exit the field (obviously, if the oinoloth's enemies would take damage from *wall of fire* on the way out, so will the oinoloth) or take necrotic damage.

Okay, so... having established all that, when and how does an oinoloth use Bringer of Plagues, which is clearly meant to be its centerpiece trait? "When" is whenever it can: A 5–6 recharge indicates a feature powerful enough to be superior to most if not all other options, whose use therefore needs to be limited. "How" is the trickier question to answer, because as I've belabored, it depends on whether or not the oinoloth and allied yugoloths can take necrotic damage from it.

It also depends—possibly even more—on why the oinoloth is there to begin with. What's the military objective? Is it just looking to kill, or is it defending a position? In the latter case, it's not necessarily going to be concerned with how many enemies are in the radius of Bringer of Plagues when it uses that trait. Instead, it's going to use it to turn the approach to whatever it wants to keep others out of into a gantlet of toxic damage fields, with a cleverly placed *wall of fire* or *wall of ice* to make progress through those fields tortuous and time-consuming. On the other hand, if its ultimate goal is merely to sicken as many opponents as it can, it's going to treat Bringer of Plagues as an area-effect spell with a 30-foot radius and therefore get in position first to affect at least six enemies—or all of them, whichever is less—then Teleport out.

How about target selection? Again, depends in large part on its mission, and on which of its foes is most likely to effectively interfere with it. Oinoloths have Magic Resistance and proficiency in Constitution and Wisdom saving throws and are immune or resistant to the types of damage most commonly deployed via evocation spells, so they're not particularly threatened by spellcasters. They're resistant to physical damage from normal weapons—meaning that anyone wielding a *magic* weapon against them is a person of interest. Less tough-looking opponents probably have lower Constitution save mods, making them easy pickings for Bringer of Plagues; Transfixing Gaze is most effective against those foes who look like they've opted to emphasize the physical over the mental. There's no simple, hard-and-fast rule—because oinoloths have no real weakness to target, and thus no particular enemy who screams to be taken out first. They simply adapt to the situation, whatever it is.

Like other yugoloths, oinoloths are happy to go to the mat on any plane except the one they were born on. If they're seriously wounded (reduced to 50 hp or fewer), they bargain for their lives—dishonestly, of course, since they're proficient in Deception, not in Persuasion.

BARGHESTS (v)

When I first saw the **barghest** in *Volo's*, I recognized it as a monster that's been around a long time—since the original AD&D *Monster Manual*—but not one I'd ever made use of. Then I read the flavor text. What the what? A monster that *only eats goblins*? That couldn't be how this creature was originally conceived.

So I did a little follow-up. Barghests come from Northern English folklore, in which they take the form of huge, black dogs, either possessed by evil spirits or spirits themselves. The second half of the name is related etymologically to "ghost" and "ghast," while the first half may mean "city," "mountain," or even "bear"; no one's sure. They prey on lone travelers

and vagrants, they often have the power to change shape or pass invisibly, and the appearance of a barghest is considered an omen of death.

That's popular lore. In D&D lore, barghests began as fiends (as they still are) associated with goblins (as they still are) and often taking a canine shape (as they still do), but the ones that prowled the material plane were the young of those that resided—and ruled their own lands—in Gehenna. The current origin story, in which they're created by the General of Gehenna to hunt goblins, is a new fifth edition twist... and, frankly, a preposterous one.

So here's how I'd interpret the flavor text in the barghest entry: *It's what goblins believe*. Everyone's afraid of barghests, and rightly so—but goblins, for some reason, have developed this myth in which barghests are out to get them specifically, and they've concocted the conflict between Maglubiyet and the General of Gehenna as a rationalization of it. I mean, you kind of have to take this approach, or else no one but goblins would ever have reason to be afraid of a barghest. Whereas, personally, I think that PCs and the NPCs they encounter should absolutely be at just as much risk from a barghest as a goblin would be.

Let's look at the stats. They're *fast*—60 feet of movement per turn. Their Constitution is good, but their Dexterity is even better, and their Strength is extraordinary: These are shock attackers and ambush predators. But they're also smart, even smarter than the average humanoid (or goblinoid). They have proficiency in Stealth and Deception as well. Not only are they good at hiding and pouncing, they can also present a convincing portrayal of a goblin while assuming that form.

They're immune to acid and poison damage and resistant to cold, fire, and lightning damage, as well as physical damage from nonmagical weapons. These creatures are fearless. They have not only darkvision but also blindsight, so they're going to attack when they have the greatest advantage: in pitch-darkness.

While shapechanged into goblin form, they have all their normal stats and features, *except* their speed and their Bite attack. The fact that they have to use an action to transform back into their speedy, chompy true form makes it inadvisable for them to start a fight while in the shape of a goblin. So let's postulate that they use their goblin form mainly to blend into a community—by necessity, one that tolerates the presence of goblins—and circulate without attracting undue attention. When they're on the hunt, they revert to their true form. A good rule of thumb might be “goblin form in daylight, true form at night.”

That being said, suppose a barghest is cornered while in goblin form by enemies who've realized what it is. Its Innate Spellcasting lets it cast *dimension door* once per day. Should it use this handy escape hatch to remove itself to a distance where it can use an action to transform into its true form, then return to the fight? Nah. Here's a better strategy: Use *dimension door* to escape, then *wait a day*, then return to true form and begin stalking its enemies that way, when it has the element of surprise. Only if it uses *dimension door* to try to get away and its opponents somehow manage to find it and chase it down again does it use an action to revert to its true form, and it does that as soon as it realizes they're onto it, so that by the time they catch up to it, it's ready to throw down.

Speaking of Innate Spellcasting, the barghest also gets a daily use each of *charm person* and *suggestion*. These are useful fallbacks if the barghest bombs a Deception check while in goblin form, and it can also invoke them if it has a particular need (or desire) to make someone do something against their better judgment. The goblin-form barghest is a wicked little troublemaker.

Pass without trace, which the barghest can cast at will, allows it to stalk targets from hiding for surprise, but it's also especially useful when it knows it's being pursued and wants to make a clean getaway. *Levitate* doesn't allow its caster to fly per se, only to float, so it's not super-useful in the barghest's true form, and in goblin form, it won't use it if anyone else is watching. Otherwise, it's good for getting the barghest to places it couldn't otherwise get to, such as second-story windows and rooftops. *Minor illusion* is... minor.

I said above that barghests are fearless, but they do have reason to shun large areas of open flame: Fire Banishment. If a barghest starts its turn in a large enough fire—at least 10 feet in length or width, such as the wrong side of a *wall of fire*—there's a chance that it will be driven back to its home plane. (This doesn't work with *fireball* or other fire attacks—the fire has to last long enough for the barghest to *begin its turn* inside the flames.) Therefore, even though barghests are resistant to fire damage, this circumstance is one they want very much to avoid.

How does it know when a *wall of fire* or some other such magical effect is going to appear? It doesn't. This is a legitimate weakness of the barghest, a way that PCs versed in barghest lore can gain the upper hand over one.

Remember that barghests are intelligent fiends. They know that wizards, sorcerers, and druids are the most likely sources of eldritch conflagration. As soon as one such enemy begins slinging damaging spells, area-control spells, or evocation spells in general, a barghest realizes that a fire spell could be next, and that spellslinger moves straight to the top of its priority target list.

At the start of combat, the barghest always initiates attack from hiding, if possible: Either it leaps out from a hiding place (Stealth), or its target is effectively blinded (most likely by darkness). Unfortunately for the barghest, it has no Multiattack; it has to settle for a Bite attack that deals two dice of damage. It never uses its Claw attack if it can use Bite, and it never sticks around to fight in goblin form (in which it has Claw but not Bite) if it can get away.

A barghest's goal in combat is to strike hard and fast, doing the most damage possible. It relies on its speed and its Bite. Its high natural Armor Class and its resistance or immunity to so many different types of damage, including physical damage from normal weapons, make it indifferent to opportunity attacks. Whomever it wants to kill, it goes straight for, even if that path takes it through another opponent's zone of control.

However, it wants to deal damage every round, so even if Maud the druid is its No. 1 enemy, if she's more than 60 feet away, it's not going to head her way and stop short when its movement runs out, with no one else to attack within reach, nor is it going to waste an opportunity to attack by Dashing. Instead, it tears through someone else along the way, attacking when adjacent, then using the rest of its movement to keep going.

A barghest steers clear of any enemy who strikes it with a magical weapon—that's trouble it doesn't need. Also, note a couple of types of damage that a barghest is *not* resistant to: radiant and thunder. Paladins are well-known for dealing both of those. If there's a paladin on the battlefield, the barghest always tries to be on the opposite side of it, and it may even decide that the fight's not worth the bother. Clerics and warlocks can also make a barghest think twice by casting spells that deal radiant, necrotic, or force damage.

Unlike many other fiends, barghests can be killed on the material plane, so when they're seriously wounded (reduced to 36 hp or fewer), they're out of there, using *dimension door* if they have it available, Dodging and moving at full speed otherwise. If their opponents are dealing damage of one or more types they're susceptible to, they abandon the fight even sooner, bailing out as soon as they're moderately wounded (reduced to 63 hp or fewer).

Finally, keep in mind that a barghest in goblin form isn't just making random mischief: It's conducting reconnaissance. If it sees evidence that the PCs include one of the aforementioned types of spellcasters, it either refrains from attacking the party at all or—depending on how malicious you want to be—finds ways to distract or neutralize those casters before it makes its move.

I. The raw math suggests that the sibriex needs a 94 percent chance that the target will fail each saving throw, but after the third failure, the target's level of exhaustion incurs disadvantage on saving throws.

II. I want to address an issue regarding yugoloths—or at least, regarding my interpretation of yugoloths. The issue involves the question of what plane yugoloths are native to, and specifically, whether they can be killed (as opposed to merely disincorporated) on any plane other than Gehenna, the outer plane of “lawful evil neutrals.” My take, which differs from current canon, is that yugoloths may be numerous in Gehenna, and *some* yugoloths may be native to that plane, but Hades has as strong a claim on them, if not stronger.

The fifth edition *Monster Manual* says:

Back to Gehenna. When a yugoloth dies, it dissolves into a pool of ichor and reforms at full strength on the Bleak Eternity of Gehenna. Only on its native plane can a yugoloth be destroyed permanently. A yugoloth knows this and acts accordingly. When summoned to other planes, a yugoloth fights without concern for its own well-being. On Gehenna, it is more apt to retreat or plead for mercy if its demise seems imminent.

This paragraph isn't an ironclad statement that yugoloths are native to Gehenna, and only to Gehenna. It doesn't state explicitly what a yugoloth's native plane is, only that if it's killed somewhere other than its native plane, it re-forms in Gehenna. Another paragraph on the same page states, “Yugoloths are fickle fiends that inhabit the planes of Acheron, Gehenna, Hades, and Carceri” (the last of these, in AD&D, originally called “Tarterus,” a misspelling of “Tartarus”), implying that any of these planes could be a yugoloth's native plane. *Mordenkainen's*, in contrast, does employ the phrase “their home plane of Gehenna”—then goes on to say that a yugoloth killed there may be resurrectable anyway, although it's costly to do so (chapter 1, “Yugoloths: Fickle Allies”). In any event, I reserve the right to declare occasionally that the official books are full of it, as in the case of the soldierly hobgoblin that for some reason instantly forgets all its training and abandons all its discipline if it happens to catch a glimpse of an elf, or the use of “efreeti” as a singular noun rather than “efreet.”

Before yugoloths were yugoloths, they were “daemons,” the neutral evil counterpart to lawful evil devils and chaotic evil demons. The first daemons to appear in a D&D sourcebook were the guardian daemon, mezzodaemon, and nycadaemon in the *Fiend Folio* (the last two are now the mezzoloth and nycaloth). The guardian daemon's home plane is unspecified, but the mezzodaemon and nycadaemon are described as inhabiting “the Lower Planes between the *Abyssal Layers and the Hells*—i.e., *Tarterus, Hades, Gehenna*” (idiosyncratic italics in original). Gehenna doesn't even appear first in that list.

All daemons/yugoloths are neutral evil—always have been, probably always will be. And in the Outer Planes cosmology, the plane corresponding to the neutral evil alignment is Hades. If there's any plane likely to have spawned a neutral species of fiend that sells its services to both of the feuding sides in the Blood War, it's

Hades. And for that matter, if daemons are found in Tartarus (C/NE), Hades (NE), and Gehenna (L/NE), chances are, they started in Hades and spread outward from there. (In fact, the second edition *Planewalker's Handbook* says, "The yugoloths live on Gehenna, although some claim the Gray Waste [Hades] was their original case [*sic*].")

And finally, *Dungeon Masters* get to make this stuff work however they want to. If you want to insist that all yugoloths are native to Gehenna and only to Gehenna, can always be killed there and can never be killed anywhere else, that's your call. If you want to say that there exist yugoloths native to Gehenna and also yugoloths native to Hades (or Carceri or even Acheron), and that any of them can be killed on their own home plane, that's also your call. If you want to say, as I like to, that yugoloths are actually native to Hades but have managed to colonize Gehenna and make it their own, resulting in their being vulnerable on *both* planes, that's your call, too! *All of this is made-up*, and you're at liberty to make stuff up as well.

However you set your cosmology up, the most important thing is that yugoloths encountered *on the prime material plane*—where most PCs spend most of their lives—can't be permanently killed *there*, and consequently aren't going to be concerned about self-preservation the way, say, a hill giant is. When your PCs are high-level enough to go plane-hopping, then you can deal with the fine print.

CELESTIALS

KIRIN (V)

The **kirin** (inexplicably hyphenated “ki-rin” in Dungeons & Dragons products going all the way back to the original D&D book *Eldritch Wizardry*, which preceded even AD&D—*kirin*, unhyphenated, is the romanized Japanese form of the Chinese 麒麟 *qilin*) is a mythical creature whose appearance portends the births and deaths of great rulers and sages. A deerlike beast with scaly skin, grand antlers, and dragonish facial features, the kirin is often characterized in Western writing as the “Japanese unicorn” or “Chinese unicorn” because of its virtuousness and standoffishness and because it’s sometimes depicted as having a single horn rather than a pair of antlers. The link is reinforced in fifth edition D&D, as both unicorns and kirin are categorized as celestials.

Kirin are reclusive, and being lawful good, they prefer to avoid violent encounters. Combat with a kirin is going to take place in only two instances: Either a PC has attacked the kirin, or the kirin is fending off an intrusion by an intrinsically evil creature, such as a fiend or undead.

A kirin’s extraordinary Strength is nearly matched by its Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma, making it one of the few creatures that’s equally well suited to melee combat and spellcasting. With proficiency in Perception, it’s hard to catch by surprise, and with proficiency in Insight, it knows which of its opponents are genuinely hostile and which are simply misguided.

Kirin have Legendary Resistance, but unlike most creatures with this feature, it doesn’t have proficiency in any saving throw, and neither its Dexterity nor its Constitution is exceptionally high, so it has to be more judicious with its uses of it. How should it decide? Consider it a matter of damage mitigation. A kirin always uses Legendary Resistance to avoid being incapacitated, restrained, paralyzed, petrified, stunned, or knocked unconscious. Other debilitating effects concern it less, and it willingly absorbs damage as long as it’s not moderately wounded or worse (reduced to 106 hp or fewer). If it *is* moderately wounded or worse, it uses Legendary Resistance to avoid damage. Aside from these cases, kirin generally allow effects that don’t damage them, with one exception: They won’t let themselves be banished. Kirin also have Magic Resistance, so that helps with many saving throws, too.

The kirin’s melee Multiattack action is simple: Hoof twice, Horn once. Clomp, clomp, stab. But its spellcasting ability is wildly complicated, and analyzing it requires looking at every spell in its repertoire—some of which it can cast innately, others of which it casts as other spellcasters do.

First, the innate spells:

- *Create food and water* is a boon the kirin can grant to PCs. No combat effect, obviously, so not of any tactical importance.
- *Gaseous form* is a potential escape hatch, though *plane shift* works better for this purpose. More likely, a kirin casts *gaseous form* simply to make it harder for an enemy it doesn’t want to fight to hurt it, or to pass under doors or whatnot.
- *Major image* is harmless, and kirin aren’t malicious or deceitful, so a kirin casts this spell only to show other characters things it wants them to see.
- *Wind walk* has a 1 minute casting time, so it won’t be casting this spell in combat. It’s more of a “Climb on my back, and I shall bear you there” spell.

Next, the conventionally cast spells:

- *True resurrection* is a favor, not a combat tactic.
- *Control weather* takes 10 minutes to cast, so also not a combat tactic.
- *Etherealness* allows a kirin to walk through walls, although the only way for it to re-manifest on the other side is to drop the spell. Since this spell is the same level as *plane shift*, casting it to tactically relocate during combat—or to appear at the start of an encounter—means that spell slot is no longer available if the kirin needs to disappear altogether. However, since it isn't likely to use its 8th-level slot to cast *control weather*, it can use that slot to slip away along with up to three willing evacuees, if necessary—but only for their sake, not when it's seriously injured itself.
- *Plane shift* is the classic escape spell, which a kirin can use to decamp, along with up to eight allies, when seriously injured (reduced to 60 hp or fewer).
- *Heroes' feast* is a favor and takes 10 minutes to cast. Not a combat tactic.
- *True seeing* is something a prescient kirin casts *before* combat begins if it has any reason to suspect the presence of invisible enemies or wily illusionists.
- *Greater restoration* is a favor, not a combat tactic. A pattern appears to be emerging.
- *Mass cure wounds* is an important option if a kirin is fighting alongside allies against evil beings. It casts this spell when all its allies (within the 30-foot radius of the spell) have taken at least 14 damage and at least one is moderately wounded (reduced to 70 percent of its maximum hit points or fewer).
- *Scrying* is a favor and takes 10 minutes to cast. Say it with me...
- *Banishment* is a useful option if a single evil enemy poses an outsize threat compared with its minions. If there are two such enemies, a kirin will attempt *once* to banish them both by casting this spell using a 5th-level spell slot, but not more than once if it fails. Requires concentration.
- *Freedom of movement* can be used in combat to free a restrained or paralyzed ally; outside of combat, it can be cast as a favor to aid travel over difficult terrain, but since the kirin has only three 4th-level spell slots and only three 5th-level spell slots (which it will need once it's out of 4th-level slots—unfortunately, *freedom of movement* can't be boosted), the PCs had better not be asking for anything else today.
- *Guardian of faith* is a beaut—one action in exchange for 60 points of free radiant damage against enemies on their own turns. Casting this spell is one of the kirin's first actions in combat if it has a PC or non-player character under its protection, or if it has reason to believe itself to be seriously threatened by its opponents.
- *Dispel magic* makes annoying enemy spells go poof. A kirin will boost this spell as high as 5th level if it needs to, but it generally doesn't bother dispelling magic that doesn't actually hurt it.
- *Remove curse* is a favor, unless an opponent is casting *bestow curse*—but for that purpose, *dispel magic* works just as well.
- *Sending*... no comment needed, really.
- *Calm emotions* requires concentration, and its only significant combat application is snapping a charmed or frightened character out of it.
- *Lesser restoration* is a favor, not a combat tactic.
- *Silence* is a good way to shut down several pesky enemy spellcasters, as long as they all stay within 20 feet of the center of the spell.
- *Command* offers a variety of tactical exploits—most of which a kirin would consider beneath it to take advantage of. Instead, it's more likely to command an enemy, "Cease!"—thereby forcing it to stop whatever it's doing, including attacking. Of course, it only lasts a round, but in the meantime, the kirin will have one more turn to follow up.
- *Cure wounds* is the low-level alternative to *mass cure wounds*, for when one ally is seriously wounded (reduced to 40 percent of its maximum hit points or fewer). In this instance, it casts this spell using the highest-level spell slot it hasn't spent any of yet, up to 5th level. (Upcasting a 1st-level spell isn't something I'd normally have a monster do, because of the scarcity of higher-level spell slots, but for the kirin, it fits.)
- *Detect evil and good* is no longer needed once combat has already broken out.
- *Protection from evil and good*, on the other hand, is useful when battling fiends or undead, though it requires concentration and can be applied to only one target. If the kirin is guarding a single character, that character is the recipient of the spell; otherwise, the kirin casts this spell on itself immediately upon seeing that it's up against such enemies, unless it seems like *banishment* is a better bet.

- *Sanctuary*, a bonus-action spell that doesn't require concentration, is another spell a kirin can cast on a character it's protecting; however, the kirin can't cast another leveled spell along with it in the same turn. Thus, it casts this spell—which is stronger at preventing direct attacks than *protection* is—in its first combat turn, and if it casts *protection* as well, it does that on its second.
- *Light* is unnecessary for the kirin, which has 30 feet of blindsight and 120 feet of darkvision. It casts this spell only as a favor.
- *Mending*... come on, seriously. If you're going to ask a legendary celestial being to fix your wagon wheel for you, do that when there's not a fight going on, mmmkay?
- *Sacred flame* can deal a whopping 4d8 radiant damage, because the kirin is an 18th-level spellcaster. *This* spell can be combined with *sanctuary*, if necessary, because it's only a cantrip. However, since it's a cantrip, it's all-or-nothing damage, voided on a successful saving throw.
- *Spare the dying* can (and will) be used on an ally who bites the dust.
- *Thaumaturgy* seems unnecessary for a celestial dragon-corn.

Whooo. That's a lot. But pare away all the noncombat spells, and the list is much shorter: *etherealness* (7th level but possibly cast at 8th); *plane shift* (7th level); *mass cure wounds* (5th level); *banishment*, *freedom of movement*, *guardian of faith* (4th level); *dispel magic* (3rd level); *silence* (2nd level); *command*, *cure wounds*, *protection from evil and good*, *sanctuary* (1st level); *sacred flame*, *spare the dying* (cantrips). This means, among other things, that a kirin can boost a *mass cure wounds* spell all the way up to 8th level if it wants, healing 6d8 + 5 hp on *each* target of the spell, then cast it again with a 6th-level slot—and still have *three* 5th-level slots left if it needs to cast it again. It's good to have a kirin for a friend—and bad to have one for an enemy.

In addition, kirin are legendary creatures whose remote lairs generate regional effects; they also have access to legendary actions on other creatures' turns. These are Detect (a Perception or Insight check), Smite (a free Hoof or *sacred flame* attack), and Move (an extra 30 feet of ground movement or 60 feet of flying movement, free from opportunity attacks).

It should go without saying, since the kirin's flying speed is twice its regular movement speed, that it moves around by flying leaps rather than conventional four-legged locomotion. Also, since it can hover, it really has no reason to fight on the ground when it can just as easily hold station in the air and either cast spells from on high or swoop down to attack. With AC 20, it laughs at opportunity attacks, and if it really wants to make its opponents look silly, it may forgo attacking altogether and simply choose the Dodge action turn after turn, giving its opponents disadvantage on every attack roll. If it changes its mind and decides they need to be hurt after all, it can still use a legendary action to do so.

The kirin saves its melee Multiattack for direct confrontation with fiends, undead, or evil PCs or NPCs, after laying down its various defenses. It flies down, strikes with its hooves and its horn, then flies back up out of melee weapon reach. If an enemy flies up to meet it, it uses its Smite legendary action to strike again with its hoof, and it does so again on other creatures' turns if the enemy remains within its reach.

Like other celestials, kirin target chaotic evil enemies first, beginning with the most powerful. They then move on to neutral evil enemies, then lawful evil enemies. Kirin aren't as concerned with chaotic characters as angels are—as reclusive as they are, there's rarely any rabble around to rouse, nor any ruckus worth raising. Their extraordinary Intelligence and Wisdom give them effective omniscience with respect to their opponents' (and allies') stats, strengths, and weaknesses, and as for the positions of skulking foes, their Perception proficiency and Detect legendary action are most likely sufficient to reveal them. Kirin always know when they *should* be using Detect to look for a hidden enemy.

Once all evil characters have been destroyed or neutralized, a kirin pauses to parley with any remaining opponents, who hopefully can be reasoned with now that their evil companions are out of the picture. As mentioned above, a kirin flees back to Mount Celestia using *plane shift* when seriously injured (reduced to 60 hp or fewer).

FEY

BOGGLES (V)

Boggles are fey pranksters, called to the material plane by people's loneliness. You might say they're the embodiment of the desire to get attention—*any* kind of attention, including negative. This may remind you of someone you know.

Boggles have low Strength but exceptional Dexterity and above-average Constitution. Their melee attack is feeble, and they lack a ranged attack. Really, they're incapable of seriously hurting any but the lowest-level adventurer. Therefore, they attack not to kill but simply to harass.

They have proficiency in Perception, Sleight of Hand, and Stealth, along with 60 feet of darkvision and advantage on Perception checks that rely on smell, so they don't operate in broad daylight but rather in twilight, at night, and underground. They're at their best in total darkness, where their Uncanny Smell more than makes up for the penalty on Perception checks to see lightly obscured targets. They're also resistant to fire, which has no meaningful bearing on their tactics.

Their skin secretes (not "excretes," as it says in *Volo's*... eww) either slippery or sticky oil. The former helps them slip out of enemies' grasp; the latter makes it harder for enemies to slip out of theirs. Also, slippery oil helps them squeeze through narrow spaces, while sticky oil allows them to cling to walls and ceilings. This oil is always present, and a boggle requires a bonus action only to switch between the two types.

Another bonus action available to boggles is Dimensional Rift, a "tunnel" up to 30 feet long that they, and only they, can move through, see through, and bring objects through. Once created, a rift lasts until the end of the boggle's next turn. The catch is that there has to be some kind of "frame" to create the rift in: a window or door, a hole in a wall, a fireplace, an oven door, a ladder, the end of a sawhorse, the underside of a raised bed, the mouth of a basket or amphora, a hollow in a tree, even the body and legs of a Medium or Large animal. Anything will do as long as there's a solid perimeter around the rift space, no more than 10 feet on a side.

Finally, there's the Oil Puddle action. Again, the boggle has a choice between slippery and sticky; it fills the boggle's square or hex and lasts for an hour. Given enough time, a boggle can oil up several squares or hexes, creating a larger puddle. A slippery puddle requires anyone moving into or through it to make a Dexterity saving throw or fall prone; a sticky puddle requires a Strength saving throw against being restrained.

Boggles' low Strength suggests that they should seek safety in numbers, but the flavor text in *Volo's* seems to imply strongly that they're solitary. Here are some ways boggles may use their constellation of features:

- A lone boggle may Hide in darkness near a puddle of slippery or sticky oil. It Pummels while unseen, giving the boggle advantage on its attack roll. It Pummels again if the target slips and falls or gets stuck in the oil. Once the target manages to get up or get free, it Pummels one last time (action), then opens a Dimensional Rift (bonus action), passes through it, and runs away (movement). (Remember that there has to be a frame present for the Dimensional Rift.)
- A boggle may create a Dimensional Rift (bonus action) and reach through it to filch an item from a victim using Sleight of Hand (Use an Object action), then run away (movement). If pursued, it passes through the narrowest space available and creates an Oil Puddle (action) in that space to impede its pursuer(s).
- A boggle may open a Dimensional Rift (bonus action) that allows it to reach a victim and Pummel them through the rift (action), then run away (movement). It can do so without incurring an opportunity attack, because the target can't attack back through the rift.

- A fleeing boggle beelines toward the nearest thing that can constitute a frame for its Dimensional Rift and uses it to gain an extra 30 feet of movement, in addition to Dashing.
- One boggle in a group of them may act as a vanguard, perpetrating some act of mischief; when caught, it runs toward the rest of the group, which has already treated the ground with slippery or sticky oil. When the vanguard boggle's pursuers slip or get stuck in the oil, the rest of the group either Pummel them or pelt them with rocks (same attack modifier and damage as the boggle's Pummel attack), then run away.

Boggles aren't made for sustained combat: They Dash away immediately upon taking *any* amount of damage, however minor.

Boggles are no threat at all to most parties; they make better MacGuffins than villains, leading PCs into other situations or settings. They can also be employed as comic subplots and running gags. If you have a Beast Master ranger in your group, you can get a lot of mileage out of a boggle that's decided its calling is to torment that ranger's animal companion.

DARKLINGS, QUICKLINGS, AND REDCAPS (v)

Darklings are the rogues of the fey world, inhabiting not just woodlands but also caves and catacombs. They're high in Dexterity, above average in Constitution, and below average in Strength, marking them as snipers and shock attackers that must choose their battles carefully. If they can't manage their mischief with secrecy and stealth, they have to compensate with numbers. But nothing in the *Volo's* flavor text suggests that they're prolific, so secrecy it is. Fortunately for them, they're proficient in Acrobatics and Deception and expert in Perception and Stealth.

They have 120 feet of darkvision topped off with 30 feet of blindsight; they're also light-sensitive, giving them disadvantage on attack rolls and Perception checks in bright light. Dim light is ideal for them, but they can function capably in total darkness—even, to a certain extent, in *magical* darkness.

They have only one attack: a simple Dagger strike, either melee or ranged. Built into this attack, however, is extra damage when they attack with advantage—a partial equivalent of the Sneak Attack feature. The most straightforward way for them to attack with advantage is to strike in darkness against a target who lacks darkvision.

Ideally, they'd attack from range, but if they throw a dagger from more than 20 feet away, they lose their advantage, so a stab in the back it must be, or at least a dagger thrown from well within range of the enemy's ability to close with them. If they're spotted before they can make that first sneak attack, they won't even go through with the fight—they simply Dash away. They'll also skedaddle if they can't finish off their targets in two rounds of combat or if they get surrounded, Dashing if within reach of only one enemy, Disengaging if within reach of more than one.

Darklings' Death Flash feature offers no benefit to a lone darkling, in terms of either its survival or its ability to complete a mission. But multiple darklings, despite their abhorrence of bright light, can take advantage of it, because the flash is instantaneous—*after* it happens, they're no longer in bright light, so they no longer suffer disadvantage on their attacks. And even if they're blinded by the flash, they can still use their blindsight to function, giving them sneak-attack opportunities against blinded opponents.

Darkling elders are similar to darklings in all basic respects. They have Multiattack, which lets them attack twice rather than once; carry shortwords, so they deal more damage with each strike; and get one more die of sneak-attack damage. But their key strength is their Darkness feature, which they can use once per encounter. Remember how I said darklings can function capably even in magical darkness? Boom. Darkness, the feature, shuts down enemies with darkvision while allowing the darkling elder and its allies to ravage largely unimpeded, as long as they aren't more than 30 feet from their foes.



Also, their Death Burn, beyond merely blinding everyone around them, also deals radiant damage. So when they go out in a blaze of glory, it does help them complete their mission. Based on this, I'd say that darkling elders are disciplined enough to fight to the death, while darklings unaccompanied by a darkling elder have enough of a self-preservation instinct that they'll try to escape when seriously injured (reduced to 5 hp or fewer).

Quicklings are malicious and capricious, although according to the flavor text in *Volo's*, they don't kill just for the sake of killing. Instead, they're more inclined to perpetrate malevolent pranks. Thus, they don't carry out ambush attacks, despite their proficiency in Stealth. In fact, they probably won't fight at all unless they're cornered. Once you've decided to introduce quicklings to your campaign, you should play them as relentless nuisances, disrupting the player characters' lives and plans, then hightailing it. (Get familiar with the chase rules—*Dungeon Master's Guide*, chapter 8, "Chases"—and impose *lots* of obstacles.)

Between their moderately high Armor Class and their Blurred Movement feature, which imposes disadvantage on attacks against them unless they're incapacitated or restrained, they have little to fear from opportunity attacks, no matter how many opponents they're surrounded by. Thus, even a cornered quickling doesn't stay cornered for long. It Multiattacks with its dagger, then moves away through any gap in its enemies' line at four times typical humanoid movement speed. Once it's no longer cornered, it's free to Dash, and forget about any chance of catching it then.

If quicklings are averse to murder, **redcaps** are just the opposite: They live for it. Vicious little brutes, with exceptional Strength and Constitution, they have no need of Stealth—which is just as well, because their Iron Boots make it hard to miss their presence.

The Ironbound Pursuit action is similar to other monsters' Charge and Pounce features, enabling a redcap to knock its enemy prone, but it also incorporates the equivalent of a Dash action. Although redcaps have a speed of only 25 feet, they can close a distance of 50 feet in a single round and still attack using Ironbound Pursuit. This action, therefore, is what they initiate combat with.

Once they're engaged with an enemy, their Multiattack action gives them three melee attacks. Having drawn blood, they're relentless: Any enemy that tries to run away, they pursue, using Ironbound Pursuit if their normal movement isn't enough. (Once again, familiarity with "Chases" is essential, except this time, it's the PCs who'll be trying to get away, because redcaps won't give up until their quarry eludes them.)

That leaves the Outsize Strength feature. Half of it is so situational that it leaves one wondering why it was even included—I'm referring to the fact that wielding a heavy weapon doesn't impose disadvantage on their attacks. Their stat block doesn't give them a heavy weapon (unless the wicked sickle is supposed to be one?), and their Multiattack specifically includes only Wicked Sickle attacks. So when, exactly, is a redcap going to be using a heavy weapon? I suppose an opponent could disarm it somehow, and the nearest weapon lying around might be a halberd or something. But three successful sickle hits deal an average total of 26 damage, while one halberd hit would deal only 10 damage on average. Meh. Disregard this aspect of Outsize Strength.

It's the other part that really matters: While grappling, the redcap is considered to be Medium. What does this imply? Redcaps are Small creatures, and a creature can grapple an enemy up to one size larger than itself. But PCs are Medium size, if not Small themselves. Outsize Strength lets redcaps grapple Large creatures—which means *they can grapple a horse*. They can also grapple a druid who's Wild Shaped into a lion, tiger, or brown bear.

But then again... so what? Multiattack gives a redcap three Wicked Sickle attacks, *period*. It can't substitute grappling for any of those attacks. It would have to substitute grappling for the entire Multiattack. Nor can any creature grapple as an opportunity attack.

Here's what I think we need to keep in mind: Redcaps, while vicious, aren't very fast. Their base movement is only 25 feet. Any opponent who Dashes can outdistance them easily. So to make any use of Outsize Strength, here's what needs to happen:

- On its first turn, the redcap uses Ironbound Pursuit to close distance, attack, and (hopefully) knock its opponent prone. Presumably, the opponent will get up—which they must use half their movement to do—then either engage in melee or back away using the remainder of their movement. If the opponent Dashes rather than Disengage, the redcap gets an opportunity attack.
- On its second turn, if the opponent didn't engage in melee or Dash away, the redcap uses its normal movement to close the distance again, then uses its action to grapple the opponent, reducing its movement to 0.

- Then, on its *third* turn, the redcap Multiattacks its grappled opponent. (If the opponent didn't try to get away, the redcap Multiattacks on its second turn, and it only grapples the enemy when they attempt to retreat.)

This is slow, and I don't love it, but the alternative is that the Outsize Strength feature never gets any use at all. Since redcaps have this feature, they're presumably going to use it somehow. Preemptively grappling opponents to make sure they can't escape seems like the most plausible application.

Here's a tricky question: Does a redcap ever flee when injured? Exhibit A: "From the moment it awakens, a redcap desires only murder and carnage, and it sets out to satisfy these cravings." Redcaps are magically created, *not* evolved, and there's something of a cousin to ideology here that may override a survival instinct. On the other side of the coin, exhibit B: "To sustain its unnatural existence, a redcap has to soak its hat in the fresh blood of its victims.... A redcap's desire to slay is rooted in its will to survive." So there *is* a survival instinct here, a strong one. Once created, a redcap wants to stick around.

The resolution, I think, is that the redcap has just barely enough Wisdom to recognize when it's outmatched. It wants to murder, but it also grasps that it's not going to get the blood it needs from a "victim" who's going to kill it first. After any round of combat that ends with the redcap seriously wounded (reduced to 18 hp or fewer) while its opponent still has 40 percent or more of their full hit points, or with the redcap moderately wounded (reduced to 31 hp or fewer) while its opponent still has 70 percent or more of their full hit points, the little monster reads the writing on the wall, hisses nastily, and Dashes away.

MEENLOCKS (V)

Meenlocks are the unseeliest of the unseelie fey: deformed, sadistic, dark-dwelling predators. They look like a cross between a lobster, a stag beetle, and Jeff Goldblum in *The Fly* (toward the end of the movie, not the beginning). They're halfling-size and not very strong, relying on Dexterity-based shock attacks, psychic terror, and a paralyzing touch to take down victims quickly. They also hunt in groups, attacking only when they have two-to-one numerical superiority or better.

Because of their Light Sensitivity feature, which gives them disadvantage on attacks and Perception checks in bright light, meenlocks shun daylight. Dim light and darkness also allow meenlocks to take full advantage of their Shadow Teleport feature, even in view of creatures with darkvision—both the space a meenlock teleports from and its destination must be in dim light or darkness, regardless of whether these spaces are unobscured or only lightly obscured to an onlooker. Because this is a recharging feature, available one turn out of three on average, Shadow Teleport is more useful as an ambush tactic than as an escape tactic—it simply isn't reliable enough for the latter. The fact that it's a bonus action means that it can be combined with an attack, and a meenlock usually uses this bonus action first, then attacks as a follow-up action.

The Claws attack has a chance of paralyzing an opponent, a disastrous condition for anyone who suffers from it. Fortunately (or unfortunately), meenlocks aren't out to kill their prey, but to abduct and torture them and turn them into new meenlocks.

Thus, a meenlock attack typically looks something like this: A meenlock Shadow Teleports up to an isolated victim and attacks with Claws.¹ It keeps attacking until one of three things happens: The victim is paralyzed, the victim is killed, or the meenlock's Shadow Teleport recharges. If this feature recharges before the meenlock has succeeded in paralyzing a victim, it gives up and teleports away, though it may try again presently if it's not moderately or seriously wounded (reduced to 21 hp or fewer).

If a meenlock does manage to paralyze a victim, it stops attacking and tries to haul them away. A meenlock can't carry a victim with it when it Shadow Teleports. A paralyzed character can't move and can't resist being moved, so the meenlock dragging them arguably shouldn't be subject to the 50 percent movement penalty for dragging a grappled victim, either; it's effectively dragging an object. On the other hand, its carrying capacity is only 105 pounds, so dragging a victim who weighs between 105 and 210 pounds reduces its speed to 5 feet. It takes *two* meenlocks, minimum, to haul away a Medium-size victim at full speed.

Thus, in the same turn that it paralyzes its victim, the meenlock and one of its allies use their full 30 feet of movement to abscond with them. On subsequent turns, as long as the paralysis hasn't worn off, they Dash. If the paralysis does wear off, they go back to square one, attacking with Claws with intent to paralyze again—unless one is wounded and its Shadow Teleport has recharged. Then it splits.

Meenlocks hunting in groups stay in the fight until they're seriously wounded (reduced to 12 hp or fewer) and focus on capturing at least *one* victim more than on trying to get away with several. Although they aren't super-intelligent or creative, they can coordinate to the extent of, say, having two run interference while the other two paralyze and drag away a victim.

They're mostly indiscriminate in their target selection, generally picking out whichever person in a group is most physically isolated. However, they do know better than to try to take down the largest person in the group. All other things being equal, they'll favor a smaller target over a larger one—avoiding dwarves, though, because they're more likely to resist paralysis.

A lone meenlock flees when moderately wounded (reduced to 21 hp or fewer) regardless of its degree of success so far.

YETH HOUNDS (V)

The **yeth hound** originates in Devonian myth as the local spin on the “black dog” motif prevalent across British and Northern European folklore as a harbinger of doooooom. In fifth edition D&D, they're evil fey predators that hunt at night, their howls echoing through the darkness.

To run a yeth hound, you're going to need to familiarize yourself with the chase rules (*Dungeon Master's Guide*, chapter 8, “Chases”), because these rules are a major component of how this creature hunts, as indicated by the first paragraph of flavor text in *Volo's*: “Yeth hounds fly in pursuit of their prey, often waiting until it is too exhausted to fight back.”

Yeth hounds have a ferocious ability contour: exceptional Strength, very high Dexterity *and* Constitution, making them both brutes and shock attackers. Their goal is to make the first hit count, but if that's not enough to slay their prey, they're tough enough to stick around and finish the job. Their Intelligence is lower than that of an ape, but higher than that of an ordinary dog; they can understand speech but can't speak. They're immune to physical damage from nonmagical, nonsilvered weapons, and they can't be charmed, exhausted, or frightened.

Yeth hounds are nocturnal hunters by necessity. They have darkvision, and their Keen Hearing and Smell means they can easily detect prey in total darkness, but moreover, with their Sunlight Banishment trait, they can't remain corporeal while sunlight shines on them—it bounces them into the ethereal plane, where they have to stay until after sunset. Therefore, the most dangerous time to have a yeth hound nearby is just past twilight, because then it has the most time to sniff you out and run you down.

The ideal hunting ground of a yeth hound is difficult terrain, full of natural hazards—slopes, ditches, cliffs, protruding tree roots, ravines, sinkholes, and so forth. This kind of terrain makes it difficult and dangerous for its prey to run away, while not inhibiting the yeth hound at all: With its 40 feet of flying speed, it can tear along a couple of feet off the ground. But also, its Baleful Baying feature forces frightened victims to run away from it by “the most direct route, even if hazards lie that way.” (If you want to build a really bonkers encounter, throw in a few opportunistic harpies to terrorize any collateral victims of terrain-related mishaps—or even to try to get to the yeth hound's prey before it can. When the hound arrives on the scene, maybe the harpies are scared off, or maybe it becomes a three-way fight!)

The range of Baleful Baying is 300 feet, but that's not the amount of distance a yeth hound can cover in a round. Ideally, it wants its quarry still to be frightened when it strikes, because that more than doubles the expected damage of its Bite. Since the frightened condition lasts until the end of the yeth hound's next turn, it needs to use Baleful Baying the turn immediately before it strikes. But Baleful Baying is probably also the first indication the PCs will have that there's a yeth hound somewhere nearby—and the first warning that a chase is about to ensue, and also the factor that determines which of the PCs the hound chases after. So what triggers it?

Well, since the yeth hound has Keen Hearing and Smell, figure that it can hear a creature trying to be quiet as if it were making a normal amount of noise, and a creature making a normal amount of noise as if it were being very loud. Using the Audible Distance table on Wizards of the Coast's *Dungeon Master's Screen Reincarnated* (which really should be published in a book!), these correspond to average distances of 70 feet and 350 feet and maximum distances of 120 feet and 600 feet. That's a long way off! What about smell? The real-world animals with the keenest senses of smell are bears and elephants, and they can pick up scents *10 to 20 miles* away. Based on these facts, I think it's perfectly reasonable to conclude that a yeth hound can hear and smell, or at least smell, any creature within range of Baleful Baying—and therefore it will take this action as soon as it detects them. Then the chase begins.

If you figure that the modal humanoid has a base movement speed of 30 feet and will Dash to try to escape a pursuing yeth hound, that's 60 feet of movement it can cover in a round—but only 30 feet across difficult terrain. The yeth hound

can cover 40 feet in a turn in which it uses its action to bay or Bite, which suggests that it should use Baleful Baying once more upon getting within 10 feet of its quarry.

Now's when the chase rules come into play. The yeth hound never gets exhausted, so it can Dash as many times as it needs to in order to run its quarry down. But its targets can Dash only a limited number of times before having to make Constitution checks (not saving throws!) against exhaustion. After two failures, a target's speed is cut in half, reducing the amount of difficult terrain it can cover to 15 feet, which means the yeth hound can use Baleful Baying once it's closed the distance to 25 feet. This twist is also consistent with the flavor text; it may be that a yeth hound that gets this close to its prey nevertheless waits to bay, and to pounce, until its target already has a couple of levels of exhaustion.

Should it hold off even longer? A third level of exhaustion imposes disadvantage on saving throws, making the target even more likely to fail their save against Baleful Baying. A fourth level halves their hit points, making their doom even more certain. After a fifth level, the target can run no more. At six levels of exhaustion, the target dies, which is no fun for the yeth hound; it wants to kill with its bite. So let's say the ideal moment for a yeth hound to use Baleful Baying against a target it's almost caught up to is when they have two to four levels of exhaustion. Before this point, it matches pace with its prey, neither closing the final distance nor letting it get away.

Yeth hounds are creatures of instinct without much ability to adapt, and they aren't very bright, but one thing they can figure out is whether a potential target isn't frightened of them. (Figure that Keen Smell includes being able to detect the smell of fear.) As long as there exist creatures nearby that are frightened of a yeth hound, it won't chase anyone who isn't. So if plucky little Marigold, the Brave halfling, makes her save against Baleful Baying, stops running, wheels around, plants her feet, scrunches her fists, and yells, "*I'm not afraid of you!*" the yeth hound's likely response is to run right past her in pursuit of some other victim. The same is true if anyone hits it with a magic or silvered weapon: It stops chasing that target *immediately* and heads off in another direction. No yeth hound's got time for that. It will, however, attack a target it's been chasing who's made their saving throw if that target has four or five levels of exhaustion, or if they have at least two levels of exhaustion and every other potential target in the vicinity has become immune to its howl.

Other than hitting it with a magic or silvered weapon, the only way to get a yeth hound to break off its attack is to seriously wound it (reduce it to 20 hp or fewer) with nonphysical damage, whereupon it Dashes away.

Traditionally, a yeth hound hunts alone, but the flavor text in *Volo's* implies that they're more often encountered in packs, commanded by an archfey or other influential evil creature. Considering that they have a challenge rating of 4, an actual *pack* of yeth hounds (i.e., four or more together) would be a terrifyingly Deadly encounter for a typical group of mid-level adventurers; PCs would have to be at least level 9 to be able to handle a number of them equal to their own, and level 11 to do so without significant risk.

HAGS (v)

Volo's includes an extended treatment of hags, and it heavily emphasizes lore: their scheming and manipulation, their names, their personalities, their use of odd mounts and vehicles and keeping of strange "pets," their fondness for weird objects. It also presents two much more powerful varieties, along with new information with the potential to alter hag tactics: lair actions and alternative coven spells.

Arch-hags, called "grandmothers," gain access to powerful lair actions, and their lairs have regional effects. As with dragons and other powerful enemies, the regional effects are mostly for flavor, and those that do actual damage do so whether the resident hags are present or not. But the lair actions include a few curveballs.

All grandmother hags have access to two of these lair actions. One allows them to pass through solid walls, doors, ceilings, and floors. The other allows them to open or close doors and/or windows at will, and a closed door or window may be magically locked against any attempt to force it open. If a battle is taking place in a hag's lair, this lair action can allow the hag to trap weaker enemies inside the lair—or in a single room within the lair. Or enemies chasing the hag through its lair may be cut off from one another by the sudden slamming of a door (giving the hag—and, by extension, the DM—incentive to create lairs that are mazes of small rooms connected by doors). Or, if a battle is going poorly for the hag, it can make its escape by fleeing through a wall, possibly leaving its would-be pursuers locked inside.

A sea hag normally prioritizes opponents who are engaging it in melee. The simulacrum lair action gives it a free opportunity, on alternating rounds, to engage non-frightened opponents beyond melee reach with a doppelgänger made of seaweed and other coastal trash. Each of these simulacra lasts from initiative count 20 in one round until initiative count 20

in the next round, so it has only one opportunity to get a hit in before it falls apart. The ideal candidate for a simulacrum is a “glass cannon”—an opponent who can dish out a lot more damage than they can take—since the simulacrum gets all the original’s offensive stats (minus those that depend on their weapon or other equipment). Alternatively, if the sea hag is about to flee, it may create a simulacrum to run interference while it escapes.

A grandmother sea hag can also obscure an underwater area with ink that she can see through but others can’t, rendering them effectively blinded. But this depends on a couple of things. First, the lair has to be underwater, and the hag’s opponents must be fighting it there. Onshore, this lair action has no effect. Second, it’s no good if the lair is in a river, an ocean or sea, or a lake large enough to experience tides (such as the Great Lakes of North America), because the current will wash the ink away after just half a round. In such circumstances, the sea hag can use the ink to cover its escape only if it takes its turn before initiative count 10.

A grandmother green hag can create an illusory duplicate that can’t take actions or reactions but *can* interact with physical objects. It must remain within sight of the hag; if line of sight is broken, the double vanishes. This lair action is tactically problematic for a few reasons. First, no one who sees what happens can mistake the double for the original (although the act of handling a physical object may create enough doubt in anyone who observes it to pose the question of whether the double is something more than just an illusion). Second, since the hag must keep it in view, the double can’t stand in for the hag while it makes an escape. Third, the double can’t fight, cast a spell, Dodge an incoming blow, or even Dash to move more quickly. Fourth, a single point of damage dispels it. It’s an interesting ability to have, but it’s so situational that I can’t think of a general case that would trigger the use of it. Maybe it could be used to momentarily lead pursuers in the wrong direction?

Grandmother night hags have two extra lair actions. One is to banish a creature to a “prison demiplane” for a single round. The other is to fling up to three creatures through the air. Once again, we have an odd disconnect between the hag’s power and its modus operandi. Of the three basic varieties of hag, the night hag is the one most likely to be encountered *outside* its lair, as it roams in search of victims to corrupt. A night hag poised over a sleeping victim that’s caught in the act would naturally love to be able to banish that witness to another plane or chuck them across the room, but these actions are available to the night hag only on its own turf. So these otherwise fitting abilities are nothing more than a couple of extra home-defense mechanisms, applicable only in one highly specific scenario: The player characters are hunting down a grandmother night hag (not just an ordinary one) in her own lair. And if they’ve pursued it that far, why won’t it just abandon ship altogether with *plane shift* as soon as it recognizes that the PCs are a real threat? (So much about these lair actions feels to me like extra complexity for not much payoff—and I haven’t even started on the alternative coven spell lists yet. The fifth edition *Monster Manual* made me appreciate hags as an enemy in a way I never had before, but much of the material in *Volo’s* seems to be written for hag-obsessed DMs who build *entire campaigns* around hag encounters.)

Let’s suppose that your PCs are fighting a grandmother night hag in its own lair, and it has some reason not to bug out right away. Banishment: Use it against the opponent who has the most robust action economy (Extra Attack, bonus actions, etc.) in order to stall for time. The night hag’s Intelligence is 16, high enough for it to be able to figure out who this is after just one round of combat, but not high enough for it to be able to make this assessment before combat begins. Therefore, this lair action will be used in round 2 or later. Fling: Use it to scatter melee opponents when surrounded, to make a quick end of frailier foes, or both. Range doesn’t matter. It requires a Con save, so the hag probably won’t try it on dwarves or barbarians. *Volo’s* doesn’t say this ability can be aimed, but it doesn’t say it can’t, either, so I’d say that flung enemies can and should be flung out windows whenever feasible. Whether those windows are open or not.

The two new hag varieties introduced in *Volo’s* are the annis hag and the bheur (pronounced *vay-ur*) hag. These are much more powerful than ordinary hags, even night hags. They’re not for low-level PCs.

Annis hags have mental abilities comparable to green hags’, but physically, they’re much stronger—even stronger than night hags. They have resistance to physical damage from nonmagical weapons as well as to cold damage. In their normal form, they’re Large creatures, but they can disguise themselves to appear Medium-size. (This is an innately cast *disguise self* spell, *not* the night hag’s Change Shape feature, so it takes no time to drop if the annis hag chooses.)

Annis hags aren’t stealthy. They are thick-skinned (natural AC 17!), but their standout ability is their extraordinary Strength. Their preference is to end a fight as fast and violently as possible. Consequently, they favor their ferocious Claw/Claw/Bite Multiattack over the slower Crushing Hug.

Crushing Hug requires a close read, because it doesn't act the same way that some grappling attacks do. An enemy caught by Crushing Hug is *not* restrained, only grappled. Its movement speed is 0, but it can fight back, without disadvantage. Nor does the annis hag have advantage on attacks against a Crushing Hug victim—in fact, it *can't attack at all* while it's grappling a foe. It can only continue the Crushing Hug. If it wants to Claw or Bite the victim, or someone else, it has to let go first. There's no combo attack here.

However, the annis hag is surprisingly fast. Its base movement speed is 40 feet, so it can close unexpectedly with opponents who might believe themselves to be out of reach. In this case, an annis hag may choose to bust out a surprise Crushing Hug against an elusive or otherwise annoying opponent before they can get away. Also, this grapple works against Large creatures as well as Medium and Small, and an annis hag isn't above giving a Crushing Hug to a rider's mount. Yep. The annis hag will attack Horsey—and probably kill Horsey in one hug. What part of “chaotic evil” was unclear?

With their high Armor Class and resistance to normal weapons, they have no fear of fighters, even those with Extra Attacks. They have it in for spellcasters, though, and this includes paladins, who like to cast *smite* spells and enchant people's weapons and stuff. In fact, annis hags will probably target those goody-two-shoes crusaders out of spite and malice as well as threat assessment.

ALTERNATIVE HAG COVEN SPELLS

Volo's offers three alternatives to the conventionally witchy hag coven spell repertoire. One is necromantic, one is nature-oriented, and one plays up the divination angle at the expense of the maledictory. These can be used with any variety of hag, although sea hags, green hags, and bheur hags seem more likely to form covens than the other two varieties, which strike me as more exclusively solitary.

Although the Prophecy list seems relatively benign compared with Death, Nature, or the default list—and even Nature seems like it could go either way—hags are not your friends. Any prophetic services you get from a hag come at a steep cost, and they enjoy watching you pay it.

The Prophecy list is distinctive in another way: It offers almost no tactical advantages or combinations. *Arcane eye* lets the coven hunt down a fleeing or hiding foe, perhaps, and *dispel magic's* utility is straightforward, but *bane* and *bless* are low-power spells that have to be sustained (and why would a hag want to *bless* anybody, even one of its sister hags?), and all the other spells in this repertoire are either rituals or strictly divination. Not only are these coven spells more suited to social interaction encounters than combat encounters, a hag coven assembling for this purpose is probably doing so for reasons entirely their own, and they may not even be casting these spells in front of your player characters.

The Nature list, on the other hand, can prove to be a tactical nightmare for the hags' opponents. About the only thing working in those opponents' favor is that so many of these spells require concentration. But there are three hags casting these spells, and each one can sustain a separate spell (although they share their spell slots), so combos are possible that would be impossible for a single caster.

- *Wall of thorns* is a concentration spell that can impede movement and does instantaneous damage when it's cast, requiring a Dexterity saving throw to reduce.
- *Insect plague* is a concentration spell that does continuous damage within a spherical area of effect on a failed Constitution save. It also creates difficult terrain, slowing creatures that move through it.
- *Tree stride* allows a hag to travel up to 500 feet, but as soon as it's more than 30 feet from its sister hags, the spell ends immediately. Why? Because three hags must all be within 30 feet of one another to have access to coven spells. They can use this spell to confound opponents by popping from tree to tree in a dense wood or orchard, always staying close to their sister hags, but only a seriously wounded hag uses this spell to escape a battle entirely, breaking the coven and abandoning its sisters.
- *Dominate beast* is about the single meanest thing you can do to a Beastmaster ranger, so of course that's exactly what a hag uses it for. Alternatively, it might order a mount to throw its rider, a pet to attack its master, etc.
- *Grasping vine* is a concentration spell that yanks a target creature 20 feet toward the root square or hex on a failed Dexterity save. It's also cast as a bonus action, so it can be combined with an Attack action—or with another hag's spell.
- *Call lightning* is a concentration spell that deals damage each round, requiring a successful Dexterity save to reduce.
- *Plant growth* is an instantaneous spell that creates overgrown terrain over an enormous area of effect. It's superb for impeding pursuers.
- *Flaming sphere* is a concentration spell that enhances the hag's action economy by providing a damaging bonus action each round; moreover, after the first round, this bonus action can be combined with casting a leveled spell, since *flaming sphere* has already been cast. A successful Dexterity save is required to reduce the damage.
- *Moonbeam* is a concentration spell that deals continuous damage within a narrow radius on a failed Constitution save. It does not enhance the hag's action economy—on the contrary, it's a drag on it, because moving the *moonbeam* requires a full action.

- *Spike growth* is a concentration spell that creates difficult, damaging terrain over a 20-foot radius. The damage is automatic, not subject to an attack roll or a saving throw.
- *Entangle* is the combo ingredient we've been missing: a concentration spell that creates difficult terrain across a 20-foot square and restrains creatures in that square on a failed Strength save. Restrained creatures have disadvantage on Dex saves, attack with disadvantage, and can be attacked with advantage. They also can't go anywhere.
- *Speak with animals* is the only spell in this list that isn't combat-relevant.

Thus, one hag can cast *entangle* on two or more enemies (Targets in Areas) while its sister hags cast *call lightning* and *flaming sphere*, which enemies restrained by *entangle* will be at a disadvantage trying to avoid. (The hag that casts *flaming sphere* will be at liberty to cast another spell on its next action, though not another one that requires concentration—not if it wants to keep *flaming sphere* going.) Or one hag can cast *entangle* and another cast *grasping vine* to yank an unlucky victim out of the weeds and attack them. Or one can cast *spike growth* and another follow up with *plant growth*, creating spiky terrain that not only deals damage but also takes four times as much effort to escape from. Adding *entangle* to this combo means that even an enemy who escapes their bonds will still have a devil of a time going anywhere else, and the hag that cast *plant growth* is free to cast *call lightning* or *flaming sphere* while its sisters sustain *spike growth* and *entangle*. (*Plant growth*'s area of effect is so large, it completely encloses *call lightning*'s, so if the hags don't want you to escape the storm, you're not going to escape it.)

Moonbeam and *insect plague*, on the other hand, don't combine especially well with the other spells on this list and will probably be used singly and situationally. *Wall of thorns*, because the entire coven has only the one 6th-level spell slot, is more valuable as an exit-strategy spell than as part of a combat combo.

The Death list offers less tactical flexibility:

- *Circle of death* (which really should be called “sphere of death”) is an instantaneous damaging spell requiring a Constitution save to reduce the damage.
- *Contagion* is a touch-required spell requiring an attack roll, imposing the poisoned condition on a hit, and potentially resulting in a disease that imposes disadvantage on skill checks and saving throws based on one ability. Obviously, Dexterity, Constitution, and Wisdom—the “big three”—have the potential to cause the most harm over subsequent rounds, as well as over the long term.
- *Raise dead* is a ritual that takes one hour to cast, so it's not going to happen in combat. If the PCs encounter a hag coven shortly after they've cast this spell, note the penalties that the until-recently deceased suffers on their rolls.
- *Blight* is an instantaneous damaging spell requiring a Constitution save to reduce the damage; unlike *circle of death*, *blight* affects only a single target.
- *Death ward* is a spell a coven hag is unlikely to cast on another creature, unless some kind of bargain is struck, but seems plenty likely to cast on itself. Is pre-casting this spell the best use of a 4th-level spell slot? I'm not sure. Perhaps a hag would cast it as a prophylactic measure upon being moderately wounded.
- *Animate dead* is a ritual that takes one minute to cast and requires the presence of a corpse. Rather than have a hag cast this during combat, it probably makes more sense to simply have it accompanied by a skeleton or zombie from the get-go and subtract the spell slot.
- *Revivify* might be cast by a hag as part of a bargain, but I doubt it would happen in combat, unless the hags were accompanied by some kind of beast or monster servant that was slain during the encounter.
- *Speak with dead* has no combat application, unless the objective of the combat is to kill someone to prevent the hag coven from getting information from them.
- *Gentle repose* is a spell the PCs are more likely to want to cast than a hag is.
- *Ray of enfeeblement* is a concentration spell requiring a ranged spell attack roll. A successful Con save terminates it.
- *False life* is an oddity that a hag in a death coven might cast prophylactically upon being moderately wounded or worse. The effect is modest, though, and the hag might be better off simply casting...

- *Infllict wounds*, or as we call it, “the Bad Touch.” It requires a spell attack roll and does no damage on a miss, but the damage from a hit is substantial.

Note what’s missing here: anything that directly inflicts a debilitating condition that primes a tactical combination. The closest thing to this is *contagion*, which imposes the poisoned condition and over time may result in the contraction of a disease. Since the death coven’s necrotic spells (except *infllict wounds*) require Con saves to resist, the most logical choice of disease is Slimy Doom. This disease *does* impose a debilitating condition in one circumstance: “In addition, whenever the creature takes damage, it is stunned until the end of its next turn.” A stunned creature can’t take actions or reactions and automatically fails Strength and Dex saves, and attack rolls against the stunned creature have advantage.

Therefore, *contagion*, in the form of Slimy Doom, is the death coven hag’s spell of first resort—and second, since the coven has two 5th-level spell slots. While waiting for the targets to succumb to the disease (which takes a while—at least three turns, more likely four or five—so combat may be over already before this occurs), the hags in the coven rely on *infllict wounds*, cast at either 1st or 2nd level, along with their own innate spells and claws, to deal damage. Once one or both targets do succumb, the hags follow up with *blight* if they aren’t stunned yet, *infllict wounds* (with advantage, and boosted to 3rd level as long as a slot is available) if they are. (*Ray of enfeeblement* could work in lieu of *blight* but isn’t nearly as good; a hag casts *ray* only if the coven is out of 4th- and 5th-level spell slots, or against a Strength-based melee fighter with Extra Attack.) *Circle of death* is a last-resort spell that a hag casts when it’s seriously injured, just before fleeing—and without regard for whether its sister hags are in the area of effect. Hags simply aren’t good team players.

The fact that they're violent brutes doesn't mean they're mindless or reckless, however. Their Wisdom is high enough for them to know when the odds are against them, and they won't willingly fight such a battle—*alone*. If they're not caught by surprise, they come to the fight with enough ogre or troll minions to tilt the encounter in their favor. And if they're moderately wounded (reduced to 52 hp or fewer) despite the favorable odds, they cast *fog cloud* to cover their retreat—and leave their stupid minions behind.

Bheur hags are different from other hags. Most distinctively, they're *not* brutes. With their high Dexterity and merely above-average Strength, and with no resistance to bludgeoning, piercing, or slashing damage, bheur hags prefer to keep their distance from their opponents. They're proficient in Stealth and can walk and climb across ice without inconvenience or penalty, and they take advantage of this, engaging with their opponents on treacherous, icy ground whenever possible.

The bheur hag always has access to *ray of frost*, but this does only 1d8 damage, less than its melee attack, so it strongly prefers to use its *graystaff* to cast spells. *Cone of cold* is the gold standard here: The bheur hag always prefers this spell as long as it can catch six of its foes (or all of them, if there are fewer than six) within the area of effect. If it has five or more opponents, and it can catch four of them within a 20-foot radius, it casts *ice storm*. A pair of particularly threatening melee opponents less than 20 feet from each other will be trapped under a dome-shaped *wall of ice*, whereas if there's only one opponent who seems dangerously chuggy-bashy, the bheur hag uses *hold person* on them.

A note about Maddening Feast: The flavor text notes, "When a bheur hag is fully in the throes of combat and has recently slain one of her foes, she often forgoes a direct attack on her remaining enemies and instead takes a moment to feed on the corpse." Okay, but look carefully at the stat block wording: "The hag feasts on the corpse of one enemy within 5 feet of her *that died within the past minute*" (emphasis mine). A PC reduced to 0 hp is not necessarily *dead*, merely unconscious (*Player's Handbook*, chapter 9, "Dropping to 0 Hit Points"). The bheur hag doesn't swoop in and start snacking unless the PC has been killed instantly or until they've failed three death saving throws. Consequently, you won't often use this feature, unless you're cold-blooded enough to have the bheur hag keep attacking a downed PC—or unless the unfortunate meal-to-be is an NPC destined to die for this purpose. Either way, it needn't last more than one turn.

Bheur hags in a coven that cast *eyebite* favor the panic option, since they want to keep their opponents at a distance. That the frightened opponent has disadvantage on attack rolls against the hag casting the spell is icing on the cake. Aside from *counterspell*, however, they generally eschew their coven spells in favor of their *graystaves'* spells, with one exception: One bheur hag in the coven may cast *hold person*, boosted to 5th level, to pin clustered opponents in place so that its sister hags can repeatedly pelt them with *cone of cold* or *ice storm*.

A bheur hag flees when seriously injured (reduced to 36 hp or fewer), mounting its *graystaff* and flying away, using the Dodge action to avoid incoming attacks.

KORREDS (V)

Korreds are cool. And hilarious.

They have a feature called Command Hair.

What would really be awesome would be if they could command *other* creatures' hair, or just hair clippings swept up from the floor of the barbershop, but alas, they can command only their own hair. That alone is brilliant, though.

Oh, also, they're Small creatures, but they're *ridiculously* strong. Tough, too, with a sizable reservoir of hit points and formidable natural armor. They're practically made to be underestimated.

Their extraordinary Strength and Constitution identify them as brute fighters, although they can do significantly more damage by hurling rocks. They can burrow as quickly as they can run. They have proficiency in Athletics, Perception, and Stealth, and the Stone Camouflage feature gives them advantage on Dexterity (Stealth) checks made to hide in rocky terrain. They're resistant to physical damage from nonmagical weapons. They have long-range darkvision *and* tremorsense. Like little Antaeuses, they do extra damage when standing on the ground (as opposed to levitating or hanging from trees, I guess).

They have Innate Spellcasting and can cast *conjure elemental* and *Otto's irresistible dance* once per day each. I'm not sure *Otto's* is a spell they'll make much use of, though, since the DC to resist it is only 13. Not many mid-level adventurers, and hardly any high-level adventurers, will have any difficulty beating that.

Because of its low spell save DC, the timing is finicky: Any attack against the involuntarily frolicking target must take place between a korred's casting of the spell and that target's own turn to receive advantage, which means the korred who

casts the spell most likely won't be the one to cash in on it. It does have the advantage of forcing the target to waste their action on the saving throw to regain self-control, but really, this is just trading one of the korred's actions for one of the target's. That's only worth the cost if korreds outnumber their opponents.

Also, both *conjure elemental* and *Otto's* require concentration, and the former is far more useful. When you're planning a korred encounter, make sure you include the CRs of any elemental allies you plan to have them summon. Also note that an elemental may go rogue if the concentration of the korred who summoned it is broken—unlikely, given their +5 on Constitution saving throws, but possible. None of the spells that a korred can cast at will—*commune with nature*, *meld into stone*, or *stone shape*—requires concentration, so any of these can be cast while a summoned elemental is on the field, although *commune with nature* is a ritual and not useful in combat anyway, and *stone shape* is more a favor they might do if they're friendly. *Meld into stone*, however, is a handy escape hatch (see below).

Finally, there's Command Hair. Specifically, a korred can command a rope woven from its own hair to grapple and restrain an enemy. Again, the DC is a lowish 13, but the korred commands its rope as a bonus action, so it doesn't have to consume its action as it would to cast *Otto's irresistible dance*. A korred can Multiattack as its action and Command Hair as a bonus action. And it should Command Hair first, because if it succeeds in restraining its target (which it has a slightly less than fifty-fifty chance of doing), it will have advantage on its own Multiattack.

“In the depths of the Material Plane, korreds typically flee from other creatures but become aggressive when they feel insulted or are annoyed by the sounds of mining,” the flavor text in *Volo's* states. Korreds are chaotic neutral, suggesting that while their default attitude is indifference rather than hostility, they greatly prefer to be left alone. Korreds who attack a party of PCs are likely to be reacting to one (or both) of two things: the PCs' own transgressions against them, or the transgressions of other humanoids they've encountered recently.

Korreds that are anticipating a combat encounter will lie in wait, concealed among rocks by their Stone Camouflage feature and Stealth skill, and try to attack with surprise. They begin with Command Hair, which technically isn't an attack, so it doesn't give away their hidden positions. Whether or not the targets are restrained, they follow up with a Multiattack action, hurling rocks if any are available (as they will be in any mountainous setting and most subterranean settings), charging and attacking with greatclubs otherwise. If any conjured elementals will be fighting alongside them, they will have summoned these creatures already, before the start of the battle, and will no longer have the *conjure elemental* spell available to cast. With a casting time of 1 minute, it takes too long to use during combat, anyway.

On the other hand, if an encounter between PCs and korreds happens by chance and turns hostile, they merely follow their usual formula of Command Hair as a bonus action, followed by a Multiattack action.

Note, incidentally, that korreds aren't limited to a single restraining rope of hair: “The korred has *at least one* 50-foot-long rope woven out of its hair” (emphasis mine). A single korred may carry several—as many as you, the DM, believe are needed—and may have several targets restrained at once, each by a separate rope. It can *command* only one rope at a time, though.

Also note that while korreds' tactics aren't super-sophisticated (Command Hair, Multiattack, repeat), they choose their battles and their targets shrewdly. Korreds seek first to restrain, then attack, those targets who can do the most damage to them—especially opponents carrying magic weapons, opponents with Extra Attack, and spellcasters. And they won't pick any fight in which they're clearly overmatched—or rather, they'll attack only in numbers great enough for them to win.

Although Command Hair seems like a valuable feature for taking captives, korreds have no use for prisoners. While they're not malevolent by nature, if they've decided to fight you at all, they're probably going to try to kill you. They know a lot of languages, though, if you want to try to talk them out of it.

When a korred is seriously wounded (reduced to 40 hp or fewer), it retreats, but how it retreats depends on the terrain. If there's any solid rock close at hand, the korred uses *meld into stone* to escape into the rock itself. If not, it burrows through the earth at 60 feet per round using the Dash action.

ELADRIN (M)

The eladrin in *Mordenkainen's* are not in any way to be confused with the eladrin subrace of elves described in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* (chapter 9, “Example Subrace: Eladrin”). These eladrin are CR 10 champions, each intimately associated with a different season of the year. Like many other fey creatures, they have a whimsical, fever-dream quality to their behavior: Their decisions sometimes make more emotional sense than they do strategic sense.

One curious aspect of eladrin is that the four “types” aren’t separate beings at all. Eladrin morph from type to type according to the season—or their moods—with the metamorphosis taking place upon completing a long rest, so you don’t need to concern yourself with their changing type mid-encounter. They don’t do that.

What qualities do all the types of eladrin have in common? They all have resistance to physical damage from nonmagical attacks. They all have darkvision, ideal for the perpetual twilight of the Feywild. They all have superior natural armor, Magic Resistance, the Fey Step trait, and proficiency with both longswords and longbows. This constellation of features allows them to dart around a battlefield, engaging and disengaging as they please, suddenly appearing up close or far away—whichever is more inconvenient for their targets.

Spring eladrin are spellcasters first and skirmishers second, and they aren’t so much about slaying opponents as they are about shutting them down. The tricky part of managing their spell kit is that so many of their spells require concentration—and that so many affect only one target at once.

Enthrall and *hallucinatory terrain* are exceptions to both of these restrictions. *Hallucinatory terrain* has a long casting time, so it’s more for laying groundwork before a combat encounter takes place; the spring eladrin’s reasons for disguising the landscape may not even have anything to do with combat per se, only with a general intent to manipulate. *Enthrall* concentrates the attention of an entire group on the eladrin, allowing its allies to surround them or slip away, depending on what the situation calls for. But its range is the same as the range of the spring eladrin’s Joyful Presence, which charms creatures within a 60-foot radius.

This means that the other spells in the spring eladrin’s repertoire have to be used for dealing narrowly with those foes who are unaffected by both Joyful Presence and *enthrall*—and these are most likely to be ones who are resistant or immune to being charmed. *Charm person*, then, is obviously off the table except against a target on whom Joyful Presence has already worn off, or as a desperation move. *Confusion* requires concentration but is useful against multiple targets—four being the ideal number, per Targets in Areas—if those who resist the spring eladrin’s charms happen to be appropriately clustered within a 10-foot-radius sphere. *Tasha’s hideous laughter*, because it incapacitates, is suitable against any single inconvenient enemy. *Suggestion* and *Otto’s irresistible dance* are subpar for the spring eladrin’s purposes, although the latter can also be used against a target who’s shaken off Joyful Presence.

Belligerent opponents who resist its charms and insist on attacking the spring eladrin will find it to be an elusive target. When engaged by a melee attacker, it begins its turn with Fey Step to distance itself without provoking an opportunity attack, moves another 30 feet away, wheels about, and Multiattacks with Longbow—once if it needs to cast a spell at the same time, twice if it doesn’t. When shot at by a ranged attacker, it does the opposite: moves as close to its foe as it can get, Fey Steps the remaining distance into melee reach, and Multiattacks with Longsword, two-handed (since it carries no shield), once plus a spell or twice with no spell. If it can’t close the entire distance to its ranged-attacker enemy, it either Dodges (if it has allies present) or Multiattacks, countersniping twice with Longbow or shooting once and casting an appropriate spell. The spring eladrin is always thinking a move ahead, so you need to, too: If the belligerent foe whom the spring eladrin needs to deal with requires the use of the weapon it’s not wielding, give it a temporizing turn while Fey Step is on cooldown to stow one and draw the other. PCs with their hands full may be willing to drop weapons on the ground to pull off short-term switches, but spring eladrin aren’t.^{II}

Also, since spring eladrin are less interested in winning a knock-down fight than they are in taking away their opponents’ ability to hurt them, you need to be conscious of why the combat encounter is taking place to begin with. Is the spring eladrin there to drive the PCs away? To prevent them from leaving? To steer them into a trap? To steer them past a danger? Is it working alone or with fey allies, and are *they* trying to harm the PCs or merely maneuvering them around as the spring eladrin is? Whatever this goal is, it’s always paramount, and the spring eladrin only *attacks* those who won’t be dissuaded from violent resistance; it would much prefer to handle the entire situation with Joyful Presence and its skill at Persuasion (or Deception). If it’s seriously wounded (reduced to 50 hp or fewer), it flees, Dodging as it retreats.

The **summer eladrin** is an aggressive shock attacker, a flare-up of wrath personified, whose main objective—as can be inferred from Fearsome Presence—is to drive others off. If this trait doesn’t suffice to repel interlopers, the summer eladrin employs the edge of its sword instead.

When combat begins, its first move is to use its movement plus Fey Step to charge the nearest opponent who’s within 60 feet of all its other opponents, so that its Fearsome Presence can take effect, and use Multiattack to strike twice with Longsword, two-handed. The summer eladrin is less concerned than the spring eladrin with using Fey Step to disengage,

because it's counting on Fearsome Presence to get its enemies to run away from it rather than vice versa. As long as they're frightened of it, they have disadvantage on attacks against it (including opportunity attacks), while it's striking twice per turn and dealing an average of 20 damage with each hit, so they *should* want to move away—and it takes its opportunity attack when they do. Of course, if it's leaving a frightened melee opponent to go engage with a non-frightened one, it may as well use Fey Step at the start of that move to preclude the OA if the feature is available. But if Fey Step *isn't* available, and it can reach that other opponent with its normal movement, it doesn't worry about the OA.

On subsequent rounds, the summer eladrin chooses a target who's overcome its Fearsome Presence or was never affected by it in the first place. If it can reach that target with normal movement alone or normal movement plus Fey Step, it Multiattacks with Longsword. If it can't, it stows its sword and takes out its bow while Fey Step is recharging, then Multiattacks with Longbow on its next turn. But if any enemy reverses direction and comes back toward it, it goes back to Longsword.

And if the summer eladrin is more than 80 feet away from the nearest of its opponents when they first meet? Rather than charge a foe it can't reach—and rather than lead with its bow—it uses its Intimidation skill to order them off. Combat ensues if they insist on approaching anyway.

A summer eladrin uses Parry against a normal melee attack only when there's no other foe with a magic weapon that it may need to Parry instead. Parrying magic weapons always takes priority over Parrying nonmagical weapons. Because the summer eladrin is ruled by its temper, it doesn't flee, no matter how badly wounded it is.

Autumn eladrin, like spring eladrin, are spellcasters first and foremost and are disinclined to fight—in fact, despite being chaotic neutral, they're quite good-natured and interested in helping out. If possible, an autumn eladrin forestalls combat altogether by using its Insight skill to preemptively discern the PCs' needs and “get to yes” with them. As it's parleying, it calmly approaches until it's within 60 feet of all of them, so that its Enchanting Presence will kick in immediately if combat should ensue.

Most of the autumn eladrin's spells—*cure wounds*, *lesser restoration*, *greater restoration*, *heal*, and *raise dead*—are boons rather than tactics. *Sleep*, as an innately cast 1st-level spell, is practically useless against a group of high-level adventurers; its only feasible application is as a gentle, nonlethal coup de grâce against one or *maybe* two already severely injured opponents. In a combat encounter, the autumn eladrin relies most heavily on *calm emotions*, which it uses to try to turn the hearts of those who insist on fighting it, and who are unaffected by Enchanting Presence, from hostility to indifference.

An autumn eladrin doesn't move to attack. If a melee opponent comes to it, it attacks with Longsword—choosing to nonlethally knock its opponent unconscious if it reduces them to 0 hp—then Fey Steps away and uses the rest of its movement to get to a safe distance. It doesn't resort to Longbow unless an intransigently antagonistic opponent resists its charms, in which case it moves to maintain a range of between 60 and 150 feet from that opponent and takes potshots until the quarrelsome idiot is finally either downed or dissuaded.

Foster Peace is an interesting feature, because it can't be used to thwart an attack against the autumn eladrin itself—it affects creatures charmed by the eladrin, and part of the charmed condition is an inability to attack whoever or whatever has charmed you. It can therefore only be used by the autumn eladrin to thwart attacks against *other* creatures—allies of the eladrin, perhaps, or third-party entities—which may inspire a few ideas about what kinds of scenarios you might have an autumn eladrin show up in.

Winter eladrin are governed by melancholy; they fight, as they do everything else, with a sense of profound sadness that such an eventuality couldn't have been avoided. They're spellcasters, but not zippy-dodgy long-range spellcasters like spring eladrin. Winter eladrin don't move unless they have to. They move their opponents instead, using *gust of wind*.

The winter eladrin's weapon attacks do very little damage; they're hardly worth using, even for opportunity attacks (Frigid Rebuke is a better use of the winter eladrin's reaction). Its first line of defense is its Sorrowful Presence, but note that the DC of this feature is significantly lower than the Presence features of other eladrin. A higher-level adventurer who fails to beat it either has dumped Wisdom or is simply unlucky. Thus, it's much more likely that a winter eladrin will have to resort to drastic measures to deal with aggressive interlopers.

These drastic measures are *cone of cold* and *ice storm*, each of which the winter eladrin gets to cast only once. *Ice storm* is for when four or more belligerents are conveniently clustered in a 20-foot-radius circle that doesn't include any charmed target; *cone of cold* is reserved for when *all* the winter eladrin's opponents insist on attacking it. In each case, just before casting, the winter eladrin uses Fey Step to reposition. Before casting *cone of cold*, it moves to the optimal place from which

to freeze all its opponents in the blast. Before casting *ice storm*, it cheekily allows its foes to surround it—then Fey Steps away to a safe distance, centering the storm on where it *used to be*. (It’s immune to *ice storm*’s cold damage, but it would suffer the bludgeoning damage if it stayed put.)

While waiting for the preconditions of these spells to fall into place, the winter eladrin moodily stands pat, using Frigid Rebuke against whichever attacker seems likeliest to suffer the damage. Its Intelligence isn’t high enough to read Constitution modifiers off character sheets, but it is high enough for it to make comparisons by observation and judge which opponents are more or less hale than one another. Thus, on the first round of attacks, it may allow one or more opponents to hit it without consequence before invoking Frigid Rebuke. (This decision is essentially a “secretary problem,” in which out of n opponents, the winter eladrin allows $n \div 2.7$ ^{III}—rounded down—to take swings at it unmolested before unleashing Frigid Rebuke on whichever subsequent opponent seems less tough than all who came before, or on the last one, if they’re the only one left.) After the first round, the winter eladrin has had the chance to compare all its assailants and can accurately judge which one has the lowest Con mod. But once another opponent manages to shake off Sorrowful Presence and joins the attack, it has to make the comparison all over again.

On its own turn, it aims *gust of wind* in whichever direction the spell pushes back the greatest number of enemies. In case of a tie, it aims it at the opponents with the lowest Strength modifiers—oh, yeah, while it was comparing everyone’s Con mods, it paid attention to their Strength mods, too.

Both *fog cloud* and *gust of wind* require concentration, but they don’t conflict, because the winter eladrin’s criteria for using them are wholly separate. *Gust of wind* is for repelling melee attackers while the winter eladrin stands its ground. *Fog cloud* is for covering the winter eladrin’s retreat when, upon being seriously wounded (reduced to 50 hp or fewer) or having spent its daily uses of both *ice storm* and *cone of cold*, it finds the idea of continuing to fight too depressing and decides to leave.

^{I.} If it’s both lightly obscured and behind the target, given where they’re looking, you can rule that it gains unSeen-attacker advantage on its first attack roll if it can equal or exceed the target’s passive Perception with a Dexterity (Stealth) check.

^{II.} My assumption is that each eladrin, since it doesn’t carry a shield, uses both of its weapons two-handed, which necessitates stowing one while wielding the other, which takes time. It is *possible*, if you want to get more action out of an eladrin, to assume that it always carries its longbow in its off hand, wields its longsword one-handed in its main hand, and uses free interactions to draw the sword (when attacking with the sword) or sheathe the sword (when attacking with the bow) as needed, as it uses its main hand to nock arrows and draw the bow. This approach strikes me as somewhat more elegant from a *game* mechanics perspective but much, much less elegant from a *biomechanics* perspective: Who does their best sword work while clutching a *6-foot* bow in their other hand? (Yes, that’s how long longbows are. We treat them as the default bow because we like the damage and the range, but they really are *enormous* sons-of-guns. The same is true of longswords, to be honest; when you think of a “sword,” generic, unless you grew up on Final Fantasy, you’re most likely thinking of a shortsword or a rapier.) Anyway, I care a lot about verisimilitude, so I wouldn’t play it this way, but there’s nothing I’m aware of in the rules as written that says *you* can’t.

^{III.} Technically, n/e , if you’re mathy.

ELEMENTALS

FLAIL SNAILS (M)

The ridiculous **flail snail** probably ought to be categorized as a beast or a monstrosity, but *Volo's* declares it to be an elemental, meaning someone casting *conjure elemental* in the hope of summoning an earth elemental, xorn, or gargoyle may end up stuck with one of these instead. Large, tough, and most of all slow, the flail snail is technically a brute, but let's not kid ourselves: This thing isn't a predator. It's prey.

Despite that, the flail snail has no effective means of running away when attacked, so it has to rely on a suite of defense mechanisms, the rudest of which is its Antimagic Shell, which has a chance of bouncing spell attacks back at their casters or refracting them into a multidirectional fusillade of force damage. Antimagic Shell, however, is passive. The one and only decision the flail snail needs to make when attacked is whether to use its Flail Tentacles, its Scintillating Shell, or its Shell Defense on any given turn.

Note that flail snails, while brilliant in the visual sense, are far from it in the cognitive sense: With Intelligence 3, they're not employing advanced combat heuristics. A flail snail's choice of action boils down to a couple of simple rules that it always follows.

Scintillating Shell is a once-per-combat ability. A flail snail should hold off on using it until it can gain the greatest benefit from it—an evaluation that the flail snail isn't intellectually equipped to make. We need to reduce it to something *very* basic. Normally, per Targets in Areas, an ability with a 30-foot radius ought to target roughly six opponents. But if the flail snail waits to use Scintillating Shell until six opponents are within 30 feet of it, it may end up waiting forever—what if it's being stalked by just two or three hunters, or by a group of archers who know not to approach too closely? Let's simply say that it uses Scintillating Shell when its tentacles and Shell Defense are turning out not to be enough to make its assailants go away—but that, at the very least, it knows not to use Scintillating Shell when there's *no* enemy within 30 feet.

Shell Defense, as an action, is one-way: It activates a benefit. To deactivate the benefit requires only a bonus action—and why would it ever deactivate the benefit? Following the principle of always interpreting every fifth edition D&D rule absolutely literally tells us something counterintuitive in this case: Shell Defense doesn't prevent the flail snail from attacking. “The flail snail withdraws into its shell” seems like it *should* prevent it from attacking, but contrast the benefit of Shell Defense, a +4 AC bonus, with the Flail Tentacles trait: “If all its tentacles die, the snail retracts into its shell, *gaining total cover*” (emphasis mine). A +4 bonus to AC isn't total cover; it's not even three-quarters cover. Even after the flail snail retracts, *something* is still sticking out of that shell—and by deduction, it's the tentacles.

Flail Tentacle, meanwhile, is a plain vanilla melee weapon attack, no special conditions, no riders.

Therefore, whenever a flail snail is attacked or a Medium or larger creature comes within 60 feet of it, its first action is Shell Defense; it uses its movement to move directly away from its attackers, heedless of opportunity attacks (it's not clever enough to know that such a thing exists). On its second turn, it Multiattacks, using its Flail Tentacles, against a randomly chosen enemy within 10 feet who's dealt damage to it. On its third turn, if its foes are still hurting it, it uses Scintillating Shell. On its fourth turn, it goes back to Multiattack, but now it attacks only a stunned opponent with its tentacles. On its fifth turn, it Multiattacks, without any further thought given to target selection, and resumes moving away. It never drops its Shell Defense as long as there's an opponent either within 60 feet of it or dealing damage to it from farther away.

ELEMENTAL MYRMIDONS (M)

Elemental myrmidons are categorized as elementals, but they also have something of the construct about them, since their essences are summoned into suits of plate armor and armed with weapons of indisputable solidity, and since they follow

their summoners' commands without free will.

More intelligent than ordinary elementals—and far more intelligent than elder elementals—elemental myrmidons have sufficient cognitive candlepower to understand and respond to what's going on in a battle, if not to assess opponents' weaknesses or devise clever plans. Each has one outstanding physical attribute: Dexterity in the case of the fire elemental myrmidon, Strength in the other three. Their Wisdom and Charisma are average.

Elemental myrmidons all wear plate armor and have resistance to physical damage from nonmagical attacks. They're immune to poison damage and can't be paralyzed, petrified, poisoned, or pruned. Their weapon attacks are magical, they have darkvision (as with elder elementals—see [page 455](#)—I construe this as indicating more an indifference to lighting conditions than an actual preference for dim light or darkness), and each of them has a single potent, slow-to-recharge special melee attack in addition to a melee Multiattack.

Of the four types of elemental myrmidon, only the water elemental myrmidon has a ranged attack, and its range is so short that using it makes little sense. Even if they're not brutes per se—and except for the earth elemental myrmidon, none of them is—they're geared for melee combat, so the only tactical decisions for them to make are whom to target and when to use their special attacks.

The **air elemental myrmidon's** special attack is Lightning Strike, which does bonus lightning damage to a single target of its flail and may stun the target. In a normal Multiattack, the AEM gets to make three Flail attacks, for an average total of 26 damage. In contrast, a flail hit with Lightning Strike does an average of 8 bludgeoning plus 18 lightning damage, also a total of 26.¹ That's not a significant difference at all—and if the AEM *misses*, it still has to wait until it rolls a 6 to use this ability again—so the real benefit of Lightning Strike lies in the potential to stun.

The Constitution saving throw DC of 13 isn't very high. Most mid-to-high-level adventurers will have little trouble beating it; a mid-to-high-level fighter, barbarian, or even sorcerer (thanks to save proficiency) will have no trouble at all. The AEM therefore reserves this feature for opponents who are clearly relying on their Dexterity, rather than their Constitution, as their primary defensive ability: shock attackers like rogues and monks, back-line marksmen, and glass-cannon spellcasters. Of these, the marksmen are the lowest-priority targets, unless they're using magic weapons or ammunition. If the AEM is ever blinded, restrained, stunned, or subjected to any other debilitating condition it's not immune to, it also employs Lightning Strike against whichever opponent was responsible for it as soon as the condition wears off.

Between its high Armor Class and its resistance to nonmagical weapons, the AEM doesn't have to worry itself much about opportunity strikes; plus, it can hover. Therefore, the tactic of waiting 10 feet in the air between rounds, flying in to strike, then flying back out of reach is doable. But if, while doing this, it takes two ranged hits that do full damage, either in the same turn or on two consecutive turns, it ditches this maneuver, zeroes in on the attacker who hit it (or dealt it more damage, if the hits came from two different attackers), and opts for straight melee engagement, breaking off only to use Lightning Strike. Whenever it succeeds in stunning a foe with Lightning Strike, it always follows up with a Multiattack against the same target on its next turn, since it gains advantage on its attack rolls.

The **earth elemental myrmidon's** special attack is Thunderous Strike, which deals bonus thunder damage to a single target of its maul and may knock the target prone. Comparing the damage of this special attack to a normal Multiattack, the basic Multi deals an average of 22 bludgeoning damage, while Thunderous Strike deals an average 28 bludgeoning-plus-thunder, stacking up more favorably—especially with the added possibility of the prone condition.

Thunderous Strike's save DC is 14, not a whole lot better than Lightning Strike's DC 13. It's a Strength save, making it particularly weak against fighters, rangers, barbarians, and paladins, but also not that great against melee-fighting clerics. At the same time, the EEM has no particularly good movement ability and neither reason nor inclination to leave the thick of a battle to wander around the perimeter, picking off archers or spellcasters.

So what's left? Support-oriented bards, druids—and *rogues*. Oh, yeah. It's so *satisfying* to smash one of those pesky little sneaks like a bug, isn't it? Then again, even an effective Sneak Attack is going to do only half damage if the weapon delivering it isn't magical. So let's say that a Thunderous Strike against one of these three classes is provoked by either moderate damage (39 or more, after resistance) from a nonmagical weapon attack; light damage (13 or more) from a magical attack or effect; or being subjected to any debilitating condition it's not immune to.

The **fire elemental myrmidon's** special attack is Fiery Strikes, which just layers additional fire damage on top of its Multiattack. It requires no saving throw and doesn't reduce the number of attacks the FEM gets to make. There's no reason

for it not to use this ability whenever it's available, against whomever it would normally attack—although subjecting it to any debilitating condition it's not immune to draws its ire as soon as that condition wears off. Because of its Water Susceptibility, it avoids water—but it's not *vulnerable* to water or to cold damage, so it has no reason to react to them in any particular way. In fact, it has no feature that suggests any specific targeting criterion. You can run an FEM on autopilot.

The **water elemental myrmidon**'s special attack is Freezing Strikes (“Behold the power of Hypothermia!”), which layers additional cold damage on top of its Multiattack. There's a subtle difference between this and Fiery Strikes, though: A successful Freezing Strike hit slows the target temporarily. This gives the WEM an incentive to use it against skirmishers and shock attackers who are using their mobility to dart into and out of its reach. Subjecting the WEM to a debilitating condition it's not immune to also provokes it to target the opponent responsible with a Freezing Strike. Anytime a WEM successfully slows an opponent with Freezing Strikes, it chases them down and follows up with a Multiattack against them on its next turn—unless Freezing Strikes has miraculously recharged, in which case it's happy to take that action again.

The WEM has a 40-foot swimming speed, so if the combat encounter is taking place *in* water, it can pull the same stunt as the AEM, only instead of flying into and out of melee range, it *swims* into and out of melee range, taking advantage of the fact that its opponents can't swim as fast. If it notices that one of its opponents isn't limited in this way, that opponent becomes the target of a Freezing Strike.

As long as targets for it exist, the WEM uses Freezing Strikes whenever that ability is available to it. Also, because it doesn't carry a shield, it always wields its trident two-handed.

Because, like constructs, elemental myrmidons are bound to their summoners' will, they can exercise no discretion regarding whether or when to retreat. If they're ordered to retreat, they retreat. If not, they fight until they're destroyed.

FROST SALAMANDERS (M)

Cousins to salamanders, elemental beings of fire, **frost salamanders** are para-elemental beings of ice—in D&D lore, a conjunction of water and air. They aren't simply salamanders reskinned to deal cold damage, though. There are major differences between the two:

- Salamanders are Large; frost salamanders are Huge.
- Salamanders can travel only across solid ground; frost salamanders can burrow and climb.
- Both salamanders and frost salamanders are brutes, but salamanders are as intelligent as sentient humanoids are. Frost salamanders are smarter than apes, but just barely, and they don't have much personality.
- In addition to their burrowing movement, frost salamanders have tremorsense, allowing them to lie in wait beneath the surface of the ground and spring out to attack prey, like a remorhaz.
- Salamanders wield weapons and can use their tails to grapple and restrain. Frost salamanders just mess you up with their teeth and claws.
- The heat of a salamander's body deals fire damage to anyone who comes in contact with it. Frost salamanders don't have equivalent contact damage. However...
- Frost salamanders have a breath weapon, Freezing Breath, whose effects lie somewhere between the Cold Breaths of young and adult white dragons. It recharges only on a roll of 6—or when it takes fire damage, thanks to its Burning Fury trait.

According to the flavor text in *Mordenkainen's*, frost salamanders dig lairs in snow and ice, then crouch nearby, waiting for hapless passersby to use those lairs as shelter. As an instinctive, mechanistic method of hunting, this strategy is pretty clever. It's even more clever if the area where the frost salamander dwells is mountainous, allowing it to scramble up and down cliff faces with its climbing speed. Since they have darkvision, they wait until after nightfall to strike.

The interplay between Freezing Breath and Burning Fury is also clever. Frost salamanders are vulnerable to fire damage, but if they take any, it instantly recharges their Freezing Breath, which otherwise would be an ability they'd get to use only once per combat on average. You *think* it's smart to target them with the damage that hurts them most, but it just gives them more chances to use their breath weapon. Thus, you end up having to fight them by conventional means—and from time to time they get lucky and their breath weapon recharges on its own anyway.

Since Freezing Breath without Burning Fury is effectively a single-use ability, however, a frost salamander needs to wait for the right moment to use it: when its conical area of effect contains *all* its opponents (or six of them, whichever is less). If they're all holed up in its lair, they're sitting ducks for this effect, but on open ground, the right opportunity might not present itself right away.

When its Freezing Breath is available *and* the above criterion is met, a frost salamander always uses it. Otherwise, it has nothing to work with but its Multiattack: four Claws attacks and one Bite attack. A frost salamander may direct its Claws attacks at one opponent and its Bite attack at another, but it doesn't divide up its Claws attacks among multiple targets. Although frost salamanders are melee-oriented brutes, Claws has a 10-foot reach, so a frost salamander needn't—and doesn't—come right up to its enemies to slash at them. (If they come right up to it, however, it doesn't try to back off.) When a melee opponent of the frost salamander tries to get away, rather than take an opportunistic swipe at them with Claws when they leave its 10-foot reach, it waits for them to leave the 15-foot reach of its Bite, which deals about 75 percent more damage, and *then* makes its opportunity attack.

Frost salamanders are mostly indiscriminate when it comes to choosing targets. As predators, they instinctively favor smaller, weaker-looking, or more isolated targets over larger, tougher-looking targets in a knot, but that's the full extent of their judgment. They also don't like it when prey fights back, and they'll retreat, Dodging, when they're only moderately wounded (reduced to 117 hp or fewer). If pursued, however, they direct Freezing Breath and Multiattacks at their pursuers as they back away using their full movement. (Not if they have to burrow or climb, though—these modes of movement logically require them to face the direction they're going. In these instances, they Dodge.)

ELDER ELEMENTALS (M)

The four elder elementals in *Mordenkainen's* have a lot in common. To me, the most striking commonality is that they're exceptional, if not extraordinary, in every single ability score but one: Intelligence. Each of them has Intelligence 2, indicating bare-minimum sentience.

We see the combination of low Intelligence and high Wisdom fairly often, but in elder elementals, it's dialed up to an extreme. What does it mean to have Intelligence 2 and Wisdom 18 or 21? It means intuition without thinking, awareness without adaptability, judgment without reason. It means a creature that acts according to its nature and can't be compelled to do otherwise. It means a creature that senses the degree of threat that a party of PCs poses but can't clearly distinguish any one of those PCs from any other.

These are the other traits shared by all elder elementals:

- At least two physical ability scores that are higher than all their mental ability scores.
- Proficiency in Wisdom and Charisma saving throws, making them extremely difficult to manipulate or to banish.
- Resistance to physical damage from nonmagical attacks.
- Immunity to poison damage, exhaustion, paralysis, petrification, and being poisoned or stunned.
- Darkvision out to a radius of 60 feet, which in this case I interpret to indicate not a preference for fighting in dim light or darkness but an indifference to lighting conditions in general.
- A lack of language. Elder elementals aren't here to chat.
- Legendary Resistance, which they use primarily to avoid debilitating conditions and only secondarily to avoid damage.
- The Siege Monster feature, which means they destroy your cover before they destroy you.
- A Multiattack comprising two different attack actions, one attack with each.
- A selection of legendary actions that includes one turn's worth of additional movement.
- Neutral alignment. The default attitude of an elder elemental toward other creatures is indifference. It's not going to attack—intentionally—unless it's provoked.

But who knows who or what might provoke it?

What distinguishes one elder elemental from another are the features that are unique to each one. Differences in damage resistances, damage immunities, and condition immunities don't count for a lot, because these are passive features and because the elder elementals' Intelligence scores are so low, they're not going to fixate on, say, an opponent who's dealing

acid damage vs. one who isn't. At most, they help determine when an elder elemental chooses to use Legendary Resistance or not to use it.

The ability contour of the **leviathan**, the elder elemental of water, peaks in Strength and Constitution, making it a melee-oriented brute. If a leviathan is provoked into fighting, it charges its enemies and tries to stay on top of them—literally, since its Water Form feature allows it to share space with hostiles—after first smashing any cover they have or vessels they're using to stay afloat.

The leviathan's Tidal Wave action is hugely powerful, with effects that persist for as many as five subsequent rounds. Given this, it seems like a waste for it not to use Tidal Wave on its very first turn—and, in fact, the expected aggregate damage it deals to all creatures affected by it beggars the average total of 44 damage it deals if both attacks that make up its Multiattack hit. A PC mathematically incapable of succeeding on their Strength saving throw or swimming out of the tsunami takes an average total of 110 damage, while even a Raging level 20 barbarian with +13 to Strength saves and Athletics checks, advantage on the latter, and resistance to the bludgeoning damage can still be expected to take 14.

However, Tidal Wave recharges only on a roll of 6. In other circumstances, we might expect a monster to save such an ability until it knows it needs to use it. In the case of the leviathan, this action might be “unlocked” by the infliction of cold damage, since its Partial Freeze feature renders it vulnerable to large amounts of this type of damage.

But I'm going to go with a different interpretation: Elder elementals are all creatures of impulse and temperament. They don't care about you unless and until they're provoked, at which point they lash out. So if your PCs have already poked the leviathan, I don't see any reason why it would feel a need to hold back. Tidal Wave right out of the gate it is. The leviathan's Siege Monster feature includes a specific exception that includes objects and structures among the targets affected by Tidal Wave, so apply that bludgeoning damage to the PCs' ships, boats, and coastal fortresses—and remember to double it.

On subsequent rounds, if Tidal Wave recharges, the leviathan gets on top of its foes and uses it again, even if the first Tidal Wave is still going. If not, it indiscriminately Multiattacks nearby enemies.

What moves a leviathan to spend two legendary actions on an extra Slam attack? Nothing but caprice. If the leviathan's last enemy has just moved out of its 20-foot reach, it uses its Move legendary action on the same turn to pursue. Otherwise, at the end of each PC's turn, just roll a d4 or d6 (depending on how many opponents the leviathan has), and if you roll a 1, have it Slam. (No need to roll if the leviathan doesn't have two legendary actions available to it.)

The leviathan uses its Legendary Resistance whenever it fails a saving throw against being blinded, taking any amount of cold damage, or taking moderate damage (99 or more) of any other type from any single source.

The **phoenix**'s ability contour peaks in Dexterity and Constitution, so it takes a more skirmishy approach, which is facilitated by its Flyby feature. Its default behavior is to stay airborne about 60 feet from its target, swoop in to Multiattack (from the target's own space, thanks to Fire Form), then use the rest of its movement to fly back out of reach. Thanks to Flyby, it doesn't incur opportunity attacks.

Clever PCs, when they see that they don't get opportunity attacks when the phoenix flies out of their reach, will Ready Attack actions that trigger when the phoenix flies *into* their reach—or they may have the Sentinel feat and get a reaction attack in addition to their turn actions. Phoenix don't care. In addition to its Multiattack, its Fire Form deals 1d10 fire damage automatically just from entering the target's space, and if the target strikes it with a melee attack, they get dealt *another* 1d10 fire damage. Fire Form also ignites flammable objects in the phoenix's environment, which includes wooden structures—and thanks to Siege Monster, the damage dealt to such structures is doubled. (Like other elder elementals, the phoenix destroys cover first, then turns its attention to soft targets.)

Unlike the leviathan, which uses its legendary Move action to chase its foes, the phoenix uses its legendary Move action to stay out of melee reach. It uses Peck and Swoop only against inanimate structures that can't fight back and against living targets who've already used their actions and won't get to attack again before the phoenix's own turn, and only if doing so doesn't bring it within movement-plus-melee reach of another opponent who can attack before the phoenix does. It uses Peck to continue attacking a target that's already within its reach, Swoop if the target is between 20 and 120 feet away.

The phoenix uses its Legendary Resistance whenever it fails a saving throw against being blinded or taking moderate damage (53 or more) of any type from any single source.

The **elder tempest** has only one ability contour peak, in Dexterity. It would be happy to attack from range if it could, but it doesn't have a ranged weapon or spell attack, so it relies on high-damage shock attacks instead. Like the phoenix, it

has Flyby and uses this feature to fly out of reach after attacking without incurring opportunity attacks. When it Multiattacks, it always directs both of its attacks against the same target in order to maximize its damage.

Lightning Storm, like the leviathan's Tidal Wave, is a recharge ability that the elder tempest can use, on average, only one turn out of six. Unlike Tidal Wave, it *doesn't* damage structures or objects, only creatures. Thus, the elder tempest's first priority is to demolish any structure that's sheltering a ranged attacker from the winds of its Living Storm. Its second priority is to fly just close enough to its opponents that it's within 120 feet of all of them, then let loose a Lightning Storm. Since targets that fail their saves by 5 or more are stunned, the elder tempest exploits this condition to Multiattack one of these targets with advantage on the following turn—that's its third priority. However, if Lightning Storm recharges immediately, it uses that action again. Its fourth priority is to demolish other cover protecting its opponents, and its fifth priority is to thunder-buffet non-stunned targets.

Like the phoenix, the elder tempest uses its legendary Move action to stay out of its enemies' reach. Lightning Strike, like Lightning Storm, doesn't affect objects or structures, so like the leviathan and its legendary Slam action, the elder tempest uses Lightning Strike out of spite and whimsy; roll a die to see whether it bothers. Screaming Gale is highly situational and expensive in its legendary action cost; the elder tempest uses this legendary action if and only if all its opponents are clustered within a 20-foot horizontal band in front of it.

The elder tempest uses its Legendary Resistance whenever it fails a saving throw against being blinded or taking moderate damage (80 or more) of any type from any source.

The **zaratan**, like the leviathan, is a brute, moving directly to engage in melee when it attacks—but not necessarily at full speed. If its opponents are protected by a structure that gives them cover, it first approaches to within 120 feet of it, then advances just 10 feet at a time, using Earth-Shaking Movement as a bonus action to inflict damage to that structure each turn, then using its Spit Rock action to inflict further damage to that structure—doubled, thanks to Siege Monster. It does this until the structure is destroyed, then resumes advancing at full speed.

Spew Debris is a recharge ability with a more typical recharge rate, but it doesn't affect objects or structures, so the zaratan refrains from using it until all its targets' cover is destroyed. Once this is the case, it doesn't hesitate to use this ability whenever it's available. Otherwise, it defaults to its Multiattack, which it uses indiscriminately against opponents within its melee reach—including against any remaining cover.

The zaratan is immune to fewer conditions than its fellow elder elementals; it's also the only one with a damage *vulnerability*, thunder. Thus, it uses its Legendary Resistance whenever it fails a saving throw against being blinded, knocked prone, or restrained; taking any amount of thunder damage; or taking moderate damage (93 or more) of any other type from any single source.

The zaratan also reacts to thunder damage by using its legendary Retract action, followed by Revitalize and Emerge at their next earliest opportunities. This sequence takes a while, because these stunts cost *two* legendary actions each, which means the zaratan has to take a turn in between Retract and Revitalize and another between Revitalize and Emerge.

While the zaratan is Retracted, it's restrained—but a restrained creature can still take actions! It just can't *go* anywhere, and it attacks with disadvantage. It can stick its face out and Spew Debris, though, if that ability is available to it. As for the third legendary action it's not spending on Retract or Revitalize, that one's probably just wasted: Move won't get it anywhere while it's restrained, and it won't bother to Stomp when it would have disadvantage on the attack. When it finally Emerges and spits a rock, it aims it directly at whatever jerk dealt thunder damage to it.

Any other time, the zaratan's default legendary action is Stomp, unless the last of those opponents within its reach moves away, in which case it uses Move to give chase. The only time it uses its legendary Spit action is while it's busy demolishing structures and other cover; once those are all gone, it doesn't use this legendary action anymore.

No elder elemental ever retreats from battle, however much damage it takes. Elder elementals are slaves to their temperaments, and they're not native to the material plane anyway, so they have no particular attachment to it. For them, being destroyed is ultimately a kind of freedom.

¹ The average damage totals aren't actually the same: Before rounding to the nearest even whole number, Multiattack deals an average total of 25.5 damage, while Lightning Strike deals an average total of 26.5 damage.

CONSTRUCTS

SACRED STATUES

See “Eidolons,” [page 258](#).

CLOCKWORKS (M)

The clockwork constructs in *Mordenkainen's* are a collection of machines used by rock gnomes to defend their turf. Combining trickery with extraordinary durability and disproportionate damage-dealing capacity, they share a range of condition and damage immunities, along with darkvision and the ability to understand their controllers' commands—but also a rigidity in their behavior that can only be compensated for by active, real-time control. If they're sent off to do their work on their own, they do it mechanistically, with no adaptation to what's going on around them.

First up is the **bronze scout**, which isn't particularly strong, but it doesn't need to be, because it's basically a self-guided mobile land mine. The key things to note are its burrowing movement, its double proficiency in Stealth, its Earth Armor trait, its Lightning Flare action, and one more trait that's mentioned in the flavor text but unapardonably omitted from its stat block: “telescoping eyestalks” that let it see aboveground while it lurks below. These eyestalks are crucial, because the bronze scout lacks tremorsense or any other listed way to detect the presence of creatures above it.

This combination of features makes the bronze scout an ideal ambush initiator: Using Stealth to muffle its approach, it scuttles along the ground until it sees movement, then tunnels into the earth and heads toward it. Once it's approximately in position, it pokes its eyestalks up and looks around, checking to see if its position is correct—that is, if at least three enemies are within 15 feet of it (Targets in Areas). If it's not, it retracts its eyestalks and repositions. If it is, it sets off its Lightning Flare, whereupon its waiting allies launch their attack. Since it's immune to physical damage from nonmagical, non-adamantine weapons, it can take a hell of a beating, biting back at whatever attacks it. But if it's seriously damaged (reduced to 7 hp or fewer), it dives back underground, provoking no opportunity attack thanks to Earth Armor, and scuttles away.

The bronze scout doesn't have to be used in this way, though. It can be used, as its name suggests, simply as a scout, which doesn't attack at all unless it's discovered. In this instance, the bronze scout Readies the Lightning Flare action, with the triggering condition “when any creature winds up to make a melee attack against it.” Including the windup in the trigger condition is key, because it's a perceivable circumstance that allows the bronze scout to use Lightning Flare as an interrupt, occurring *before* the opponent follows through with the attack, whereas if the condition were “when any creature *makes* a melee attack,” the reaction would have to wait until after the attack either hit or missed.

A bronze scout that's merely scouting doesn't stick around and Bite unless an enemy manages to grapple it and thereby keep it from burrowing away, and it only Bites whoever has grappled it. As soon as the grappler lets go, it burrows away.

Let's talk about those eyestalks for a minute, because poking them up out of the ground within the line of sight of other creatures could arguably expose a hidden bronze scout to them. This surely calls for an additional Dexterity (Stealth) check, above and beyond the one that initially determined whether the burrowing bronze scout was hidden. However, since its eyestalks are considerably smaller than the bronze scout in toto, I'm inclined to give the bronze scout advantage on this check. In fact, I think I'd have to give the bronze scout advantage on Stealth checks as it burrows underground as well, because the earth would muffle its sounds while providing continuous total cover. Only aboveground would the bronze scout need to make straight Stealth checks.

The bronze scout has darkvision, optimizing it for underground or after-dark reconnaissance, either one preferable to snooping around in daylight.

The **iron cobra** is another mobile mine, or perhaps more properly a mobile grenade, since it doesn't burrow. It does, however, have a high Stealth modifier, allowing it to Hide where a target might pass by it or even to approach unnoticed if visibility is poor or the target is distracted. (An alert target with clear lines of sight and nothing else to occupy its attention will see it coming—it doesn't even get to make a Stealth check under such circumstances.) It, too, has darkvision, making it preferable to use it at night or underground rather than aboveground during the daytime.

With a respectable reservoir of hit points and the same immunity to physical damage from normal, non-adamantine weapons as the bronze scout, the iron cobra can keep Biting its designated target for as long as it needs to. As a construct with Intelligence of only 3, it has no capacity for independent judgment and has to follow its controller's instructions to the letter, whether these instructions are "Bite once, then retreat," "Bite three times, then retreat," or "Bite *everybody in the whole world!*" If its instructions don't include retreating after a certain amount of time, it doesn't—it keeps Biting until it's damaged beyond its ability to function.

I don't like the random-effect aspect of the Bite, and I personally think the type of effect the Bite's poison causes should be part of the instructions given to it, e.g., "Bite once to paralyze, then make subsequent bites to cause confusion," or, "Bite only to cause poison damage." Any such instructions given, however, have to be phrased in the simplest, most concrete terms. The iron cobra has no capacity for target assessment: It can't distinguish, for instance, whether a target seems low-Constitution or high-Constitution, nor can it make decisions based on what a target is doing, unless what it's doing is attacking the iron cobra. Its Intelligence is 3, which seems to me like a nice cap on the number of situational factors it can evaluate while executing its instructions.

The *controller*, on the other hand, presumably knows how to get good use out of an iron cobra. Paralysis is a good effect to use on a target against whom the controller intends to follow up with an attack of its own or an effect that requires a Dexterity save to resist. Confusion is good against supporters, who are likely to be positioned within easy reach of their allies and whose combat role can thereby be subverted. Poison damage is all-purpose.

The **stone defender** is a front-line bulwark that interposes itself between its allies and their enemies. It always positions itself immediately adjacent to or in front of an ally, which it defends with its Intercept Attack reaction. Lacking the capacity for independent judgment, it always Intercepts the first attack that would otherwise hit its ally; it has no way of deciding that one attack should be let through in order to prevent a potentially more dangerous attack. (That's assuming that the stone defender is a wind-it-up-and-let-it-go device, however. If the creature it's protecting is actively controlling it, you may decide that the controller can use *its own* judgment to call out, "Protect me, squire!" when it wants the stone defender to Intercept an attack and stay mum when it doesn't.) On its own turn, it Slams any enemy within reach that has attacked it or one of its allies, that its ally is also attacking, or that its ally orders it to attack.

There's nothing more to the stone defender than this. However, *allies* of the stone defender will surely take advantage of its Slam attack by moving in and aiming melee attacks at enemies knocked prone by it. Stone defenders don't retreat, no matter how much damage they take.

The **oaken bolter** is an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink artillery piece that can operate anywhere on the battlefield, including, counterintuitively, the front line. That's because its Lancing Bolt attack is both a ranged attack (with a very long range, equal to that of a heavy crossbow) and a melee attack, so it suffers no penalty at point-blank range. That doesn't mean it *belongs* on the front line, just that it *can* operate there if things get weird. Its ideal position, however, is between 40 and 50 feet from the nearest enemy and 100 feet or less from the most distant one.

Harpoon, on a hit, offers the option of pulling the target 20 feet closer using a bonus action. An excellent application of Harpoon is to pull an enemy out of position—for instance, to drag a spellslinger or marksman out of the back line. Another is to keep a shock attacker from slipping away. Another is to yank a melee attacker off an ally that's looking the worse for wear. Another is to pull an enemy past a hidden iron cobra. Note, though, that Harpoon only grapples; it doesn't restrain, so a follow-up Lancing Bolt attack roll doesn't gain advantage from a successful harpooning.

Explosive Bolt is best used when four or more opponents are clustered within the area of effect (which is large—40 feet in diameter, same as a *fireball*), and since it's on a 5–6 recharge, the oaken bolter takes this action whenever that criterion is met and the ability isn't on cooldown.

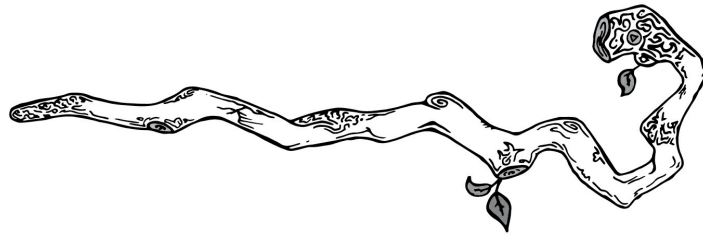
An oaken bolter rolls around constantly within its optimal range from the enemy; if it ends up outside or inside this range (by some means other than harpooning an opponent and dragging them nearer), it uses its movement to try to return to it, potentially incurring one or more opportunity attacks. Because it shares the same damage immunities that all these

clockwork constructs possess, and because it, too, is a construct without independent judgment, it doesn't concern itself with this fact. It doesn't retreat when seriously damaged.

The enhancement and malfunction tables under "Individual Designs" don't alter these constructs' tactics in any way, but they do make the execution of those tactics more entertaining, and I see no reason to forgo using them. In fact, I'd go so far as to suggest having a clockwork construct suffer a random malfunction whenever it's reduced to 40 percent or less of its hit point maximum or takes a critical hit.

DUERGAR CONSTRUCTS

See "Duergar," [page 31–44](#).



STONE CURSED (M)

You may think that once a basilisk or a medusa turns you to stone, your life has gotten about as bad as it's going to get, but there exists one even more dismal possibility: Some jerk of an alchemist could come along and turn you into a **stone cursed**, a statuary semi-zombie created to serve as a sentinel. (Why not create a caryatid column, a time-honored monster dating back to the AD&D *Fiend Folio*? Beats me. So far, in fifth edition D&D, caryatid columns are mentioned only in *Mythic Odysseys of Theros*, which gives no stat block for them.)

The stone cursed's ability contour is unimpressive, with very high Strength and high Constitution standing out among its otherwise below-average scores. Despite possessing limited sentience—they have Intelligence 5 and can still speak the languages they knew in life—stone cursed are shambling and mechanistic, lurching into melee combat to attack with their Petrifying Claws. Most often, as dimly implied by their Cunning Opportunist and False Appearance traits (and their pitiful 10-foot movement speed), they initiate combat only against beings who've walked right up to them. In that situation, False Appearance lets them surprise their opponents in the first round of combat, giving their Petrifying Claws a potential head start toward turning their targets to stone as well, and if those opponents try to retreat without Disengaging, they gain advantage on their opportunity attacks.

However, they possess no sophistication beyond this sequence. Their low Intelligence and Wisdom grant them no tactical flexibility or target selection acumen, and as constructs, they have no independent judgment. Once a stone cursed begins attacking a given opponent, nothing short of that opponent's defeat, its own destruction, or a direct order from its creator can induce it to stop, and when it wins a fight, if no one else is attacking it, it trudges back to its post and resumes its watch. If attacked with a ranged weapon while not engaged in melee, it plods dully toward its attacker, 10 feet at a time, letting itself be pincushioned by their shots as it vainly tries to close the distance.

Stone cursed should therefore be thought of less as creatures and more as a hazard.



CADAVER COLLECTORS (M)

Cadaver collectors are like monstrous Roombas that scour the endless battlefields of Acheron, scooping up corpses and recycling the souls that formerly inhabited them into specters, which are then bound to fight for the cadaver collectors' masters. Although native to that outer plane, they can be summoned to other planes as well, including the prime material—and if the summoner dies or loses control of them, they just keep on Roomba-ing around, turning living beings into cadavers if there aren't already cadavers handy.

With Intelligence 5, they're mechanistic juggernauts that never vary their method. What is their method? Well, they're brutes, with extraordinary Strength and Constitution, so whoever, whatever, and wherever their targets may be, they march straight at them. They have no independent judgment and lack the Wisdom to discriminate among targets, but they have a function, and a good machine completes its function with maximum efficiency, so they tend to head toward *concentrations* of bodies, whether those bodies be alive or dead. When they're close enough to three living targets to engulf them all in a 30-foot cone of Paralyzing Breath, that's what they do (as long as this recharge ability isn't on cooldown). And when they come within melee reach of a paralyzed target—or when cheeky opponents with magic or adamantine weapons run up and impertinently attack them—they employ their dual Slam Multiattack (rolling with advantage if the target is paralyzed, with every hit a crit).

What if they're attacked by foes with nonmagical, non-adamantine weapons? They ignore it and keep juggernauting toward the nearest knot of humanoid organic mass. These attacks can't hurt them and have no relevance to their mission. Woe betide the third opponent to get in on the action, though: At that point, the cadaver collector's density-detecting algorithm kicks in, and all it has to do is take a couple of steps back—heedless of opportunity attacks—to nail all three with Paralyzing Breath.

Once per combat, a cadaver collector has access to the Summon Specters bonus action. The question is when it uses this feature, which has no particular connection to how many opponents it's fighting or has already defeated in a given combat encounter, and I'm not sure that any *obvious* answer to this question presents itself. One could reasonably argue that, for maximum advantage, it always uses it in the very first round of combat, to maximize the difficulty of the encounter from the get-go. But am I alone in thinking that's deeply unsatisfying from a narrative point of view? It seems like Summon Specters should happen at a more dramatic moment, doesn't it?

So what could that moment be? Should it be tied to how much damage the cadaver collector has taken? (Having taken moderate damage—being reduced to 132 hp or fewer—would be a reasonable bar to set for this criterion.) But the cadaver collector is a servant—nay, an *implement*. As a construct, it has no self-preservation instinct and no purpose other than to follow its instructions. It seems more like the trigger for Summon Specters should be connected to what's happening with the cadaver collector's *allies*. But then again, there's also the possibility that the cadaver collector has no allies, because it's gone errant.

This is going to be a real reach—I admit it forthrightly—but what if the cadaver collector has a sort of uncanny intuition for when the tide of battle needs a nudge, either when the introduction of some fresh forces could turn a losing fight into a winning one, or when a battle the cadaver collector's side is winning with great effort could be turned into one it can win handily? If you need to make this sense weirder and more mechanistic, what if the cadaver collector always bases its judgment on however many allies it had, and whatever condition they were in, when it was last under its summoner's control? In other words, maybe it was summoned as an auxiliary to the Khuren Kharuul, an elite guard unit fifty hobgoblins strong, and it activates Summon Specters once combat has gone on long enough that it's strange that its opponents would still be holding out against fifty hobgoblins.

None of these rules really lends itself to consistent application. I think the best rule is probably to use Summon Specters when it feels right to you as the DM, and not to try to justify it.

It should go without saying, but just in case it doesn't: A cadaver collector doesn't retreat, no matter how much damage it's taken. It does its thing until it's busted.

RETRIEVERS (M)

Created by the drow to catch and transport demons, **retrievers** are mechanical kidnappers built in the shape of—what else?—spiders. Durable and implacable, they're designed specifically to pursue their quarry across the planes of the multiverse and bring them back home to the prime material plane.

Retrievers possess extraordinary Strength and Constitution, very high Dexterity, and approximately the Intelligence of a dog. These brute fighters don't possess the Magic Resistance trait, but they make up for it somewhat by being proficient in all of the "big three" saving throws. Proficiency in Perception and Stealth makes them capable ambush attackers, and their plating can't be penetrated by nonmagical weapons unless they're made of adamantine.

Despite the length of its stat block, the retriever's combat sequence is fairly simple. Its goal is to abduct a specific target, as instructed by its controller. Its Faultless Tracker trait lets it zero in on that target. Instinctively able to predict with ordinary accuracy which way its target will go, it uses darkness and cover to conceal itself and get close to them (ideally, within 40 feet or less) without being seen or heard. However, if no such concealment is available, it's not above simply Dashing toward its target over open ground.

Once it comes within 40 feet of its target or vice versa, it unleashes its Multiattack, beginning with its Paralyzing Beam. If the beam succeeds in paralyzing the target, it skitters in, snatches the target up, makes its remaining Foreleg attacks against anyone else within reach, and uses the remainder of its movement to move away again, heedless of opportunity attacks. If the beam doesn't succeed, it makes its Foreleg attacks against the target instead, but if it reduces them to 0 hp, it keeps them unconscious but alive and doesn't attack them again; if it has an attack left over, it uses it against a bystander instead.

The retriever uses its Paralyzing Beam only against its target, and only when that target isn't paralyzed already. Against other opponents, it uses Force Beam, even if their Dexterity is higher than their Constitution; it's not smart enough to make the distinction. (It would have been interesting if Force Beam pushed its target back or knocked them prone on a hit, but instead it just does a big splat of damage.)

On its next turn, if it's on a different plane from where it's been told to take its target and the target is paralyzed, it spirits them away with *plane shift*, and that's that. If it's taking the target someplace on the same plane, it has to take some precautions.

First, as long as the target remains paralyzed, it Dashes away with them—still unconcerned about opportunity attacks, and exploiting its climbing speed wherever possible—until it's out of sight of anyone who might interfere, then casts *web* to gum up the path behind it. (The retriever's spell save DC for *web* isn't high enough for it to seriously consider casting it against opponents directly, but for this purpose, the threat is stronger than the execution: Rather than run straight through, pursuers will pause before entering the area of effect and lose time trying to cut or burn through it.)

Whether or not it's escaped with its quarry, if they shake off their paralysis, it has to stop and either try to paralyze them again or strike at them with its forelegs. Again, its goal is to bring its quarry back alive, so it never strikes a killing blow, and it doesn't use Force Beam against them, since the damage can't be made nonlethal (*Player's Handbook*, chapter 9, "Knocking a Creature Out").

What if allies of the target interpose themselves between the retriever and their comrade? Depends on your degree of enthusiasm for the optional actions presented in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* (chapter 9, "Action Options"). If you don't care for those actions, simply have the retriever dart around or through a gap in the defensive line—did I mention that the retriever really doesn't care about opportunity attacks?—or, if they haven't allowed it any way past, try to slash and blast its way through them with its forelegs and Force Beam.

In my opinion, however, the more elegant route is to let it Overrun as a bonus action, having the Large retriever make a Strength (Athletics) check with advantage against the unfortunate defender(s) in its path—who, being smaller, must make their own check(s) with disadvantage—and barge right past them. If it somehow fails to break the line, it still has its action available to Multiattack, while if it succeeds, it disregards the defender(s) and goes straight for its target.

Retrievers, being constructs, pursue their mission relentlessly and don't retreat no matter how much damage they're dealt.

HELLFIRE ENGINES (M)

In both name and concept, the **hellfire engine** sounds like the subject of a direct-to-cable movie: a diabolical, semi-sentient truck on a mission of destruction. Created by powerful devils for battlefield use against their foes, it's a self-powered armored assault vehicle with a variety of appropriately vicious armaments, which sometimes gets bored of waiting around for an invasion and decides to wander off and engage in some unsanctioned recreational extermination.

This juggernaut has extraordinary Strength and Constitution, high Dexterity, and rock-bottom Intelligence and Charisma. If not for its proficiency in Charisma saving throws—which *raises* its modifier to +0—and its Magic Resistance, it would be a sitting duck for a *banishment* spell, and even with those features, its chances of succeeding on its saving throw against it are less than confidence-inspiring if the caster has a spell save DC of 13 or greater; against DC 16 or greater, even with advantage, they're less than fifty-fifty. Therefore, despite its general haphazardness with respect to target selection, when it feels that magical interplanar tug and manages to resist it, it goes straight for the caster responsible and tries to paint the ground with them.

When not being targeted by *banishment*, it spends its time mechanistically using its Flesh-Crushing Stride¹ and Hellfire Weapons to slaughter as many living creatures in its vicinity as it can. The criteria for the various weapons are hardwired, not the product of independent judgment or experience. Flesh-Crushing Stride, Bonemelt Sprayer, and Thunder Cannon all require at least six targets (or every available target, if there are fewer than six) within their various areas of effect for a hellfire engine to use them; when it doesn't have targets positioned appropriately for any of these weapons, it defaults to Lightning Flail.

- Thunder Cannon, which offers the most bang, is the hellfire engine's first choice. The area of effect is circular, with a 30-foot radius, centered on a visible point within 120 feet.
- Flesh-Crushing Stride, its second choice, covers a 40-foot straight-line path, 15 feet wide, beginning at the hellfire engine's current position.
- Bonemelt Sprayer's area of effect is a 60-foot cone.

If there's a seventh target in the area of effect of Flesh-Crushing Stride, it becomes preferable to Thunder Cannon against only six. If there are eight targets in Bonemelt Sprayer's area of effect, it becomes preferable to Flesh-Crushing Stride against six, and if there are nine, it becomes preferable to Thunder Cannon against six.

When counting targets for Hellfire Weapons, include those who are unconscious but not dead. As far as the hellfire engine is concerned, they're still fair game; it's trying to *kill* them, not simply put them out of commission. Don't count them for Flesh-Crushing Stride, however, since kills with this action don't send their victims' souls to hell.

The hellfire engine doesn't fear opportunity attacks, but it doesn't come closer than 15 feet to its target before attacking with Lightning Flail if it doesn't have to; it would rather do a drive-by, in the hope of reaching a position where one of its better attacks becomes feasible. Since Lightning Flail is its only melee weapon attack, it doesn't get to deal opportunity attacks of its own unless a melee opponent moves more than 15 feet away from it—but if one does, it's more than happy to let the lightning leap toward those still engaged with it.

Weapons and spells that deal acid, lightning, thunder, necrotic, radiant, or force damage bypass the hellfire engine's resistances and immunities, but they don't enrage it further or attract its attention. It wants to kill *everyone*; the order doesn't matter. Except for that punk who tries to cast *banishment*—they die first.

The hellfire engine's Wisdom is high enough to suggest a rudimentary self-preservation instinct, but it's a construct fueled by pure, molten malice. It doesn't stop until its hit point tank runs dry.

STEEL PREDATORS (M)

Manufactured by a rogue modron exiled from Mechanus, the **steel predator** is a construct custom-built for a customer who wants someone dead badly enough to send a CR 16 killbot after it. With extraordinary Strength and Constitution, it's a brute melee fighter designed with a specific purpose—to kill a single designated target—and it pursues this target mechanistically and relentlessly, ignoring other creatures unless they get in its way.

Although its Intelligence is very low, its Wisdom is high. Usually, such a Wisdom score would mean that if it saw that things weren't going well, it would break off and either retreat or try to negotiate, but the steel predator is a construct and has no independent judgment. Its Wisdom is merely a foundation for its Perception and Survival skills.

Being proficient in both Perception and Stealth, the steel predator is an ambush predator, always trying to gain surprise and make its first attack without being seen. Proficiency in Survival allows it to track targets that are actively trying to elude it.

Its most distinctive feature, and the one around which its tactics revolve, is Stunning Roar, which recharges on a roll of 5 or 6. A 60-foot, cone-shaped shock wave, Stunning Roar not only deals thunder damage but stuns targets and makes them drop everything they're holding on failed saving throws. Based on the size and shape of the area of effect, per Targets in Areas, a steel predator wants to aim it at six or more foes if possible—or at all of its opponents, if they number fewer than six—including its designated target. The goal here is twofold: to debilitate the target and to keep bystanders from coming to their rescue.

If the designated target is stunned, the steel predator immediately homes in and Multiattacks. If not, it uses Stunning Roar again if it's recharged (repositioning first to target not just the designated target but anyone else who's still moving), Multiattack if it isn't. Its mission is to *kill*, not just knock out, so it continues to attack the designated target even after it's reduced to 0 hp. When its work is done, it *plane shifts* away.

The steel predator mostly disregards any other opponents who may attack it. The exception is if they're somehow obstructing it from reaching its designated target. It's not enough for them simply to interpose themselves: They must literally *prevent* the steel predator from reaching its target. Since it's immune to physical damage from nonmagical weapon attacks, if an enemy runs at it with an off-the-rack halberd and starts hacking at it, it doesn't consider that enemy to be an obstruction, since they can't do it any harm, and it ignores them. If an enemy comes at it with a *magic* halberd, on the other hand, that's a situation it has to deal with.

With AC 20 on top of this damage immunity, the steel predator shrugs off opportunity strikes. On the other hand, if you were looking for an opportunity to give a player buyer's remorse about having chosen the Sentinel feat for their character, here it is. A PC who uses that feat to stop a steel predator in its tracks gets treated to *all* the attacks.

Usually, a recharge ability is so good that a monster will employ it whenever it's not on cooldown. Stunning Roar is a partial exception. It always uses it when it's available and its designated target is un-stunned. But what about when the designated target is stunned, but an interloper character isn't? That depends entirely on the extent to which the steel predator cares about the interloper.

Alone, a defending character with a weapon that can't harm the steel predator at all, or can't do so meaningfully, isn't worth Stunning Roar; Multiattack is enough for them, even if Stunning Roar has recharged. However, if the defender is wielding a +2 or +3 weapon, or a magic weapon that deals acid, fire, force, or radiant damage—and, again, we're talking a defender that's successfully keeping the steel predator from its designated target—that's worth a Stunning Roar to shut down, from an angle that also gives the designated target another dose of it and includes any other opponent who's still moving around.

The steel predator uses *plane shift* to travel back and forth between its home base (wherever that is) and the plane on which its target resides. For localized, precise teleportation, it uses *dimension door*, which it can cast three times per day. But its Intelligence is very low, so its ability to use this spell effectively is limited to a very small number of situations: pursuing its targets through barriers or up or down in space, or catching up with a target that's outrunning it, for instance.

Aside from knowing when to cast *dimension door* and where to position themselves to affect enough targets with Stunning Roar, steel predators lack the Intelligence to alter their tactics or adapt to a changing situation. They attack their designated targets, they attack anyone with the power to get in their way, and that's it. As constructs, they don't exercise independent judgment, they don't parley, and they fight until the job is done or they're destroyed.

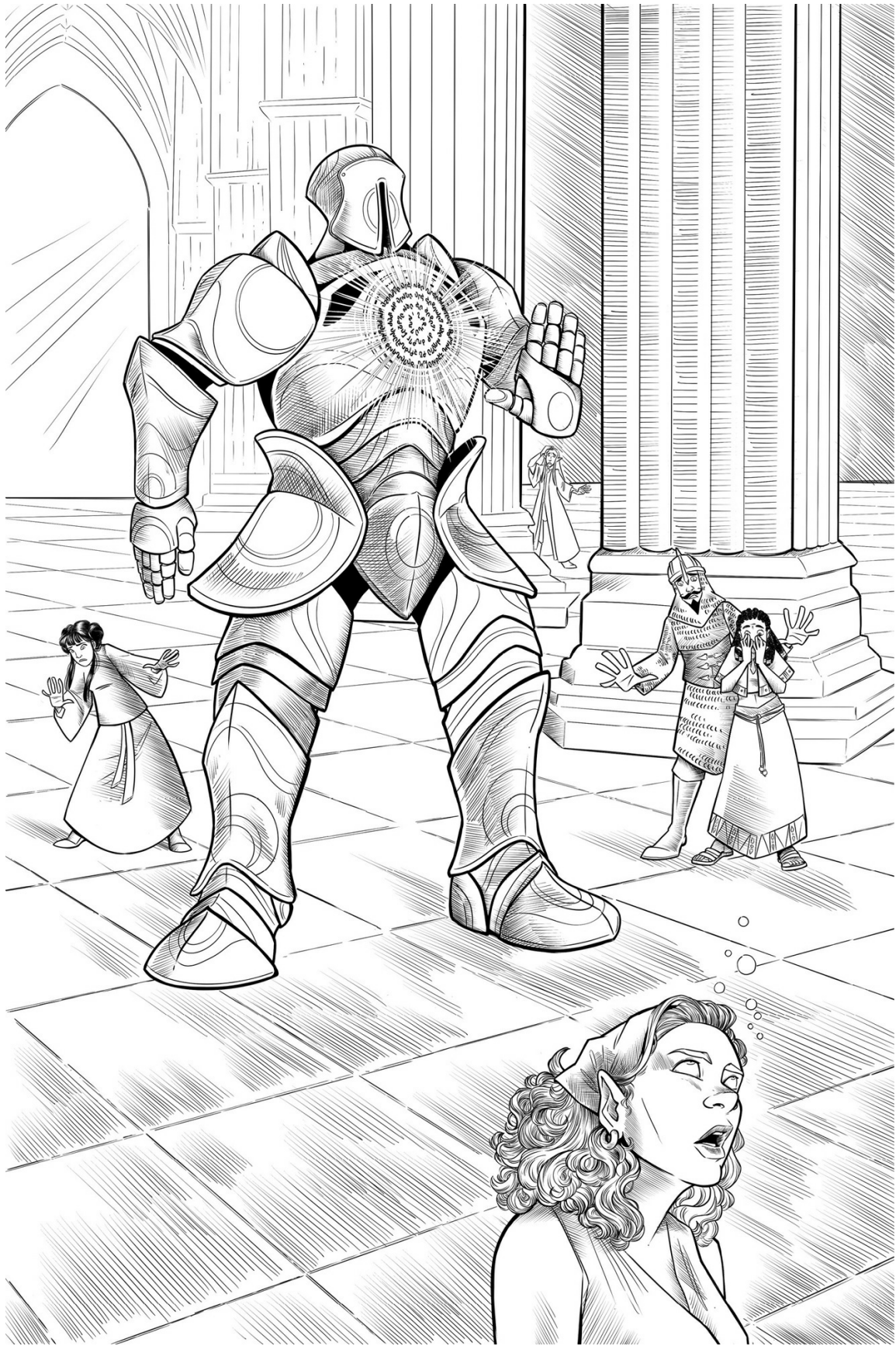
MARUTS (M)

Maruts are interplanar marshals that monitor and enforce compliance with mystically signed contracts, and by “enforce compliance,” I mean deliver beatdowns to whoever breaches them. Unlike most constructs, maruts are highly intelligent and able to exercise considerable individual discretion in carrying out their tasks; the tasks themselves, however, are rigidly determined. Maruts don't care whether you've honored or violated the *spirit* of a contract, only the letter of it.

As lawful neutral creatures, maruts are indifferent toward other beings by default. If you're helping them in their duties, they're agreeable, in a robotic sort of way. If you're hindering them, they'll clear the blockage. Once you no longer pose any hindrance, however, they'll be on their way. If you're not the party they're out to punish, they only attack to subdue.

Maruts are spectacularly tough, with more than 400 hp, AC 22, and extraordinary Strength and Constitution. Their Intelligence and Charisma are also exceptional, and their Wisdom is high; they have expertise in Insight, Intimidation, and Perception. They're brutes, but they're *brilliant* brutes: They can see through most lies and know other creatures' abilities

and weaknesses as if reading them off their character sheets or stat blocks. Unfortunately for them, while they're capable of great tactical flexibility, they don't really have the features they need to make full use of it.



Maruts are immune to poison; they're resistant to thunder damage and to physical damage from nonmagical weapons; and they can't be charmed, frightened, paralyzed, poisoned, or knocked unconscious. By process of elimination, they *can* be knocked prone, blinded, restrained, or stunned, and they'll use their Legendary Resistance if necessary to avoid these conditions.

The marut's basic melee attack is Unerring Slam, which has *no chance of failure*. Where you'd expect to see a to-hit modifier, its stat block says, "automatic hit."

Unerring Slam does an automatic, unvarying 60 force damage and also pushes a Huge or smaller target one square or hex away from itself. It gets *two* of these in its Multiattack action. When using Unerring Slam against an interloper, it first positions itself to the side, so that it pushes the interloper out of its own path. Against the target it's been sent to punish, it doesn't care, and it may not even bother to push the target at all (it doesn't have to).

Blazing Edict is one of the rare instances in which a creature might want to use an area-effect ability even when there are fewer targets in the area of effect than it could be reasonably expected to affect. What do I mean by this? The area of effect of Blazing Edict is a 60-foot cube. Referring to Targets in Areas, one might reasonably expect this to affect twelve creatures—and by my usual criterion for deciding when to use area-effect attacks, this would mean that the marut wouldn't want to use Blazing Edict *unless* it could catch at least twelve of its opponents (or all of them, whichever is fewer) in the cube.

But the marut is only interested in whether its *designated* target(s) are in that area of effect. It's not evil: It's not looking to harm anyone else. But it's also not good: It's not going out of its way to *avoid* harming anyone else. It does, however, have double proficiency in Intimidation. So it's going to begin combat not with a combat action but with a social action, using Intimidation to warn its quarry to halt—and everyone else to get behind it.

It doesn't issue this warning twice. On its next turn, it positions itself where its designated target(s) are in front of it and as many innocent bystanders as possible are behind it, then uses Blazing Edict. If any bystander was foolish enough not to get out of the way, too bad.

A failed saving throw against Blazing Edict results in a target's being stunned. The stunned condition includes incapacitation, which is important, because incapacitation results in an automatic failure on saving throws vs. Justify.

Justify is tricky: It allows the marut to teleport up to two other creatures, plus itself, directly to the interplanar courthouse. It doesn't have the option of staying behind. If either target fails its saving throw, the marut goes with it.

Thus, you have to know in advance whether the contract the marut is enforcing calls for the target to be hauled back in front of the mechanical magistrate or simply beaten down. If the beatdown is called for (e.g., when a party has flagrantly violated the contract), it proceeds from here to a straightforward melee rumble, with the marut Multiattacking its stunned targets with advantage and using Blazing Edict again as available when the marut's targets shake off its effects. However, if there's some question about whether the contract was violated or not, or if the terms of the contract call for further judgment in the case of a particular violation, the marut proceeds from Blazing Edict directly to Justify, hauling the miscreant(s) back to the Hall of Concordance while they're still stunned.

That being said, if the parties to the contract who are being called back to face a hearing number more than two, it's going to take the marut multiple trips to get them all—and it will have to rest for at least an hour in between trips. Because of the imprecise nature of *plane shift*, it may take it considerable time to catch up with them again; meanwhile, the group is split across two different planes. In this instance, I'd bend the lore: Rather than assign only one marut per contract, when the parties in breach of a contract number three or more, have the court send multiple maruts—one for every two summonees, plus one more for any odd remainder. (Maruts are careful not to position themselves where their Blazing Edicts will affect other maruts.)

If a marut's target preemptively surrenders—and the marut doesn't have to bring in anyone else who *is* resisting—it skips Blazing Edict and goes straight to Justify. Cooperation is rewarded. Resistance is punished.

Many player characters with good Wisdom scores and/or proficiency in that saving throw—that is, with a saving throw modifier of +5 or better—will have a reasonable chance of resisting being stunned by Blazing Edict. Not many PCs will also have a reasonable chance of resisting Justify as well. Even a PC with a +5 Wisdom save mod *and* a +5 Charisma save mod will still have only a 1 in 9 chance of making both saves. And flunking the first save means automatic failure on the second.

Even so, maruts take special care with clerics, paladins, and warlocks, who have proficiency in both of these saves and are most likely to have such high modifiers in them. If two uses of Blazing Edict aren't enough for them to fail their saves, they

switch to the beatdown method, pursuing incapacitation through the unconscious condition rather than the stunned condition, and they don't use Justify on those targets unless and until they're incapacitated one way or the other. In fact, remember how I suggested sending at least one marut to haul back every two targets? Just to be safe, let's say that a cleric, paladin, or warlock gets their own *personal* marut, if apprehending them is what the marut is sent to do. The same goes for any target with +5 on one of these saves and more than +5 on the other.

Maruts are creatures of duty; they never flee. Either they leave with their targets when they use Justify, or they cast *plane shift* and depart when they've beaten their target(s) into unconsciousness. If a marut fails in its duty, the Hall of Concordance sends two more.

¹ The art in *Mordenkainen's* and most other fifth edition references depict hellfire engines as wheeled vehicles, but the name of this action implies a walking configuration, like a mecha. I guess that means it's your choice!

Oozes

OBLIXES (M)

Jeremy Crawford, lead designer of the game's fifth edition, characterized the oblix as "D&D's new scariest monster." I'm not convinced that it's the scariest, in terms of the degree of threat it poses—but I would say it's one of the *creepiest*.

The main reason I think oblixes (I feel like the plural should be "oblices") are more creepy than scary is that they don't need to kill their victims to consume their memories. They *can* kill their victims, but they don't need to. Furthermore, it's not clear that they have any compelling reason to. It's the memories that power them, not the physical substance of their victims. There's also a curious choice of wording in the Eat Memories feature that makes me wonder whether an oblix has any good reason to use it more than once per target. But more on that below.



Oblexes/oblices have an unusual ability contour, with peaks in Dexterity, Constitution, and Intelligence. Dexterity plus Constitution usually means “skirmisher,” but oozes can’t move fast enough to skirmish. What they really are is quasi-brutes with Dexterity- and Intelligence-based rather than Strength-based attacks and a keen sense of their opponents’ weaknesses.

They also have 60 feet of blindsight, meaning that even when they take an apparently humanoid form, they have eyes in the back of their heads, figuratively speaking, and can zero in on their victims even in absolute darkness. Nighttime suits them, as do subterranean environments.

They’re all Amorphous, able to slip through cracks as narrow as 1 inch wide (the text specifically says “without squeezing,” which I take to mean—based on “Squeezing Into a Smaller Space” in the *Player’s Handbook*, chapter 9—that passing through such a crack doesn’t slow them down at all or penalize them on attacks or Dexterity saving throws, nor does it grant opponents advantage on attacks against them). Finally, they all have Aversion to Fire and immunity to several debilitating conditions, four of which are fairly self-evident based on their oozy nature (the charmed condition is the fifth).

The **oblex spawn** is the simplest and weakest form of the oblex, produced when a greater oblex becomes too full of memories and needs to shed a few. Oblex spawn can’t consume memories themselves yet, so they don’t engage in combat if they can help it. Instead, their goal is to avoid engagement and get someplace safe where they can grow, as quickly as they can manage. If an enemy does engage an oblex spawn in melee, it fights back, whomping the meddler with a pseudopod—but not if its attacker deals fire damage to it. Even the smallest amount of fire damage prompts the oblex spawn to Dash away, as does being moderately wounded (reduced to 12 hp or fewer). Oblex spawn are intelligent enough to Disengage, but they’re so slow that doing so only hinders them further.

The **adult oblex** is the basic form, and it’s *much* tougher than the spawn. It possesses extraordinary Dexterity and Intelligence and very high Constitution and Charisma. The primary benefit of the latter is its skill at Deception, which is to say, impersonation of the people whose memories it’s consumed in the past. “The sharper the mind, the better the meal,” says *Mordenkainen’s*, so the adult oblex zeroes in on the PC or NPC with the highest Intelligence in the area. It’s up to you, as the DM, to decide whether it needs to observe the PCs and NPCs for a while to pick out the most intelligent among them or whether it can just sense the rich, delicious complexity in their brainwave patterns.

Actually, the ideal victim is a PC or NPC with high Intelligence *and low Wisdom*. Given a choice between, say, a character with Intelligence 18 and Wisdom 14 and one with Intelligence 16 and Wisdom 10, an adult oblex weighs the risk against the reward and may opt for the latter. Figure that the oblex wants a solid two-thirds chance of success and won’t settle for less than fifty-fifty: A target with a +0 or lower Wisdom saving throw modifier is ideal, and one with a +5 or higher modifier is out of the question. On the flip side, a target must have an Intelligence of at least, say, 14 to be of any interest to the oblex at all.

The oblex is like Sun Zi: What it wants is not to fight but to win without fighting. To this end, it has the Sulfurous Impersonation feature, plus four magic spells in its repertoire:

- A boosted *charm person*, affecting up to five targets at once.
- *Color spray*, primarily useful for covering the oblex’s escape if and when it decides it needs to flee. Because of its area of effect, a 15-foot cone, the oblex can only reasonably expect it to affect two enemies, with hit points totaling 33 or fewer. So we’re talking, like, level 3 PCs here, or maybe a single PC of level 6 or 7—and probably *not* the one most able to hit the oblex with something sharp or heavy.
- *Detect thoughts*, useful for confirming whether the target whom the oblex thinks will make the finest meal really will. The presence of this spell in the oblex’s repertoire may incline you against simply letting an oblex know your PCs’ stats automatically; it does for me.
- *Hold person*, also boosted to affect two targets at once. Good to use against the dumb but dangerous ones whose memories the oblex isn’t interested in. Requires concentration.

The oblex’s modus operandi is shaping up something like this: First, it uses Sulfurous Impersonation to present itself as a reasonable, not-at-all-suspicious person (or two, or five) for the PCs to interact with, relying on its proficiency in Deception to maintain the charade. If Deception fails and the PCs start to get suspicious, it falls back on *charm person* to keep them in line. (Why not use *charm person* first, to gain advantage on Deception checks? Because once *charm person* ends, targets always realize immediately that they’ve been charmed—but it can take *years* for people to realize they’ve been deceived, if they ever admit it to themselves at all.)

From this point on, the oblex has one hour to get what it came for. It also has to stay within 120 feet of its body to maintain its slime-tether, which means that if it spools itself all the way out, it's limited to its body's 20-foot movement speed.

This leads us to a point that *Mordenkainen's* doesn't address, and I wish it did: What's the DC of noticing the oblex's slime-tether? On the one hand, we can posit that the slime is translucent, making it harder to see. On the other hand, when I hear "slime," I think "glistening," and light reflecting off the slime could well make it *easier* to see. As a kludge, we can declare that the DC is 15, since the DC of all the oblex's other abilities is 15. But this DC is going to give any PC with a good passive Perception score, especially one proficient in that ability or with the *Observant* feat, a strong chance of noticing the slime-tether right away. (Of course, if the oblex puts the whammy on that PC with *charm person* quickly enough, they may look at the slime-tether and say, "This is fine.")

Anyway, the goal of the oblex's actions is to get itself close enough to its preferred target—and everyone else far enough from them—for it to surprise them with the *Eat Memories* action. Here's the next thing about the oblex entry that's peculiar: The victim's memory is drained upon their failing the saving throw just once. According to the wording of the feature, "When an oblex causes a target to become memory drained, the oblex learns all the languages the target knows and gains all its proficiencies, except for any saving throw proficiencies." This phrasing seems to imply that after one successful *Eat Memories* action, the oblex's work is already done. Yet the feature also discusses the effects of multiple uses of the *Eat Memories* action.

Here's where I think this may be coming from: the possibility of there being an oblex *colony*. In other words, if there are several oblices in a location, they *all* want a piece of Trawiadol the Uncanny's recollections. So the second paragraph must, I think, be discussing the effects of being memory drained once each by more than one oblex. Each oblex, however, is sated after using *Eat Memories* just once.

The "memory drained" condition, as defined by the *Eat Memories* feature, penalizes the one suffering from it a single die (the size of which is determined by the number of times their memory has been drained) on all ability checks and attack rolls, presumably representing moments of flaking out. But while the feature indicates that the memory drain lasts until the target rests or has *greater restoration* or *heal* cast upon them, it doesn't say anything about whether the target suffers from general amnesia. I'd take the literal wording of the feature to mean that they don't.

All of that is a roundabout path to the conclusion that the oblex consumes its victim's memories once, and that once is enough for it. At that point, it would like to leave. But the victim probably isn't going to just let it, because the act of eating their memories terminates the effects of the oblex's *charm person* spell on the victim. (Oddly enough, since no damage is inflicted on a successful saving throw, a target who makes their save against *Eat Memories* remains charmed!) Also, what if there's more than one tasty memory-morsel in the vicinity? The oblex would love to stick around and gobble up that one, too, if possible.

Here's where the *Multiattack* comes in. The oblex has no reason to use its *Pseudopod* attack against someone whose memories it wants to eat. But once it's *already eaten*, the need to defend itself comes to the fore. So we have three possible offensive actions:

- *Eat Memories*, by itself, for when the oblex just wants to eat someone's memories.
- *Pseudopod*, by itself, for when the oblex is done eating memories and defending itself as it retreats.
- *Multiattack*, for when the oblex wants to eat one target's memories while defending itself against another.

Now, here's a really dirty thought (and yet another possibility that *Mordenkainen's* doesn't explore): The *Sulfurous Impersonation* feature lets the oblex create a simulacrum as a bonus action. What does it take for an oblex to *unmake* a simulacrum? The stat block doesn't say. Can it do that in a bonus action, too? If it can, it may not even have to retreat, just let its simulacrum collapse into goo and reel its slime-tether back in. Maybe it's not that easy, though. Since the stat block doesn't specify that it can abandon a simulacrum so efficiently, we should probably assume that it can't. Clarification would be welcome, though, because if the oblex had this choice available, it would surely make use of it.

The problem is that while the hypothetical "Abandon Impersonation" bonus action might be too cheap and easy, *without* that option, the oblex has no good retreat action and is practically doomed to die. Its *Armor Class* is too low for it to *Dodge*, it's not fast enough to benefit from *Disengage*, and as for *Dash*, it's both too slow *and* too likely to be surrounded by enemies who all want to do it in.

For this reason, I think the oblex has to rely on two things in order to retreat effectively: the mousehole it rode in on, and *hold person*. Consider that if *charm person* works, the only ones chasing the oblex will be those it harms with Eat Memories (and if it doesn't work, things may not even get that far). Therefore, it shouldn't need to cast *hold person* on more than one or two opponents, and that—plus, in a pinch, *color spray*—should give it the chance it needs to get back to its source crevice and schlorp through to safety. (Incidentally, this tactic is also what the oblex employs if things go so far wrong early in the process that it never even gets to eat anyone's memories. As a retreat action, it prefers Dash but uses Disengage if engaged in melee by three or more enemies.)

The oblex is in much deeper trouble if its enemies find its body. In this instance, if it doesn't have a crack it can flee through, it has to lash out with everything it's got and hope for the best. It Multiattacks every round, eating the memories of anyone within reach whether or not they're all that smart, just to inflict the damage. Against opponents within melee range, it uses Eat Memories against more heavily armored foes and Pseudopod against more lightly armored ones. Unfortunately, if its body is attacked with fire, there's not much it can do about it except try to use its spells to disable whoever's doing that damage. In that case, the burden of the die roll is on the opponent, so the disadvantage imposed by Aversion to Fire no longer matters.

The **elder oblex** has the same feature package as the adult oblex, but it can impersonate as many as thirteen past victims, it's better at Eating Memories, and it has more spells in its repertoire. Sensibly, it ditches *color spray* in favor of *confusion*, *dominate person*, *fear*, *hallucinatory terrain*, and *hypnotic pattern*, all of which serve the same purpose of disorienting and delaying pursuers. It also has *dimension door* as a last-ditch method of escape if its enemies find its body, along with *telekinesis* for amusing poltergeist action. Note, though, that it doesn't get to boost *hold person* anymore. Guess it outgrew that.

Sulfurous Impersonation and Deception, followed by *charm person* if necessary, is still the elder oblex's best opening play. However, the elder oblex has the means to stay on the scene longer, because its Eat Memories DC is 18 rather than 15. Consequently, it can reasonably expect to succeed against targets with Wisdom save modifiers of +3 or lower, and a save modifier of +8 or higher is necessary to deter it completely. It also has Constitution 21 and a big pool of hit points. It's going to take what it wants before it goes.

Once it breaks the charmed condition by eating a victim's memories, it can use its Multiattack to Pseudopod-whomp that victim into submission while it uses Eat Memories on another. The damage on the elder oblex's Eat Memories action is ferocious: an average of 44, vs. just 18 for the adult oblex, and thus much more likely to render a target unconscious from the get-go. So it may not even need to use its Multiattack—but if it does, it does.

What spells it casts after it's finished snacking and ready to skedaddle depends on how many uncharmed enemies it needs to gain control of in order to make its escape. In particular, it uses its spells to deal with pesky ranged attackers, since it can't reach them to use its attack actions. If it only needs to disable one, *hold person* is the go-to (or *hold monster*, if the enemy is a non-humanoid creature, such as a ranger's beast companion). Against two, it uses *dominate person* to turn one against the other. Against three clustered up just right, *fear*; against four or more, *hypnotic pattern*. In this company, the odd spells out are *hallucinatory terrain* (too long a casting time) and *confusion* (too unreliable and with too small an area of effect to compete). *Telekinesis* is situationally useful, most of all when the elder oblex's enemies are succeeding on too many Wisdom saves.

When its body is attacked (as opposed to its simulacra), the elder oblex is much more likely to stand its ground, because it can: Its spell repertoire can keep enough enemies disabled long enough for it to pick them off one or two at a time. But it's going to have a hard time against a high-Wisdom party, and it realizes it may be in some trouble when it's moderately wounded (reduced to 80 hp or fewer). At this point, it slithers away through a crack if it can, *dimension doors* away if it can't. If it has to retreat through a crack, its Armor Class is good enough that Dodge is a reasonable action for it to take on its way out.

However, if it's truly cornered—no cracks to slip through, no more uses of *dimension door*—it stands its ground and fights to the death with its Multiattack, even if it's taken fire damage. Eat Memories may still work, even if it has disadvantage on its Pseudopod attacks, and it deals more damage besides.

The **slithering tracker** is one of the AD&D *Monster Manual's* original oozes. Mind you, back then, “ooze” wasn't a monster category; certain monsters simply happened to be oozy by nature. Also, it was smaller: only 2 ½ feet long. (It's Medium-size now.)

A curious thing about the slithering tracker is that its lore has also been changed: It's no longer a mere denizen of the underdark but the product of a nasty magical transformation, the sort that usually produces something undead, and rather than simply hunt prey to consume, it actively seeks vengeance. However, unlike, say, a revenant, once a slithering tracker sucks the life out of its target, it doesn't consider its mission fulfilled. Instead, it keeps compulsively sucking life from whatever other beings it can suck life from until it's put out of its misery.

For this reason, you can't treat a slithering tracker like any other ooze. It's much more akin to the undead, in the sense that it's driven by a compulsion that it can't control and that overrides its survival instinct, despite its high Wisdom.

For a being made of supernatural jelly, the slithering tracker has astonishingly impressive physical ability scores: Its Dexterity is extraordinary, and both its Strength and its Constitution are very high as well. Its Intelligence is humanoid-average. Although it lacks proficiency in Perception, it has 120 feet of blindsight, and this sense, combined with expertise in Stealth, the ability to climb and swim, and a collection of other traits, ought to make it a consummate ambush attacker that finishes its primary victim off in a turn or two.

And yet there's an internal contradiction in its abilities that undermines its potential effectiveness somewhat. The Ambusher trait gives it advantage on its first-round attack roll against a surprised target, but the action it really ought to take in its first round of combat is Life Leech, which restrains its target and deals ongoing necrotic damage—but calls for a saving throw to resist, which forfeits the benefit of Ambusher.

Let's assume that a slithering tracker has a 65 percent chance of hitting its target, that its target has a 50 percent chance of making its saving throw, and that it always gets to make that first attack with surprise. How, then, does using Life Leech right away compare with first using Slam in round 1? We'll look at just three rounds of combat, since the slithering tracker wants this fight to be over fast.

By increasing the probability of a first-round hit from 65 percent to nearly 88 percent, using Ambusher deals roughly an additional 2 damage, on average, over waiting to use Slam until round 2. However, using Life Leech right away allows the possibility of an additional round's worth of necrotic damage. The net result is that the damage difference between the two sequences is insignificant: Accounting for the probability of escape from the grapple/restraint, each can be expected to deal about 26 damage over three rounds.

To look at it another way, however, the competitiveness of Life Leech depends on its target's failing that first saving throw. If they succeed instead, you can scratch off all the necrotic damage that Life Leech would deal, *and* the opportunity to gain advantage on a round 1 Slam attack is lost. So that seems to be an argument for seizing the chance to Slam with advantage in the first round. Life Leech can still fail in later rounds, but at least the opportunity cost is lower.

How much of a difference does it make if the target's Armor Class or saving throw modifier is lower or higher? Answering this question requires algebra, which looks hideous! but reveals a surprisingly simple underlying truth: Against a foe with AC 10 or 11, it's better to Leech first and Slam later when they have a Dexterity saving throw modifier of +3 or less, and against AC 12 to 20, when it's +2 or less.

Who's going to have AC 10 or 11 and a Dex save mod of +4 or higher? Almost nobody. For classes without Dex save proficiency, it's mathematically impossible; for monks, it's possible only if they've inexplicably shorted themselves on both Dexterity and Wisdom. An unarmored bard, ranger, or rogue can have a Dex save mod of +4 and an Armor Class of only 11, but it's not often that they'll choose to go without any armor at all when they get leather in their starting kits. How about a Dex save mod of +3 or higher? Bards, monks, rangers, and rogues are the classes the most likely to have a high modifier, thanks to their proficiency on Dex saves. Otherwise, you're mainly looking at spellcasters or marksman fighters with Dexterity 16 or greater, and these will usually be humans, elves, halflings, or forest gnomes.

With Intelligence 10, a slithering tracker can recognize a target's race and guess their class, but reading their exact Dex score is beyond it. So this long and winding journey brings us to the conclusion that a slithering tracker leads with a Slam attack against a bard, monk, ranger, or rogue; a human, elf, halfling, or forest gnome wielding a bow or crossbow; or an elf or halfling back-line spellcaster. Against anyone else, the potential extra round of necrotic damage is enough for it to forgo the benefit of its Ambusher trait and use Life Leech immediately.

False Appearance, Spider Climb, and Watery Stealth allow slithering trackers to lie in wait in a variety of nasty places: muddy roads, slimy cavern ceilings, rafters, rain gutters (really, anyplace overhead—if you’ve played any first-person shooter video game, you know that nobody ever looks up), docks, wells, fountains, horse troughs. When a victim comes within reach, a slithering tracker initiates combat as described above. If it hasn’t killed its target in three rounds, or if it tries to use Life Leech and fails, it Disengages and retreats to the nearest safe hiding place (Liquid Form lets it slip through a 1-inch crack), taking full advantage of its climbing and swimming speeds to elude pursuers. Once hidden, it uses its best judgment (which is pretty good, given its high Wisdom) to determine whether it’s worth sticking around and finishing the job or wiser to try again later. If it took damage in the fight, it’s more likely to wait; if its victim and their defenders seemed pretty hapless, it’s more likely to stick around and strike again.

What about if the slithering tracker is seriously wounded? Tough call. Revenge is easier to take when you’re not dead, and its Wisdom suggests that it should grasp that. But as I mentioned, the manner of its creation suggests that its drive to attack is compulsive, especially if it’s already achieved the revenge it sought to take in the first place, so maybe it can’t bring itself to retreat when its life is on the line. It may even vary from slithering tracker to slithering tracker. I’d say that the more a given slithering tracker has succumbed to insanity and bloodlust, the less likely it is to withdraw to save itself. If you decide that *your* slithering tracker is more mission-oriented and willing to take a loss today if it means a win tomorrow, the threshold for departure is when it’s reduced to 12 hp or fewer.

I. Leeching first is better when $t > \frac{-8.5a + 8.5s}{\sqrt{-8.5a^2 + 8.5s}}$, where a is the chance of hitting on an attack roll and s is the chance that the target fails their saving throw. Trust me, it looks even worse if you solve for a .

PLANTS

VEGEPYGMIES (V)

In yon days of AD&D, TSR published every adventure “module” (as we called them then) with an alphanumeric code, and if you speak the code “S3” to a role-playing gamer of my generation, it’ll be met with a big grin and the reaction, “The one with the spaceship!” Yep, that’s *Expedition to the Barrier Peaks*, a D&D/science fiction crossover in which the PCs explore the wreckage of a futuristic craft and stock up on assorted high-tech weaponry and loot.

One of the more memorable monsters from this module is the wolf-in-sheep’s-clothing, a carnivorous, tentacled stump with a wiggly appendage at the top that resembles an adorable furry creature. Another—equally memorable but less fondly remembered—is the **vegepygmy**. Among my D&D friends, I think vegepygmies must have come in for more derision than any other D&D monster except the flumph and the flail snail, although thinking about it now, I couldn’t tell you exactly why we thought vegepygmies were so ridiculous. Maybe it was just the name. Anyway, the last paragraph of the vegepygmy entry in *Volo’s* contains a cheeky shout-out to their origin.

Vegepygmies, essentially, are fungus in a humanoid form, though they differ from myconids in... ways. For one thing, they do possess the power of speech, sort of. They’re not telepathic. They’re a little more peoply-looking. They propagate by infecting other creatures with russet mold spores, rather than independently. Ultimately, though, they’re still just another form of animate fungus. And like myconids, they’re categorized in *Volo’s* as plants, even though fungi, it turns out, are closer to animals than to plants in the taxonomic tree. As I suggested with myconids, you may choose to categorize them as humanoids or even aberrations instead, then let your players try to solve the riddle of their plant-related spells’ not working on beings that sure do look like plants.

Your basic vegepygmy, with low Strength and high Dexterity and Constitution, is a skirmisher that attacks only when it has a large numerical advantage. It’s not bright, behaving entirely according to instinct, nor is it sophisticated in its target selection, though it does know when to flee a losing battle. With darkvision, Plant Camouflage, and proficiency in Stealth, it’s an ambush attacker, capable of attacking aboveground at night or in mist or fog, though it’s just as likely to stick to the Underdark.

Since vegepygmies depend on their Dexterity for both their melee attacks and their ranged attacks, they can fight just as well either way, and a large group of vegepygmies is likely to divide the labor, with, say, one ranged fighter for every three melee fighters. Close in, they slash with their claws; at a distance, they hurl sling stones. The melee attack deals a hair more damage, but attacking from a distance is safer.

They have the Constitution to endure a longer battle, plus Regeneration to keep them in the fight, but they’re hampered as skirmishers by their merely average speed and their lack of any mobility feature that would allow them to easily disengage and relocate. If they attack in large enough numbers, though, they don’t need a feature like that: They attack with a three-to-one advantage, say, and if one takes damage, it can Disengage (action) and retreat a ways while its companions continue to claw at their target; when its hit points regenerate, it can then return to the fight. A vegepygmy melee fighter can even switch to ranged attacks while it heals up.

Vegepygmies aren’t quite bright enough to actively flank a single target, but they instinctively try to surround a *group*. Here we should note that vegepygmies are neutral, not evil. In other words, they’re indifferent to other creatures by default, not hostile. They may or may not be territorial, and so other beings may or may not trigger their ire by crossing paths with them. Who knows? They don’t think the same way we do. It’s entirely possible, however, that vegepygmies might attack not to kill trespassers but simply to drive them off, or for that matter to take them prisoner—perhaps to expose them to

russet mold and make more vegepygmies. As a DM, you should decide in advance what criteria they use to decide which of these goals to pursue.

Regardless, they remain hidden until their foes pass close enough for them to launch an ambush, then all spring out at once. Being moderately wounded (reduced to 6 hp or fewer) is enough to make a vegepygmy Disengage and back off, but it reengages once it's back to its full 9 hp. (This Disengage action reflects instinct, not discipline.) A seriously wounded (reduced to 3 hp or fewer) vegepygmy makes a weird whistling noise, but it doesn't leave the battle entirely just yet. Once it's Regenerated back above 3 hp, it stops making the noise. When at least half of all the vegepygmies in an attacking group are whistling, they all Disengage and retreat as a group, and if pursued, they vanish into surrounding foliage as soon as their pursuers aren't looking directly at them.

It all changes up, though, if they're attacked with cold, fire, or necrotic damage. A vegepygmy that takes any amount of damage of one of these three types *shrieks*. A shriek causes every other vegepygmy in the area to swarm against whoever dealt the damage. The swarm continues until this foe is dealt with, and then any remaining vegepygmies return to their original behavior of ganging up on whoever else is left. Vegepygmies who suffer cold, fire, or necrotic damage don't return to the fight, however; it's not worth it to them. They Disengage, and then they skedaddle.

Vegepygmies that are "attacking" in order to repel trespassers or take prisoners don't attack creatures that aren't fighting back. They just stand menacingly around, gesturing and making fungusy noises, until their opponents figure out what they're supposed to do.

A **vegepygmy chief** is stronger and has more hit points and a melee Multiattack, so it's always part of the melee scuffle rather than the ranged volley. It carries a spear, and since it has no shield, it can wield the spear two-handed for some additional damage. It retreats when reduced to 23 hp or fewer and returns to the fight once it's regenerated back up to 30 hp or more.

Once per day, it can release a puff of Spores, which fill a 15-foot-radius circular area. It releases its Spores as soon as there are three or more enemy creatures within this radius, but if it can position itself to affect more without putting itself at undue risk, it tries to affect as many as it can. Other vegepygmies block for it so that it can get to where it wants to be in order to maximize the effect of its spore output.

Thornies are vegepygmies grown from the bodies of four-legged creatures. They have less Intelligence than ordinary vegepygmies, and their ability scores conform to a brute profile, so they always engage in melee. They don't withdraw when they take damage unless all other vegepygmies are withdrawing too, or they take cold, fire, or necrotic damage.

WOOD WOADS (v)

Wood woads are lawful neutral living plants, basically meaning, don't start none, won't be none. The only way you're going to get in a fight with a wood woad is either to trespass on the territory it guards and initiate ruckus, or to attack it outright. Otherwise, wood woads are likely to remain indifferent to your presence. Not friendly—indifferent.

Wood woads are tough. They have 10 hit dice, exceptionally high Strength and Constitution, and a two-swing Multiattack with a Magic Club that does considerable whomp damage. However, they also have proficiency in Perception and Stealth—and advantage on Stealth checks in "terrain with ample obscuring plant life," i.e., any kind of forest, wild or cultivated, or even a tall-grass prairie—so they don't run straight at you as soon as they see you. Instead, they blend in quietly, waiting to attack until trespassers come within reach—or, if they need to put an immediate end to a disturbance, closing the distance with Tree Stride, then attacking. Thus, their first attack is always an ambush, with surprise and most likely with unseen-attacker advantage as well.

However, this ambush isn't *necessarily* an attack with intent to harm. They're lawful *neutral*, not lawful evil. They have proficiency in Athletics as well, and in combat, that usually means grappling or shoving. If they're not outnumbered, rather than try to pummel trespassers, they may simply try to bounce them: grapple them, drag them to the edge of their territory, and dump them there. Or they may shove a trespasser into a pit or trap, but chances are, they're not who dug that pit or built that trap. Shoving is a tactic they generally use only when they're henchmen of something or somebody else—though a roaming wood woad, if antagonized, might choose to shove an enemy into a ravine, if one happened to be nearby.

Being woody plants, wood woads are vulnerable to fire, which also inhibits their Regeneration feature. However, their fear of fire is offset by their devotion to duty, especially if they're carrying that duty out. The result is that fire is more likely to anger them than deter them from doing their job. If a melee attacker strikes at a wood woad with a torch or a flaming

magical weapon, the wood woad uses its action to try to Disarm its enemy (*Dungeon Master's Guide*, chapter 9, "Action Options"). If it succeeds, it either stamps out the torch or picks the weapon up itself as a free action. On its next turn, if it picked up a weapon, the wood woad uses its action to hurl it as far as it can from its owner. That's *at least* 60 feet (*Player's Handbook*, chapter 5, "Improvised Weapons"), possibly more, given that the wood woad has Strength 18 and isn't aiming at anything. Only after all that does the wood woad resume attacking its foe directly, and that foe will get the sense that it's pummeling them with particular ill will.

If the fire comes from a spell, that attracts the most unwelcome sort of attention from the wood woad toward the caster. It closes the distance by the fastest means possible, including Tree Stride if necessary, and focuses all its attacks on that enemy until they're unconscious. If more than one enemy is attacking a wood woad (say, with a mix of fiery melee weapons and fiery spells), the wood woad has to make a judgment call: Is it easier to disarm the melee opponent or to get to the caster and pound them insensible? The easier opponent to extinguish is the one the wood woad goes after first.

Being creatures of duty, wood woads will fight to the death in order to guard whatever they've been assigned to guard, but a roaming wood woad, encountered in a less structured setting, retreats when seriously wounded (reduced to 30 hp or fewer), and if it's attacked with fire, it retreats when moderately wounded (reduced to 52 hp or fewer). A retreating wood woad uses the Dodge action to impose disadvantage on incoming attacks and the Tree Stride feature to put as much distance as possible between its foes and itself.

CORPSE FLOWERS (M)

The **corpse flower** is a horrible ambulatory plant that scavenges the remains of the dead and occasionally belches one of them back out as a zombie. As such, particularly given its slow speed, it's not a predator that might pursue a party of PCs, but rather a noxious nuisance that the PCs might be called to eliminate.

It has a weird ability contour: peaks in Constitution and Wisdom, with high Strength and Dexterity as well. It has no Wisdom-based offensive action, and while its Strength and Dex are equal, its Tentacle attack is clearly Strength-based. What we have here, I think, is a creature that's mostly brute but that also has a touch of the skirmisher to it. It's not fast, but it can climb, so that's going to add a wrinkle to its behavior.

The corpse flower's Intelligence is just barely within the range of sentience. Though able to grasp what's going on around it, it's still extremely instinct-driven and inflexible, locked into one mode of behavior. What about that high Wisdom, though? Normally it would suggest a creature that's good at sizing up threats and reluctant to pick fights it can't easily win. However, the corpse flower is utterly reliant on its blindsight to sense danger. It's not able to pick up on clues such as a character's confidence or the quality of their equipment to read them as presenting an above-average threat. Any reaction to the danger an opponent poses is going to have to occur after a demonstration of that danger.

The corpse flower has two main actions: Harvest the Dead and a triple-Tentacle Multiattack. Harvest the Dead is situational, usable only when there's an "unsecured dead humanoid" within its 10-foot reach. What does "unsecured" mean? On the level of the obvious, we're talking a corpse that isn't roped or chained down. However, the flavor text states that corpse flowers prowl "battlefields and graveyards." Corpses on battlefields are often just strewn around, but in graveyards, they're usually buried or entombed, and possibly enclosed in coffins as well. Are these bodies "secured"?

I think so, and furthermore, note that while the corpse flower can climb, it can't burrow. Nor does it have any trait or action that suggests an ability to dig. Per the *Monster Manual*, monsters can take the actions available to all creatures—i.e., those listed in "Actions in Combat" in the *Player's Handbook*, chapter 9—so we could stretch that and argue that by taking the Use an Object action, a corpse flower could wrench off the lid of a coffin or yank open the door of a tomb, perhaps upon succeeding on a Strength check.

I'm disinclined to do that, though. To a corpse flower's blindsight, a coffin looks like a wooden box; a tomb, like a solid block of stone; a grave, like any other patch of ground. How could it know there was something it wanted inside? It doesn't have Keen Smell, nor any other specialized trait that would let it sense the presence of a corpse that wasn't lying out in the open. A partially destroyed coffin, lying aboveground—that would be another matter. It might use a Tentacle attack to smash it to flinders, then Harvest the contents on its next turn... but only if there weren't easier pickings in the area, and only if it wasn't under attack. The battlefield is therefore much preferred over the graveyard.

The corpse flower's preferred action is Harvest the Dead, because taking this action makes it stronger, so whenever it's given leeway to do so, its turn sequence is simple: move, snatch corpse. However, when anything moves within its reach, it

reflexively lashes out with its tentacles. If only one creature comes close enough, they get whomped by all three tentacles. If three creatures approach, they get one tentacle each. If two approach, they get one each, and one or the other gets whomped once more, with enemies not incapacitated by the corpse flower's Stench of Death being favored as targets. If that doesn't break the tie, the selection is random.

The whomping doesn't stop when a foe is beaten unconscious. An unconscious humanoid is of no use to a corpse flower. A *dead* one is useful. Therefore, without compunction, a corpse flower keeps attacking an enemy who's reduced to 0 hp—focusing its attacks on this enemy, sensing that they're near death. As soon as that last death-save failure is chalked up, it Harvests their body on its next turn, even if this means forgoing an attack against another living enemy.

Like the shambling mound, the corpse flower doesn't know what to make of a ranged attack that originates from beyond its blindsight radius, and it reacts instinctively to a hit from such an attack by moving away from the attacker. A ranged attack that originates from within its blindsight radius, however, draws its ire and causes it to move *toward* the attacker.

One trick the corpse flower employs instinctively whenever it's under attack is to move toward the nearest tall thing—a tree, a tomb—and climb up it until it's 10 feet off the ground. This movement places it out of reach of its opponents' weapons, while they remain within reach of its tentacles. It can also snatch a corpse up off the ground if and when it creates one.

In addition to its action and its movement, the corpse flower has a choice of bonus action: either pop out a zombie or regenerate some hit points. Until it's moderately wounded (reduced to 88 hp or fewer), the corpse flower doesn't bother to regenerate; as long as it senses enemies, it uses that bonus action to chuck a zombie at them. After it's moderately wounded, it digests a corpse and regenerates anytime it's taken 11 damage or more since the end of its previous turn. If it's taken less damage (or none), it produces a zombie.

(Yes, it pops out zombies even when it's up in a tree or sitting on top of a tomb. Yes, the zombies take 1d6 falling damage as they plummet to the ground. Falling zombies are comedy gold.)

The only time the corpse flower doesn't use a bonus action at all is when it's uninjured or only lightly wounded and doesn't sense another living creature within 120 feet. Within reason, that is—let's say a Small or larger living creature. A bird flying over it isn't going to activate zombie production.

Then again, this condition raises an interesting question. Suppose something bigger, like a coyote, passes through the corpse flower's blindsight radius and does trigger the production of a zombie, but then the triggering creature simply leaves. That's going to leave an unattended, purposeless zombie wandering around, isn't it? Yep. So I'd conclude that any corpse flower encounter is highly likely to be foreshadowed by at least one seemingly random zombie, and once a group of PCs finally closes in on the thing, there ought to be a few already existing zombies to deal with as well.

When a corpse flower is seriously wounded (reduced to 50 hp or fewer), its self-preservation impulse kicks in to tell it that it's not going to survive just by digesting its corpse collection. Lacking the Intelligence to Disengage, it Dashes away in the direction in which it senses the fewest enemies.

BEASTS

CRANIUM RATS (v)

Cranium rats are minions of mind flayers, created “by bombarding normal rats with psionic energy” (and also, it seems from the illustration, delicately removing the top layers of their scalps and skulls). Mind flayer colonies use them as forward observers; although the range of their telepathy is short (only 30 feet), the 120-foot telepathic range of a mind flayer extends their link to a more practical distance, and the 5-mile range of an elder brain increases their effectiveness by several orders of magnitude.

A lone cranium rat can't do much. It's extremely weak, with only 2 hp and 30 feet of darkvision. Its Bite attack is inconsequential. It can cause its brain to glow, emitting eerie dim light to a range of 5 feet, but that's not very useful. If its range were 30 feet, it could combine this illumination with its darkvision to eliminate its Perception penalty within that radius. Since its passive Perception is only 10, *that* would be fairly useful. At only 5 feet, though, all a single cranium rat can do with this glow is give itself away.

However, a cranium rat that's actively spying for a mind flayer colony might be ordered to use Illumination because a mind flayer or elder brain wanted to get a good, clear look at someone or something that the cranium rat had approached in the dark. In this scenario, the cranium rat is effectively doomed to die, providing a brief moment of extreme creepiness before it turns, runs, and succumbs to the inevitable opportunity attack. If that attack should somehow miss, the cranium rat snuffs its light and Dashes away, hopefully to safety.

Cranium rats pose a real threat only when they get together in a swarm, which, like a hag coven, amplifies their abilities. In addition to their basic traits—and the traits common to swarms, which include various resistances and immunities and the ability to surround other creatures—cranium rats in a swarm manifest a highly intelligent hivelike consciousness, along with the ability to cast various spells psionically.

The most broadly useful of these spells is *confusion*, because it can affect multiple targets, and the closer the quarters, the more targets it can affect. Because *confusion* affects a spherical volume with a 10-foot radius, the swarm never uses it against just one target; the minimum is two. (If it wants to affect just one, it has *command* or *dominate monster* for that.) Since it's only available once per day, however, the swarm applies it judiciously. As a swarm, cranium rats become intelligent enough to lead potential victims on, luring them into tight spaces and onto narrow paths flanked by treacherous drops. When as many targets as possible are enticed to group up within that 10-foot-radius sphere, that's when they put the *confusion* whammy on them.

A swarm of cranium rats also has the additional ability to increase their cranial Illumination, shedding bright light up to a distance of 20 feet and dim light for 20 feet beyond that. In subterranean settings, this light (set to a radius of 15 feet rather than 20) is a great way to provoke the curiosity of incautious dungeon delvers: When those hapless mooks get within 30 feet, the swarm can use its bonus action to plunge the area back into darkness, then overrun its nearest victim and Bite. In contrast to the 1 piercing damage of a single cranium rat's Bite, a swarm deals four dice of damage, which is far nastier.

Generally speaking, though, even a swarm of cranium rats doesn't necessarily want a head-to-head fight with anyone. It's happy to launch an unexpected shock attack, but it wants to finish that fight quickly, and if it doesn't do enough damage in one round to vanquish its foe in one more, it pulls back, Disengaging—it's smart enough to know how to do that—or, if allies are running to its target's aid, takes advantage of their clustering to pop *confusion*. It's generally pretty indiscriminate about target selection (except in one instance—see below), but if it's targeted with a type of damage other than bludgeoning, piercing, or slashing, it turns its fury against that opponent, using *command* to force it closer if it can't close the distance on its own.

When in telepathic communication with a mind flayer, a swarm of cranium rats can provide much more useful intel than individual cranium rats can, using *comprehend languages* to translate other creatures' conversations and *detect thoughts* to extend its master's mind-reading range. It also has the smarts to scout independently, reporting back to a mind flayer or elder brain when it reestablishes a telepathic connection to check in. But one of the nastiest tricks up the swarm's sleeve is *dominate monster*.

This stunt requires some delicacy to pull off. First, the target only has to be within 60 feet of the swarm—but the swarm has to be able to see them, and it has only 30 feet of darkvision. If the target or one of its companions is providing the light by which the swarm can see them, super! If, on the other hand, the target and its companions all have darkvision themselves and aren't bothering to carry any light source, the cranium rats have to get closer, and they aren't particularly stealthy.

Second, they have to correctly infer which of their possible targets is likely to fail a DC 13 Wisdom saving throw. Their Intelligence is good, but not extraordinarily good; their only means of evaluating their targets' Wisdom is by following and observing them for a while, and even then, they're making an educated guess at best. However, rats of normal size in a subterranean cavern are as common as copper pieces—certainly not something adventurers of modest renown and experience would concern themselves with. (Unless they happened to notice that the top of each rat's head had been neatly sliced off. Can we disregard the illustration and agree that cranium rats look like normal rats, not like horribly unethical lab experiments, at least until they activate *Illumination*?) A swarm of rats *following* a group of adventurers is weird, certainly, but if they eventually go away, there's no need for violence to ensue, is there?

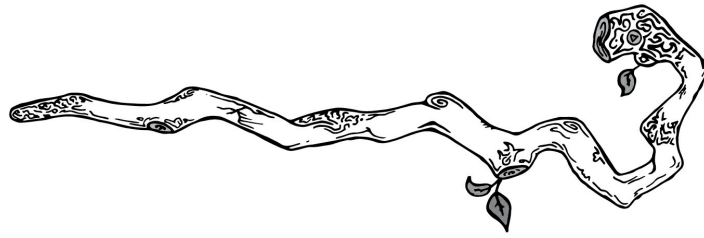
Anyway, if the swarm can stay close enough, long enough, to choose a promising victim and cast *dominate monster* on them, and if they fail the saving throw, that control can be maintained for up to an hour—and need not manifest outwardly in any way until the time is right. During that time, the swarm can have nice, friendly telepathic conversations with the target, inquiring into their abilities and their allies' abilities, and consider how to make the best use of its new thrall. If they need a second opinion, a mind flayer or elder brain can provide that when it checks in. As long as the dominated target takes no damage, they don't get another saving throw to escape being dominated. Also, the swarm no longer has to keep following the target: The telepathic link created by *dominate monster* is maintained as long as the target stays on the same plane of existence. (While the spell is active, the swarm has to maintain concentration and can't use *detect thoughts* to read the mind of any other creature, nor cast *confusion*.)

Unfortunately for the swarm, if the target makes their saving throw, that's it; the swarm doesn't get another chance to cast *dominate monster* until the next day. But who's to say a given mind flayer colony employs only one swarm of cranium rats?

Because of their darkvision, cranium rats prefer not to go out aboveground in daylight, and because the range of their darkvision is so short, they prefer confined spaces to open ones. Even in a swarm, cranium rats aren't going to chase anyone through the market square at high noon.

A swarm of cranium rats in telepathic contact with an elder brain or mind flayer master will obediently fight to the death if ordered to. But what about one *not* under the influence of an elder brain or mind flayer, or under their influence but not in active contact with them? When reduced to 14 hp or fewer, the swarm scatters into six to eight individual cranium rats that all Dash off in different directions, unless the entire swarm can make it to a mousehole less than 60 feet away.

The question of what happens when a swarm of cranium rats moves beyond an elder brain's range of influence is an interesting one, because for whatever it's worth, cranium rats are still beasts; they're not aberrations. Even a swarm of cranium rats isn't an aberration—it's a swarm of beasts. So does a swarm of cranium rats pursue the same goals as any other beast, only much, much more cleverly? Does it become unaligned, as most beasts are, or does it remain lawful evil? It may not be a mastermind, but it's probably more than smart enough to, say, get itself elected to the Senate. Even if we assume its motivations remain fundamentally bestial, it's still entertaining to contemplate how a swarm of cranium rats could use its respectable intellect not just to improve its access to food and defend its territory but to *guarantee* its access to food and make its territory *uncontestable*—and cause no end of problems to anyone who tries to interfere with it. In a one-shot adventure for a party of level 3 or 4 characters, it could even be a worthy boss monster.



CONJURED CREATURES

Creatures summoned by *conjure animals* are as often found fighting alongside PCs as against them—and, in fact, the tactics relating to conjured creatures are player tactics as much as they are creature tactics, if not more so. Therefore, as a DM, you should share this section with any player whose PC acquires this spell. It will make their life and yours easier.

Conjure animals—along with the closely related spells *conjure woodland beings* and *conjure minor elementals*—is sometimes referred to as a “broken” spell. It’s not necessarily that the spell is excessively powerful; in fact, as we’ll see, it comes with a built-in hitch that can have just the opposite effect. Rather, it’s the fact that this hitch encourages casters to summon as many creatures as possible, causing combat to bog down badly—over and over and over again. So one of the things I’ll talk about is how to keep this from happening.

It behooves any player whose PC learns *conjure animals* (or *conjure woodland beings* or *conjure minor elementals*) to read the spell description *very* closely, because it doesn’t necessarily do what they think it does. Unlike, say, *find familiar*, these spells don’t give the caster the privilege of choosing what kind of creature shows up. They don’t even let the caster dictate how powerful the summoned creature(s) will be. The only thing one is assured of is *how many* creatures show up.

Read it closely:

You summon fey spirits that take the form of beasts and appear in unoccupied spaces that you can see within range. Choose one of the following options for what appears:

- One beast of challenge rating 2 or lower
- Two beasts of challenge rating 1 or lower
- Four beasts of challenge rating ½ or lower
- Eight beasts of challenge rating ¼ or lower

So a player can’t say, “I summon eight wolves.” They can only say, “I summon eight beasts.” It’s up to the DM *what* beasts show up. It could be eight wolves, but it could also be eight spiders—not giant spiders, just regular ol’ house spiders—because CR 0 is technically “challenge rating ¼ or lower.” For that matter, it’s technically “challenge rating 2 or lower” as well. A PC could cast this spell hoping to summon a single cave bear or rhino and *still* end up with a cute, harmless spider. Small wonder, then, that players are inclined to call for eight critters every time. (Not to mention the fact that there’s strength in numbers, as reflected by the Encounter Multipliers table in the *Dungeon Master’s Guide*, chapter 3, “Evaluating Encounter Difficulty.”)

If a PC is going to be working with this spell, then, it’s of the utmost importance that you and they have a good relationship and that, even as the DM, you’re fundamentally on their side, whatever challenges you may throw at them. In other words, don’t be a jerk. Without mutual trust, *conjure animals* can generate all kinds of bad blood. Lay some ground rules in advance, for instance:

- The DM will choose a creature that might plausibly be found in the environment it’s being summoned into—not something obviously designed to screw the PC over, such as a shark in the desert or a giant elk underwater.
- Out of the creatures appropriate to this environment, the DM will choose one with a challenge rating as close as possible to the maximum allowed by the PC’s choice.

- If the DM chooses a creature with a challenge rating below the maximum, it will be a tougher than normal specimen—e.g., one with the greatest possible number of hit points rather than the average.

The summoner of a horde of creatures also has the responsibility to deploy them in a way that's not going to waste their fellow players' time. One of the most important things one can do is use mob attack rules (*Dungeon Master's Guide*, chapter 8, "Handling Mobs") for any group of four or eight creatures. This helps in two ways: Not only does it speed things up, it also suggests how to optimize the deployment of one's creatures.

For instance, let's say Bodhmall the druid has in fact summoned eight wolves, and she's sending them against some trolls. A troll has AC 15, and a wolf has +4 to hit. Therefore, a wolf needs a d20 roll of 11 or better to hit a troll. But wait: Remember that wolves have Pack Tactics, granting them advantage when attacking alongside an ally. So if more than one is going up against the same troll—and they usually will—it's really more like 7 or better. In a group of attackers that need to roll 7 or better to hit, one of them hits for every two that attack. Therefore, commanding eight wolves, Bodhmall should send them out against those trolls in groups of two. Each of those groups will land one automatic hit. All her player has to do is roll damage. (As a DM, you may go further and say that conjured creatures always deal average damage rather than roll for it, to streamline combat even more.)

Some other easy-to-miss details:

- The summoned creatures "appear in unoccupied spaces," not in *an* unoccupied space. Each one takes up a space of its own, even if it's Tiny. It's ambiguous—and therefore, probably, the DM's call—whether the caster decides what spaces they appear in or the DM does.
- The caster rolls initiative for the creatures, and they all take their turns together on the same initiative count.
- They're friendly to both the caster and their allies, but they do have to be told what to do. My take: Their understanding of their instructions may be limited by their Intelligence, so keep your commands simple: "Attack that monster." "Gnaw through that rope." "Steal the groundskeeper's keys."

Most beasts are simple, but some have tactically useful traits that you should be mindful of.

CR 2 BEASTS

Only one of these can be summoned at a time, so they fight solo.

Allosaurus. Send it to go maul something 35 to 60 feet away, so that it can Pounce. If it knocks its target prone, it gets an additional Bite as a bonus action. Bite is always preferable to Claws. (Grassland)

Aurochs. A big, bad-tempered prehistoric cow. Send it to go maul something 25 to 50 feet away, so that it can Charge for extra Gore damage. (Grassland, Hill, Mountain)

Cave bear. Functionally identical to the polar bear (see below). (Underdark)

Giant boar. Send it to go maul something 25 to 40 feet away, so that it can Charge for extra Tusk damage. (Forest, Grassland, Hill)

Giant constrictor snake. Constricts to restrain, so that it can then Bite with advantage. You and your allies can attack the restrained target with advantage, too. (Desert, Forest, Swamp, Underdark, Underwater)

Giant elk. Send it to go maul something 25 to 60 feet away, so that it can Charge for extra Ram damage. Hooves is preferable to Ram unless it's charging. (Forest, Grassland, Hill, Mountain)

Hunter shark. Stupid, simple brute. Attacks with advantage against foes that have already taken damage. (Underwater)

Plesiosaurus. Has Stealth, so if you summon it before a battle, it can hide in the water and strike at an opportune moment. Otherwise nothing special. (Coastal, Underwater)

Polar bear. Basic mauly brute that can chase opponents through, across, and into water. Multiattack is always Bite/Claws, so it can't grapple targets and drag them into the water without forgoing both attacks. (Arctic)

Quetzalcoatlus. Hangs out in the air between turns, 30 to 40 feet above its target's head. Uses Dive Attack to strike, then Flyby to go airborne again without provoking an opportunity attack. (Coastal, Hill, Mountain)

Rhinoceros. Send it to go maul something 25 to 40 feet away, so that it can Charge for extra Gore damage. (Grassland)

Saber-toothed tiger. Send it to go maul something 25 to 40 feet away, so that it can Pounce. If it knocks its target prone, it gets an additional Bite as a bonus action. Claw is preferable to Bite unless it's pouncing. Has Stealth, so if you summon it before a battle, it can hide and strike with surprise at an opportune moment. (Arctic, Mountain)

CR 1 BEASTS

These can be summoned two at a time. You can send them against two different targets or, if your DM uses the optional Flanking rule (*Dungeon Master's Guide*, chapter 8), to attack the same target from two sides for advantage.

Brown bear. Basic brute; no tactics to speak of. (Arctic, Forest, Hill)

Deinonychus. Send both deinonychuses after a single target 25 to 40 feet away, so that they can Pounce. The first to knock its target prone gets an additional Bite as a bonus action. If that's also the first one to attack, the second gains advantage on all its attack rolls against the prone target. Use Claw attacks before Bite attack when Multiattacking. (Forest, Grassland, Hill)

Dire wolf. Send both dire wolves after the same target—they have Pack Tactics, so no special positioning is required for them to gain advantage on their attack rolls. (Forest, Hill)

Giant eagle. Send them against targets you can't easily reach. Also, with Intelligence 8, these are about as smart as beasts come, capable of following fairly complex commands. Unusually for beasts, giant eagles have an alignment—neutral good—and while *conjure animals* states that uncommanded creatures do nothing but defend themselves, I'd make an exception in giant eagles' case, allowing them to independently take actions that help their summoner. (Coastal, Grassland, Hill, Mountain)

Giant hyena. Send them against targets that are already seriously wounded, so that they have a chance of invoking Rampage. (Desert, Forest, Grassland, Hill)

Giant octopus. Have Stealth, so if you summon them before a battle, they can hide and strike at an opportune moment. Although they're fast swimmers, *don't* send them against targets you or an ally can't easily reach yourselves: Their tentacle hits grapple and restrain, giving you advantage on attack rolls against their prey (or, more likely, negating the disadvantage you have from attacking underwater). Ink Cloud can be used offensively, to neutralize advantage and disadvantage—the area of effect is *large*—or to cover a retreat if a battle is going badly. (Underwater)

Giant spider. Web is a big deal. It's a recharge ability, and the giant spider always uses it if it's available. Command giant spiders to Web targets that you or one of your allies are going to follow up with attacks against: Attack after they're restrained and before they break free, and you'll have advantage on the rolls. Giant spiders can also chase climbing opponents, and they have Stealth, so if you summon them before a battle, they can hide and strike with surprise at an opportune moment. (Desert, Forest, Swamp, Underdark, Urban)

Giant toad. Send them against Medium or smaller targets, so that they can Swallow. Also, they have Standing Leap, so they're unaffected by difficult terrain. (Coastal, Desert, Forest, Swamp, Underdark)

Giant vulture. Send both giant vultures after the same target—they have Pack Tactics, so no special positioning is required for them to gain advantage on their attack rolls. Giant vultures also have an alignment—neutral evil—so they're another exception to the “uncommanded creatures” clause. As long as there's a wounded creature on the field that's not the caster or one of their allies, giant vultures attack it opportunistically, whether told to or not. (Desert, Grassland)

Lion. Send both lions after the same target—they have Pack Tactics, so no special positioning is required for them to gain advantage on their attack rolls—25 to 50 feet away, so that they can Pounce. Bite is always preferable to Claw. Good in difficult terrain, thanks to Running Leap: Lions' 50 feet of movement is enough to cover 10 feet over difficult terrain (20 feet of movement consumed) plus a 25-foot leap in a single turn. (Desert, Grassland, Hill, Mountain)

Tiger. Send them to go maul something 25 to 40 feet away, so that they can Pounce. If one knocks its target prone, it gets an additional Bite as a bonus action. Bite is always preferable to Claw. Have Stealth, so if you summon them before a battle, they can hide and strike with surprise at an opportune moment. In their usual environments, they may be lightly obscured by foliage or tall grass, but if you want one to run at its target and Pounce and still gain

unseen-attacker advantage on the attack roll, you'll need to make another Stealth check to see whether it can cover that ground without being spotted by its quarry. (Forest, Grassland)

CR ½ BEASTS

These can be summoned four at a time, the threshold for switching to mob attacks in order to keep combat moving. In most instances, the d20 roll needed for one of these beasts to hit an opponent will be 6–12, so players should send them out in pairs unless and until the DM tells them they're not hitting, in which case switch to four against one.

Ape. They can throw rocks, but not from a great distance, and they can only throw one per turn. Stick to melee and Multiattack. (Forest)

Black bear. Basic brute; no tactics to speak of. (Forest)

Crocodile. Have Stealth, so if you summon them before a battle, they can hide and strike at an opportune moment. Their Bite grapples and restrains, so send them against targets that you or an ally are going to follow up with attacks against. (Swamp, Urban)

Giant goat. Send them against targets 25 to 40 feet away, so that they can Charge. (Grassland, Hill, Mountain)

Giant sea horse. Send them against targets 25 to 40 feet away, so that they can Charge. (Underwater)

Giant wasp. They're fast fliers, so send them at the opponents' back line or to chase after skirmishers. (Forest, Grassland, Urban)

Reef shark. Have Pack Tactics, so subtract 4 from the d20 roll needed to hit. (Underwater)

Warhorse. If you summon four of these, the best thing you and your companions can do with them is *ride them*. Since they're friendly creatures that obey verbal commands (which require none of your action economy to issue), you can use them as independent mounts with total confidence that they'll do exactly what you want them to. They're twice as fast as the average humanoid, and Trampling Charge is tremendous. Read up on mounted combat (*Player's Handbook*, chapter 9), then go forth with the warm feeling of knowing that your DM loves you if they gave you these. (Urban)

CR ¼ BEASTS

These can be summoned eight at a time, and using "Handling Mobs" to manage their attacks is essential. As with CR ½ beasts, players who don't know what d20 roll they need to hit should assume it's 6–12 unless and until two beasts attacking together don't land an automatic hit; then switch to two squads of four, then all eight if necessary to land a hit. If your DM uses Flanking, assume that all these beasts are doing it unless otherwise specified, and subtract 4 from the d20 roll needed to hit. Note that eight Medium or smaller attackers on a square grid will completely surround a Medium or smaller opponent, and six will do it on a hex map. If your critters have every path to your foe blocked off, you won't be able to attack it yourself, unless you're wielding a ranged weapon or a melee weapon with a long reach—and even then, your foe may enjoy partial cover as a result.

Axe beak. Large, so eight of them take up a *lot* of space. Four will completely surround a Medium or smaller opponent on a square map, but with clever tessellation, you can still get six around one on a hex map. Aside from that, no tactics to speak of. (Grassland, Hill)

Boar. Send them against targets 25 to 40 feet away, so that they can use Charge—then be prepared to move in after them and make melee attacks against the ones they knock prone. (Forest, Grassland, Hill)

Constrictor snake. As with the giant constrictor snake, Constrict first, then Bite the grappled and restrained target with advantage—and attack the target yourself as well, along with your allies. Large, so eight of them take up a lot of space. (Desert, Forest, Swamp, Underwater)

Cow/ox. Send them against targets 25 to 30 feet away, so that they can use Charge for extra Gore damage. Large, so eight of them take up a lot of space. (Grassland)

Deep rothé. A "stunted Underdark variant" of cattle, these have darkvision and can innately cast *dancing lights* at will—although it still takes an action for them to cast. Use them as you would a cow that can cast *dancing lights*. (Underdark)

Dimetrodon. No tactics to speak of. (Coastal, Swamp)

Draft horse. If the warhorse is how your DM shows you they love you, this is how they show you they hate

you. Large, slower than a riding horse or warhorse, with no tactics to speak of. (Urban)

Elk. Send them against targets 25 to 50 feet away, so that they can use Charge. Hooves is preferable to Ram when not charging but can be used only against prone targets. Large, so eight of them take up a lot of space. (Forest, Grassland, Hill)

Giant badger. Basic brutes with Multiattack; no tactics to speak of. Burrowing speed is too slow to use tactically. (Forest)

Giant bat. One of the few creatures you can summon that performs best in total darkness—even the magical darkness of a *darkness* spell. Fast fliers, good against your opponents' back line. (Forest, Underdark)

Giant centipede. Mindless brutes; no tactics to speak of. (Underdark, Urban)

Giant frog. Send them against Small or smaller targets, so that they can Swallow. Standing Leap is better in difficult terrain than basic ground movement. (Forest, Swamp)

Giant lizard. Large, dumb brutes. No tactics to speak of. (Coastal, Desert, Forest, Swamp, Underdark)

Giant owl. Large, fast fliers with Flyby, these hang out in the air between turns, up to 30 feet above their opponents' heads. They fly down, strike with Talons, then fly back up without provoking opportunity attacks. Have Stealth, so if you summon them before a battle, they can hide and strike with surprise at an opportune moment. In a forest environment, they may be lightly obscured by foliage, but if you want them to gain unseen-attacker advantage on their attack rolls as they dive at their targets, you'll need to make another Stealth check to ensure that they aren't spotted by their quarry. Also, with Intelligence 8, these are about as smart as beasts come, capable of following fairly complex commands. (Arctic, Forest, Hill)

Giant poisonous snake. No tactics to speak of. (Desert, Forest, Grassland, Swamp, Underdark, Urban)

Giant wolf spider. Have Stealth, so if you summon them before a battle, they can hide and strike at an opportune moment; also have darkvision and 10 feet of blindsight, so they're good in the dark. Finally, they're fast and can climb, making them good for chasing down fleeing enemies. But as far as attacking features go, all they have is Bite. (Coastal, Desert, Forest, Grassland, Hill)

Hadrosaurus. Large, dumb brutes. No tactics to speak of. (Grassland, Swamp)

Panther. Send them against targets 25 to 50 feet away, so that they can Pounce. Bite is always preferable to Claw. Have Stealth, so if you summon them before a battle, they can hide and strike with surprise at an opportune moment. In a forest or grassland environment, they may be lightly obscured by foliage or tall grass, but if you want them to run at their targets and Pounce and still gain unseen-attacker advantage on their attack rolls, you'll need to make another Stealth check to see whether they can cover that ground without being spotted by their quarry. (Forest, Grassland, Hill)

Pteranodon. Large, fast fliers with Flyby, these hang out in the air between turns, up to 30 feet above their opponents' heads. They fly down, strike with Bite, then fly back up without provoking opportunity attacks. (Coastal, Grassland, Mountain)

Riding horse. They're not as good as warhorses, but you can still use them as reliable independent mounts. Large. (Grassland, Urban)

Stench kow. Large, so eight of them take up a lot of space, and constantly require adjacent creatures to make Constitution saving throws against being poisoned. Send them against targets whose attacks you want to shut down. (Grassland)

Velociraptor. Have Pack Tactics, so subtract 4 from the d20 roll needed to hit. (Forest, Grassland)

Wolf. Have Pack Tactics, so subtract 4 from the d20 roll needed to hit. Have Stealth, so if you summon them before a battle, they can hide and strike with surprise at an opportune moment. In a forest or grassland environment, they may be lightly obscured by foliage or tall grass, but if they have to run to reach their targets and you want them to gain unseen-attacker advantage on their attack rolls, you'll need to make another Stealth check to see whether they can cover that ground without being spotted by their quarry. (Forest, Grassland, Hill)







DINOSAURS (v)

The *Monster Manual* contains stat blocks for six dinosaurs; *Volo's* contains seven more. The CR 1/4 hadrosaurus, the CR 4 stegosaurus, and the CR 5 brontosaurus are all plant eaters. The CR 1/4 dimetrodon and velociraptor, the CR 1 deinonychus, and the CR 2 quetzalcoatlus (also a flier) are meat eaters.

The **hadrosaurus** is a Large (cattle-size) dinosaur with a bony crest on its head which walks on four legs but can rear up on two, balanced by its tail. That tail is its only defense against predators, aside from its 40-foot movement speed. It flees from predators and other threats, using the Dash action exclusively; it attacks only when cornered. When handled by a trained rider, it can be ridden as a controlled mount.

The **stegosaurus** is a Huge dinosaur whose neck and highly arched back are protected by huge, flat plates, and whose tail is covered with spikes. This armored beast can move quickly (40 feet per turn), but like the ankylosaurus, it's disinclined to step aside for creatures smaller than itself. They get the spiky tail. However, a seriously wounded stego (reduced to 30 hp or fewer) gives up the fight and Dashes for safety.

The **brontosaurus** is a Gargantuan (whale-size) dinosaur that yields to none but the terrible tyrannosaurus. Having its choice of two attack actions—Tail and its Stomp, which can knock a target prone—it uses Stomp first, then bludgeons prone targets with Tail. A seriously wounded bronto (reduced to 48 hp or fewer) lumbers away using the Dash action.

The **dimetrodon** is a Medium (human-size) carnivorous dinosaur that hunts along rivers and coastlines. It can swim, but it's faster on land, so it uses this movement only to chase prey through and into water. It's neither stealthy nor subtle: It simply runs up to its intended prey and delivers a vicious bite, again and again. Like other predators, it goes after the easiest target in sight: the young, the old, the weak, the isolated, and the oblivious. Its prey isn't supposed to fight back, so when it's just moderately wounded (reduced to 13 hp or fewer), it reconsiders its choices and backs off, using the Dash action.

The **velociraptor** is a Tiny (cat-size) but vicious hunter with a distinctly birdlike appearance. Low in Strength but high in Dexterity and Constitution, with Pack Tactics and a Claw/Bite Multiattack, it hunts in flocks and engages in coordinated attacks with others of its kind. One velociraptor won't attack a target unless another velociraptor can attack the same target at the same time, preferably from a different direction. If they're seriously wounded (reduced to 4 hp or fewer), or if enough of their allies are killed that they can no longer enjoy a numerical advantage of at least two to one, they skedaddle, using the Dash action. The velociraptor has a pronounced preference for isolated targets, but even going up against a group, it can pick out the most promising prey with reasonable accuracy.

The **deinonychus** is a Medium-size cousin of the velociraptor. It's *much* stronger and lacks Pack Tactics, so it's more of a soloist than an ensemble player. Its primary method of attack is to charge toward its targets, flap its rudimentary wings a bit to launch itself airborne, and land claws-first on the back of its prey (the Pounce feature). If it succeeds in knocking its target prone, it then gets a bonus Bite attack. Since its Multiattack action is compatible with Pounce and comprises two Claw attacks and one Bite attack, this means the deinonychus can get up to two Claw attacks and *two* Bite attacks in a single turn.

With this combo, and with its high Strength and Dexterity, the deinonychus is the assassin of the dinosaur kingdom, aiming to take a target out quickly with a single shock attack. If it knocks its prey down to 0 hp in a single attack, it devours it on the spot (Bite attacks until dead). If not, it follows up with another Multiattack—with advantage, if the target remains prone—and that will probably be enough to tear its prey to shreds. Again, however, deinonychuses are used to other creatures' running away, *not* fighting back. If its prey, or one of its prey's allies, can turn around and deal it a moderate wound (8 hp or greater from a single hit), it Dashes back in the direction it came from.

The Huge, flying **quetzalcoatlus**, believe it or not, is a creature that really existed: a larger cousin of the pteranodon, standing as tall as a giraffe, with a wingspan as broad as that of a Cessna 172. Unlike the sea-feeding pteranodon, the quetzalcoatlus lived far inland, and they're believed to have fed on small land vertebrates in a manner similar to storks. Chances are, then, that the Medium-size PCs in your group are reasonably safe from quetzalcoatlus attacks, but the Small ones had better watch out. The quetzalcoatlus's stat block includes a Dive Attack that's like an aerial Pounce, dealing extra damage rather than knocking the target prone; this maneuver isn't consistent with how it's believed to have fed in real prehistory, but then, no one's found any elf fossils, either. Anyway, standard dive-bomb tactics apply: Begin turn 40 feet up, fly down to Bite, fly back up to end the turn. No opportunity attacks, because of Flyby. A quetzalcoatlus withdraws when only moderately wounded (reduced to 21 hp or fewer).

ROT GRUBS (v)

Rot grubs are nearly mindless creatures that exist primarily in swarms, a stat block for which is provided in *Volo's*. They're a nasty surprise for any adventurer who stumbles across them, since the only way to fight them off once they've burrowed into you is to intentionally burn yourself. However, to talk about their having "tactics" is to give them too much credit.

A swarm of rot grubs is easy to hit, having an Armor Class of only 8, but not so easy to destroy. The swarm is resistant to piercing and slashing damage, reflecting the fact that you can kill a lot more grubs with a broad bashing weapon than with a thin cutting edge or poking point. The swarm is also immune to most debilitating conditions, stunned and unconscious being two standout exceptions. The swarm can be blinded, but that doesn't mean much, since it has 10 feet of blindsight. Except for its Constitution, which is average, the swarm's ability scores are pitifully low.

The swarm has only one attack, a Bite that does only indirect damage. Rather than take place at the moment of attack, the damage occurs at the start of the target's turn, and it varies in proportion to the number of grubs that have burrowed into the target's flesh (1d4 per hit). The target must cauterize the wound on this turn, or the burrowing grubs will do continuous round-by-round damage until the target is either cured of the infestation or dead.

A swarm of rot grubs moves at 5 feet per round across any surface, horizontal or vertical, and it lacks the Intelligence to do anything more complex than move directly toward the first other living being that comes within 10 feet of it. I'd allow one exception to this, for the DM who likes to play dirty: Because they can climb, rot grubs can swarm across a *ceiling* and drop down onto someone who walks beneath them. The swarm has no self-preservation instinct (with such a low movement speed, even if it had one, it wouldn't do it any good), only the instinct to feed.

A rot grub can be encountered singly, but it doesn't get an attack; instead, the target makes a DC 10 Dexterity saving throw when it enters the rot grub's space or vice versa.

And that's pretty much all there is to say about rot grubs, but I'll leave you with this haunting thought: Rot grubs are maggots. Maggots are larvae. Larvae are the immature forms of holometabolous insects. Therefore, eventually, rot grubs metamorphose into *something else*. "*This isn't even my final form!*"

THE MALEFACTORS



Conspicuously missing from the list of archdevils in chapter 6 of *Mordenkainen's* is the polished master villain of the AD&D *Monster Manual*, the devil himself: Asmodeus. I think this represents a shift in thinking about who and what he is: No longer can you dethrone the tyrant of the Nine Hells. He's god-tier now. At best, a party of legendarily mighty champions might be able to knock off one of his lieutenant generals and move a few other ambitious devils up the org chart. His rulership of his plane is beyond challenge. Which makes sense for the embodiment of lawful evil, on a plane governed and defined by lawful evil values. It may be possible elsewhere to resist an oppressive social order and overthrow a despot, but not in the Nine Hells.

Asmodeus isn't the only first-generation archdevil to be missing from *Mordenkainen's*. Dispatzer also seems to enjoy diabolic immunity, while Baalzebul is on the outs, according to current lore. Of the original *Monster Manual* Gang of Four, only Geryon makes an appearance in the bestiary, and he's been demoted. In fact, every current ruler of a level of hell is untouchable, save one: Zariel, the recently promoted lady of Avernus. All the other archdevils with stat blocks are merely "dukes" of the Nine Hells, either lieutenants or rivals to the infernal big cheeses.

In contrast, every demon lord from the AD&D *Monster Manual* has a stat block in *Mordenkainen's*. You want to come at Orcus or Demogorgon? Bring it. No one's stopping you.

Team Chaos is rounded out by Zuggtmoy, the final boss of the AD&D adventure *The Temple of Elemental Evil*, and three long-reigning demon lords out of the four from AD&D's *Monster Manual II*: Baphomet, Fraz-Urb'luu, and Graz'zt (alas for Pazuzu, who didn't make the cut).

ARCHDEVILS (M)

Most archdevils share a constellation of features that influence their combat behavior in the same or similar ways. I'll summarize those here; they apply to all archdevils unless otherwise specified.

- Although their other abilities are generally extraordinary as well—at a minimum, they're all very high by mortal standards—their primary offensive ability is Strength, and their Constitution exceeds their Dexterity, making them brute fighters that favor melee engagement.
- All are proficient in Intimidation, and they use it *constantly*; talk is free, after all. When they're winning a fight, which is most of the time, they taunt and bully, hoping to wear their opponents down and obtain their compliance at no further risk to themselves. When they're losing, even outside the Nine Hells, those who are proficient in Persuasion switch to that skill and try to parley their way to an outcome that satisfies both sides, while those who aren't try to bluff their foes into standing down. This talk has no binding mechanical effect: Without subjecting them to enchantment magic, you can't require your PCs to act contrary to their players' volition. However, it does allow you to describe the situation in loaded terms that may influence their interpretation of their chances. To keep things high-speed, low-drag, resolve this threatening harangue as a contest between the archdevil's passive Charisma (Intimidation) and each PC's passive Wisdom (Insight), unless players indicate that their characters are actively trying to shrug off the archdevil's fearmongering, in which case have each side roll. If the PC wins the contest, they perceive the truth of the situation: Describe the situation neutrally. If the fiend wins, it imposes its interpretation: Pull out all the stops with your descriptors of pain, menace, and futility, emphasizing the archdevil's strengths and the PCs' weaknesses. Every archdevil can communicate telepathically, so language is no barrier.
- All archdevils are resistant to physical damage from normal, nonsilvered weapons; all are immune to poison damage; most are immune to fire; and all are either resistant or immune to cold. However, this list leaves a lot of damage types that they're *not* resistant to. In particular, radiant damage suppresses their Regeneration trait, making any opponent who inflicts it a top priority for elimination. Foes who deal any meaningful amount of acid, lightning, thunder, necrotic, psychic, or force damage (say, at least 10 percent of the archdevil's hit point maximum) are also considered

threats more significant than those who don't. Unlike demons, which pass up no opportunity to abuse the weak, devils have the discipline to neutralize dangerous opponents first—then punish them for their temerity.

- Similarly, while all archdevils are immune to being charmed, exhausted, frightened, or poisoned, they're *not* immune to being paralyzed, knocked prone, restrained, or stunned. Successfully impose any of these conditions on an archdevil, and it says, "Oh, it's like *that*, is it?" and does its best to make sure you don't get to try it again.
- It's difficult to make any spell stick against an archdevil. They all have Magic Resistance, granting them advantage on their saving throws, and Legendary Resistance, granting them three opportunities to turn failures into successes. All but Zariel have proficiency on Dexterity and Constitution saves; all but Bael have proficiency on Wisdom saves; and all but Hutijin have proficiency on Charisma saves. Combine these with their impressive-to-begin-with ability score modifiers, and the list of good spells to use against them becomes awfully short. Thus, they focus much more on enemies with magic weapons. Generally, they deal with those wielding magic melee weapons themselves and send minions to handle those wielding magic ranged weapons, but if they have no minions present or their minions have been eliminated, their choice is determined by what type(s) of damage each weapon is dealing.
- All archdevils can teleport up to 120 feet, not just as an action but as a legendary action. They go wherever they need to be to target whomever they want, without ever having to worry about opportunity attacks.
- All have Innate Spellcasting, but most of the spells they have in common are ineffective in combat. *Animate dead*, for instance, takes a minute to cast and produces just one magnificent CR ¼ zombie; it's little more than a means of adding insult to injury once combat is over. *Alter self*, *detect magic*, and *suggestion* are all modestly useful in noncombat situations, but they also all require concentration, so only one of them can be cast at a time. Of the three, *alter self* seems like the probable go-to, letting archdevils disguise themselves as mortals for counseling sessions and contract negotiations. Assuming that combat doesn't come as a surprise, *detect magic* provides a bit of recon during the trash-talking phase of the encounter, allowing an archdevil to sense who's got weapons that can hurt it; it can drop the spell as soon as it's got the info it needs. *Suggestion* seems more like the culmination of a social interaction encounter, considering the number of different spells an archdevil might want to concentrate on instead during combat—but by necessity, an encounter in which the fiend has finally revealed its true form, since *alter self* must be dropped to cast it. *Symbol* (which also takes 1 minute to cast) is a trap, whose debilitating effects allow an archdevil or its minions to get the jump on foes when they set it off.

That leaves *invisibility* (or *greater invisibility*) and *wall of fire*, both of which are abundantly useful in combat. Turning invisible is an amusing way to generate confusion before and while Teleporting as a legendary action—remember that Teleport is an *action*, neither an attack nor a spell, and therefore doesn't break *invisibility*!—as well as to thwart Readied actions until the clock runs out on them. *Wall of fire*, per Targets in Areas, requires at least two targets in the area of effect to be worthwhile; thanks to their immunity to fire damage, Bael, Hutijin, and Moloch can pull the efreet/pit fiend stunt of casting it in a ring around themselves with the flames pointing inward, charring opponents engaged in melee with them. (This tactic doesn't work for Zariel, who's merely resistant to fire damage, not immune.)

Three archdevils (Bael, Moloch, and Titivilus) can cast *major image* at will. This spell has all sorts of applications, but since it requires concentration, its primary use in combat is misdirection. It may distract a non-melee opponent, taking them out of the fight for a round or two, or lure a foe into giving chase and thereby running into a trap. It can also serve as a double during any conversation that an archdevil anticipates may turn into a fight.

- With one exception, archdevils encountered outside the Nine Hells never retreat—they don't need to—but on their home plane, it's another story. Defeat reveals weakness, and fleeing combat means leaving behind a power vacuum that the next devil in line is eager to fill. On the other hand, archdevils are all about living to fight another day; what's the point of all the constant jockeying for status if you're just going to throw the game by letting yourself be destroyed? Thus, when reduced to 40 percent of their hit point maximum or less, any archdevil will stand down and see whether a mutually satisfactory resolution can be reached. Bael, alone of those discussed here, negotiates in something resembling good faith; Geryon, Moloch, and Titivilus lie through their teeth and try to seal the deal with a slippery contract;¹ and Hutijin and Zariel take the "You'll never get out of here alive" approach, cloaking the fact that they're buying their survival under a layer of face-saving bluster. However, no matter whether they employ Deception, Intimidation, or Persuasion, they always strive to give as little as possible in return for what they're

getting, and their initial offer is always outrageously inadequate, so as to establish a strong bargaining position for themselves.

- Devils are not merciful; archdevils, even less so. If an archdevil has tagged an enemy as a high-level security risk, it doesn't stop attacking just because that enemy is unconscious. They might get back up. An archdevil makes sure they're *dead*.

TITIVILUS

Alone among the statted archdevils, **Titivilus** is not a brute melee fighter; he relies on spellcasting and, even more heavily, Persuasion and Deception. He'd rather not fight with weapons at all, much preferring to achieve his goals through social interaction. If forced into combat, he often simply Teleports away, then casts *nondetection* to stymie pursuit. If sufficiently provoked—or if attacked in Dis, where he can't abscond without endangering his status—he fights as a shock attacker, striking for maximum damage while minimizing his time engaged in melee. Flight, teleportation, and invisibility aid him immensely in this combat role. Even more important, however: He sows discord.

Titivilus's opening play is to cast *greater invisibility*, then use his Ventriloquism trait to disguise his actual position as he hectors his foes. Next, he takes the Corrupting Guidance legendary action to use Twisting Words on one of his opponents; if he succeeds, he's careful not to deal that opponent any damage for the next minute, so that they remain charmed. There's no limit on how many opponents he can have charmed by Twisted Words at a time. If he can put the whammy on an entire low-Charisma party this way, one by one, he does—and then makes them attack one another, so that he doesn't have to.

On his turn, he prefers to use Multiattack. It's a simple equation: He can use a legendary action either to Teleport or to use Twisting Words, but it costs him *two* legendary actions to gain just half the value of his Multiattack. From the air—he never touches down during combat unless, for some reason, he has to—he swoops down toward the opponent he considers the greatest threat and attacks them with his Silver Sword. As described above under “Archdevils,” this opponent is likely to be one who wields a magic weapon and/or can deal damage he doesn't resist, especially radiant. For Titivilus, however, the greatest threat is an opponent who can see him when he's invisible; one with both high Wisdom and high Charisma is also a threat, because they're less susceptible to his shenanigans, and cold damage suppresses his Regeneration as well. If he lacks this kind of intel on his opponents, he starts with good-aligned paladins and clerics. As soon as it's clear that the greatest present danger to him is a noncorrupted, non-Intelligence-based spellcaster, he forgoes his Multiattack and sucker-punches them with *feblemind*.

Titivilus's Multiattack also includes a use of Frightful Word. As long as he's invisible, he's exempt from opportunity attacks, so after attacking with his sword, he keeps moving until he's within 5 feet of the desired target of Frightful Word—and uses Ventriloquism to make it sound like it's coming from a different direction. Funny thing about Frightful Word: Although the target is frightened of him, as long as he's invisible, they don't suffer any disadvantage on ability checks or attack rolls against other targets. However, whether they can see him or not, they're compelled to Dash away from him (the Word is *that* Frightful), giving him an opportunity attack if he's still by them when their turn comes around.^{II}

Titivilus is a schemer whose Intelligence is high enough that he can effectively read the stats off PCs' character sheets. Consequently, he knows who's most susceptible to Frightful Word (low Wisdom saving throw modifier) and Twisting Words/Corrupting Guidance (low Charisma save mod), as well as who's resistant or immune to being charmed or frightened. To be a target of one of these actions, an opponent must have a save mod of +6 or lower (+3 or lower with advantage on the saving throw), but the lower, the better.

Once he's used Twisting Words on as many of his opponents as it's likely to work on, he tugs the loose thread and makes the party start to unravel. Circling above the fray, invisible, he takes his Corrupting Guidance legendary action up to three times, each time preceding the turn of an opponent he's corrupted, to try to make that opponent attack one or more of their own allies. As long as *he* does no harm to a corrupted opponent, the opponent remains corrupted—no new saving throw until the minute is done. On his own turn, he descends to Multiattack a foe who isn't corrupted, then floats up to a safe distance again.

By the time they're experienced enough to take on an archdevil, PCs ought to be able to figure out eventually that they can pop Titivilus's *greater invisibility* with a 4th-level *dispel magic*. If they do, although he can cast it again immediately,

he's not such a fool as to do so. Instead, he briefly switches to *mislead*, to give his noncorrupted opponents a new problem to solve—and a higher-level spell to pop—until his next turn, when he attacks again and the double vanishes.

The question then is whether it's worth his while to go back to *greater invisibility*. If his opponents' only way of dealing with it is to dispel it, and they have to spend spell slots to do so, that's a point in its favor. If they have other ways of seeing invisible creatures, or if there aren't enough corruptible individuals among them to do his dirty work (say, if they constitute less than half the party), those are points against it.

Titivilus relies on his opponents' doing the lion's share of his fighting for him. If not enough of them are corrupted, he has to use his action to Multiattack, because he's not going to deal damage any other way. As long as enough of them are corrupted, he has the luxury of using his action to work down his list of other spells. In order of preference, after *greater invisibility* and *mislead*:

- *Suggestion* to take a noncorrupted opponent out of play for a while: "You're too frail for this battle, sorcerer. Run while you still can." "Oh, bard, that A-string is *terribly* flat. Everything's going to go wrong if you don't fix your tuning." "Tut tut, paladin... going into battle with a stain on your armor like that! Here, have a chamois and go clean that up."
- *Major image* as described under "Archdevils."
- *Confusion* against two or more noncorrupted, low-Wisdom opponents within a 10-foot-radius sphere. It's okay if Titivilus happens to catch a corrupted opponent in this sphere as well—in fact, it's win-win. If he chooses to use Corrupting Guidance on them, *he decides how they act*, the spell notwithstanding; if he chooses not to, the spell's effect kicks in.
- *Bestow curse* to cause an opponent with Extra Attack to waste its turns, impose disadvantage on a rogue, or add necrotic damage to attacks against a spellcaster. Used against a noncorrupted, low-Wisdom opponent.

Once he's down to *bestow curse*, he may as well go back to Multiattacking again so that he can get some use out of it. *Modify memory* isn't a good use of his time once combat is already under way, *nondetection* is pointless when he's *right there*, and *sending* is only going to be answered with, "Oh, are you having a difficult time, Titivilus? Have you finally been promoted to your level of incompetence? Solve your own problems."

When Titivilus can no longer rely on Corrupting Guidance to play Punch-and-Judy with his foes, he sets it aside and instead uses his legendary actions to Teleport around so that he's never within easy reach of an opponent when their turn comes up. Only if this becomes pointless as well does he take the Assault legendary action to gain one more attack between turns. When he's reduced to 50 hp or fewer, he yields at last and tries to strike a bargain.

BAEL

Although **Bael** is a brute melee fighter, he's every bit as good at slinging spells as he is at swinging his morningstar. In addition to enemies who wield magic weapons and/or deal types of damage he doesn't resist, especially radiant, those he rates most highly as threats include opponents who are immune or resistant to being frightened; have a Wisdom saving throw modifier of +8 or higher (his Intelligence is high enough that he can tell); have a Wisdom save mod of +5 or higher and advantage on saves against magic (ditto); or deal cold damage, which also suppresses his Regeneration.

Bael has one bonus action, Dreadful, which comes with no downside and has no competition, so he uses it routinely at the start of his turn, with one exception: If he happens to be using his action to Teleport, he uses Dreadful after doing so rather than before, in order to scare the new neighbors (unless he *really* doesn't want the old neighbors to follow him to his new position).

Like Titivilus, Bael has a legendary action that provides only half the value of his Multiattack action at twice the cost of his other legendary actions, each of which grants him a full action. Therefore, he has a strong incentive always to use his action on his turn to Multiattack—even more so because his Multiattack deals spectacular damage. The main alternative to Multiattack is casting a spell, in the following order of preference:

- *Dominate monster*, but only if there's an actual monster to dominate—something summoned by one of his opponents, for instance. Also, it has to be one that won't simply disappear if the summoner drops concentration on

their summoning spell. Bael gets only one shot at this, so it's got to be the right choice. He's not going to waste it on a giant elk. Cast *planar ally*, on the other hand, and that's a guaranteed yolk.

- *Fly* is Bael's only way of getting airborne, and it requires concentration, so he casts it only if he doesn't need to cast and sustain *dominate monster*. He doesn't need the speed boost—he can Teleport hither and yon—but the benefit of being able to attack from the air while wielding a weapon with a 20-foot reach is hefty. If an enemy knocks him out of the sky with *dispel magic* and he has a legendary action available, he Teleports safely to the ground (kind of a cheat, but the rules as written are ambiguous about the timing of a fall, and archdevils feast on ambiguity).
- *Wall of fire* as described under “Archdevils.” It also requires concentration, so it's incompatible with *fly*; Bael casts it when he can hurt more than the bare-minimum two targets with it.
- *Dispel magic* is for certain 2nd-, 3rd-, and 4th-level spells only: *haste*, *enlarge/reduce*, *spiritual weapon*, *protection from evil and good*, and *aura of purity*. Those get nullified immediately. (Dispelling *aura of purity* requires him to succeed on a DC 14 Charisma check.) Bael doesn't need to dispel *invisibility* or *greater invisibility*, since he has truesight, or *spirit guardians*, since he can attack from outside its radius.

Bael casts *counterspell* against these same spells if they're cast in his presence—except for *haste*, which he allows to be cast, then immediately dispels, in order to sandbag the target.

- *Invisibility* as described under “Archdevils.”
- *Infllict wounds* isn't much on its own for a creature as powerful as Bael, but when he casts it, it's boosted to *8th level*, for a whopping 10d10 necrotic damage. That amount of damage makes it competitive with his Multiattack! Plus, if an enemy is resistant to physical weapon damage—say, a Raging barbarian—*infllict wounds*' necrotic damage bypasses that resistance. The downside is that it's all-or-nothing: Bael might miss with one melee attack but hit with the other, but if he misses with *infllict wounds*, that's that. Bael therefore casts *infllict wounds* if the target he wishes to attack has resistance to piercing damage and AC 20 or less (AC 17 or less if he has disadvantage on the attack roll, any Armor Class if he has advantage).
- *Major image* as described under “Archdevils.”
- *Charm person* can be useful for sidelining a target with a Wisdom save mod of +3 or less who isn't immune to it, but to resort to this rather than simply attack, Bael has to be worried: By the guidelines in “Combat Encounter Difficulty” (*Dungeon Master's Guide*, chapter 3), the encounter has to be Easy or Medium for the PCs, or a Hard encounter in which any minions he's brought along have been defeated already.

Speaking of minions, Bael's Infernal Command action assumes that he brings some along. As a cunning commander of fiendish troops, he knows exactly what his underlings are capable of, so calculate the encounter difficulty for Bael and his minions together, Bael alone, and the minions alone:

- If the minions alone constitute a Hard or Deadly encounter for a party of PCs, while Bael alone would be Easy or Medium, Bael hangs back and lets his minions do most or all of the work, stepping forward only if they're wiped out.
- If both the minions alone and Bael alone constitute Hard or Deadly encounters, Bael still lets his minions do most of the work, but he intervenes as needed to shut down their most threatening opponents.
- If the minions constitute only an Easy or Medium encounter, Bael participates actively in the fight from the beginning.

In the first of these scenarios, Bael takes the Infernal Command action on his turn unless and until it's time for him to step up. In the second, he takes this action on his turn when he doesn't have anything better to do, and uses a legendary action to take it when he spends his turn action on Multiattack or Teleport. In the third, he uses Infernal Command only as a legendary action. When he uses it as a legendary action, he does so on the turn immediately after his own, because the more turns go by, the less value he gets out of it.

When he's actively engaged in combat, Bael's plan of attack most of the time is to position himself—in the air if possible, on the ground otherwise—10 feet from his chosen target and as many other opponents as possible, use Dreadful (bonus action), then Multiattack (action). On other creatures' turns, he uses his Teleport legendary action to ensure that he's out of reach of any genuinely dangerous melee opponent. If he doesn't need to do that but has a legendary action available, and if there's a target who's susceptible to it (Intelligence/Investigation modifier +6 or less for *major image*,

Wisdom save mod +3 or less for *charm person*), he may opportunistically take the Awaken Greed legendary action. Only when none of these options is of any use at all—or he’s beginning to get desperate—does he take the Attack legendary action.

When he’s reduced to 75 hp or fewer and unable to get back above that number by regenerating, Bael admits defeat and offers his vanquishers lavish wealth in exchange for letting him hold on to his life and his station.

HUTIJIN

Hutijin is a brute fighter with a ferocious Multiattack. Although he’s no slouch as a spellcaster, melee is his preferred mode. Rather than use his Teleport to avoid his foes, he uses it to make *himself* unavoidable.

To Hutijin, the greatest threat, aside from an opponent who wields a magic weapon and/or deals a type of damage he isn’t resistant to (especially radiant), is one who can withstand Fearful Voice, Lightning Storm, or the poison of his Bite—in other words, one with immunity or resistance to lightning or poison damage or to being frightened or poisoned; a Dexterity, Constitution, or Wisdom saving throw modifier of +8 or higher (his Intelligence is high enough for him to “read” PCs’ stats); a Con save mod of +5 or higher and advantage on saves against being poisoned; or a Wisdom save mod of +5 or higher and advantage on saves against being frightened. The more of these criteria a foe possesses, the greater the threat.

Although he has the Intelligence and Wisdom to head off threats to himself, he tends to be single-minded once those are taken care of, focusing his attacks on the foe who’s displeased him the most—generally by demanding his attention when he’s not inclined to give it. Also, even though he can fly, he’s not reluctant to position himself right in the thick of things; in fact, he enjoys it, because it maximizes the effectiveness of Infernal Despair, Fearful Voice, Lightning Storm, and his flexible Multiattack. He hangs in the air above his enemies, descending just low enough to attack with Bite and Mace, then rising up again just out of their reach. As long as they don’t deal radiant damage, opportunity attacks don’t concern him.

For him to forgo his Multiattack to cast a spell, it has to address a clear and present danger. He favors them in the following order:

- *Hold monster*, but only against a fell threat—or a target he detests so much he wants to humiliate them before crushing, slicing, and gnawing them to death. When he casts this spell, he stays within 15 feet of the target at all times, so that Infernal Despair imposes disadvantage on their saving throws, and he knows better than to try it from any farther away against a target whose Wisdom-save mod is too high (see above).
- *Lightning bolt*, but only if he can strike four or more opponents with it. It’s just not worth it against fewer. At least he can fly and teleport to get into position for it.
- *Heal* on himself the first time he’s down to 130 hp or fewer even after using Regeneration at the start of his turn.
- *Wall of fire* as described under “Archdevils.” He’d prefer to scorch at least four opponents with this spell as well, but he’ll settle for three if they’re all within 15 feet of him.
- *Dispel magic* against certain 2nd-, 3rd-, and 4th-level spells only: *haste*, *enlarge/reduce*, *spiritual weapon*, *spirit guardians*, *protection from evil and good*, *aura of purity*, *aura of life*, and *Otiluke’s resilient sphere*. (To dispel the last three of these, he has to succeed on a DC 14 Charisma check.) Hutijin doesn’t need to dispel *invisibility* or *greater invisibility*, since he has truesight.

Hutijin uses his Fearful Voice reaction the first chance he gets. It recharges on the standard schedule, but its utility diminishes quickly: A successful saving throw confers immunity against it for 24 hours, and using it again on an already frightened target doesn’t make them more frightened, so there’s no point in using it on the same opponent twice. If and only if there’s a new target within 30 feet, he uses it again as soon as it recharges. Once there’s no longer any enemy left that it will work on, he becomes willing to cast *invisibility* as described under “Archdevils,” but only if he has no reason to cast any of the other spells listed above.

At first glance, Lightning Storm, which costs two legendary actions, seems like a bad deal, but if there are four targets in range and the alternative is two Attack legendary actions, it’s actually excellent. Each Attack legendary action deals an average of 15 damage on a hit, and there’s always a chance (a small one, given Hutijin’s +15 attack modifier, but still a chance) that it will miss. Lightning Storm has a radius of 20 feet, and Infernal Despair imposes disadvantage on saving

throws out to 15 feet, so three out of four targets are nearly certain to fail their saves, and the fourth has to have a Dex save mod of +8 just to have a one-in-three chance of success. Thus, Lightning Storm can be expected to deal just shy of 72 damage in total—more than double the damage of Attacking twice.

The only time Hutijin *doesn't* spend two legendary actions on Lightning Storm is when he can't get at least two opponents to stay within 20 feet of him—and can't spend his third legendary action on Teleport to bring him within range of at least three. (Spending a legendary action to Teleport means he can't spend it on another Attack, so the opportunity cost is higher.) More is always better, of course, so if Hutijin can use his first of three legendary actions to increase the number of foes within 20 feet of him by at least one—after accounting for the possibility that the next one to take a turn may try to run away—by Teleporting, he does so, then uses Lightning Storm at the end of the next creature's turn. (Forget this, though, if it means moving more than 15 feet away from a target paralyzed by *bold monster*—or out of melee reach of that opponent whom he detests enough to pound into paste.) Otherwise, he uses Lightning Storm first, then either Attacks or Teleports, whichever seems to offer greater advantage at the moment.

When he's forced down to 80 hp or fewer, Hutijin's first tack is to Teleport to a safe distance, regenerate until he feels better, then return to the fight. If this isn't feasible, he yields at last, acknowledging that his foes have bested him (“this time”) and paying for his life in the coin of information or arcane secrets. They'll have made a permanent enemy of him, however, and they'd be wise to bind him to a contract that forbids him or any of his minions from coming after them in the future.

MOLoch

Of all the archdevils with stat blocks in *Mordenkainen's*, **Moloch** is the one who's most likely to be an *ally*, rather than an adversary, of a party of PCs. The reason is, Moloch is a fugitive. Formerly the lord of Malbolge, Moloch got cocky and tried to take down Asmodeus; now if he so much as sets foot in the Nine Hells, he's transformed into a lowly imp. To have any chance of reclaiming his former title, he has to rely on the meanness of strangers, whom he hopes to induce to help him by offering information about the various planes of existence, especially the Nine Hells themselves.

In terms of threat assessment, Moloch is most concerned by opponents who wield magic weapons and/or deal damage he isn't resistant to, especially radiant. But of these, he ups his threat estimate even further if a foe has a Wisdom saving throw modifier of +7 or better, or +4 or better with resistance to being frightened, or is immune to the frightened condition altogether. His Intelligence is high enough to “read” a PC's stats, but he doesn't know exactly what spells they can cast until they cast them. It's reasonable for him to surmise, however, that any good-aligned cleric or paladin can dish out radiant damage aplenty.

Moloch is a brute whose kit is built around casting *stinking cloud*, then preventing his foes from getting out of it. *Stinking cloud* is a spell with a few drawbacks, No. 1 being that enemies can simply walk out of it—but Moloch can use his Many-Tailed Whip, which has a 30-foot reach, to yank them back in, at least if they started their turn adjacent to him. No. 2 is that it heavily obscures its area of effect, which denies him opportunity attacks and breaks line of sight, which he needs in order to get the most use out of Breath of Despair; on the other hand, with all sources of attack roll advantage and disadvantage denied, his +15 to hit and average total of 56 damage per turn look quite favorable. No. 3 is that *stinking cloud's* only other effect is to consume the action of a target who fails their saving throw, but he doesn't mind that, because battles of attrition favor the big guy with Regeneration.

However, drawback No. 4, the fact that it monopolizes his concentration, unequivocally works against Moloch, because he'd rather devote his concentration to *fly* or *wall of fire*. Therefore, if and when the *stinking cloud* strategy proves ineffective, he ditches it without hesitation and switches to *wall of fire*.

There are a couple of strategies he can use with *wall of fire*. One is to cast it in a ring with himself at the center, with the flames pointing inward. Being immune to fire damage himself, he can use it in this way to present his melee opponents with a dilemma: Either stay inside, keep fighting Moloch, and take an average 22 fire damage from the flames; or run out, risk an opportunity Bite attack that deals an average 26 damage, and find some other way to hurt Moloch from outside a ring of fire that hides him from sight. He chooses this option when facing multiple opponents who are determined to assault him with melee weapons; it doesn't work as well when they try to run away, because if they Dash, he can't reach them with his whip to pull them back in.

Another strategy is to cast *wall of fire* 30 to 40 feet from himself, cutting off his opponents' retreat. He can then use Breath of Despair to impose the frightened condition on them and scare them away from himself, potentially gaining an opportunity attack against his top-priority foe, and follow that up by using his Many-Tailed Whip to haul them right back to his side. There's no definition of "the safest available route" that includes running through a *wall of fire*, so this tactic stops his fleeing opponents in their tracks while they're still within range of his whip.

Speaking of Breath of Despair, Moloch isn't too eager to rush into the *stinking cloud* strategy right away, because one of the first things he needs to do is to confiscate Sir Bogumil the Blessed's *holy avenger* sword. If Bogumil is a paladin powerful enough to take on an archdevil, he and all his companions are immune to being frightened, but they're *not* immune to the psychic damage dealt by Breath of Despair—nor to the rider effect of dropping whatever they're holding. Bogumil may not run, but if he fails that saving throw, he'll lose his grip on his sword, and Moloch will use his free interaction to snatch it up. Then, on his next turn, he'll use his free interaction to tuck it in the waistband of his loincloth so that his hand is free to Claw again. As Breath of Despair recharges, Moloch uses it to expropriate his opponents' magic weapons, one by one, while imposing disadvantage on their attack rolls and ability checks and terrifying them into incurring opportunity attacks against themselves. The psychic damage is nice, too.

When Breath of Despair is unavailable, Moloch's default turn action is Multiattack. However, if *stinking cloud* and *wall of fire* aren't paying off anymore, his next tactic is to go airborne with *fly*. Also, once he's neutralized the opponents who initially worry him, he casts *burning hands* (at 7th level, dealing 9d6 fire damage) against two or more opponents who fit neatly into a 15-foot cone in front of him and have Dexterity save modifiers of +6 or lower; or, barring that, *flame strike* against three or more opponents who fit into a circle with a 10-foot radius centered within 60 feet of him and also have Dex save mods of +6 or lower. *Confusion* isn't worth his time or his concentration.

Once Moloch has used Breath of Despair to take away his opponents' most dangerous magic weapon, he approaches his top-priority target and uses his first legendary action to cast *stinking cloud*. As long as that's up and stinking, he uses his legendary actions to attack with his whip, pulling that target back into the cloud—and his reach—if they try to run away. If they manage to get out of reach of his whip, e.g., by succeeding on a saving throw and then Dashing, he uses a legendary action to Teleport after them. There is no escape.

While sustaining a ring-shaped *wall of fire*, Moloch is happy to use the Whip legendary action to pull opponents into the ring of fire: He can't see them outside the wall, but they can't see him inside, so advantage and disadvantage cancel out. However, his top priority is still to attack those foes who pose the greatest threats; he doesn't let himself get distracted by targets of opportunity. While under the *fly* spell, Moloch is fond of staying 30 feet up in the air and pursuing his most favored enemies with his Many-Tailed Whip, pulling them up into the air, then letting them plummet and take three dice of falling damage. No one ever said devils lacked imagination.

When Moloch is seriously wounded (reduced to 101 hp or fewer, with little hope of regenerating those hit points back), he faces a predicament: Although he'll simply re-form in the Nine Hells if he's killed outside them, he'll re-form *as an imp*, which will not only impede his ability to get out again and resume his scheming but also expose him to the risk of being permanently killed. Therefore, he immediately calls a halt to the fight and asks his enemies what information he can offer them that will induce them to let him walk away. If his opponents insist on getting the deal in writing, he agrees—but unless his opponents are sharp-witted, he also makes sure it includes no penalty for providing information that turns out not to be as complete and accurate as advertised.

GERYON

Why did **Geryon** lose control of Stygia? Perhaps because of his lack of tactical flexibility. Geryon is a brute melee fighter, and despite his extraordinary Charisma, his spell repertoire is nothing to write home about, nor do his available actions offer a wide variety of options. He's still formidable, though, thanks to his many hit points, his flying speed, the long reach of his melee attacks, his Claws' ability to grapple and restrain, and the poison of his Stinger, which reduces its target's hit point maximum. He also has a lair in Stygia, where he's even harder to bring down.

Like all archdevils, Geryon is susceptible to magic weapons and to damage types he's not resistant to, especially radiant; foes with these powers rate as threats, as do those with a Constitution saving throw modifier of +7 or more (+4 or more if they have advantage on saving throws against being poisoned).

There's not much variation in his attack pattern: He flies 15 feet above his opponents' heads and Multiattacks against whomever he considers the greatest threat, first with Claws, then with Stinger. Claws grapple and restrain on a hit, granting him advantage on his follow-up Stinger attack roll. If he succeeds in restraining his foe, he then carries them another 20 feet up in the air so that if they escape, they fall, taking two dice of damage.

At the end of the next creature to act's turn, if he has room, he teleports another 120 feet upward so that if his foe escapes, they take *fourteen* dice of damage when they fall. If vertical space is limited, he instead spends two legendary actions on Swift Sting for another Stinger attack with advantage against his restrained foe. This option is costly, but Geryon doesn't have a plethora of other options. Aside from the "You escape, you fall" ploy, he doesn't need to Teleport unless his No. 1 target has retreated out of reach, and Infernal Glare does nothing but frighten a single opponent. It's good for sandbagging a rogue who's trying to line up a Sneak Attack, or a marksman who's less than 60 feet away, or a front-line warrior who thinks they might accomplish something by hurling hand axes or javelins, but it's not what you'd call broadly useful. If he has nothing better to do with Infernal Glare, he can use it on the target he holds grappled, so that they have disadvantage on any escape check.



Once per day, Geryon can cast *divine word*, his one unambiguously strong combat spell aside from *invisibility*. But it presents him with a quandary: Like other archdevils, Geryon systematically eliminates threats, starting with the most serious and working his way down. However, *divine word* is most useful against a large number of badly wounded enemies; it doesn't even affect a creature with more than 50 hp. When is he going to have occasion to use it if he's knocking down foes one at a time?

When he has minions fighting alongside him, that's when. The "Sound the Horn" variant action summons 5d4 minotaurs (CR 3—in tier 4 play, three to six are a match for a single PC), which can then be ordered to whale on his enemies so that he's not doing all the work himself. As with other summoning variants, especially since this one has no chance of failure, I recommend choosing in advance how many minotaurs will appear and when; one good juncture is when he's lightly wounded (reduced to 270 hp or fewer), which proves that his foes do have the power to hurt him. Once every opponent he considers a threat is brought down to 40 hp or fewer by the end of his turn, Geryon utters his *divine word* as a bonus action.

It's also possible that a party of PCs will have to face Geryon at the end of a gantlet of fights with other devils, leaving them battered and bleeding when they face him, and getting them all to 40 hp or fewer won't involve as much work. Having *divine word* up his sleeve makes it less important for Geryon to deliver coups de grâce to his unconscious foes; if they fail that Charisma save, they'll be killed outright whether they have 20 hp or 0 hp.

Finally, Geryon may not consider it necessary to render a threatening opponent fully unconscious. After two turns' worth of attacks plus a Swift Sting, if he's poisoned them with his Stinger—a condition that lasts until the target's next rest unless it's cleared with *protection from poison*, *lesser restoration*, Lay On Hands, or the like—he may consider them effectively dealt with for the time being and move on to the next threat. It depends on how much of a nuisance they've been.

Against a grappled opponent, if both attacks hit, Claws plus Stinger deal an average total of 64 damage, plus another 13 if the opponent fails a Con save. This damage total creates a steep opportunity cost for *wall of ice*, which needs to be cast over at least three opponents (based on damage output) and preferably at least four (based on Targets in Areas) to merit spending an action on. Fortunately for Geryon, the wall can zigzag around the battlefield, going wherever his opponents are, and stand as an obstacle to frustrate them. Unfortunately, it requires concentration, so it precludes *invisibility*. As for *ice storm*, it needs at least four targets in the area of effect even to be worth considering.

If Geryon failed to hit with his Claws, or if his grappled target got away, his ice spells stack up better—but they're not his style. He'd rather keep going after his No. 1 target with Multiattack, even if it didn't work quite as well as he'd hoped the first time. The second time, however, he gives himself an edge by spending his action to cast *invisibility*. He then situates himself over the target's head, spending a legendary action to Teleport if necessary. Just before his turn comes around, he spends his last two legendary actions on a Swift Sting with unseen-attacker advantage, then follows it immediately with a Multiattack against his unhappy foe.

It's unlikely that he'll miss with Claws two turns in a row, especially with advantage the second time, but if he does, he'll be frustrated enough to give up on it for the moment and cast *wall of ice* instead. Both *wall of ice* and *ice storm* become much more attractive when he has no opponent grappled and he can cast either spell against *five* or more opponents.

Geryon has three lair actions: a blast of cold damage, psychic restraint, and *banishment*. His choice of lair action is mechanistic, with the restriction that he can't use the same one twice in a row. His first choice, if his current No. 1 threat has a Charisma save mod of +6 or less, is *banishment*, and he maintains his concentration on it for the full duration if he can, permanently kicking the interloper out of the Nine Hells. His second choice, if he's not invisible and his current No. 1 threat has a Wisdom save mod of +6 or less, is psychic restraint, so that when his turn arrives he can gain advantage on his Claws attack roll. His third choice, if he can see at least two opponents with Con save mods of +6 or less within 10 feet of each other, is the cold blast. His fourth choice, if he is invisible and the top threat has a low enough Wisdom save mod, is to use psychic restraint on the *second* most serious threat. His fifth choice is a cold blast against any two opponents who are close enough together, and sixth and last is an opportunistic cold blast against one.

Geryon is rarely encountered outside the Nine Hells; if he is, he fights until he's destroyed. At home, he keeps going until he's seriously wounded (reduced to 120 hp or fewer) and unable to regenerate enough hit points to recover sufficiently. Thing is, Geryon doesn't want to waste his time fighting a handful of presumptuous mortals—he wants to be fighting Levistus for dominion of Stygia. He'd rather have anyone who can clobber him this badly as an ally than as an

enemy. Consequently, when forced to yield, he tries to recruit his opponents to his cause, offering to make them even mightier and more masterful if they aid him. Such a deal has to be put in writing, of course, and he sneaks in an assortment of poison pills that will allow him to revoke his gifts and destroy his former foes once his goal is achieved.

ZARIEL

A lord of the Nine Hells but also a parvenue among them, **Zariel**, who rules Avernus, is a spellcaster first and a melee fighter second. Although she can deal an average of 110 damage by hitting twice with her Longsword, this Multiattack is her third choice of turn action, after casting a spell (when the right criteria are met) and a Multiattack that includes Horrid Touch. She combines a 10-foot reach on all her melee weapons with an Armor Class of 21 and the ability to fly at a blazing speed of 150 feet, allowing her to go where she likes and attack whom she likes without fear of opportunity attacks.

Like all archdevils, she's wariest of opponents who wield magic weapons and/or deal damage to which she's not resistant, but her relationship to radiant damage is a little different: Although it suppresses her Regeneration trait, as it does for every other archdevil, she's also resistant to it. Thus, her concern when she takes radiant damage isn't the damage itself but rather the *other* damage that it prevents her from mending. An enemy who deals radiant damage is therefore only a significant threat if all her enemies put together are inflicting 78 damage or more on her per round (to her, anything less is just a scratch). In that case, she needs to put a stop to the radiant damage to preserve her ability to regenerate. Otherwise, the only foes she considers potentially problematic are those who are immune to the poisoned condition.

So if she's not Multiattacking, what spell is she casting?

- *Blade barrier* allows Zariel to separate enemies she considers significant threats from enemies she considers insignificant threats—or to separate significant threats from each other, so that she can deal with them one at a time. It's worth remembering that the barrier can be shaped in a circle *up to* 60 feet in diameter. If she wants to be supremely spiteful, Zariel can make the radius just 21/2 feet and purée a single enemy inside it. Still, if that enemy is lucky enough to succeed on their Dexterity saving throw, they'll take only 16 damage on average when they dive out of it. With *blade barrier*, the threat is stronger than the execution: The sight of the wall of spinning razors should suffice to deter foes from trying to pass through it. Making them desperate is counterproductive.
- *Fireball* is never wrong when four or more enemies are clustered within a 20-foot-radius sphere—and Zariel can cast it again and again, indefinitely. However, she prefers to cast it only when all the foes she considers threats are together in that area of effect.
- *Finger of death*, against a target with a Constitution saving throw modifier of +5 or lower, can't fail. But Zariel casts it only if the opponent she considers most dangerous at the moment is such a target.
- *Invisibility* requires concentration, making it incompatible with *blade barrier*. However, if casting *blade barrier* happens to be undesirable, for whatever reason, Zariel is happy to vanish and flit around cloaked for a bit—especially since she can still use her Immolating Gaze legendary action while invisible, and since it's neither an attack nor a spell, using it doesn't reveal her.
- *Wall of fire* also requires concentration, so Zariel casts it only when *blade barrier* is undesirable and *invisibility* has proven fruitless, e.g., if all her opponents can see invisible creatures, or if some lucky stiff has somehow managed to tag her with *faerie fire*. She also needs to be able to route it through at least three opponents, and she'd prefer all of them to be ones she considers threats.
- *Dispel evil and good* isn't a worthwhile use of Zariel's turn action. Any summoned creature she could banish with it, she can kill almost as easily.

On her turn, Zariel tears through the air, never descending below an altitude of 10 feet or coming closer than 10 feet to any of her opponents. If circumstances call for one of the spells above, she casts it. If not, and she has Horrid Touch available, she uses it against her top-priority target, then completes her Multiattack with a Longsword strike—unless her top-priority target has a weapon with a 10-foot reach, in which case she throws a javelin from 15 to 30 feet away instead. If Horrid Touch hasn't recharged yet, she makes two Longsword attacks, again substituting Javelin for Longsword against a target with a long weapon. Depending on how much room she has to maneuver and how much movement she has left, she

spends her time between turns as high as 90 feet in the air—beyond the range of thrown weapons and suboptimal for shortbows and light crossbows.

If her foes manage to force her down to earth, she uses her Teleport legendary action to ensure that she's never within melee or movement reach of the next enemy to act. As long as she can stay in the air, she uses her Immolating Gaze legendary action against her most threatening foe, leaving her one legendary action with which to Teleport in case of emergency.

In her lair in Avernus, she can use a lair action either to cast *fireball* or to project a quartet of simultaneous, highly disturbing illusions. Since she can't use the same lair action twice in a row but also has only two of them, she must alternate between them. In round 1, if the usual criteria for casting *fireball* are met, she casts *fireball* in odd-numbered rounds and *major image* in even-numbered ones; otherwise, she casts *major image* in odd-numbered rounds and *fireball* in even-numbered ones.

Zariel's position of authority is precarious, and she can't afford to lose face. Even as her foes wear her down, she continues to taunt them—but when she's seriously injured (reduced to 232 hp or fewer), her jeering takes a new tone. Rather than continue to belittle her opponents' abilities, she bemoans the fact that they're wasting their time fighting her when there are greater glories to be had in the Nine Hells, and she tries to win them to her side with backhanded compliments: "I respect your boldness. Not everyone could hold out this long in a fight they were so unprepared for." "It's impressive how you make up for your lack of training and discipline with such passion and intensity." "If you were a little stronger, you might be a match for Dispater. I could help you with that, you know." If they refuse to take the bait, her self-preservation instinct, as strong as it is, can't overcome her zealotry, and she goes down fighting.

DEMON LORDS (M)

Most demon lords share a constellation of features that influence their combat behavior in the same or similar ways, but it's narrower than that of archdevils. These features apply to all demon lords unless otherwise specified.

- Although their other abilities are generally extraordinary as well—at a minimum, they're all very high by mortal standards—their primary offensive ability is Strength, and their Constitution exceeds their Dexterity, making them brute fighters that favor melee engagement.
- All are proficient in Perception, making them extremely difficult to sneak up on or hide from.
- All are resistant to cold, fire, and lightning damage, and all are immune to poison and physical damage from nonmagical weapons. Dealing at least 10 percent of a demon lord's hit point maximum in acid, thunder, necrotic, psychic, radiant, or force damage gets its attention, and not in a positive way.
- All demon lords are immune to being charmed, exhausted, frightened, or poisoned. They *can* be paralyzed, knocked prone, restrained, or stunned, and they don't much care for any of that, either.
- At a minimum, all demon lords have proficiency in all of the "big three" saving throws—Dexterity, Constitution, and Wisdom—which along with their Magic Resistance and Legendary Resistance causes most spells to simply fizzle against them. Magic weapons, on the other hand, don't have to contend with anything except their Armor Class (as long as they're not cold-, fire-, or lightning-flavored). Hitting a demon lord with a magic weapon is another reliable way to get on its bad side, not that it has a good side.
- All demon lords have Innate Spellcasting, but the spells they can cast are highly idiosyncratic. The only spell they all have in common is *detect magic*, which they cast just before a throwdown to sniff out magic weapons and other dangerous artifacts. Seven out of eight of them also have *dispel magic*, but five out of eight of them can cast it just three times per day; only Fraz-Urb'luu and Graz'zt can cast it at will. Aside from a few 2nd- and 3rd-level spells that get snuffed on sight—*baste*, *enlarge/reduce*, *spiritual weapon*, *spirit guardians*, and *protection from evil and good* (demon lords don't need to dispel *invisibility*, since they all have truesight)—there aren't that many spells that truly inconvenience them and last more than an instant. Also, if they don't have a good enough chance of dispelling a spell of 4th level or higher, it's not worth it for them to try. Most demon lords are so powerful, and so magic-proof themselves, that it's generally more effective simply to dispel the caster's concentration. By hurting them. But it varies by demon lord: Graz'zt, with his astronomical Charisma and reliance on magic, extinguishes spells of a wide variety of levels, while Baphomet and Yeenoghu don't even try.

- Demon lords aren't masters of impulse control. They like to abuse the weak, and they generally begin combat by picking on opponents who aren't threats to them at all. When opponents begin inflicting meaningful harm upon them, they tend to be reactive, lashing back at whoever hurt them last. If that's one opponent, they focus (for the moment) on that one opponent. If it's several, they use whatever area-effect attacks they have available. When a round goes by in which no one inflicts meaningful harm upon them, they revert to tormenting their weaker foes.
- Outside the Abyss, a demon lord can't be permanently destroyed, so it doesn't back down no matter how much damage it takes. If it's about to go down, it inflicts as much collateral damage as it can, out of spite, before it's driven back to its own plane.
- Unlike the archdevils listed above, who are upper management but (except for Zariel) not C-suite, these demon lords are the sovereigns of their domains. They all have lairs in the Abyss—some of which span entire cities or regions—and these lairs come with lair actions, making them even more formidable on their home turf. A demon lord moderately wounded (reduced to 70 percent or less of its hit point maximum) anywhere in the Abyss other than its lair flees there to recuperate and prepare for a final stand, commanding any minions it has present to cover its retreat; demon lords may be remorseless, but they're not stupid or foolhardy.
- No matter how close to death it may be, a demon lord in its own lair doesn't strike deals (who'd trust it to uphold its end of the bargain, anyway?) and doesn't flee (where else is left for it to go?).

BAPHOMET

Baphomet is a relentless brute, a powerhouse of raw destructive force. While he moves quickly for such a big guy, his Charge trait doesn't require him to move far to enhance the damage of his Gore attack, and he has a long reach on all his melee attacks, so he can wade into the thick of battle and still make extensive and effective use of Charge.

He initiates combat by using Frightful Presence. Like the draconic trait of the same name, this action ceases to affect any opponent who either resists it initially or shakes it off, so there's no reason to use it later or a second time.

After that, on any given turn, Baphomet's default action is Multiattack, beginning with Gore, enhanced by Charge. With AC 22 and immunity to damage from nonmagical weapons, he's utterly indifferent to opportunity attacks; if he needs to take a step back to Charge but it will take him out of an opponent's reach, he does it anyway. He follows Gore with Heartcleaver and Bite, on which he has advantage if he's knocked his target prone with Charge. The order of these two attacks doesn't matter, as long as they come after Gore.

He precedes his first Multiattack by using his bonus action to cast *hunter's mark*. Although demon lords aren't as systematic as archdevils about shutting down the biggest threats first, Baphomet has no trouble identifying who the biggest threat is—one who wields a magic weapon, deals damage he isn't resistant to, is immune or resistant to being frightened, and/or has as many hit points as he does—and chooses that opponent to tag with *hunter's mark*.

As for his other spells:

- *Maze* deletes an opponent—but only for as long as Baphomet concentrates on it. Deciding when to cast it and whom to cast it against is tricky, depending more on intuition than calculation. If he should happen to take 30 damage or more at once, the chance that his concentration might be broken becomes nontrivial, and losing concentration on *maze* feels a lot worse than losing concentration on *hunter's mark*. On the other hand, escaping from *maze* is difficult, especially since it hinges on an Intelligence *check*, not an Intelligence saving throw. It's most effective against a foe with an Intelligence modifier of +5 or less. Also, being imprisoned drives chaotic PCs to distraction. Use it when Baphomet wants to torment a foe, not just carve them up.^{III}
- *Teleport* is Baphomet's "uh-oh" spell. He can cast it only once per day, and that once is when he realizes he needs to get back to his lair, stat. If he's in his lair already, he casts it when he's seriously wounded to teleport elsewhere in his lair and mobilize reinforcements. He can then use his lair actions (see below) to bewilder his opponents or lead them directly to him, as he pleases.
- *Wall of stone*, like *maze*, requires concentration, along with a good sense of how and when to cast it. I think a strong candidate situation is when Baphomet wants to show his opponents that they aren't worth his time by walling them in, leaving them no path of escape. They have 10 minutes to figure out how to break through the wall before they're entombed. Used this way, *wall of stone* works best against an entire group; too much is likely to change before the

spell reaches its duration if it's used against just one or two opponents. It's still useful as a way to divide ranged attackers from melee attackers or supporters from the allies they're supporting, but for this purpose, it's only a temporary measure.

- *Dispel magic* as described above under "Demon Lords."
- *Dominate beast*, unless he can use it to commandeer a flying mount, a Wild Shaped druid, or someone *polymorphed* into a tyrannosaurus, isn't worth Baphomet's time.

Baphomet has the Reckless trait, but *he's* not reckless—not with that extraordinary Wisdom. He never uses it if his opponents will make more attack rolls against him than he will against them before the start of his next turn. Since he can make three Heartcleaver attacks using legendary actions, the maximum number of attacks he can make in a round is six; if he casts a spell rather than Multiattack, the limit is three. (Alternatively, for flavor's sake, you might decide to have him switch into perma-Reckless mode once he's seriously wounded—reduced to 110 hp or fewer.)

His Charge legendary action comes at twice the cost of Heartcleaver Attack, and the only benefit he gains from it is the ability to move up to 40 feet and maybe knock someone down. As long as he has melee opponents engaged with him whom he's happy to keep hacking away at, he sticks with Heartcleaver Attack. On the other hand, if he has no melee opponent within reach, or if an opponent he's on a rampage against tries to run away from him, he'll go ahead and spend the additional legendary action on Charge.

Baphomet has three lair actions: sealing a doorway or entryway with stone for 1 minute, reversing gravity in a room, and fast-casting *mirage arcane* in any room in his lair. The first and last of these are useful for herding interlopers around so that they end up where he wants them to. The first and second are most directly useful in combat. Of course, any given room has only so many exits, so there will come a point where the first is no longer an option, while the second—as delightful as it is to repeatedly slam one's foes back and forth between floor and ceiling—can only be used every other round. So be it. Baphomet will skip a round rather than cast *mirage arcane* just to cast it, but if he has a specific need that can be fulfilled by altering the appearance of the terrain, such as wanting to fix every one of his opponents in place where they are or keep them from venturing in a certain direction, he'll go ahead and make use of it.

FRAZ-URB'LUU

Fraz-Urb'luu fights as a brute, but he also has a large repertoire of illusion spells, a couple of which are useful in combat. Most of them, however, are tricks he can employ to mess with people before combat ever ensues—in some cases, long before.

An interesting detail of his stat block is his proficiency in Stealth. Combined with Perception proficiency, this skill normally indicates an ambush attacker, but Fraz isn't exactly the hunting type. I think the strongest and most interesting application of this skill proficiency is to allow him to remain hidden in his lair while he torments those who come to challenge him with illusions, until the moment when they finally come within reach and he attacks with surprise. But with his propensity for deception, and considering that he also has *alter self*, he could meet the PCs pretending to be a skilled rogue or ranger and possess the necessary skill to back it up.

With the ability to fly and a 10-foot reach on both his weapons, Fraz can remain airborne and attack with impunity, except against targets with magical polearms, lances, or whips. His Armor Class isn't quite high enough that he can afford to risk opportunity attacks from those—but he has an answer for that, in the form of a legendary Tail attack with a 15-foot reach.

Fraz's Multiattack deals an average 64 damage if all three attacks hit, so any spell he'd cast has to have at least that much value to be worth casting. How do his spells stack up?

- *Phantasmal force*, a 2nd-level spell, seems far beneath him—but you can make it work by lying to your players. Yeah, I did just say that. Fraz is a demon lord and a master of illusions, and his spell save DC is 23. If even a 20th-level PC fails their Intelligence saving throw against that number, *the spell works*. Declare, "Sadegh, you're surrounded by a bubble about 7 feet in diameter, glowing faintly golden. Your talwar bounces off it. There's no visible way out." Boom, the fighter is out of commission until he can beat a 23 on an *Intelligence (Investigation) check*.

The important thing here is never to use the words “*phantasmal force*.” If asked to describe it, do so in terms that imply that Fraz cast *forcecage*, so that the too-clever-by-half wizard jumps to the conclusion that *dispel magic* won’t work against it. (Never say “*forcecage*,” either. In fact, do your best to avoid saying “force” altogether.)

The one hitch is that Sadegh’s allies won’t be able to see or touch the (nonexistent) bubble, and they may tell him so. Unless he can succeed on that Investigation check, though, hearing that won’t help him.

Fraz knows better than to try this stunt against a target with an Intelligence saving throw modifier of +9 or higher; ideally, he targets one with a modifier of +3 or lower who’s mathematically incapable of succeeding. With Intelligence 26, Fraz can read the stats off everyone’s character sheets.

- *Confusion*, which also requires concentration, is worth casting only against at least two opponents with Extra Attack and Wisdom saving throw modifiers of +8 or lower who are within 20 feet of each other. The more opponents he can affect and the lower their Wisdom save mods (especially if they’re +3 or lower), the more desirable *confusion* becomes.
- *Dispel magic* is more useful to Fraz than to other demon lords, because he has such extraordinarily high Charisma. In addition to the spells that other demon lords dispel without hesitation (see “Demon Lords” above), Fraz attempts to eliminate *aura of purity*, *aura of life*, *Otiluke’s resilient sphere*, *antilife shell*, *Bigby’s hand*, *Tenser’s transformation*, *holy aura*, and *invulnerability*. (Outside combat, he tries to scrub *hallow* whenever he encounters it, just because he can.)
- *Mislead* is subpar once combat is under way, because it also requires concentration and can’t compete with *phantasmal force*, *globe of invulnerability*, or *confusion*. However, it’s strong right at the *onset* of combat, when Fraz can send his illusory double forth to bait out his enemy’s biggest spells—then drop the spell and attack from the shadows where he’s been hiding. He also uses it when he’s moderately wounded (reduced to 235 hp or fewer) anywhere in the Abyss other than his lair, sending his double Dashing off in one direction while he Hides, then slinks off invisibly in another.
- None of his other spells measure up to these or to his Multiattack.

As mentioned above, if there’s a melee opponent wielding a magic weapon with a 10-foot reach, they’re an automatic target for Fraz’s legendary Tail attack, which not only deals solid damage but grapples, restrains, and is extremely difficult to break loose from. When Fraz has an opponent grappled, he doesn’t make the mistake of getting within 10 feet of them, even though they’d have disadvantage on attack rolls against him and he’d have advantage against them. Instead, he holds them out of reach and uses subsequent legendary actions to squeeze the life out of them. Just to be sure, however, he ends his turn as far up in the air as he can get—and brings his grappled opponent along with.

It’s possible that there won’t be any such opponent to give him trouble. In that case, he turns his attention to his other Achilles’ heel: opponents with ranged magic weapons or spell attacks. When he wants to do something about them, he can spend two legendary actions on Phantasmal Killer, which lets him cast the eponymous spell without having to break his concentration on any other spell he has going. Since the spell simply doesn’t function with an instantaneous duration, I think we have to conclude that it lasts a full minute or until the target succeeds on a Wisdom save (good luck with that). Which makes it considerably more powerful than it appears at first glance, because not only is it nearly certain to deal at least as much damage in total as two Tail attacks—as long as he doesn’t try to cast it on the cleric, the druid, or the monk—it also inflicts the frightened condition, imposing disadvantage on the target’s attack rolls. Problem doubly solved. Even better, he can cast it against additional targets on subsequent rounds!

In his lair, Fraz has access to three lair actions: scrambling the topology of his hideaway, cloning any humanoid in it for a round, and generating a “wave of anguish” that floods everyone in sight with psychic damage. The first choice is entertaining when foes are panicking and on the verge of fleeing, but the second and third are where the real power’s at. Because the clone is created without any equipment, the smart play is to clone a spellcaster or a monk. It can’t regain spell slots or ki, but since it disappears one round later and can be created afresh a round after that, who cares? Meanwhile, the amount of damage inflicted by the wave of anguish makes the cost of fighting Fraz in his own house dauntingly high.

Finally, there’s a sentence in the flavor text which mentions that Fraz has been searching for the fragments of a *staff of power*. How do his tactics change if he gets his hands on it? Well, the *staff of power* detailed in the *Dungeon Master’s Guide* is merely a very rare magic item, not a legendary artifact, so it’s not clear that this item is the one Fraz is looking for. On the other hand, no other description of the staff is provided. You can whip up one of your own, but if you use the official,

nonlegendary version, have Fraz cast *wall of force*, *fireball*, or *hold monster* as appropriate before casting *phantasmal force*, and *lightning bolt* or *cone of cold* before *confusion*. Because *globe of invulnerability* only stops spells of 5th level and below, there's not much cause for Fraz to cast it in the early stages of combat, when his opponents are lobbing their most powerful spells at him; he waits until they've used up their higher-level spell slots, *then* casts it. He doesn't bother with *magic missile*, *ray of enfeeblement*, or *levitate*, nor does he use the staff's Power Strike. If he starts his turn with 33 hp or fewer and there are still charges in the staff, however, he does use its Retributive Strike, fancying a 50 percent chance of getting shunted to another plane next to the near-zero likelihood of surviving the next round.

JUIBLEX

Calling a huge blob of ooze a "brute" seems off, somehow, but **Juiblex** (pronounced *joo-bleks*—the *i* is silent, as in "juicy") unambiguously favors melee fighting over other modes of combat and tries to get as close as it can to as many opponents as it can, the better to nauseate them with its Foul trait.

Juiblex regenerates hit points when not dealt fire or radiant damage since its last turn. When it takes fire damage, which it's resistant to, it retaliates just as it would against an enemy who dealt it, say, acid or thunder damage: irritably, reflexively, almost absentmindedly. When it takes radiant damage, however, it becomes implacably focused on destroying whoever dealt it, ignoring sources of other types of damage in the meantime.

Whenever Eject Slime is available, Juiblex uses it against its highest-AC enemy with a Dexterity saving throw modifier of +6 or lower (it's surprisingly smart for an ooze blob—it knows its opponents' stats). When it's not available, Juiblex Multiattacks, unless the criteria for one of the following spells are met:

- *Contagion*, causing Slimy Doom, against an adjacent opponent whose Constitution save modifier is +3 or lower.
- *Blight* against an opponent between 15 and 30 feet away (after Juiblex's movement) whose Constitution save modifier is +3 or lower.
- *Acid splash*, dealing 4d6 damage, against two adjacent opponents between 15 and 60 feet away (after Juiblex's movement) whose Dexterity save modifiers are both +3 or lower. When it casts *acid splash* as a legendary action, Juiblex is less choosy: One opponent is enough, although two are better.

Gaseous form is a trap choice unless Juiblex is positioned near a crack that it can seep through. Resistance to nonmagical damage doesn't help an entity whose enemies must already rely entirely on magic to harm it, and Magic Resistance already provides advantage on most Strength, Dex, and Con saves. If Juiblex is moderately wounded (reduced to 245 hp or fewer) anywhere in the Abyss outside its lair, its only sensible choice is to Dash away until it finds such a crack.

Juiblex strikes back with a legendary action whenever an opponent deals it 35 damage or more; it spends any remaining legendary action(s) on the turn(s) just before its own. In the latter case, it prefers Attack over Acid Splash if there's an opponent within reach. In either case, however, it prefers Corrupting Touch over Attack if it has two legendary actions to spend and the target hasn't been struck by it already.

According to *Mordenkainen's*, the Slime Pits are Juiblex's "principal" lair, which implies that it can establish secondary lairs elsewhere! In any of these lairs, Juiblex can use lair actions to create patches of restraining slime, slippery slime, or green slime (*Dungeon Master's Guide*, chapter 5, "Dungeon Hazards"). Restraining and slippery slime appear on the ground; green slime appears on ceilings, so Juiblex can use this lair action only in an enclosed location (based on the description of Juiblex's principal lair, much of it is outdoors). Juiblex uses restraining slime primarily to pin down a skirmisher or shock attacker, engage them in melee, and keep them from disengaging; and secondarily to hold any front-liners it's engaged with in place. On the other hand, sometimes those front-liners, and perhaps their supporters as well, have exceptionally good synergy and need to be scattered in various directions. That's what the slippery slime is for. Green slime is placed to drop on whoever's farthest from the party's support spellcasters.

ZUGGTMOY

Zuggtmoy's Strength is extraordinary, but her Charisma is even more so, so her melee attacks take a backseat to her magical powers. She closes to melee range, then employs spells and other nonweapon actions to disrupt her opponents' attacks against her and turn them against one another, as well as to lay the groundwork for her damage-dealing Pseudopod attacks.

At the center of her strategy is Mind Control Spores, a recharging action that can charm opponents within 20 feet of her. This action in turn powers her Protective Thrall reaction and Exert Will legendary action, both of which require charmed targets. To make optimal use of this ability, she needs to place herself among her foes, ideally with at least four of them within 20 feet of her; the more of these foes have Wisdom saving throw modifiers of +4 or lower, the better, and she can tell who does and who doesn't. However, she doesn't risk provoking an opportunity attack from an opponent with a magic weapon while maneuvering into position.

If she can't get to a spot where her criteria for using Mind Control Spores are met, she casts a spell:

- *Etherealness*, which she can cast just once per day, lets her step out of the material plane and resituate herself, without provoking opportunity attacks, in the best place for her to use her Mind Control Spores. It takes another action for her to reenter the material plane, giving her opponents a chance to scatter before she can release her spores. Therefore, she prepares to cast this spell by first casting *entangle* or *plant growth* (see below).
- *Dispel magic* is reserved for poofing *haste*, *enlarge/reduce*, *spiritual weapon*, *spirit guardians*, *protection from evil and good*, *aura of purity*, or *Otiluke's resilient sphere*. The most important of these is *aura of purity*: She never allows this spell to remain in effect if she can help it, and dispelling it is an even higher priority for her than using her Mind Control Spores. However, since it's a 4th-level spell, she has to succeed on a DC 14 Charisma check to make it go away.
- *Teleport*, her other once-per-day spell, is for retreating back to her lair from elsewhere in the Abyss if she's moderately wounded (reduced to 212 hp or fewer).
- *Entangle* allows her to restrain four or more opponents with Strength saving throw modifiers of +7 or lower, clustered together in a 20-foot square.
- *Plant growth* is how she prepares to cast *etherealness* when the circumstances aren't right for casting *entangle*. In fact, it's likely that casting this spell will be the first action she takes in a combat encounter, particularly in her lair. The quadrupling of movement cost doesn't hinder her when she's ethereal, allowing her great latitude in positioning herself for an optimized release of Mind Control Spores.

Locate animals or plants is useful for only one narrow application: depositing a unique species of algae somewhere on an enemy's person and using it as a tracking signal if they try to get away and don't make it any farther than 5 miles. *Ray of sickness* isn't useful at all.

Her Mind Control Spores last for 1 minute, so once she's released them, there's no reason to release them again in the same spot unless that time has elapsed or she's moved at least 20 feet from the center of that spore cloud.

In the event that Zugtmoy can't get into position to use Mind Control Spores (or this action is recharging, or a previous cloud still lingers around her) and she has no suitable spell to cast, she chooses between Multiattack and Infestation Spores. Taking the latter action requires four foes within 20 feet of her with Constitution save mods of +4 or lower, and she does so the first time these criteria are met. After that, however, she Multiattacks rather than use Infestation Spores again, unless she's moved 20 feet or more from the last place where she released them or 1 minute has gone by. She also Multiattacks whenever the criteria for Infestation Spores aren't met.

One of her spells, *ensnaring strike*, is cast as a bonus action. She uses this action before taking the Multiattack action against an unrestrained target with a Strength save mod of +7 or lower, so that her target is restrained after the first hit and she makes subsequent attack rolls with advantage. She releases the spell only if she turns her attention to another opponent and wants to restrain them instead. Because this spell requires concentration, it's incompatible with *entangle*, but if she's maintaining *entangle*, she probably doesn't need to cast *ensnaring strike*.

When none of her opponents are charmed by Zugtmoy's Mind Control Spores, the only legendary action available to her is Attack. Once at least one is charmed, she can begin taking the Exert Will legendary action, and she does, directing her pawns' attacks and movements first and foremost against foes who manage to deal 30 damage or more to her at once, secondarily against those whose Constitution and Wisdom save mods are too good for her spores to take hold, and lastly against those she considers weak and pathetic.

Zugtmoy's palace in the abyssal realm of Shedaklah is described as her "principal" lair, implying that she can establish secondary lairs elsewhere. Her lair actions comprise fungus growth, action surges for plant creatures, and remote-control spores. The last of these is far and away the most powerful, but her targeting criteria still apply, except for the fact that she

doesn't need to be at the center of the burst. Her preference for Mind Control Spores over Infestation Spores also holds. The second implies, and requires, the presence of allied plant creatures.^{IV} The most powerful such creature that might be friendly to Zugtmoy is the corpse flower ([page 496](#)), followed by the shambling mound. However, gas spores and violet fungi, though much less powerful, also fill the bill—and these can be created by the first lair action, then mobilized by the second. “Mobilized” is a strong word for creatures that have speeds of 10 feet and 5 feet, respectively, but given that Zugtmoy can create four new ones every other turn, they can rapidly become a minefield of toxic spore bombs. Moreover, when Zugtmoy's opponents' movement is hampered by thick, overgrown plants, the fact that gas spores *fly*—and therefore are not slowed—makes them that much scarier. Violet fungi are nasty in tighter quarters, where their 10-foot reach makes them devilishly difficult to avoid, but I'd choose gas spores in any other instance.

GRAZZT

Let's be clear from the get-go: **Graz'zt** is a third rail. His description in *Mordenkainen's* should have been accompanied by a content warning. Introducing him into a story line will earn your formerly PG-13 game an R or even NC-17 rating, and his combination of licentiousness, manipulative ways, and absolute lack of restraint is an invitation to blur, if not demolish, boundaries of consent. If your players haven't explicitly indicated to you that they're okay with this sort of thing in their game, you'll need to tone his lore way down—or, better yet, steer clear of him altogether. The tactics I present here assume that you're playing him as nothing worse than a Dionysian puppet master.

Graz'zt's phenomenal Charisma is clearly his primary offensive ability, so while he likes to engage opponents at close range, he favors spellcasting over melee attacks and uses his Multiattack only when there's no appropriate spell for him to cast. Spells that impose the charmed condition are necessary for him to get any use out of his Dance, My Puppet! legendary action.

The Shapechanger ability allows Graz'zt to take the form of a Medium humanoid, and I have to imagine that one of his favorite games must be posing as one of his own escaped prisoners and leading enemies on wild-goose chases around his lairs, returning to his true form once he has them where he wants them. Of course, “where he wants them” has to be wherever his personal weapon, Wave of Sorrow, is, because Shapechanger doesn't allow him to conceal it as part of his disguise. If you play this game, make sure he gets to it before the PCs do—or casts *charm person* on that PC and persuades them to hand it over. (He's *extremely* persuasive.)

Graz'zt's spell repertoire includes the following:

- *Dissonant whispers* against a target within his melee reach or that of one of his allies, preferably one with a Wisdom saving throw modifier of +8 or lower (+5 or lower with advantage—he knows), but also one he feels disdainful toward, as though they're unworthy of the opportunity to fight him. He uses his own reaction to give them an opportunity smack with Wave of Sorrow as they run. Since he can cast this spell as a legendary action, however, he doesn't necessarily want to spend his turn action on it; if another spell suits the moment, he casts that one instead.
- *Greater invisibility* is available to him only once per day, and he can't be sure it will last an entire combat encounter. He also can't use it simultaneously with *crown of madness*, *darkness*, *telekinesis*, or his *dominate* spells, which compete for his concentration. He doesn't need it to escape, since he can teleport, and he gets a kick out of knowing that his mind-controlled enemies can see him yet can't attack him. So when does he use it? When he discovers, through either perspicacity (with Intelligence 23, he can “read” PCs' stats at a glance) or direct experience, that his foes are whammy-proof: They have Wisdom saving throw modifiers of +9 or higher (+6 or higher with advantage, e.g., if they're an elf or gnome) or are immune and/or confer immunity to the charmed condition (e.g., if they're a Berserker barbarian, a Devotion paladin, or a bard using Countercharm).

On the other hand, against a party of PCs who are highly whammy-susceptible and who he knows are coming for him, Graz'zt might take the opposite approach of lying invisibly in wait and hitting them with *charm person*, one after another, before any fight commences (so that they don't gain advantage on their saves), becoming visible again only when his foes' numbers are so reduced that taking him on would be madness. At that point, he can cast *sanctuary* on himself so that anyone who tries to sucker-punch him fails (his only practical use for *sanctuary*). To attempt this stratagem, however, he has to be absolutely confident that he's not going to need to turn invisible later.

- *Dispel magic* is for voiding *haste*, *spiritual weapon*, *spirit guardians*, *protection from evil and good*, *aura of purity*, *hallow*, and *Bigby's hand*. If any of these spells except *haste* and *hallow* are cast in his presence, he attempts to *counterspell* them, along with *Tenser's transformation*, *holy aura*, and *invulnerability*.
- *Teleport*, the spell—as opposed to *Teleport*, the action—is for zopping back to his lair when he's moderately wounded (reduced to 242 hp or fewer) anywhere else in the Abyss.
- *Dominate person* is Graz'zt's personal favorite. A good target is weak-willed (see Wisdom save mod thresholds under *greater invisibility* above), not resistant or immune to the charmed condition, and capable of wrecking face on his behalf. The target gets a new saving throw only upon taking damage, which means their allies have to hurt them. What fun!
- *Dominate monster* is for taking over a summoned creature or *planar ally*. He doesn't waste his time casting it on anything below CR 5.
- *Charm person* is usually hard to make work in combat, because its targets gain advantage on their saving throws. Graz'zt, however, has a spell save DC of 23: It takes a Wisdom save mod of +6 or greater just to get his probability of success down below two-thirds. This hurdle leaves him plenty of opportunity to make his opponents ease off and go, "Oh! I had you all wrong!" Plus, unlike *dominate person*, *charm person* doesn't require his concentration.
- *Darkness* is good defense for Graz'zt when charming foes isn't working and *greater invisibility* has already failed, since he doesn't rely on combos that give him advantage on attack rolls.
- *Telekinesis* is an inferior use of his concentration compared with *dominate*, but he can use it to move enemies around like dolls, provided they have a Strength-save mod of +8 or lower (+5 or lower with advantage). The question is, whom does he want to move, and when, and for what purpose—especially since he can teleport? Rather than use it to keep opponents at bay, I think he prefers to use it to *pull* opponents to him who'd rather be far away, if for whatever reason he doesn't want to move from where he is. But now we're reaching.

There's one other unlikely scenario worth considering: What if, without having to concentrate, he's managed to influence all his opponents except for one single melee attacker with a magic weapon? Then he might use *telekinesis* to hold this poor sap exactly 10 feet away from him, where he can reach them with his weapon but they can't reach him with theirs, or—if they happen to wield a polearm—let them simply hang helplessly in the air. In that highly specific case, the fact that he has to keep using both his concentration and his action to restrain his opponent doesn't matter so much.

- *Crown of madness* is another inferior use of concentration, but if Graz'zt isn't concentrating on any other spell, it does have one clever tactical application, particularly since he can cast it as a legendary action: When two of his enemies are standing adjacent, he can target one of them with this spell just before they take their turn, forcing them to take a swing at their neighbor. He doesn't even have to maintain the spell after that, and most likely won't want to. Wisdom save mod thresholds apply; void where targets are immune to the charmed condition.

When he's run out of ways to get his opponents to do his dirty work for him, Graz'zt finally deigns to use his own Multiattack—against an uncharmed target who isn't being attacked by anyone else, ideally. He doesn't use the *Teleport* action on his own turn when he can use a legendary action to do it on someone else's. Conversely, he doesn't Attack as a legendary action when he can attack twice as an action on his own turn—not if he has reason and opportunity to take any other legendary action.

As mentioned above, his Sow Discord legendary action can be used to cast *dissonant whispers*, dealing psychic damage and, more important, forcing an opponent to provoke an opportunity attack from him—or from a different opponent whom he's dominating. It can also be used to cast *crown of madness*, as long as he's not concentrating on any other spell (or doesn't mind dropping it) and the timing and positioning are right. *Dance, My Puppet!* can be used to provoke opportunity attacks from *non-dominated* opponents, although those opponents may well decline the opportunity, or to place the target of *crown of madness* next to an erstwhile ally just before the target's turn, so that they're compelled to attack. It can also be used to speed the target of *dominate person* or *dominate monster* toward a prospective victim—say, a glass-cannon spellcaster in the back line. (Note that it consumes the target's reaction, so it doesn't work twice against the same target.) *Teleport* gets Graz'zt out of the unpleasant predicament of being too close to too many magic weapons—or too far from a spellcaster who needs to be sworded. Attack is self-explanatory, but it's the least desirable legendary action of the four.

The Argent Palace in Zelatar is Graz'zt's "principal" lair, and the flavor text in *Mordenkainen's* also refers to "Graz'zt's lairs," making it even clearer that he can establish others elsewhere. In these lairs, he has access to two lair actions: simultaneously casting *command* on as many targets as he likes; or turning every wall, floor, ceiling, and other smooth surface into a mirror, making it harder to Hide. He can't use either lair action two rounds in a row, meaning he has to go back and forth between them (which makes no sense), choose the mirrored walls and stick with them, or cast *command* on alternating turns.

If his opponents include an Assassin rogue, a Shadow monk, or both, sticking with the mirrored walls is almost a necessity. Otherwise, the mass *command* is probably preferable. What command to issue, though?

Command is an interesting D&D spell—possibly the only spell in the game that varies in power according to which language you're playing in! In English, you're limited to unadorned intransitive verbs: "Approach," "Flee," "Halt." In Spanish, on the other hand, you can make object pronouns part of an imperative verb: *Dámelo* ("Give it to me"), *Apuñálale* ("Stab him/her/them"), *Confésales* ("Confess to them"). In German, an adverb or object noun can be attached to a verb: *Herunterspringen* ("Jump down here"), *Bogenentspannen* ("Unstring a bow"). The more agglutinative the language, the more specifics you can pack in,^V whereas if you speak a language that relies on particles, you're more constrained.

Which raises interesting questions: Assuming that the languages we speak as players and DMs are merely proxies for the languages characters speak in the game world (as per *The Lord of the Rings*), who's to say that Common doesn't allow a pronoun to be affixed to a verb the way Spanish does? What properties do different in-world languages have, and is *command* more powerful in some of them than others? And what if a magical command is issued telepathically, transcending verbal grammar?

Assuming you and your players aren't linguists and you're playing in English, it's safest to stick with an unmodified verb stem. However, because English is such a thief of a language, you can take advantage of its many synonyms, especially those that come from Latin and therefore have built-in adverbial affixes. "Come out" isn't a legitimate command, but "Emerge" is.

With that established, surely a demon lord can come up with more imaginative one-word commands than "Approach," "Drop," "Flee," "Grovel," and "Halt." Keeping in mind that *command* lasts only one round and can't make targets harm themselves, here are some ideas to choose from:

- **Slander.** The target falsely accuses an ally of some misdeed and then ends its turn.
- **Chastise.** The target criticizes an ally's faults, either real or perceived, and then ends its turn.
- **Disperse.** The target spends its turn moving away from its allies by the fastest available means.
- **Indulge.** The target spends its turn either satisfying a personal vice or joining in one in which others present are wallowing.
- **Vomit.** The target is incapacitated and makes passive checks at -5 until the start of its next turn.
- **Faint.** The target falls unconscious until the start of its next turn or until roused as from a *sleep* spell.
- **Submit.** The target does not attack or cast a spell and has disadvantage on Wisdom saving throws until the start of its next turn.
- **Dance.** The target uses all its movement to dance without leaving its space and has disadvantage on Dexterity saving throws and attack rolls. While the target is affected by this spell, other creatures have advantage on attack rolls against it.
- **Panic.** The target's behavior is affected as if it were under a *confusion* spell.
- **Unfocus.** The target's concentration is broken.
- **Apostatize.** The target spends its turn renouncing its faith, oath, or pact.

Of these, while the ramifications of "Apostatize" are potentially terrifying, I think the one most broadly beneficial to Graz'zt once combat is under way, as well as most consistent with his style, is "Submit." He takes particular satisfaction in the struggle his foes undergo as they regain their agency, only to lose it again, on alternating rounds, wearing them down until they yield.

Going to the other extreme, though, it's reasonable to suppose that Abyssal has as many words for particular flavors of degeneracy as a painter has for hues of red. Thus, any command that might be encapsulated in a single word in Abyssal can

be transmitted to a target, in its conceptual entirety, via telepathy. If you can sum it up in a short phrase, Graz'zt can probably *command* beings in his lair to do it—so long as they all do exactly the same thing. Now we're venturing back into sensitive territory, though, so I'll leave those who are content to play him as is to work out the details.

YEENOGHU

With **Yeenoghu**, we're back to the brutes. More than most demon lords, Yeenoghu revels in attacking the weak—literally, as he prefers to target those with lower Strength scores over those with higher. Note that in this case, we're talking raw scores, *not* saving throw modifiers. Yeenoghu is clever, but he lacks the Intelligence to see beyond the obvious.

What he lacks in quickness of apprehension, he makes up for in quickness of foot. Yeenoghu is *fast*, and with AC 20, he's unafraid of opportunity attacks—even from magic weapons, if he can outrun their wielders. What's wrong with risking one hit from the fighter while moving out of their reach when he'll have to duck three or four anyway if he sticks around? Generally speaking, Yeenoghu attacks the weakest opponent he can get within reach of—and the reach of his Flail attack is 15 feet. There's a twist, however.

Yeenoghu's Multiattack comes with three riders, each of which can be added to a Flail hit only once per turn. Because one of these riders targets Constitution and another targets Wisdom, Yeenoghu has an incentive to divide his Multiattack between two opponents, and ideally, he'd like one to have low Con and the other low Wisdom. However, he can gauge Con only imperfectly, by appearances, and he has no way of gauging Wisdom at all, except by class (he's worldly enough to know that clerics, druids, monks, paladins, and sometimes rangers resist the *confusion* effect of his flail more often than others).

What he tries to do, therefore, is position himself within 15 feet (if possible, 10 feet) of the weakest opponent he can see *and* within 15 feet of another opponent—of the other type, if possible. Of course, some opponents will have both low Con and low Wisdom. Those are always good secondary targets. Yeenoghu loves having them around.

Don't try to make these calculations on the fly—before your session, sort the party into columns for easy reference. For instance, in my recently concluded main game, Tola the Beast Master ranger would be classified as low-Constitution; Kukl the barbarian, LeGuardeus the Arcane Trickster rogue/Hunter ranger, and Tobac the bard as low-Wisdom; Tuktuk the Thief rogue and Piggy, Tola's boar companion, as both low-Wisdom and low-Con; and Tilda the druid as neither. Importantly, though, these classifications aren't entirely correct: Kukl and Tuktuk both have good Wisdom scores, although you wouldn't guess it from their classes.

In this party, Tuktuk has the lowest Strength and would be pursued by Yeenoghu most relentlessly. Thinking (wrongly) that she was both low-Con and low-Wisdom, he'd make all three Flail attacks—and use all three riders—against her.

Tuktuk likes to shoot at things from far away, though, so Yeenoghu might not be able to reach her. If he couldn't, his next inclination would be to attack Tobac. Since Tobac is low-Wisdom, Yeenoghu would prefer his secondary target to be low-Con: Tola or Piggy. (Preferably Piggy, since Tola is stronger and Piggy smells like bacon.) He'd position himself between his targets and attack Tobac twice and either Tola or Piggy once, using the extra damage and *confusion* (Wisdom save) effects against Tobac and the paralysis (Constitution save) effect against Tola or Piggy. In the unlikely event that one of his attacks against Tobac missed, he'd make his third attack against Tobac, too, for another chance to apply the second rider. When he uses the extra damage and paralysis effects against the same target, he always uses the paralysis effect first, to prime his next Flail attack.

Once Yeenoghu has locked on to a primary target, it's hard to redirect his attention. He may make secondary attacks against an opponent who hurts him badly, but his primary target doesn't change. The reason is his Rampage trait, a strong incentive to try to knock opponents down to 0 hp. Note the wording of Rampage: "When Yeenoghu reduces a creature to 0 hit points with a melee attack on his turn, Yeenoghu can take a bonus action to move up to half his speed and make a bite attack." He doesn't have to take that bonus action *right away*. If he still has Flail attacks left in his Multiattack, *he keeps attacking the unconscious target* until they're dead or he's out of attacks. *Then* he takes his Rampage bonus action. (For flavor, I might swap in Bite for any attack he makes against an unconscious target, even though his Multiattack is technically Flail-only. I wouldn't apply any of the Multiattack riders to a Bite attack.)

Although he does possess Innate Spellcasting, Yeenoghu's spell list is short:

- *Dispel magic* is an almost absurd option, since the amount of damage he can deal with his Multiattack overwhelms what can be accomplished with most 2nd- or 3rd-level spells and he lacks the Charisma to reliably dispel anything stronger. But *baste* or *enlarge* cast on a high-damage output foe with a magic weapon does have the potential to mess him up, so that has to go.
- *Teleport* is for vanishing back to his lair if he's moderately wounded (reduced to 233 hp or fewer) elsewhere in the Abyss.
- *Invisibility*, if he's surrounded by melee opponents who all wield magic weapons, is a good way to avoid *multiple* opportunity attacks when there's someplace else he wants to be.
- *Fear* is best for scattering opponents who are working too effectively side by side, but if they're right next to him, the cone-shaped area of effect won't be wide enough to hit more than one. Unless they're arranged one in front and two or more behind, it's not worth the opportunity cost.

Yeenoghu's Charge legendary action allows him, potentially, to reach a target up to 200 feet away from his starting position (Charge × 3 plus normal movement on his turn), a good way to illustrate his mercilessness. Savage isn't really worth the cost if he has only two opponents within 10 feet of him—he could take the Swat Away legendary action twice, deal more damage, and send them both flying—but it's better the more foes he's surrounded by. At four or more, it's a no-brainer. Swat Away is Yeenoghu's default reply to an opponent who deals him 34 damage or more while he's trying to pick on somebody smaller.

He has only one lair: the Death Dells, an entire outdoor territory in the Abyss. His three lair actions cause sharp iron spikes to jut out of the ground, grant a burst of speed to his gnoll and hyena minions, and cause those minions to attack recklessly. The speed burst is necessary only for minions who aren't already engaged in melee, to allow them to close the distance. The reckless rage is desirable only if the minions outnumber their foes by enough for their attacks to exceed all their foes' weapon and spell attacks. An iron spike is never bad, and it's a good thing to aim at the opponent who's dealing lots of damage to Yeenoghu while he's busy pounding some other poor, unfortunate soul into paste.

DEMOGORGON

The mere name of the Prince of Demons, **Demogorgon**, has been terrifying D&D players for more than forty years; it's no accident that the writers of *Stranger Things* chose to name their parallel-world *über*-monster after him. He's the apotheosis of madness and destruction: the most chaotic of the chaotic, the most evil of the evil.

Demogorgon is a brute melee fighter whose gaze induces madness. It's easy enough to avoid... if an opponent is willing to avert their eyes, which means accepting the onus of disadvantage on attack rolls against him and the risk of incoming Tail attacks with advantage. Either way, he comes out ahead. He exploits this dilemma to blunt threats posed by foes with magic weapons or spell attacks that deal damage he isn't resistant to. Which, really, are the only things that threaten him at all.

Like other demons, Demogorgon picks on his weakest opponents first; his measure is a function of Constitution and Wisdom saving throw modifiers and current hit points. (With Intelligence 20, he can infer all these numbers.) If an opponent has a Con or Wisdom save mod of +9 or higher, he adds 50 percent to their hit points; if they have both, he doubles them. Whoever has the lowest result is his punching bag.

His default action on his turn is Multiattack, unless his chosen target is more than 60 feet away (50 feet of movement plus 10 feet of reach—with AC 22, he'll risk an opportunity attack, maybe even two), in which case he uses Gaze or casts a spell, then uses his full movement to draw nearer to his chosen target. Which gaze, which spell? In order of preference:

- *Feeblemind* is a sucker punch with the potential to take one foe out of the fight entirely—or, at a minimum, to force another to spend time and a valuable spell slot undoing the damage. Demogorgon casts it at the earliest opportunity, both because if it sticks, its effect will hinder his opponents for the entire fight, and because of the terror of the unknown: If they're unaware that he can cast it only once per day, they'll have to assume that he might do it again.

Since its primary impact is on spellcasting, he uses it to sabotage a spellcaster—but not a wizard, because they're sure to have an Intelligence save mod of +9 or higher, and ideally, he'd rather target someone with a save mod of +4 or lower (+3 or lower with advantage on the save). Its secondary impact is to undermine Charisma, so bards and

warlocks are primary targets, followed by paladins and sorcerers. But Demogorgon's evil genius is such that he'll pass up all those foes in order to target the cleric or druid who can cast *greater restoration* or *heal*, which would undo his hard work.

- Hypnotic Gaze is for taking control of enemies and forcing them to use their limited class resources against their own allies. Spellcasters are made to blow their highest-level spell slots. Raging barbarians Attack, then end their Rage; non-Raging barbarians begin a new Rage, then Attack. Paladins use up their Lay On Hands pool to heal Demogorgon. Fighters burn their Action Surges prematurely. Monks deplete their ki by using features with steep ki costs or by attacking allies with Flurry of Blows and multiple Stunning Strikes. Because rogues' class resources are unlimited (except for Arcane Tricksters' Spellcasting and Masterminds' Unerring Eye), he doesn't use Hypnotic Gaze on them.

He uses this gaze close to the start of combat as well, right after casting *feblemind*, because it's another demonstration of his power. In this case, the threat is stronger than the execution: He'd rather be whomping his enemies with his tentacles, and the effect of this gaze is so alarming that his opponents will start averting their eyes as soon as they see one of his heads turning their way—maybe even *all the time*, if they're easily scared.

If possible, Demogorgon uses it against whomever he considers to be his strongest enemy, provided their Wisdom save mod is +4 or lower (+3 or lower with advantage on the save). If it's not, he uses it against the strongest enemy whose Wisdom save mod is lower and makes *them* target his strongest enemy.

- *Fear* is for breaking up opponents who are setting up tactical combos for each other. The area of effect is a 30-foot cone, meaning it's most effective against a front-liner and a couple of supporters; he doesn't cast it against fewer than three. It's Demogorgon's only more-than-halfway-decent spell that requires concentration, so once he decides to cast it, he keeps it going as long as possible.
- *Telekinesis* requires concentration and is halfway decent only because it allows him to chuck opponents out the windows of Abysm's serpentine towers. (It's also appropriate wherever there happen to be crevasses, lava pits, or inexplicable spinning blades.) He uses it against a proven nuisance who's within 60 feet of him and within 30 feet of an environmental hazard and who has a Strength save mod of +4 or lower (+3 or lower with advantage on the save).

Major image and *projected image* are no longer halfway decent once combat has kicked off in earnest, although they're good ways to lure foes into position before initiating.

As for Beguiling Gaze and Insanity Gaze, they're both solid, but they can also be used via the Maddening Gaze legendary action, so there's no good reason to spend Demogorgon's turn action on them.

Peculiarly, Demogorgon, alone of all the demon princes—and, in fact, alone among all the legendary creatures in the *Monster Manual*, *Volo's*, and *Mordenkainen's*—can take only two legendary actions on other creatures' turns, not three. Choosing them is tricky, particularly because Demogorgon is reactive by nature, like most demon princes, but also always looking one turn ahead. He's consistent about preferring to use his turn action to hurt his weakest enemy, but what he spends his legendary actions on is a function of who, if anyone, is able to deal 41 damage or more to him at once. That's his threshold for retribution.

Pay close attention to the timing of Gaze: The effects always expire at the start of Demogorgon's next turn, meaning he has to cash in on them *before* then. Thus, if he's going to use the Beguiling Gaze effect to stun an opponent, then follow up with a melee attack, it has to be a Tail attack, which will use his other legendary action. He can use Tail twice, he can use the Insanity Gaze effect of Maddening Gaze twice, or he can use each of these legendary actions once. Using Beguiling Gaze twice will prevent some incoming damage, but the other benefits of imposing the stunned condition on an opponent are lost.

All other things being equal, Demogorgon prefers brutality over prophylaxis. However, he's quick-witted enough to know whether he has a greater chance of success against a given opponent with Tail or Maddening Gaze, and with this formula, you can know, too: If the opponent's Armor Class minus their Wisdom save mod is 16 or less (do the math before your session, not at the table), he selects Tail over Maddening Gaze.

There are two exceptions to this rule:

- If the Wisdom save mod is +2 or lower, Demogorgon always chooses Maddening Gaze: The target is mathematically incapable of resisting, whereas his Tail attack can always miss if he rolls a natural 1.

- If the target has advantage on the saving throw, Demogorgon favors Tail if the difference is 17 or less for AC 20–22, 18 or less for AC 23–24, 19 or less for AC 25–27, 20 or less for AC 28–31, 21 or less for AC 32–34, 19 or less for AC 35–36, and 18 or less for AC 37 or higher.

At the outset of the combat encounter, he takes whichever legendary action is indicated by this rule against the two weakest opponents within reach or range—Tail on their turns, Maddening Gaze on the turns immediately before theirs—until someone deals him enough damage to rile him up. At that point, if he still has a legendary action available and the opponent who hurt him is within 15 feet of him, he immediately strikes back with Tail, even if Maddening Gaze is the mathematically better choice. He also starts tallying grudges.

From then on, if only one opponent has managed to earn his ire by the end of the turn before theirs and they're within 15 feet of him, he proactively uses the Beguiling Gaze effect of Maddening Gaze on them, then smacks them with Tail on their own turn. If they're farther than 15 feet away, he hits them with the Insanity Gaze effect on the turn before theirs, then uses his other legendary action on Tail or Maddening Gaze against another strong opponent, as indicated. If multiple opponents have managed to inflict significant damage upon him, he targets the two who did the most damage, again with either Tail (reactively, on their turn) or the Insanity Gaze effect of Maddening Gaze (proactively, on the turn before). If he used Hypnotic Gaze on his turn, of course, his only available legendary action is Tail, with which he hews as closely as possible to whatever his course of action would be otherwise.

In his lair, Demogorgon has his choice of two lair actions: creating an illusory duplicate of himself and dropping four spheres of *darkness* within 60 feet of himself. Both are excellent, but taking the Gaze action requires him and his target to be able to see each other, so he never places a sphere of *darkness* on himself or on any opponent whom he'd rather use Insanity Gaze against than attack with Tail. If an opponent in *darkness* has Devil's Sight or some other way of seeing through it, he realizes it immediately as soon as they take an action or a reaction. He doesn't bother to take this lair action if he can't gain any benefit from it, and he measures that benefit in terms of two things:

- Being able to nullify any advantage his enemies may have on their attack rolls.
- Being able to avoid opportunity attacks if he's within reach of two or more enemies with magic weapons and his desired target is far away. In this instance, he centers one of the spheres upon himself, then immediately walks out of it.

The main benefit of the illusory duplicate is to allow him to head for an out-of-reach target without his opponents' knowing for certain that that's what he's doing. However, once he's pulled this stunt a couple of times, they'll catch on. Therefore, after the first use of this lair action, flip a coin or roll a die: Heads or odds, he walks toward his target, and his duplicate stays behind; tails or evens, he sends his duplicate toward the target, and he stays behind. If the decision is authentically random, there's no pattern for his opponents to ascertain.

When Demogorgon is moderately wounded (reduced to 284 hp or fewer) in the Abyss outside his lair, he heads for home, first casting *fear* to deter pursuit; if the area of effect misses anyone, or if anyone succeeds on their save against it, he uses his Maddening Gaze legendary action to check them with the Beguiling Gaze effect before they can take their turns.

ORCUS

The Lord of the Undead has a combat style all his own. Strength is his highest ability score, so when it comes to dealing damage, his preferred mode is the melee weapon attack. But the other peaks in his ability contour are in Constitution and Charisma, which makes us contemplate the astonishing possibility of a creature *who employs Charisma as his primary defensive ability*. What we end up with in **Orcus** is an entity who sometimes fights as a brute but other times fights as a World War I general sending privates forth to die in the trenches on his behalf.

On the first turn of combat, Orcus wastes no time before taking flight, 10 feet over his enemies' heads, and using the *wand of Orcus* to call up undead allies, whose combined average hit points must total 500 or less. Obviously, for this purpose, he wants undead creatures that punch above their hit points, but given how complicated some creatures' abilities can get, especially at high challenge ratings, his choice ultimately depends not only on their hit points and CRs but also on how much you as the DM are capable of juggling without letting combat bog down. Here are some rosters worth considering:

- ***Sheer In-Your-Face Power.*** Six demiliches; or three liches, a bodak, and a deathlock.
- ***Zombie Factory.*** Four skull lords (minus the usual intercephalic bickering) and two deathlocks.
- ***Nope Nope Nope Nope Nope Nope.*** Two adult blue dracoliches and a deathlock; or two death tyrants, a demilich, and a flameskull.
- ***Danger in Numbers.*** Thirty-one shadows, twenty-two will-o'-wisps, or thirteen deathlocks.

Once he's conjured these creatures, his ability to make more depends on having corpses on the ground. On the material plane, he'll only be encountered in places of death, such as graveyards, mausoleums, and catacombs. Anywhere else, it's better to assume that he has to create a corpse himself before he can recruit it, which means he's looking to kill his foes—or, if there are any present, bystanders—as rapidly as he can. Consequently, starting in round 2, he focuses his Multiattack action on targets who have the fewest hit points already (with Intelligence 20, he can accurately judge how near an opponent is to death).

Occasionally, Orcus may decide to use his turn action to cast a spell instead, either one he can cast innately or one from the *wand of Orcus*:

- *Dispel magic* is chiefly for popping *aura of life*, *death ward*, and *protection from evil and good*. Orcus can practically *smell* these spells and dismisses them without hesitation (the first two require successful DC 14 Charisma checks to dispel). He gets to cast *dispel magic* only three times per day, so he saves his third casting for one of these three unless several rounds have gone by without anyone trying to cast them. Secondly, he'll also dispel *haste*, *enlarge/reduce*, *spiritual weapon*, *spirit guardians*, *aura of purity*, or *Otiluke's resilient sphere*, but snuffing those preceding three spells comes first.
- *Create undead*, which Orcus can cast three times per day, is for occupying the attention of anyone trying to attack him or defend the target of his melee attacks, if his previously conjured allies aren't doing the job to his satisfaction. It requires corpses on the ground, but since the Master of Undeath trait lets him cast it at any level he chooses, he can fire it off at 9th level and raise up to three wights, which in turn can potentially turn foes into zombies with their Life Drain attack. (Orcus isn't greedy for kills. As long as living creatures are being turned into dead ones, the details don't matter.)
- *Animate dead*, cast from the *wand of Orcus*, costs him nothing but an action. Again, Master of Undeath lets him cast it at any level, which means he can create up to thirteen zombies or skeletons at once, as long as the raw materials are present. The three wights spawned by *create undead* are still better, though.
- *Time stop*, which Orcus can cast only once per day, is the obvious way to get out of trouble if he's caught someplace in the Abyss outside his lair and moderately wounded (reduced to 283 hp or fewer). With a minimum of two turns of movement plus actions, he can appear to simply disappear noiselessly while Dash-flying 160 feet in the blink of an eye. If he rolls well, he can make it 400 feet. With whatever minions he's left behind monopolizing the attention of those who might wish to pursue him, he should have no difficulty getting away.

Orcus is the one demon lord whose self-preservation drive is so strong—his overriding goal is to be the last living creature in the entire multiverse—that when he's seriously wounded (reduced to 162 hp or fewer) in his own lair, rather than fight frenetically to the death, he'll retreat. *Time stop* is how he pulls off a Houdini escape. On his first turn under the spell, as a distraction, he uses his wand on any available corpses to cast *animate dead*, scattering zombies behind him like caltrops. (Since this spell affects corpses, not creatures, it doesn't end *time stop*. The corpses rise when time resumes.) With his movement, he flies away, as far as he can. On his second turn, as well as any other the spell grants him, he Dashes, seeking a place where he can lie low, recover, and plot the next day's revenge.

- *Power word kill* costs 2 charges from the *wand of Orcus*. It affects only opponents with 100 hp or fewer—but it *always* affects them. This spell is the one with which to finish off the Raging barbarian whom Orcus's minions have managed, at long last and with great effort, to beat, rend, impale, burn, freeze, and putrefy down to that number. Enemies with high Constitution-save modifiers are the ones Orcus has the hardest time dealing with, so when he gets the chance to delete one of them, he doesn't mess around. However, he can also cast this spell as a lair action, without costing any charge from the wand, and if the time and place are right, that's how he prefers to do it.
- *Finger of death* costs 1 charge from the *wand of Orcus*. Normally, it deals less damage on a failed Constitution saving throw than his Wand of Orcus attack deals on two hits. However, if the target is vulnerable to necrotic damage

because of his Creeping Death legendary action, *finger of death* deals more. It also has a 60-foot range, making it good against targets too far away for him to smack with the wand. However, he doesn't cast this spell against a target with a Con save modifier of +4 or higher (+1 or higher with advantage on the save).

- *Blight* is another spell Orcus can cast from his wand without expending a charge. This spell deals an average of only 36 necrotic damage on a failed save, although Creeping Death can double it to 72. Because it's weaker than *finger of death*, Orcus uses it only when it has a strong chance of killing a target outright, i.e., when the target has a Con save mod of +0 or lower (-1 or lower with advantage on the save) and 30 hp or fewer (60 hp or fewer if vulnerable to necrotic damage), and when he can't get at them with his Wand of Orcus melee attack.
- *Circle of death* costs 1 charge from the *wand of Orcus*. Its only merit is that its radius is huge. Its chief drawbacks are that this huge radius means it needs to affect *all* his enemies (or a dozen of them—whichever is less) to be worth casting and that it impacts Orcus's own minions. Demiliches and shadows are immune to necrotic damage, so if they're all he's got, he doesn't need to worry. All his other conjured henchthings are resistant at best. Zombies and skeletons will simply disintegrate.

Because he has a 40-foot flying speed and a 10-foot reach, Orcus can move around the battlefield freely, avoiding opportunity attacks and relentlessly pursuing whomever he's most interested in killing at the moment. Rather than retaliate when an opponent deals him significant damage (41 or more), Orcus sics his undead minions on them. That's what they're there for: to keep his stronger foes so busy that they can't focus damage on him. Between turns, he stays in the air, out of reach of his enemies' weapons.

How he spends his legendary actions depends on whether he intends to cast *finger of death* or *blight* on his chosen target, which in turn is largely a function of their distance and their Con save modifier. If he does plan to cast one of these spells, he spends two legendary actions to use Creeping Death against his target at the end of their turn, so that they can't escape the area of effect. If another creature has a turn before his, he uses his third legendary action at the end of that turn to cast *chill touch* on his target, exploiting their vulnerability to necrotic damage. If his target's turn occurs right before his own, Orcus casts *chill touch* at the end of the turn immediately after his, to prevent the target's allies from healing them until his next turn.

If Orcus doesn't intend to cast *finger of death* or *blight*, he still casts *chill touch* on his victim at the end of the turn following his own, but how he uses his other legendary actions varies. If an enemy slips past his undead defensive line, gets within 10 feet of him, and attacks him with a magic weapon (to do so, they'll most likely have to be able to fly themselves), he smacks them with his Tail, and if no one else manages to do the same, he does it again on the final turn before his own. If he never has to use Tail, he goes ahead and spends his other two legendary actions on Creeping Death on that last turn, against his chosen target.

Orcus's three lair actions are to cast *power word kill* against any creature anywhere in his lair, to raise six more corpses as undead minions, and to call skeletal arms up from the ground to snatch at enemies and restrain them. If *power word kill* works, no matter against whom, he uses it; why pass up the opportunity to create another corpse? If he can't cast *power word kill* against anyone, either because there's no suitable target or because he cast it the previous round, raising six new corpses is the next best thing, and of course he chooses CR 1 ghouls over CR 1/4 zombies or skeletons. Skeletal arms are the honorable-mention lair action, used when neither of the other lair actions is available. The 20-foot-square area effect is best used against four or more opponents, but a combat encounter involving Orcus is going to sprawl all over the place, and his allies will often outnumber his enemies, so it's hard to place this effect where it will offer meaningful benefit. If it can be used to pin down a couple of melee fighters who are about to be dive-bombed by a dracolich, you can call that a win.

I. If you need ideas about how to construct a deal with an archdevil, let me recommend *Devil's Advocate: A Guide to Infernal Contracts* by Justice Arman, available on the Dungeon Masters' Guild (dmsguild.com).

II. This reading of the feature is the literal one, but if you prefer, you can play it as requiring the target to flee only when they can see him—which makes it a sleeper feature, activated if and when Titivulus reappears, as long as the target hasn't made a successful saving throw before then.

III. Then have him gloat so obnoxiously that it becomes a matter of honor for the foe's allies to break Baphomet's concentration, because this is a crummy situation for that foe's player, and seeing their allies striving mightily to free them can make the experience somewhat less so.

IV. I have to heave a tired sigh and state for the record once again that fungi are taxonomically more closely related to animals than they are to plants.

V. The most extreme example I can think of: In the invented Klingon language, *yIHu'laHbe'law'taH* means “Continuously act as if you’re unable to stand up!”

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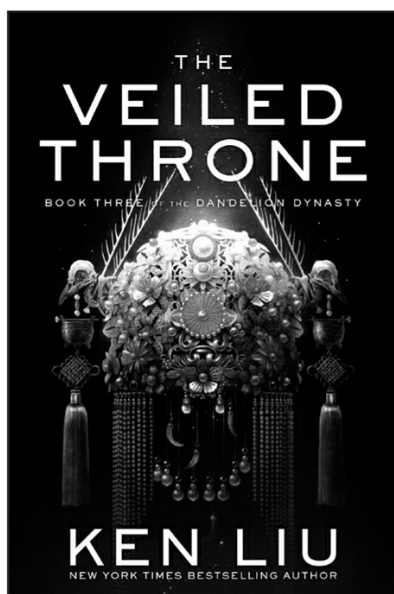
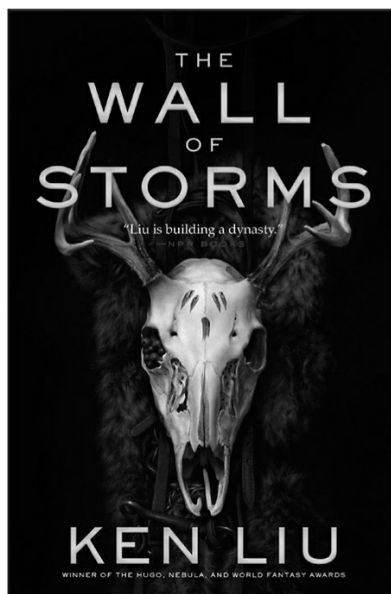
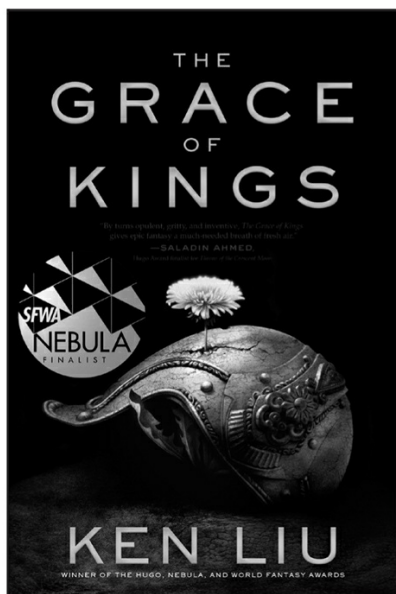
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