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DRAGON[®]

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Elemental Evil

By Steve Winter

"Nothing is easier than to denounce the evildoer; nothing is more difficult than to understand him."

—Fyodor Dostoyevsky

We've been spending a lot of time on elemental evil lately. In March, *Dungeon* published "The Village of Hommler." That adventure was about the cult of elemental evil's attempt to reestablish itself in a locale that was once its heart. In May, we featured the "Inn of the Welcome Wench," undoubtedly the best-known and most fondly remembered landmark in the village of Hommler, and the D&D ENCOUNTERS® adventure, "The Elder Elemental Eye."

This month, we put the capstone on our obsession with elemental evil by delving into its long history in the worlds of D&D® and its true nature. As we tossed around ideas for elemental evil-themed articles, Rodney Thompson suggested an examination of just what, precisely, we mean by that term. As a concept, "elemental evil" is a bit like a hagfish. The more you try to hold onto it, the slipperier it becomes.

So we turned to Skip Williams and Thomas M. Reid to slice through the Gordian knot of intrigue, deception, scheming gods and demigods, and cults within cults that entangles elemental evil. The machinations around and within this legendary temple may be the most complex plot thread ever to snake its way through four decades of D&D history. The results are, we hope, two highly readable accounts: one of the history of elemental evil and the other of its structure and deep secrets.

But this issue isn't all elemental evil. We also have the second (and final) part of the major catastrophic dragons writeup covering tornado and wildfire dragons. Along with the design work of Bruce Cordell, Jennifer Clarke Wilkes, Ari Marmell, and Robert J.

Schwalb, this two-part Bestiary owes much to the masterful editing and assembly of Scott Fitzgerald Gray, who took a basket of related pieces and fashioned them into a powerhouse pair of articles.

We also offer six ways to spice up combat in another imaginative "Unearthed Arcana" by Robert J. Schwalb and Matt Sernett. "The Broken Gauntlet" is a tavern that literally fell below the ground in Skullport during the Spellplague, where it lay buried until a few ambitious mithril miners rediscovered and reopened it as an even seedier joint than before. In *Eye on the Realms*, we learn just how dangerous a small, forgotten wooden box can be. And as a special treat for those of you who couldn't make it to Gen Con last year (and even those who could), we present "The Night Thelva Clovenaxe Flew." The husband-and-wife team of Thelva and Ruthgular Clovenaxe were the protagonists of Ed Greenwood's Spin-a-Yarn event at Gen Con 2012, and Ed wove their alarming misadventures into this delightful tale.

Finally, we'd like to congratulate Rodney Thompson, Peter Lee, and the rest of the *Lords of Waterdeep* development team for winning the Best Board Game of 2012 trophy at Origins. While we're at it, congratulations to all the other category winners, too: Margaret Weis Productions, AEG, Wizkids, Cubicle 7 Entertainment, Tree Frog Games, Q Workshop, Victrix Ltd., Zvezda, Battlefront Miniatures, and Catalyst Game Labs, plus *Munchkin* and *Dominion* for gaining coveted slots in the Hall of Fame!




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History Check: The Temple of Elemental Evil

By Skip Williams

Illustrations by Franz Vohwinkel, Chris Seaman,
and Tyler Jacobson

The History Check series explores the annals of the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® game by taking a close look at the iconic heroes, villains, organizations, and events of the setting. This installment delves into the Temple of Elemental Evil, a deliciously infamous place that looms large in the memories of thousands of roleplayers. Legions of heroic alter egos began their careers on the dusty streets of the village of Hommlet and persevered until they had plumbed the mysteries of the last accursed elemental node in the temple's forbidden depths. The evil cult behind the temple has suffered repeated defeats, but like a stubborn weed, it always seems to grow back—not always stronger, perhaps, but just as nasty.

This article covers the temple in detail, from the evil deity Tharizdun's subtle machinations through

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PUBLISHING HISTORY OF THE TEMPLE

The Temple of Elemental Evil and the cult of Tharizdun have been the subjects of several products over the years.

T1, The Village of Hommlet, TSR, Inc. 1979

This adventure introduces the Village of Hommlet, its major personalities, and the temple moathouse.

WG4, The Forgotten Temple of Tharizdun, TSR, Inc. 1982

This adventure offers our first peek inside Tharizdun's cult of insane followers and the bizarre places they frequent.

T1-4, The Temple of Elemental Evil, TSR, Inc. 1985

This adventure reprints the contents of *T1, The Village of Hommlet* and adds details of the temple and its dungeons as they existed after Luz and Zugtmoyn

completed the elemental nodes. (The modules T2, T3, and T4 were never published separately.)

The Temple of Elemental Evil (novel), Wizards of the Coast, 2001

This novel explores the temple, its foes, and its denizens.

Return to the Temple of Elemental Evil, Wizards of the Coast, 2001

This adventure details the cult of Tharizdun's final attempt (to date) to reopen the temple and release the deity.

The Temple of Elemental Evil (video game), Troika Games/Atari, 2003

This roleplaying video game covers the events of *T1-4, The Temple of Elemental Evil*.

all that follows. It is left to the reader to decide how much is factual and how much is speculation by Rufus. Keep in mind that his insights had considerable influence in both Verbobonc and Veluna.

An Old Evil Dons a New Mask

Among the ancient evils known to our most distant ancestors was a malevolent deity named Tharizdun, an entity so feared and reviled that the name was hardly ever spoken, let alone recorded. I have no doubt that if the unspeakable Tharizdun were not still making mischief in the world today, the name would have become lost to mortal knowledge long ago. Contemporary religious scholars (and deranged worshipers) cite Tharizdun's spheres of divine influence as eternal darkness, decay, entropy, malign knowledge, and insanity.

In ancient times, Tharizdun seemed hungry for power in the mortal realm. Some suggest that this was part of a larger plan to overturn creation and remake the world. I expect Tharizdun might simply have wanted power for its own sake and the freedom to follow any capricious whim that struck his foul mind.

An alliance of gods defeated Tharizdun's efforts to secure power in the mortal realm and banished the deity—to where, I can't precisely say. The Dark God presently abides in an extradimensional realm or prison, almost entirely cut off from the living world.

The banished deity has only the most tenuous contact with his followers through sporadic dreams and visions. He cannot grant spells to his clerics unless they have a vile relic or artifact at hand to act as a conduit, or unless they prepare their spells in an ancient site that retains some threadlike connection to the deity. This limit on Tharizdun's power in the world was to become a key element in the repeated rise and fall of the Temple of Elemental Evil.

several iterations of the cult of elemental evil. Spoilers abound, and those who hope to play through the full arc of adventures in the temple should read no further.

Given the cult's uncanny ability to reconstitute itself after a defeat, it's possible to use the group as an ongoing campaign element, and the article closes with suggestions for doing just that. Players who merely wish to become acquainted with one of the cult's more spectacular efforts should feel free to read all but the final section.

LETTERS FROM HOMMLET

One of the cult's most stalwart foes over the years was Rufus of Hommlet. With his adventuring partner, the wizard Burne, Rufus personally defeated numerous cultists and eventually became co-lord of a castle overlooking the village of Hommlet. From the castle, Rufus and Burne kept a wary eye on the nearby temple ruins for many years. Though an active and physical person, Rufus was also a man of letters and, unknown to many, he carried on a long correspondence with the viscount of Verbobonc (and, some suggest, with the archcleric of Veluna as well). Excerpts from this correspondence form the bulk of

Despite his banishment, Tharizdun constantly strives to return to the world. What this loathsome entity might do if freed is beyond my imagining, but it's unlikely to be pleasant for mortals. Over the centuries, Tharizdun's questing mind has found deranged mystics, maniacal dreamers, egotists, and other fools who believe they can benefit from the deity's return. Thus, his cult survives and has briefly flourished in certain times and places.

Tharizdun's worshipers found an insidious method to increase their patron's power. They patiently infiltrated other evil religions, even worming their way into the ranks of the Lolth-worshipping drow. Once established, they turned some of the faithful—and even some of the clerics—to the Dark God.

In the case of the drow, the dupes were lured to revere Tharizdun in the guise of the Elder Elemental Eye. Even the drow clerics in this splinter cult were unaware which deity they actually served. Among the more notorious exploits of these renegade drow was an attempt to establish a power base on the surface by influencing tribes of giants. That effort ultimately failed, but not before rampaging giants inflicted a great deal of misery on their neighbors.

Tharizdun's quest for release found more success among the followers of Zuggtmoy, demon queen of fungi, slimes, and oozes. Although Zuggtmoy had created a viable cult dedicated to slimes and fungi, the demoness became frustrated with the cult's sluggish growth and its lack of power and influence.

Under Tharizdun's subtle guidance, Zuggtmoy conceived the cult of elemental evil, an organization dedicated to the spread of chaos and malevolence. The cult had four competing branches, each devoted to a different element: fire, water, air, and earth. Zuggtmoy believed (probably correctly) that the organization would prove more appealing to mortals than her older cult ever could. Each of the four elements drew its own group of worshipers, and competition among the branches prompted all the cultists to strive



THARIZDUN

Tharizdun is an ancient deity of uncertain origins. His desire to destroy the world made him so dangerous that the other gods banded together to defeat him. They could not (or would not) slay him, so they banished him to an extradimensional prison instead.

Though cut off from the world, Tharizdun still maintains contact with a few dedicated followers through dreams and visions. The deity also sends visions to other powerful beings whose lust for power makes them useful tools. Zuggtmoy was one such tool.

In more recent decades, the Dark God has been using a new guise: that of the Elder Elemental Eye. Clerics of the Elder Elemental Eye are Tharizdun's clerics, although sometimes they do not realize it. For example, drow clerics introduced to the religion of elemental evil did not know that they actually served the Dark God.

The clerics of the original Temple of Elemental Evil also worked for Tharizdun unknowingly. They believed that they served the destructive and evil aspects of the elements (or, in some cases, the demon Zuggtmoy).

The symbol of the Elder Elemental Eye is a black triangle that points downward. An inverted yellow Y within the triangle is positioned such that the tips of the Y meet the middle of each of the triangle's sides.

The cult of Tharizdun uses the symbols of a golden flaming eye or a jagged spiral, among others. In the recent past, the flaming eye symbol was wrongly attributed to Zuggtmoy, thanks to her role as the Dark God's unwitting tool.

harder to gain power and to overlook the hidden agenda they actually served.

Thanks to the cult's divided and competitive nature, it never achieved lasting success, but it did experience spurts of incredible growth, and it has come dangerously close to seizing real power in the world several times.

The Temple Rises

The rival factions in the elemental cult quickly achieved considerable wealth and influence. With subtle prompting from Zuggtmoy, they chose a site near a crossroads in the Flanaess, west of the great lake Nyr Dyv, as the site for a temple. This crossroads is better known to the world as the town of Hommlet (only a very small village at that time). It had much that appealed to the cultists. The roads through the town carried a lot of traffic, and waves of industrious settlers gave rise to a thriving local economy. If the cultists could seize control, they would gain an excellent base.

The cultists infiltrated the squalid village of Nulb, a stone's throw from Hommlet and a haven for squatters, bandits, and monstrous raiders. Nulb provided a ready source of labor for constructing a great temple in the marshes nearby and also served as a place where the cultists could stockpile materials without attracting attention from the residents of Hommlet.

In three years, the cultists' temple was complete. Aboveground, the edifice featured architecture that appealed to their evil and vicious natures. The place was built from leprous gray stone quarried from the dungeons below. It was roughly chevron shaped and huge, nearly 450 feet long and almost that wide at its broadest point. Its walls had buttresses and pilasters supporting an oddly peaked roof that could set a viewer's teeth on edge. Gruesome visages in the forms of projecting ornaments, supports, and bas-reliefs glared from every exterior surface. The evil power

emanating from the place even warped the vegetation around the temple into loathsome forms.

Evils from Below and Afar

The extensive dungeons below the temple reflected the cult's divided nature in several ways. The cultists included separate complexes dedicated to each of the four elements, plus a main area devoted to the cult proper. In the dungeon's lowest depths, they built gateways to the so-called elemental nodes.

While the cultists labored on the temple's physical structure, Zuggtmoy created the nodes as sources of power and as places to store materials and tools to fuel her ambitions in the world. In this endeavor, the demon queen received help from an unexpected source: the evil demigod Iuz, who rules an empire north of the temple site to this day. Iuz seems to have been motivated mostly by worldly political considerations. At the time, he feared (or at least despised) the growing power of Veluna and Verbobonc to his south, and he distrusted his neighbors to the east and west (the Horned Society and the Bandit Kingdoms), whose rule over their territories was as evil and as wicked as his own.

It is not clear how Iuz became aware of Zuggtmoy's efforts at the temple, but I think it likely that he received at least a hint from Tharizdun, perhaps through corrupted underlings or perhaps directly through subtle hunches and insights that came from his own mind—or so Iuz would have believed.

By pooling their skills and magical potential, Zuggtmoy and Iuz made each node a miniature, self-contained universe a little more than 5 miles across. Each node had a tiny, moonlike body, stranded in a small, peculiar, and isolated region of magically created space. The powers of the nodes allowed the pair to magically summon or recruit a growing army of evil elemental creatures.

The nodes were hazardous places for mortals. Without the correct magic keys, a trip into a node could be a

one-way affair unless Zuggtmoy deigned to let a visitor out again. Inside, the nodes were filled with potentially lethal environments. For example, high winds carrying clouds of dust and larger debris could scour the flesh from an unprotected visitor's body.

Zuggtmoy lost no time collecting the aforementioned army of evil elemental creatures, which she housed in the appropriate nodes. These creatures—largely neglected, often ill fed, and inclined by nature to be unfriendly—attacked newcomers without hesitation. It seems certain that Zuggtmoy must have lost more than a few followers this way, but the demoness likely relished such violence, both as entertainment and as useful combat experience that ultimately made her surviving minions stronger.

In connection with the nodes, Zuggtmoy and Iuz also created at least one evil artifact, the *Orb of Golden Death* (also known as *Yellowskull*, *Golden-skull*, or the *Death Orb*). The orb served as a key that allowed (relatively) easy access to the nodes. It also seems to have played an essential role in creating or opening the nodes.

Ancient Power

While the cultists constructed the temple and excavated the dungeons, they were unaware that the site lay near a long-buried shrine of Tharizdun. During the centuries before his banishment, the Dark God and his followers had created numerous places of evil—conduits allowing Tharizdun to draw power from the land to enhance himself or to lend to his mortal pawns. It remains unclear whether he foresaw his banishment and the need for such places or whether he had them created simply to satisfy his ego.

Was it pure, unfortunate coincidence that Zuggtmoy's followers built their temple near one of the most potent leftovers of the Dark God's arsenal? It seems certain that Zuggtmoy was aware that a source of divine power existed in the temple's vicinity, but it also seems certain that she failed to understand its

true nature. I suspect that, with no comprehension of the source of the power, she believed she could tap and use it herself.

One has to wonder why Tharizdun did not lure Zuggtmoy to build her temple exactly at the site of the shrine. Perhaps the demon queen was unwilling to risk having the shrine fall directly into the cultists' hands, or perhaps Tharizdun deflected the temple site away from the shrine so as to preserve its secret.

Whatever the truth, after completing the temple, the cultists built a small fortress over the shrine, ostensibly as part of a series of fortifications meant to extend the temple's secular influence as far as possible. This fort would eventually become infamous under the unassuming name "the moathouse."

Armies Move

The cult's rapid growth went to Zuggtmoy's head, and she became arrogant. With the nodes developing nicely and her armies growing steadily, she decided it was time to grab secular power and territory. Using the temple and the nearby moathouse as bases, her armies of gnolls, bugbears, ogres, trolls, giants, evil humans, demons, and other foul creatures raided north and west. From the temple, Zuggtmoy (perhaps with help from Iuz) unleashed earthquakes, storms, fires, and floods on the countryside. This display of martial and arcane power drew even more evil beings to the cult. They hurried to the temple like steel drawn to a lodestone.

Not surprisingly, nearby kingdoms—the lands of Furyondy and Veluna chief among them—quickly noticed the threat. The allied armies marched on the temple and confronted Zuggtmoy's forces in the battle of Emridy Meadows, named for the site of the largest confrontation. The attackers destroyed or drove off most of the evil forces. The armies of good lost no time in laying siege to the now-vulnerable temple. In less than a fortnight, they destroyed the temple's upper works and scattered what remained

of the cult's defenders. After the main temple fell, the attackers stormed the moathouse and overran it after a brief but intense battle.

With the fall of the moathouse, the rout of the cultists seemed complete. Villagers in Hommlet still recall seeing groups of bizarrely clad priests fleeing the region at top speed. But all was not as it seemed. The temple was heavily damaged, but the underground levels were extensive and dangerous even for the battle-hardened troops. Narrow dungeon corridors are no place for an army to fight. The victorious allies had to settle for sealing off the dungeon. In so doing, they imprisoned Zuggtmoy. The demon queen was bound to the site and left to rage and fume over her wrecked plans.

It might seem odd to you that Iuz, with his keen grasp of politics and strategy, did not try to redirect or delay Zuggtmoy's territorial ambitions until a more opportune time. Perhaps he, too, became overconfident, or perhaps he foresaw the danger but perceived a greater gain in letting the demon queen suffer for her folly. Certainly, Iuz's ambitions for the temple and the cult did not suffer from having Zuggtmoy, a potential rival, contained for a time, nor did it bother Iuz to have Furyondy and Veluna preoccupied with matters fairly close to home.

The Temple Resurgent

After sacking the temple, the allied armies withdrew. Neither Furyondy nor Veluna could afford to keep troops in the field indefinitely. The teams that sealed the temple and bound Zuggtmoy did their work well, and the wizards and sages who accompanied the force deemed that what remained of the site and the cult posed little threat.

Survivors from the sacked temple crept back to the ruins almost immediately after the armies returned home, but they found almost nothing useful or valuable. To them, it must have seemed that their days of glory were over.

But it was during this time of defeat and weakness that a new entity became aware of the temple: Lolth, the demon queen of spiders. Lolth was a longtime rival of Zugtmoy and also dealt with Tharizdun's machinations on her own turf. It is not clear when (or even if) Lolth knew of Tharizdun's role in the cult of elemental evil. After she learned of the overthrown temple, however, she lost no time in sending agents to explore it and the ruined moathouse. Lolth charged them with learning what they could about the defeated cult, recovering any items of power that had been overlooked by the forces of good, and seeking out any other tool or knowledge that could prove advantageous. These agents encountered the surviving cultists, allowing Lolth to quietly infiltrate the cult.

Iuz, too, remained active in the wrecked temple. He visited the place himself from time to time, hoping to glean something more from his past efforts. Iuz believed that if he could free Zugtmoy from her banishment, she would acknowledge her debt to him. At the same time, Iuz reasoned, she would be eager to get revenge on the people who had imprisoned her, and those people were among Iuz's most dangerous foes.

No mortal can know how much effort Iuz put into freeing Zugtmoy, but he did not succeed. He spent far more energy supporting and advising the surviving cultists. This was a clever approach, because most of the cultists gave their allegiance to the organization itself, not to their secret patroness, Zugtmoy. With help from Iuz and Lolth's agents, the survivors formed a viable group, although Iuz lacked the power to forge the reconstituted cult into a useful tool—or perhaps, at that time, he didn't yet have a clear purpose in mind for the group.

Meanwhile, Tharizdun's agents knew that the Temple of Elemental Evil was too powerful and valuable to lie fallow for long. Zugtmoy was imprisoned, but that was of little import to them. She had been a useful tool when free to act, but now that she was captured, she could be set aside.

Using their connections in the thriving cult of Lolth, the clerics of Tharizdun induced powerful individuals to return to the ruined temple. The most noteworthy of these included Lareth the Beautiful (a cleric who took command of the ruined moathouse), the wizard Falrinth (who recovered the *Orb of Golden Death*), and Barkinar (the temple commander).

For his part, Iuz sent a powerful cleric named Hedrack to the recovering temple. Iuz charged this emissary with discovering a way to free Zugtmoy.

Not all of these people and factions were friendly to one another, but all found their way into the hierarchy at the recovering temple, and all seemed to believe that

the temple would grow quietly until it was ready to strike. This shared belief did not keep them from competing or even fighting openly at times.

Tharizdun's followers took full advantage of the turmoil. They subverted Hedrack into following the Elder Elemental Eye, and the cleric embraced the Dark God's cult and became privy to its secrets. This was an important victory for Tharizdun because he had nothing to gain if Hedrack succeeded in freeing Zugtmoy. At best, the goddess of fungi and slime would become an ally who would eventually wrestle for control over the cult of elemental evil; more likely, she would be hostile to Tharizdun's plans.



Second Fall

The minds behind the plot that gave rise to the Temple of Elemental Evil never worried about the divided state in which its denizens lived and worked. Indeed, they welcomed and even encouraged conflict among the factions. They believed that the struggle would make each group stronger.

Unfortunately for them, the temple's competing factions failed to do some simple things that might have allowed the cult to recover its strength and truly rise to power again. For example, they did not keep their activities secret, nor did they impose any real discipline on their fragmented group. Starting just days after the temple's initial fall, the citizens of Hommlet and environs noticed suspicious figures skulking along the roads in the area, stalking through the fields, and—worst of all—combing through the fallen temple's wreckage. (Those last individuals were later confirmed to be agents of Lolth, beginning their work.)

A decade after the temple's fall, new waves of monsters were roaming the old areas, and bandits were prowling the roads. No doubt many of these activities made the sponsoring factions a little stronger with each minor success, but the end result was that the forces of good discovered the resurgent Temple of Elemental Evil before its supporters could fully prepare against a new assault.

Lessons learned from the first campaign against the temple were not forgotten. Instead of armies, parties of adventurers made quick strikes against temple dungeons. Local commoners gave succor to these heroes and at times lent a sword arm or a spell to bring down the evil temple. The cultists, on the other hand, were isolated. The attacks inexorably wore down the forces guarding the temple and eventually eliminated the key personnel.

Finally, adventurers broke the wards keeping Zugtmoy imprisoned, but the fungi queen's joy at regaining her freedom was short lived. She immediately suspected that something bigger was going on.

For the first time, she began to understand that other personalities lurking in the shadows had manipulated events surrounding the cult and directed forces she thought were her own.

Zugtmoy had no opportunity to act on her new insights. Adventurers destroyed the *Orb of Golden Death*. That act caused the subterranean levels of the Temple of Elemental Evil to collapse, cutting off access to the elemental nodes. (Initially, it was believed that the nodes had imploded or been hurled away into the depths of elemental chaos, forever beyond mortal reach.) Of more immediate concern to Zugtmoy, she was ripped from the world and hurled into the Abyss (or the Shadowfell). As she went, Tharizdun's clerics captured much of her essence and trapped it in a new prison.

Darkness Returns

With the cult's second defeat, the temple's physical collapse, the destruction of Lolth's and Iuz's agents, and the (apparent) banishment of Zugtmoy, it seemed that all the loose ends finally had been tied off and that the temple posed no further dangers.

Alas, it was not so.

Tharizdun's ancient shrine still lay buried and undiscovered under the temple's wrecked moathouse. The Dark God's surviving followers knew that if they could recover that place, they still could free their deity.

Even before the Temple of Elemental Evil fell anew, Tharizdun's cult was establishing a new base, the Temple of All-Consumption, hidden to the south in the Lortmil Mountains. Here, Tharizdun's followers spirited away several clerics and other powerful servants of elemental evil. In the years that followed, these survivors formed the core of a new effort to recover the buried shrine and release Tharizdun.

The Dark God's followers had several hidden weapons, and the first among these was knowledge. They knew about the place of power beneath the

moathouse, and they knew that the elemental nodes were merely isolated, not destroyed or cast away. The followers also had the *Orb of Oblivion*, a vile artifact that had provided the blueprint for the *Orb of Golden Death*. They had Zugtmoy's captured essence, and most important of all, they had the short memories and foolish hopes of people who insisted on believing that evil could be defeated permanently.

Foiled Again

Tharizdun's followers were more careful and secretive than the elemental cultists had been. This is not surprising considering that the Dark God's followers had generations of experience with subterfuge and a much smaller group of active members. They infiltrated Hommlet, creating allies through a combination of mind-bending spells and simple bribery. They established a safe house of sorts within the town and replaced one of the leading citizens, Jaroo the druid, with an imposter.

After they were established in Hommlet, Tharizdun's cultists moved ahead with their plan. They began excavations under the moathouse to uncover the hidden shrine, and they started similar efforts at the ruined temple to find the gates to the elemental nodes. When the excavations were complete, the cultists intended to use the *Orb of Oblivion* to link the site under the moathouse with an elemental node and channel enough power through the node to free Tharizdun.

It was a bold plan, and it came close to success. As it turns out, the good folk in Hommlet had kept close watch over the moathouse and the temple. They were quick to notice suspicious activity and put out the word to adventurers willing to investigate.

The cultists' plans began unraveling when adventurers disrupted the activities at the moathouse and the temple. The campaign against the cult continued with a foray into the Temple of All-Consumption and concluded with a return to the reopened dungeons

under the Temple of Elemental Evil, where heroes faced down Imix, a terrible fire elemental creature.

Thus, it seems, the threat posed by the temple finally has been put to rest. Beware, however, because people have reached the same conclusion twice before.

FURTHER ADVENTURES

Tharizdun's cult has shown a disturbing talent for rebounding from defeat, and it certainly could reappear to menace the players in your campaign.

- ◆ As noted in *Return to the Temple of Elemental Evil*, the cultists infiltrating Hommllet were based not at the Temple of All-Consumption but in another stronghold in the Kron Hills. The adventure gave no details on the stronghold, but it likely has something that attracted the cultists in the first place. The Kron Hills location could be another hidden place of Tharizdun's power (not as potent as the one near Hommllet, but dangerous nevertheless), a natural elemental gateway or node, a mine, or perhaps a hidden settlement of evil creatures ripe for exploitation. Even if this place was explored as a side adventure during the events in *Return to the Temple of Elemental Evil*, it still might hold dark secrets.
- ◆ The site hidden under the temple moathouse might still draw Tharizdun's cultists, even if it was supposedly destroyed or neutralized. The cult might have devised a way to restore the site, or perhaps the place holds enough residual power to be useful.
- ◆ Tharizdun's cult seems to have a fascination with dangerous, evil artifacts that can be broken down and reassembled. The group might locate part of one such artifact and seek to recover the rest. The player characters must disrupt the effort.
- ◆ Given the cult's penchant for misdirection and subterfuge, it might take some time for a party to discover the truth. For example, a group based in a

city might be asked to investigate a series of daring burglaries. After capturing the miscreants, the characters might find that the criminals have been working for a shadowy employer that turns out to be a cell in Tharizdun's cult.

About the Author

Skip Williams has been active in the game industry since 1974, when he took up wargaming and roleplaying in high school. He soon got an afterschool job at TSR, Inc., the original publisher of the D&D game, and the rest (as they say) is history. As the fighter Rufus, Skip was one of the first players ever to explore the ruins of elemental evil.





The Anatomy of Elemental Evil

By Thomas M. Reid

Illustrations by Christopher Burdett, Eric L. Williams, Steve Ellis, and Matias Tapia

Mention “elemental evil” in a conversation about DUNGEONS & DRAGONS®, and a few lasting images spring to mind. First and foremost among these is a great stone and iron gate festooned with leering gargoyles, smashed open to reveal a gothic monstrosity of a temple, a looming, dark gray edifice decaying beneath a lightning-slashed sky. This is, of course, the famous cover painting for the classic AD&D® adventure T1-4, *The Temple of Elemental Evil*, beautifully rendered by the late Keith Parkinson.

The Temple of Elemental Evil was the long-awaited sequel to one of the earliest adventures, T1, *The Village of Homlet*, written by Gary Gygax and published by TSR, Inc. in 1979. That beloved adventure featured an excursion to the eponymous small hamlet along the edges of the Kron Hills and a not-so-abandoned moathouse in the fens nearby. Fans had been clamoring for years for the promised follow-up when TSR, Inc. finally released the sequel in 1985. The adventure, written by Gary with Frank Mentzer, contained the original T1 module, slightly updated, as well as a much larger mini-campaign that sends doughty heroes to explore the vast depths of a sinister temple and defeat the remnants of a twisted cult hidden within.

The Temple of Elemental Evil has been called by turns one of the best of the classic AD&D adventures and a disappointing, skeletal dungeon crawl with little plot or background. Some fans, dissatisfied

with the lack of story and politics, lamented what might have been. Others, including me and my gaming group of more than 20 years, found within those pages quite a bit of great source material upon which to build. Over the years since our inaugural exploration, we have run the module for new groups numerous times, envying them their first glimpse into the dark recesses of the physical structure of the temple and the shadowy, devious minds of its inhabitants. Each time we launched the adventure, we teased out new, more complex threads of hidden intrigue from the subtle clues, casual comments, and quick asides about the various forces at work within the temple, and we have used those disparate scraps to build the campaign into a dynamic corner of the world of Greyhawk.

In this article, I’ll explore the nature of the cult upon which the Temple of Elemental Evil was ostensibly founded and give you some ideas for running the cult to its fullest potential in other parts of your campaign. I’ll also share ways you can flesh out the original temple background, citing examples of what my gaming group came up with in our own game.

A word of warning: If you’re in a campaign that includes (or might include) *The Temple of Elemental Evil*, you should not read the rest of this article. In the course of examining the factions and dynamics at work, I reveal quite a few spoilers. Dungeon Masters looking for interesting ways to flesh out their

handling of this adventure will find lots of meaty ideas, but players who peek are only going to ruin the fun for themselves and the rest of their gaming group.

A CAST OF THOUSANDS

Just as the physical locale of the adventure sits astride a crossroads, the confluence of political events surrounding it functioned as a figurative intersection. The rise of the Temple of Elemental Evil brought together a number of powerful forces—both individuals and nations, both good and evil—in a clash for control of the region, as well as the many humans, demihumans, and humanoids that dwelt therein. God squared off against god, and territories joined in a great struggle focused on that forbidding edifice.

The entities that vied for control of the temple can be broken down, naturally enough, into the forces of good and evil, though neither side could even remotely be said to have operated in harmony. The cunning schemers attempting to exploit the ruins of the temple for malevolent ends and the alliance of good folk arrayed against them both worked at cross purposes. No power drawn into the engagement operated without at least one separate secondary (or even primary) agenda.

The Cult of Elemental Evil

At its surface, worship of the four basic elements—air, earth, fire, and water—would seem to be fairly straightforward. The elements are often thought to be primal forces, neither good nor evil: the stuff from which all things in the universe come. Ceremonies that include the elements (or representations of the elements) should be equally direct. Indeed, it is common to find those with a devotion to the natural order of the energies in balance throughout the universe. Many claim that druids follow such a path.

But what is the essence of elemental evil, and how was something as basic and fundamental as element worship so corrupted? Why didn't the concept spread and infiltrate other parts of the Flanaess? What follows is an examination of how the cult might have functioned at its height, before the first defeat at the Battle of Emridy Meadows (and ten years prior to the arrival of the heroes in Hommlet). The state of things within the temple during the time frame of the adventure is a very different story and discussed in further detail afterward.

The Major Evil Players

The origins of the cult and the rise of the Temple of Elemental Evil are a long and convoluted affair. At the center of the conflict sits a powerful but obscure demoness known as Zuggtmoy. As part of the backstory, it is revealed that this horrible denizen of the Abyss brought her love of fungi and all things slimy to the Flanaess and tried, in secret, to grow her power by enticing followers to worship her. Her spheres of influence were not attractive or popular, though, even among the most wretched and vile creatures she could hope to tempt.

In desperation, Zuggtmoy turned to other possibilities. The adventure background suggests that she conceived of the idea of a cult of elemental evil, though it also hints that cunning Iuz planted the seed for his own purposes. In *Return to the Temple of Elemental Evil*, Monte Cook posits that neither Zuggtmoy nor Iuz were the ultimate power, but rather mysterious Tharizdun—he of the many lost temples—was the deepest layer of the proverbial onion. Regardless of the “truth” (and how any particular DM wants to spin it), the fact remains that Zuggtmoy cloaked herself behind a façade of elemental worship. The four elemental themes would be more appealing as potential forces of power than mushrooms and oozes would. Being a demon, Zuggtmoy comes across in the adventure as chaotic and self-absorbed. The text portrays

her in scant detail because she remains imprisoned for most of the adventure, and the battle against her is really part of the post-climactic denouement. My gaming group saw her as distracted, not really interested in maintaining the organization of the cult she had spawned, and thus not the key figure in the temple's machinations.

Enter Iuz.

Much has been written about the cambion demigod, and he deserves it. In Greyhawk, he is a much craftier, more scheming force than is Zuggtmoy, and it makes sense that he would come to her aid to exploit the situation for his own purposes. The Temple of Elemental Evil holds a lot of interest for Iuz. Obviously, it's always good to find a new source of power. Beyond that, and far more significantly, the location of the temple would be a terrific and potent thorn in the side of his enemies—Veluna, Furyondy, and (to a lesser extent) Verbobonc. If Iuz could grow the forces gathering at the temple sufficiently and counsel patience to Zuggtmoy long enough, he could develop a second front for any potential war he might launch against his foes. (When the boxed set *From the Ashes* was published by TSR, Inc. in 1992, it provided the perfect outcome to do just that. My gaming group and I were overjoyed at how well this revelation meshed with our own campaign plots with only a few minor adjustments.)

Of course, things did not go as planned for Zuggtmoy and Iuz. The original temple was attacked and torn down by the forces of good, setting up the opportunity for reclamation at the beginning of the adventure. As the heroes enter the story, Zuggtmoy is imprisoned within the depths of her own temple, and Iuz and his minions are ostensibly looking for a way to free her.

In the meantime, we note that Lolth, the goddess of the drow, also has her finger in the pie. In one spot in the adventure notes, the authors suggest that Lolth directly offers her assistance to Zuggtmoy in the

development of the temple, but this never made much sense to me, and that doubt is corroborated elsewhere in the text. It seems far more likely that Lolth would want to secretly keep an eye on Iuz and Zugtgtoy without tipping her own hand. So, after the brouhaha during the temple's initial fall, Lolth takes a keen

ARCHOMENTALS

If you're interested in using the concept of a cult of elemental evil beyond its dysfunctional presence in the temple, you can find plenty of source material to make it work. There are hints of great beings (now referred to as archomentials) in the original text, particularly within the four elemental nodes, and more information appears in *Return to the Temple of Elemental Evil*.

These beings, also known as the Princes of Elemental Evil, have appeared in various published sources over the years. The four Princes—Imix, the Prince of Fire; Ogremoch, the Prince of Earth; Olhydra, the Princess of Water; and Yan-C-Bin, the Prince of Air—are on par with minor deities and could easily be placed as such within a campaign, granting spells and running their own machinations. It would take a powerful, charismatic leader to form a greater elemental temple capable of corralling the four individual faiths into a cohesive whole, but such an organization could be a fearsome foe to any group of characters for many entertaining hours of gaming.

In addition to the four princes named above, other archomentials exist, and you could include them, too, if you want to expand the evil cult in new and interesting directions or create a rival cult of elemental good to oppose it.

interest in its redevelopment. As the remnants of the cult of elemental evil crept back into the structure's vicinity, Lolth made sure that a few of her own were in the mix. I'll discuss how this works to the DM's advantage in a bit.

In the meantime, let's turn our attention to the structure of the cult itself.

The Three Circles

To better understand how elemental evil would function as an organized movement (using the term "organized" very loosely), we must examine its internal structure. From various game sources and histories of the Temple of Elemental Evil's rise to prominence, we know that the cult was divided into three heavily insulated vertical layers, each more hidden and removed than the one below it. We can call these three layers circles: the Elemental Circle, the Greater Temple Circle, and the Tharizdun Circle. For the most part, members of the lower two circles were unaware of the third circle, and those in the lowest circle knew relatively little about the nature of the circle directly above their own.

The Elemental Circle

Those on the lowest rung of the ladder, the Elemental Circle, worshiped the primal forces that come from the elemental planes. Unlike the pure devotion to the collective energies in balance found in other parts of the Flanaess, adherents of this circle aligned themselves to a single element: air, earth, fire, or water. The vast majority of adherents congregated in this circle of power, and it was the most open and visible level of the cult.

Clerics heading up a temple devoted to one of the elements focused their allegiance to that particular form of power to the exclusion of the other three, maximized their potential in divine magic around that chosen energy, and called on the creatures from that plane to serve them. Arcane spellcasters drawn

to a single form of elemental energy were welcomed as brothers and sisters of the faith and were often given honored positions of authority and responsibility in the temple hierarchy. These leaders were undoubtedly the most devout and driven of all the adherents of the different circles, for it was they who guided the elemental energy—and the creatures born of it—often bending and corrupting it for their manic purposes.

The remaining worshipers in the lowest circle of the cult came from all walks of life but were often outcasts from society, seeking a place where they could belong. These cultists likely had no strong affinity or love for the element they honored. It is far more plausible that they accepted recruitment into the ranks in exchange for a promise of wealth when the temple grew in power and prestige. Certainly a pyromaniac might be drawn to the temple of fire, while a recruit who was terrified of being buried alive might eschew the earth temple in favor of one of the other three. But by and large, these foot soldiers—made up mostly of thieves, bandits, humanoids, and other, more formidable monsters—cared little for the cause, craving only the promised wealth and secular power that came with service.

It helps to think of these four temples as rival clubs or fraternities (or, perhaps even more aptly, as the Houses from the popular series of books about a secret wizards' academy of magic). They competed constantly, working to one-up and betray one another, trying to see which temple could gather the most wealth from secret raids on the surrounding communities or win outright battles in the form of skirmishes and ambushes. This animosity between the four elemental temples was both a blessing and a curse. It culled the weak from their ranks, but it prevented them from growing strong enough to threaten the lands around the temple as much as they might have done otherwise.

The Greater Temple Circle

The second level or circle of the cult can be thought of as the Greater Temple. Those in this circle understood the true purpose of the temple's existence and the connection between the façade of elemental evil and Zugtmoy's love of mushrooms, slimes, and oozes. Thus, this team managed the complex, planning expansion, assigning responsibilities for outposts and raids, and so forth. According to the text of the original adventure, there were three primary groupings:

- ◆ regular temple troops who wore the Flaming Eye symbol (what *Return to the Temple of Elemental Evil* referred to as the Elder Elemental Eye),
- ◆ temple guards who adorned their clothing with Iuz's grinning, red horned skull emblem, and
- ◆ clergy and arcane leaders who wore a motif of a golden skull that was missing its lower jaw and wore a bejeweled crown (an homage to the *Orb of Golden Death*, the powerful magic item that maintained some of the elemental "nodes," or limited planes, at the lowest levels of the temple).

During the height of the temple's prowess, these three groups were almost certainly divided by the listed responsibilities. During the time frame of the adventure (after the fall and during the subsequent efforts at recovery), their activities were spurred more by their allegiances to the major players.

In any event, the adherents of the Greater Temple Circle understood the true nature of the chaos of the elements and the evil that is required to return the universe to a state of volatility. The circle's leaders believed in strife, and they manipulated the four lower temples into a never-ending struggle against one another so as to bring about greater chaos and intensify the presence of the elements in the world. This internecine conflict, coupled with the powerful magic of the Greater Temple, created a zone of

corrupt elemental energy for leagues around the area. The effects of this magic were immediate and baleful. Harsh weather, deadly earthquakes, flooding, fires, and temperature extremes all made the land around the temple almost uninhabitable.

The internal strife caused by the Greater Temple had other effects, too. First, it prevented any one lower temple from growing too powerful and possibly destroying another outright (or even challenging the Greater Temple). It also allowed circle leaders

to cull the most promising members of the four elemental temples. Only the most devout and crafty among them could rise to become part of the Greater Temple. It is this level of devotion that was most closely connected to Zugtmoy and Iuz, and the one the pair appropriated for their own ends, luring some of the highest-ranking devotees to do their bidding.



The Tharizdun Circle

The final and most secretive level of the cult is that of worshipers of Tharizdun. The Dark God's role in events is not addressed in the original adventure but is covered extensively in *Return to the Temple of Elemental Evil*. That follow-up adventure maintains that Tharizdun's involvement was hidden from most (if not all) of those caught up in the temple's machinations, so it really isn't germane to this discussion, but I mention it here for the sake of completeness.

The followers of Tharizdun were the truly mad ones, corrupted by their exposure to his subtle but baleful influences. Clerics of this inner circle once followed the Elder Elemental Eye, a deceitful aspect of the Dark God that many mistook to be Zugtmoy's own cult symbol, the Flaming Eye. Regardless of the name and connection, these followers became tainted—either accidentally or through the machinations of other clerics of the third circle—by Tharizdun's slumbering malevolence projected through dreams and visions. In secret ceremonies, powerful clerics of the second circle were brought before the terrifying thoughts of the Dark God. Those who survived the ritual often went mad from their new understanding, and, seeing the bleakness of the universe at last, they joined their brothers and sisters in the plot to release Tharizdun and bring about the destruction of all things. Clerics who evaded the madness that took their kin were labeled as unworthy, unable to see the truth, and were slain.

An Alliance of Necessity

On the other side of the epic battle stood the forces of good. The nations and tribes most clearly threatened by the rise of elemental evil—the areas of civilization closest to the temple or the territories of dangerous foes associated with the cult—came together to defeat it as a matter of self-preservation. During the first opposition to the temple, several countries mustered forces for a great army. The solid alliance they formed was based

on a common cause: open warfare against evil. They defeated the temple forces and tore down the surface structure, but they could not finish off the most powerful foes. Iuz escaped, and Zugtmoy was imprisoned.

The armies of good disassembled, the troops returned home, and the allies left behind hidden agents to watch for a return of the evil. In the decade that followed, those nations bickered about taxes and trade and a slew of other petty disagreements. Their agents fell into complacency and did not act when the evidence showed that something might be up at the temple once more. Thus, when *The Temple of Elemental Evil* starts, the forces of good are not a harmonious, cohesive whole (the same problem faced by the major players in the cult). The primary operatives striving to check or defeat the temple do so largely in secret, often reluctantly, and usually at cross purposes with their supposed allies. They may have recognized the importance of defeating the temple forces, but they were ill prepared to act, which is why the heroes get drawn into the mix.

The Major Good Players

The main powers opposed to the Temple of Elemental Evil were the human regions of Furyondy, Veluna, and Verbobonc. These three civilizations were closely allied and often called on one another in times of need. In fact, shortly after the initial fall of the temple, King Belvor IV of Furyondy and Hazen, the archcleric of Veluna, arranged for the king's son (Prince Thrommel) to wed the archcleric's daughter (Jolene) to further bond the two nations. The wedding plans were dashed when the prince disappeared while on a hunting expedition. He was never found, but rumors about who was responsible for the tragedy strained relations between the two countries.

In addition to the humans, the elves of Celene and the gnomes and dwarves of the Kron Hills aided in the destruction of the temple. As elves and dwarves are wont to do, they bickered over many things

regarding the war, and when the evil that had been checked the first time began to resurface, the demihuman races chose to watch their borders in hopes of sealing the strife out. In secret, they sent spies to observe and report back, but neither Yolande, the queen of the fae, nor her dwarf and gnome counterparts were willing to do more.

In the aftermath of the initial fall of the temple, other forces of good also kept an eye on the region, monitoring the comings and goings and taking note of anything strange or sinister. In particular, the Knights of the Order of the Hart and clergy devoted to St. Cuthbert, the demigod most directly opposed to Iuz, placed silent watchers in the vicinity. Even so, the evil crept back, and the temple began its work anew.

USING THE TOOLS

Now that we've covered the origins of the cult of elemental evil and the forces that had a vested interest in its success or downfall, how can you as a DM use this material to give your campaign more pop and sizzle? Consider the ideas presented below, many of which come from my gaming groups' experiences in various incarnations of the campaign over the years. You can almost think of these events and relationships as the game around the game; this is where you get to have the most fun, running your own characters and playing alongside the rest of your group.

The Bad Guys

First, figure out what the major evil players are doing. The adventure as written is fairly static. All the mercenaries, clerics, and monsters in the encounter listings are just sort of sitting there, waiting for the player characters to show up and beat them to a pulp. But it doesn't have to be that way. You can make an inventory of who's who and figure out how they work together or against one another. Let's examine the forces of the temple first, breaking them down by who they truly serve.

Zuggtmoy

We'll start with those loyal to Zuggtmoy. This group includes the clerics of the four elemental temples, who also command troops and creatures. The text suggests that they bicker, but you could show some of this conflict to make the game more dynamic. Perhaps during one of the player characters' forays into the temple dungeons, they come across a skirmish between two opposing elements (earth and water are good choices because the text has clues that these two groups are squabbling). What would the two sides do if they noticed the characters watching them? They might join forces and attack the intruders if the characters have already made a nuisance of themselves. On the other hand, they might keep fighting each other if one side is weakened and on the brink of total defeat.

Of course, the clerics of the four lesser temples don't have a full grasp of what's going on in the Greater Temple or have much direct contact with Zuggtmoy. They get their marching orders from the clerics of the Greater Temple, Barkinar and Deggum, who command the temple troops and guards (respectively), and Senshock, their wizard associate. In addition to controlling the lesser temples, these three work on larger schemes. Barkinar needs troops to continue growing the temple's army so that he can someday march it forth and conquer everything around. Deggum has to focus on the safety and secrecy of the temple (especially after he hears of the meddling characters killing things on the upper levels). Thus, they constantly struggle with each other over scarce resources.

In one of my gaming group's recent run-throughs of the adventure, we assumed that this trio was responsible for the moathouse near Hommlet and that they had similar sites all over the region. We determined that these places served the Greater Temple as recruitment centers and training grounds for troops who would eventually come to the temple to serve. The remote sites also functioned as

headquarters for raiding parties to bring in wealth for the temple. In fact, the bandits hidden on the upper level of the moathouse were sent there by another recruiter so that Lareth could make use of them in raiding the area around Hommlet.

We also decided that the mercenaries in the tower on the ground level of the temple, commanded by Smigmal Redhand, are a batch of relatively new recruits sent to the temple from another outlying location. Smigmal reports to Deggum because she has been assigned the task of front line defense for the temple, and when the characters start messing with things, it falls on her to put a stop to it. We made her very dynamic, sending urgent reports to Deggum asking for reinforcements and getting her wizard lover, Falrinth, to use his quasit familiar as a spy. On more than one occasion, Smigmal fought back, sending her troops to follow the heroes and attack them at their camp.

Iuz

In the meantime, Iuz has his own loyalists operating in the temple. The main nonplayer character to focus on here is Hedrack, the supreme commander and high cleric of the Greater Temple. Everyone else in the circle reports to him. Hedrack is growing the temple and finding a way to free Zuggtmoy, but he and Iuz have other schemes in the works, too. Thus, the cleric occasionally gives orders that run counter to what the rest of the cultists expect. It sets up a lot of wonderful internal intrigue. (It also keeps the temple forces from responding too quickly and decisively against the heroes. If the entire might of the Greater Temple fell on the characters too early, the characters would be doomed.)

In the recent campaign for my gaming group, Hedrack and Iuz wanted to learn how to free Zuggtmoy so they would be ready when the time came, but they didn't intend to set her loose just yet. Instead, they secretly looked for a way to get into the

elemental nodes at the bottom of the dungeons and connect one or more of them directly with Dorakaa, the capital city of Iuz's empire. Iuz figured that, if he could create a direct path from his front porch to the temple, he could march part of his own army directly into Veluna's and Furyondy's backyard. (Remember when I said the *From the Ashes* boxed set played so nicely with our campaign? This is what I was talking about. In my original campaign, the characters defeated the temple and Zuggtmoy, and Iuz *still* came back and brought this plan to fruition. Now the characters are contending with an all-out invasion of the Gnarley Forest.)

Lolth

The drow deity has spies in the temple's midst. The first of these notable characters is Lareth the Beautiful, the promising young cleric who runs the moathouse and recruits new adherents. His ultimate goal on behalf of Lolth is to rise within the ranks, take over the temple, and convert it to serve her interests. Thus, Lareth bides his time and executes his orders to the best of his abilities, but he also controls the information and wealth that flows back to Hedrack and the other clerics.

In one incarnation of the temple campaign that I helped to run, the characters didn't quite defeat Lareth at the moathouse. He slipped away, but he lied to his superiors about what had happened there. In the meantime, the adventurers were being watched by one of Lareth's spies, and when the party discovered his small shrine to Lolth, the spy grew suspicious of her boss and sent word back to the higher-ups in the Greater Temple in the hopes of currying favor. Indeed, Hedrack used her to keep an eye on the party for quite some time, and it was great fun to watch the players wonder how the temple seemed to know their every move.

The other spy is Falrinth, a capable wizard who, on the surface, tagged along as Smigmal's lover, but

who is in a perfect position to observe the leadership of the temple in the lower levels. Falrinth has the *Orb of Golden Death* (the key to unlocking the four elemental nodes and something Hedrack desperately wants to find), a fact he has kept to himself. In that recent version of our campaign, the crafty wizard also spent time moving among the four lesser temples, using their natural antagonism toward one another to crank up the turmoil, believing that this conflict would work counter to Hedrack's ultimate plans. (Again, this is a great justification for why the lesser temples don't turn on the characters en masse when they begin invading the upper levels of the dungeon.)

The Rest of the Cast

In addition to understanding how the major players behave and giving them dynamic activities to carry out while the characters explore, consider the bit players. You can create connections, allegiances, and rivalries among the nonplayer characters mentioned in the adventure. Giving them personalities and motives will breathe life into the day-to-day operations of the temple.

For example, in a recent version of the campaign, the two evil traders in Hommlet were part of the temple forces before they were caught behind enemy lines in the Battle of Emridy Meadows. They stole the livery off a pair of dead Furyondian soldiers and escaped persecution, marching with the triumphant army back to the moathouse siege, and finally settling in Hommlet to wait and watch. They took an interest in Lareth, and they shuttle information and supplies to him on occasion, but they have grown to enjoy the cushy lives they've made for themselves and are unwilling to risk exposure without very good cause.

As another example, the adventure mentions Dick Rentsch and his lover Dala, a pair of low-level ne'er-do-wells running a hostel in Nulb. In a bit of inspiration, we connected them to Romag, the lowly cleric of the earth temple, and Senshock, the



wizard of the Greater Temple. Dick, Dala, Romag, and Senshock were once adventuring companions in not-too-distant lands. They got in over their heads deep in a dwarven stronghold, and in an act purely of self-preservation, Senshock (as the most powerful character and leader of the group) left Romag behind so that the other three could escape. This did not set well with Dick and Dala, but they fled alongside Senshock just the same, and Romag wound up as the “guest” of the dwarves for several years. In the meantime, Dick and Dala became lovers and settled in Nulb, while Senshock went on his own way and joined the evil temple nearby.

Eventually, Romag escaped and sought his former companions for revenge. Upon discovering Dick and Dala together, he confronted them, but they convinced the cleric of their regret and told him how he could find the wizard who was the true traitor. Seeing the possibility of playing a long game (and perhaps gaining Dala’s favor—he always had a thing for the cutpurse), Romag spared them and gained entrance

HISTORY CHECK

For a more thorough examination of the major power factions as well as a detailed history of the Temple of Elemental Evil in all its incarnations, see “History Check: The Temple of Elemental Evil,” an article by Skip Williams in this issue of *Dragon* magazine. Skip pulls together the story from several interrelated adventures, including *The Temple of Elemental Evil* and Monte Cook’s *Return to the Temple of Elemental Evil*, and he peels away the layers of the onion to reveal the powers behind the powers. On that subject, Skip goes into much more detail than is allowed by the scope of this article.

to the temple himself, playing on his old relationship with Senshock to curry a favorable position. The wizard saw a potential ally in Romag and believed that granting him a leadership role in the earth temple might assuage any lingering resentment felt by the cleric. He convinced Barkinar to put Romag in charge of the earth temple.

At the beginning of the adventure, Dick and Dala (who have been retired from the adventuring life for a while) lag behind Romag by a level or two, even though he had little chance to raise his stature while imprisoned by the dwarves. All three trail behind Senshock in power, for the wizard has been blessed with a comfortable job and many opportunities to hone his craft. Thus, Romag bides his time, struggling as the least powerful cleric in the least powerful temple, until the time is right to exact his overdue revenge. Dick and Dala spy for him in Nulb, and he uses their information to impress his superiors, slowly clawing his way up the temple ladder.

The Good Guys

On the other side of the ledger, the agents of good are trying to learn what is going on in the ruins of the temple while not giving themselves away. These non-player characters might provide aid and succor to the heroes or pass along information to their superiors, but they are unlikely to join forces with the characters or be in a position to summon more powerful assistance. In some instances, they might not want the characters to succeed in quite the way the players expect.

The Obvious Assistance

Good folks scattered throughout the adventure can help the heroes in limited ways. In Hommlet, the mayor and his council can provide information and a bit of coin. Terjon the cleric, Jaroo the druid, and Rufus and Burne of the burgeoning tower can offer training. In the temple dungeons, a few nonplayer characters can grant boons to the heroes if rescued.

This kind of aid is fairly obvious and does not need to be described in detail here.

The Hidden Agendas

Other good characters have more going on than meets the eye. You can use them to add depth and richness to the campaign, though their aid always comes with strings attached. In our campaign, they became the focal point of side treks and later adventures that kept the Flanaess moving in a dynamic way.

For example, my original campaign saw a schism unfold between the forces of good. Remember when I mentioned the betrothal of Thrommel to Jolene? The engagement was a throwaway line in the adventure, but my group turned it into a major issue with massive repercussions. We assumed that some of the major houses of Veluna, much like the barons of medieval England, wielded great influence over the archcleric. They did not support the marriage and conspired to have the prince kidnapped during his hunting excursion. With him out of the way, the houses could maintain their grasp on power. Thus, when the heroes freed Thrommel from stasis and he returned to Furyondy in triumph, it set off a chain of events that culminated in revolution and civil war among the houses in Veluna.

Initially, the player characters heard little of this development because they were busy disrupting plans in the temple. But it affected those around them quickly enough. We decided that the cleric Terjon in Hommlet was loyal to one of the houses in revolt, while the Canoness Y’dey (in disguise as one of the herbalists in Nulb) served the archcleric. (In our campaign, the theocracy of Veluna worshiped St. Cuthbert, since no information to the contrary had yet been published. More recent products have the people of Veluna paying homage to Rao.) Terjon and Y’dey began giving the heroes conflicting orders without being able to explain why. Caught in the middle were Elmo and Otis, two Knights of the Order

of the Hart. When the civil war was put down and the dust finally settled, the landscape of the good countries had shifted slightly, and the distraction had been enough to buy the forces of evil (particularly Iuz) time to further their own schemes.

WRAP-UP

As an adventure, T1-4, *The Temple of Elemental Evil* is a monstrous dungeon crawl, but with a little work, it can become much more. I believe that Gary wrote the adventure in much the same way that he presented most of his Greyhawk material. He gave us sketchy details about the world and focused on the encounter descriptions to keep the gaming sessions rolling. It falls to us to ferret out those bits of inspiration. The kernels of many schemes and plots are there, offering just enough detail to spark your ideas and let you run with them in whatever way suits your campaign. That's what my gaming group did, and I hope you've enjoyed seeing a glimpse of what's possible.

About the Author

During a career that has spanned more than two decades, **Thomas M. Reid** has designed, edited, or managed over 100 published RPG products. He currently lives on a quarter-acre cat ranch in the Texas Hill Country with his wife and three sons. When he isn't busy riding herd, Thomas still plays his original GREYHAWK® campaign with the same group of friends he's known since junior high.





Tavern Profile: The Broken Gauntlet

A D&D® backdrop for adventurers of all tiers

By Craig Campbell

Illustration by Ralph Horsley

Cartography by Jared Blando

For decades, a tavern called The Thrown Gauntlet was revered as the dirtiest and most despicable of Skullport's pit-fighting establishments. This tavern, located in the area then known as the Lower Heart, was a second home to many of the nastiest denizens of Skullport. Shadowed conversations took place. Nefarious deals were struck. Blood was spilled.

All this changed when the Spellplague rampaged across Toril. The magical cataclysm tore the underground port city to pieces, and The Thrown Gauntlet was among the demolished establishments. The majority of the tavern broke to pieces and fell into a large chasm, killing dozens of people.

By the time the cataclysm ended, only the front wall and doors of the tavern remained intact. The tavern's wooden sign, depicting a single (thrown) gauntlet, fell to the ground and broke in two.

THE GAUNTLET REBORN

For many years, the ruins of The Thrown Gauntlet lay undisturbed. Eventually the excavations of Skullport resulted in the discovery of mithral, as well as some Netherese artifacts. The resulting "Mithraldelve"

ushered in the re-establishment of Skullport for a new age. Refer to "Backdrop: Skullport" in *Dungeon* 200 for more information on the "new" Skullport.

About five years ago, an unsuccessful duergar Mithraldelver named Durthik discovered the ruins of The Thrown Gauntlet while seeking his fortune. Knowing of its history and its previous ownership by a duergar named Skuerren, Durthik set about restoring the old tavern.

With the imminent return of Skullport to its former glory as a port destination, Durthik changed tactics and decided to establish a new tavern in the ruins of the old. He hired delvers to excavate the ruins of the old tavern, insisting that great riches were to be had at the location.

In just a few months Durthik and his cohorts uncovered the entirety of the old tavern just below the surface of the Dredge slum, carving a new tavern from the wreckage of the old. Durthik also discovered a large natural cavern just below the ruins. The blood-red walls of this cavern inspired Durthik to establish his new venture not only as a tavern in the new Skullport, but also as a pit-fighting establishment, paying homage to the original tavern's history and reputation.

Durthik also uncovered the original tavern's broken sign. He nailed the sign's halves to the old tavern's front wall in the Dredge and named his establishment The Broken Gauntlet, in honor of the old tavern.

In the past few years, The Broken Gauntlet has become a hot spot for drinking, carousing, and pit fighting in Skullport. It's a bawdy and raucous place, filled with political intrigue, danger, and blood sport.

THE TAVERN SPIRITS

When The Thrown Gauntlet fell to the Spellplague, dozens of people were crushed to death within it. For unfathomable reasons, the spirits of the dead were denied passage to the afterlife in the wake of the catastrophe.

These restless spirits now inhabit The Broken Gauntlet, unable to leave it. These ghosts flit between portions of the tavern, passing easily through walls and other areas of wreckage and entreating tavern patrons to help them escape their ephemeral bonds. They drift around in the upper entry vestibule and in the middle tavern level, but they can't enter the pit-fight cavern farther below since it was not part of the original tavern.

You can transform a previously published monster into a tavern spirit by using the following guidelines.

- ◆ Give the monster the shadow origin and the undead subtype.
- ◆ Give the monster a normal speed of 0, a fly speed of 6 (hover), and phasing.
- ◆ Give the monster the insubstantial trait and reduce the monster's hit points by 30 percent.
- ◆ Add the necrotic keyword to a few of the monster's key powers.



THE SUNDERED SIGN

The uppermost level of The Broken Gauntlet lies in the Dredge along a narrow road. The tavern's broken sign stands above a pair of simple wooden doors that open onto a small chamber containing a ramshackle spiral staircase that leads down to the tavern level.

Within this entry vestibule, a pair of middle-aged human brothers named Mordis and Feldis fancy themselves the “doormen” of the tavern, requiring anyone who wishes to continue down to pay an entry fee. Although they present themselves as official doormen to The Broken Gauntlet, they are actually opportunistic vagabonds who seek to bilk a few coins from unsuspecting visitors, and they have no association with the tavern. Durthik is amused by their entrepreneurial spirit, as he calls it, and lets them stay as long as they don't prevent people from entering his establishment.

If someone entering the tavern gives the brothers any trouble, they quickly back down, preferring their simple con to actual confrontation.

THE TOPPLED TAVERN

The middle level of The Broken Gauntlet contains the tavern area and is comprised of the remains of the original tavern that fell when the Spellplague tore through Skullport. The entire tavern area has a closed-in feel, cramped by a stone ceiling roughly 8 feet above the floor.

The outer walls of the tavern area are rough cavern stone. Durthik used the remnants of the old tavern to craft several semiprivate drinking rooms around the perimeter of the cavern. These makeshift walls are composed of broken bits of boards, shingles, tables, and the like to provide a modicum of privacy. A 5-foot by 5-foot crack in the floor of the tavern opens to the cavern below, while a larger crevasse behind the bar contains a ramshackle stair

leading down. The entire tavern area is lit by oil-burning braziers affixed to the walls.

The furnishings are simple and sturdy, made of stout oak. The only truly beautiful bit of furniture in the tavern is the bar itself. The bar top is formed from several pieces of granite laid tightly together and polished to a high sheen, sitting upon a sturdy lattice of heavy oak timbers.

Several areas keyed on the tavern map are described below.

T1: This is the bar area, generally overseen by two bartenders.

T2: The only truly private room in the tavern lies behind a stout wooden door set into the cavern wall here.

T3: This is Durthik's personal chamber and is the only bedchamber in the tavern. Its door is made of steel and twice-locked. Durthik keeps his amassed fortune in a large chest that is both locked and trapped.

T4: This storeroom contains shelves filled with supplies for the tavern along with a number of kegs of fine ales.

Durthik

Durthik is a middle-aged male duergar with a keen business sense honed over the years. His tavern is profitable and he's proud of this accomplishment, though he doesn't boast of it. He is tall for a duergar but bulky, dressing in black leathers.

Durthik is in business for the money. He makes this goal clear to his staff and regularly reminds his employees that they are easily replaceable. The only employee he treats with respect is the Red Lady (see below). He is friendly and talkative with his patrons and treats them well—for a duergar.

Durthik uses the tavern's spirits to spy on his patrons, with promises that he will help free the spirits at a later point. As a result, he has built a considerable repository of knowledge that he can use to extort information and money from his tavern's

more important patrons. Durthik believes that it's only a matter of time before strife breaks out in Skullport, and he retains the juiciest tidbits as leverage so that he can save himself when this inevitable conflict begins.

Tavern Staff

Durthik employs nearly a dozen ne'er-do-wells as bartenders and waitstaff at any given time. He chooses only the toughest and meanest he can find so that he doesn't need to keep bouncers on staff. All his employees can handle themselves in a fight.

Durthik's staff changes regularly. Introduce whichever types of nonplayer characters you need to fit your campaign.

Tavern Regulars

All manner of folk frequent The Broken Gauntlet, but two regulars of note nurse drinks in the tavern at almost any time.

An elderly halfling male referred to as “Old Happy” sits idly in the tavern area most days. Old Happy is just that, very happy . . . and very old. He wears simple clothes and sports long, disheveled hair that falls into his eyes and across his shoulders. He comes across as a bit senile, but this guise is a ruse.

Happy is a savvy halfling, with a keen eye for trouble and considerable combat skills. He knows a little something about everything happening in the tavern (and quite a bit about happenings in Skullport in general), and he trades this information for good stories. His advanced age prevents him from traveling to gather such tales for himself, so he relies upon patrons to bring the stories to him.

A doppelganger named Ithustis calls the tavern home as well. About a year ago, three of the spirits bound to the tavern discovered that they could possess the weak-minded shapechanger and share his body with each other, leaving Ithustis's actual personality

buried deep within his mind while the spirits force his body to take on their forms. Astute adventurers might note that three different “regulars” wear the same set of simple clothes, but they are never seen together.

The ghosts trade “ownership” of Ithustis’s body to live out some semblance of a normal, corporeal life. As a result of their ongoing swapping, Ithustis remains in the tavern area around the clock. If the characters glimpse the true Ithustis as two ghosts trade places, he calls out briefly, “Help me!”

THE CRIMSON CAVERN

The lowest level of The Broken Gauntlet is the pit-fight cavern. The walls of this natural cavern glow slightly, bathing the entire area in a soft red light augmented by oil-burning braziers affixed to the walls.

A ramshackle wooden stair connects the cavern to the tavern area above. The ceiling of the cavern is 20 feet above its floor.

Several areas are keyed on the cavern map and are described below.

C1: The center of the cavern is the pit-fight area. It is circumscribed by a series of 1-foot-tall iron spikes driven into the cavern floor, defining the fight area. A series of stout wooden benches lie outside the fight area, providing seating for onlookers.

C2: A simple wooden table stands in one corner of the cavern. The Red Lady waits at this table between fights to take bets from patrons.

C3: This side cavern is completely empty and serves as the home of the Red Lady. It features no furniture or accoutrements, except for a single brazier that lights the chamber.

C4: This cavern houses a pit where Durthik keeps his pit-fight slaves. The slave pit lies 10 feet beneath the adjoining floor. A large locked iron door separates it from the rest of the cavern. An iron golem under the command of the Red Lady keeps tireless watch

over the slaves who live out their meager lives in this pit between fights. Durthik provides these slaves with just enough sustenance to keep them strong enough to fight.

C5: This side cavern serves as a preparation area for patrons who wish to test themselves in The Broken Gauntlet’s pit fights.

The Red Lady

A young female tiefling called the Red Lady is the Mistress of Ceremonies for The Broken Gauntlet’s pit fights. Her skin is deep red and her head is crowned with a pair of twisted black horns.

The Red Lady was cursed years ago with skin that erupts in small sores that constantly ooze blood, though she suffers no ill effects from this malady. Her tattered leather armor is stained a dark brown from her bleeding wounds. Rumors abound within the tavern about the reason for the curse, but no one knows the truth.

The Red Lady takes her position as Mistress of the Fights seriously and seeks to provide great spectacles at all times. When introducing combatants, she puts on a great show, using her startling appearance to dramatic effect. If approached away from the fights, she is quiet and matter-of-fact, rarely saying more than a few words at a time.

Regardless of the specifics of the fights, the Red Lady oversees all bets and introduces the fighters. Durthik gets a cut of every bet, no matter how large or small, and he pays the Lady well for her services.

The Pit Fights

Combat takes place in the central fight area every day and at all hours, though the frequency of such fights varies from day to day.

The tavern’s patrons are free to challenge each other in the pit, this being the most common form of combat seen in the tavern. If no such “challenge

fights” occur for a few hours, the Red Lady brings out some of the tavern’s slaves to duel with each other.

The lethality of these fights also varies, according to the proclivities of those involved. Patrons might engage in fights to best each other in combat or in fights to the death. Patrons can also “purchase” fights with the tavern’s stockpile of slaves at a hefty price.

Most of these fights take place between two combatants, though occasionally more fighters are involved. The circle of metal spikes in the fight area’s floor serves as a boundary for these fights, but it’s not uncommon for battles to flow over into the surrounding seating areas. Many patrons see this as a feature of the fights: One never knows when a fight will break free of the circle and involve onlookers. Fights even spill over into the tavern area above if a combatant attempts to flee the duel.

The Pit Slaves

Durthik purchases slaves who have outlived their usefulness from members of the Reforged Ring. At any given time, as many as a dozen slaves inhabit his pit.

The current “slave-pit champion” is Mertin, a middle-aged gnome who fights in a loincloth and carries only a single dagger into combat. Mertin has seventeen kills to his credit and is a fierce combatant.

SKULLPORT FACTIONS

The Broken Gauntlet is frequented by members of several factions that vie for control over Skullport. Refer to the “Backdrop: Skullport” in *Dungeon* 200 for more information on these factions.

The Lowfellows

Members of this secret society wish to end the recent incursions into the area and return Skullport to what it was just after the Spellplague ravaged the area.

They use The Broken Gauntlet to eavesdrop on those attempting to rebuild Skullport.

The Mandible

Members of this loose association of wealthy traders, pirates, and skulldiggers frequent the pit fights. They make large wagers with each other over minute details of each fight. Though these bets are generally friendly, it's not uncommon for a heated argument to erupt among their number over the specifics of a bet.

The Reforged Ring

Members of Skullport's slaver faction come to the tavern to sell slaves to Durthik and occasionally hang around to watch their former slaves do battle. They find Mertin's winning streak incomprehensible and hurl insults at both Mertin and his vanquished foe whenever the gnome gains another victory.

About the Author

Craig Campbell is an architect by day and a D&D® player, DM, and freelancer by night. He enjoys sticking it to the "architecture-man" by designing dungeons without stairwell guardrails or proper lighting control systems. He is a regular contributor to both *Dungeon* and *Dragon*, his most notable article being "Baba Yaga's Dancing Hut."

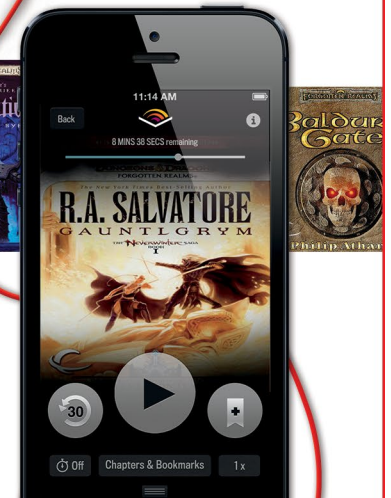
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Bestiary: Catastrophic Dragons

PART 2

By Robert J. Schwalb and Jennifer Clarke Wilkes

Illustrations by Zoltan Boros

In the darkest days of the Dawn War, Io died, cloven in two by a primordial's axe. From his body sprang his children, the dragon gods. Metallic dragons chose to follow Bahamut, while Tiamat led the chromatic dragons. Some dragons rebelled against Io's children, turning instead to the power of the primordials. These were the first catastrophic dragons, and though the primordials lost the Dawn War, their terrible children have endured.

Catastrophic dragons are the incarnation of destruction. Wind and fire, thunder and lightning, bitter cold and rending earth all rage within their draconic forms. These dragons bring disaster where they dwell, with the peace and order of civilization a favored target. Legends abound of world-shattering events spawned by catastrophic dragons. Destroying such threats is a job for heroes of uncommon might.

LIFE CYCLE

Like true dragons, catastrophic dragons are long-lived creatures with distinct stages of life that determine their abilities. The similarity between catastrophic

dragons and true dragons ends there, though. These creatures are as elemental as they are draconic, embodying their environment and demonstrating a unique life cycle.

This section contains information for the new catastrophic dragons introduced in this article and in last month's *Dragon*, as well as for the catastrophic dragons of *Monster Manual*® 3.

Eggs and Imprinting

As creatures of the elements, catastrophic dragons have long since lost the physical drives of their draconic kin. In addition to not needing to eat or sleep, catastrophic dragons do not mate, instead reproducing by metaphysically imprinting onto their environment.

Each breed of catastrophic dragon has its own reproductive cycle. Some, such as avalanche dragons and typhoon dragons, reproduce each year as the changing seasons inspire the events for which they are named. Others operate on a far more intermittent schedule, imprinting only every few decades when their natural disasters unfold. Catastrophic dragon eggs usually imprint only when a dragon of at least

adult age is present and participating in an elemental cataclysm. On rare occasions, however, a disaster of sufficient magnitude leaves behind such eggs even with no dragon present.

Catastrophic dragon eggs appear during the most fearsome episodes of elemental upheaval. For example, typhoon dragon eggs might be found buried in coastal sands, left behind by the swirling foam of the most violent tempests. The rubble of a deadly tremor might hold the rough-shelled eggs of an earthquake dragon, scattered among a city's broken stones. Blizzard dragon eggs might appear as crystalline orbs found in the wake of a deadly winter storm.

Gestation and Hatching

Catastrophic dragon eggs have widely varying rates of viability. Dragons that imprint more often have a lower success and survival rate, such that their numbers stay consistent with their slower-reproducing but more viable kin. Moreover, the gestation period of catastrophic dragon eggs is not a fixed length of time, but depends on the frequency and intensity of elemental forces affecting the local environment. Eggs can lay dormant for decades if untouched by the proper disaster, or they can hatch in a matter of months if the environment cooperates.

CATASTROPHIC DRAGON EGGS

"The damn pirates carried catastrophic dragon eggs in their hold! I lost my entire command that day. And my right eye."

—Bran Molworth, former port authority inspector

A catastrophic dragon egg takes the form of a nodule whose size, shape, and structure varies according to the type of dragon that imprinted it. Some appear to be made of stone or ice. Some are composed of

a swirling, flickering substance that can only be described as solid cloud-stuff. Earthquake dragon eggs might appear as roughly spherical boulders in a cave wall. Wildfire dragon eggs can take the form of ovoid coals, smoldering as they're dug up from beneath the ground. Typhoon dragon eggs can appear as effervescent bubbles of semisolid water buried in an otherwise empty stretch of sand.

Eggs average 8 inches long and weigh approximately 5 pounds, but even those imprinted at the same time and place can vary greatly in size. The one feature that catastrophic dragon eggs share is the elemental power imbued into them. Each contains the potential strength, fury, and capability for destruction of the dragon slated to one day hatch from it—but without sentience to guide or control it. Combined with their rarity, this makes catastrophic dragon eggs as valuable as they are dangerous.

While a catastrophic dragon egg remains in the area where it imprinted, it is relatively hardy and resistant to damage. When removed from its preferred hatching ground, it becomes a fragile liability. If not transported in the proper fashion, a catastrophic dragon egg can detonate—hatching prematurely to produce a blast of elemental energy that lays waste to the surrounding area.

With a bit of care, knowledgeable characters can secure and transport catastrophic dragon eggs with only minimal danger of mishap. Additionally, the Enchant Magic Item ritual allows catastrophic dragon eggs to be used as magic items until their consumable power is employed, reshaping the terrain around the egg into a hazardous zone of elemental energy.

Handling an Egg

It takes a successful DC 22 Arcana check or Dungeoneering check to recognize a catastrophic dragon egg. An egg can be extracted from the location where it imprinted and then packed with a DC 22 Arcana check or Dungeoneering check. The egg must be

DETONATING AN EGG

At your discretion, the repercussions for detonating a catastrophic dragon egg could extend beyond the effect noted in the magic item statistics block. The release of such concentrated chaotic energy might leave the terrain permanently altered at the site where the egg was destroyed, or it could introduce subtler changes into the landscape in a wider area.

The destruction of a catastrophic dragon egg might also attract a catastrophic dragon of the kind associated with the egg. The dragon might appear immediately, particularly if it was the creature that imprinted the egg that was destroyed, or it could be drawn to the site at a later date.

placed in a protective receptacle for transport, usually a form-fitting covering composed of alternating layers of materials such as wood, stone, clay, or liquid. If the check to extract and pack the egg fails by 5 or more, the egg detonates.

An unattended egg can be detonated if targeted with a melee attack, even if it has been properly prepared for transport. As a standard action, a catastrophic dragon of the same kind as the egg can detonate an egg it has line of sight and line of effect to, even if the another creature is holding or carrying the egg.

If an egg detonates, it has the same effect as an egg that is a consumable magic item, except that the burst is centered on the egg at the time it detonates, rather than up to 10 squares from that spot. The DM determines the appropriate level for the effect.

Catastrophic Dragon Egg Level 8+ Uncommon

With a cataclysmic roar, the egg fractures under the pressure of the elemental power within it.

Lvl 8	125 gp	Lvl 28	85,000 gp
Lvl 18	3,400 gp		

Consumable**Utility Power (Zone) ♦ Consumable (Standard Action)**

Effect: You hurl the egg up to 10 squares, where it creates a zone in a close burst 5 that lasts until the end of the encounter. The zone is difficult terrain, and the zone's damage starts at 5, increasing to 10 at level 18 and 15 at level 28. The type of egg, as follows, determines the zone's damage type and other effects.

Avalanche: Creatures that have earth walk ignore the zone's difficult terrain. Any creature that starts its turn in the zone takes damage and must succeed on a saving throw or fall prone. As an opportunity action, you slide a creature that falls prone in the zone up to 2 squares.

Blizzard (cold): Creatures that have ice walk ignore the zone's difficult terrain. The zone is heavily obscured. Any creature that starts its turn in the zone takes cold damage and is slowed until the start of its next turn.

Earthquake: Creatures that have earth walk ignore the zone's difficult terrain. Any creature that starts its turn in the zone takes damage and must succeed on a saving throw or fall prone. A creature in the zone cannot stand up during the turn in which it falls prone.

Tornado (cold, lightning): The zone is lightly obscured. Any creature that starts its turn in the zone takes cold and lightning damage, and the creature is slowed until the start of its next turn. As a minor action, you slide each slowed creature in the zone up to 3 squares.

Typhoon (lightning, thunder): Any creature that starts its turn in the zone takes lightning and thunder damage. As a minor action, you pull each creature in the zone up to 2 squares toward the zone's central square. A creature that would be pulled into the zone's central square falls prone instead.

Volcanic (fire, poison): The zone is lightly obscured. Any creature that starts its turn in the zone takes ongoing fire and poison damage, and it loses any fire resistance it has (save ends both).

Wildfire (fire): Creatures with fire resistance ignore the zone's difficult terrain. Any creature that starts its turn in the zone takes ongoing fire damage and can take no actions during another creature's turn (save ends both).

Eggs as Consumable Items

A character can use the Enchant Magic Item ritual to prepare a catastrophic dragon egg for use as a consumable item. If the egg is not imprinted at the time the ritual is used, the ritualist can determine the type of catastrophic dragon the egg's power emulates. Eggs that have been so prepared are said to be "tamed." When such an egg's consumable power is used, the egg is destroyed. A tamed egg cannot be detonated.

TORNADO DRAGON

"Friend, there ain't no reason to go to Gallowston. It's gone. Something tore a hole in the sky, and the wound bled dark, angry clouds. As the winds howled, a demon rode that storm. It danced in the lightning, and where it flew, death followed it."

—Renard, wilderness scout

Thunder shatters the silence. Black clouds scud across an olive sky, loosing random droplets to spatter and splash, but the rain stops as soon as it starts. The air goes still. The world holds its breath. Then the chilling quiet surrenders to a rising roar, as the churning clouds overhead unsheathe a black blade. The tornado descends to cut a ruinous swath across plain and forest, village and city—and within it swirls a draconic form, its roar eclipsing the wind's howl to herald the coming destruction.

A tornado dragon has a draconic shape, but its resemblance to chromatic and metallic dragons ends there. This monstrous thing is formed from black clouds, icy hail, and savage winds. Its eyes flash with lightning, and when it roars, it reveals teeth formed of white ice. When one takes to the air, it is hard to tell where the dragon begins and the storms stop.

Lore

Arcana DC 25: The most learned dragons recall the world's earliest days through legends told and retold across generations. One such tale involves the world's birth, when the primordials kindled creation within a sea of darkness. This nascent world was too hot and too unruly for life to prosper. And so Io, eager to populate this new realm, blew upon its surface to bank the land's fire, to settle the boiling oceans, and to solidify its tumultuous mass. His breath mingled with the elemental energies, and from this union were the first dragons born.

Io's breath lingered in all dragons, giving them the power and strength to earn their place as the world's mightiest creatures. In some dragons, the influence of primordial power remained strong and was held in check only by loyalty to their maker. With Io's death, those dragons shed their devotion to the gods and sought their own path.

Tornado dragons descend from those renegade dragons that found shelter in the Elemental Chaos, and which sided with the cruel primordial known as Yan-C-Bin. Sworn to the Chained God, the elemental prince saw these dragons as weapons he could use against his enemies and as tools to break his master's chains. He poisoned the dragons sheltering in his palace with toxic words, turning their hearts and souls against their kin. The tighter his control over the dragons, the more their draconic natures were eclipsed by elemental power.

Yan-C-Bin charged the first tornado dragons with killing the mortal servants of the gods, a task for which they were eminently suited. Destroying cities and menacing whole armies, the tornado dragons were stopped only by Bahamut and his seven gold dragon exarchs, who rallied the mortal legions and dispersed the elemental host. The surviving tornado dragons fled civilized lands and have lingered in the wilderness ever since.

Encounters

Tornado dragons struggle with their divided natures. Some remain loyal to Yan-C-Bin for the power he bestowed on them, serving the elemental prince despite his exile to the Elemental Chaos in the aftermath of the Dawn War. These tornado dragons fear their metallic kin and loathe Bahamut and his servants, haunted by their failure to complete Yan-C-Bin's mission. Others do their best to escape Yan-C-Bin's dark influence.

Loyalty and grief might divide them, but tornado dragons share a scorn for the world. Few cultivate mortal servants, and those that do destroy their devoted followers when they tire of them. Instead, tornado dragons seek out other elemental creatures for companionship, finding common ground with storm giants, typhoon dragons, and djinns. Demons hunt tornado dragons to enslave them, selling them into the service of Pazuzu and other demon lords.

CATASTROPHIC DRAGONS

The blizzard dragon, the earthquake dragon, and the volcanic dragon were introduced in *Monster Manual*® 3. This article details the tornado dragon and the wildfire dragon, and discusses the catastrophic dragon life cycle and catastrophic dragon eggs. The avalanche dragon and the typhoon dragon appeared in last month's *Dragon* magazine, along with information on the origins, physiology, and nature of these destructive creatures.

Tornado Dragons in Combat

Tornado dragons are wild and unpredictable opponents, charged with the fury of the worst spring storms. Cities and settled lands have little to fear from these creatures, which prefer the untamed prairies, savannahs, and forests. Despite the elemental nature that keeps them from needing to eat for sustenance, tornado dragons are driven by instinct to hunt. They scour their environments for herd animals, descend with sudden violence to tear apart victims, then leave the storm-battered carcasses to rot.

Isolated settlements sometimes receive similar attention, since tornado dragons have a hard time seeing humanoids as anything more than prey. As a result, borderland settlements and other places where civilization intrudes on the wilderness are at risk of a tornado dragon's attack.

Wild, spontaneous storms herald a tornado dragon's appearance. Black clouds pile up on the horizon, and a keen eye might spot the dragon flying along their leading edge. A swirling column of wind tethers the dragon to the storm, growing in intensity as it rips through trees, buildings, and anything else in its path. Like any natural storm, the tornado dragon produces torrential rains, hail, lightning, and damaging winds. The dragon's physical attacks are fearsome, to be sure, but its channeling of the storm's power greatly increases its devastation.

Environs and Lair

Tornado dragons claim fallen ruins, devastated cities, and mountain aeries as their own. A few settle in empty plains, savannahs, and deserts, but they avoid caves, canyons, and other confined spaces. An individual lair has little hold over a tornado dragon, however. As free spirits, these creatures roam lands far and wide, never staying in one place for long. Tornado dragons establish several lairs around a

Tornado Dragon Wyrmling	Level 3 Lurker
Medium elemental magical beast (air, dragon)	XP 150
HP 39; Bloodied 19	Initiative +8
AC 16, Fortitude 14, Reflex 15, Will 13	Perception +2
Speed 6, fly 6 (hover)	Darkvision
TRAITS	
☼ Whirling Winds ◆ Aura 1	
The dragon has partial concealment against any enemy in the aura.	
STANDARD ACTIONS	
⬇ Bite (cold) ◆ At-Will	
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +8 vs. AC	
Hit: 1d6 + 4 damage plus 1d8 cold damage.	
⬇ Claw (lightning) ◆ At-Will	
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +8 vs. AC	
Hit: 1d4 + 4 damage, and ongoing 5 lightning damage (save ends).	
⬇ Wyrmling Fury ◆ Recharge ☒ ☒	
Requirement: The dragon must be bloodied.	
Effect: The dragon uses bite and claw.	
TRIGGERED ACTIONS	
Storm Twist ◆ At-Will	
Trigger: The dragon takes lightning or thunder damage.	
Effect (Opportunity Action): The dragon becomes insubstantial and can shift up to its speed.	
Str 14 (+3)	Dex 17 (+4)
Con 15 (+3)	Int 10 (+1)
	Wis 13 (+2)
	Cha 11 (+1)
Alignment evil	Languages Draconic, Primordial

particular region, settling in one for a short time before moving off to another location.

Tornado dragons are creatures of the sky, enjoying nothing more than riding the air currents and the clouds. Left to itself, a tornado dragon in flight exhibits a gentle nature. When angered, however, its quiet strength turns quickly to terrifying violence. The sky darkens as fierce clouds erupt around the dragon. Lightning cuts through the gloom as torrential rains drown the land. When the source of the dragon's rage has been dealt with, it wings off to leave the storm to blow itself out.

These dragons share terrain with other catastrophic dragons, particularly blizzard and typhoon dragons. They hate metallic and chromatic dragons.

Young Tornado Dragon	Level 8 Elite Lurker
Large elemental magical beast (air, dragon)	XP 700
HP 144; Bloodied 72	Initiative +13
AC 21, Fortitude 19, Reflex 20, Will 18	Perception +7
Speed 8, fly 8 (hover)	Darkvision
Saving Throws +2; Action Points 1	
TRAITS	
☀ Whirling Winds ♦ Aura 1	
The dragon has partial concealment against any enemy in the aura.	
STANDARD ACTIONS	
⬇ Bite (cold) ♦ At-Will	
Attack: Melee 2 (one creature); +13 vs. AC	
Hit: 1d8 + 5 damage plus 2d6 cold damage.	
⬇ Claw (lightning) ♦ At-Will	
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +13 vs. AC	
Hit: 2d4 + 5 damage, and ongoing 5 lightning damage (save ends).	
⬇ Double Attack ♦ At-Will	
Effect: The dragon uses <i>bite</i> and <i>claw</i> or uses <i>claw</i> twice.	
MINOR ACTIONS	
⬇ Expanding Aura ♦ Recharge when the dragon starts its turn and its <i>whirling winds</i> is smaller than aura 5	
Effect: The <i>whirling winds</i> aura expands by 2 squares.	
⬇ Twister Unleashed ♦ Recharge when the dragon starts its turn and its <i>whirling winds</i> is aura 5	
Effect: Any effect on the dragon that includes the immobilized, restrained, or slowed condition ends. The dragon becomes insubstantial and shifts up to its speed, and it can move through enemies' spaces. Each time the dragon enters an enemy's space for the first time during this movement, it can use <i>bite</i> against that enemy. On a hit, the dragon slides the target up to 2 squares and the target falls prone.	
Effect: The dragon's <i>whirling winds</i> reverts to aura 1.	
TRIGGERED ACTIONS	
⬇ Storm Twist ♦ At-Will	
Trigger: The dragon takes lightning or thunder damage.	
Effect (<i>Opportunity Action</i>): The dragon becomes insubstantial and can shift up to its speed.	
Str 17 (+7)	Dex 20 (+9)
Con 18 (+8)	Int 13 (+5)
Wis 16 (+7)	Cha 14 (+6)
Alignment evil	Languages Common, Draconic, Primordial

Adult Tornado Dragon	Level 13 Elite Lurker
Large elemental magical beast (air, dragon)	XP 1,600
HP 210; Bloodied 105	Initiative +16
AC 26, Fortitude 24, Reflex 25, Will 23	Perception +10
Speed 8, fly 8 (hover)	Darkvision
Saving Throws +2; Action Points 1	
TRAITS	
☀ Whirling Winds ♦ Aura 1	
The dragon has partial concealment against any enemy in the aura.	
STANDARD ACTIONS	
⬇ Bite (cold) ♦ At-Will	
Attack: Melee 2 (one creature); +18 vs. AC	
Hit: 2d6 + 7 damage plus 2d6 cold damage.	
⬇ Claw (lightning) ♦ At-Will	
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +18 vs. AC	
Hit: 2d4 + 6 damage, and ongoing 10 lightning damage (save ends).	
⬇ Double Attack ♦ At-Will	
Effect: The dragon uses <i>bite</i> and <i>claw</i> or uses <i>claw</i> twice.	
MINOR ACTIONS	
⬇ Expanding Aura ♦ Recharge when the dragon starts its turn and its <i>whirling winds</i> is smaller than aura 5	
Effect: The <i>whirling winds</i> aura expands by 2 squares.	
⬇ Twister Unleashed ♦ Recharge when the dragon starts its turn and its <i>whirling winds</i> is aura 5	
Effect: Any effect on the dragon that includes the immobilized, restrained, or slowed condition ends. The dragon becomes insubstantial and shifts up to its speed, and it can move through enemies' spaces. Each time the dragon enters an enemy's space for the first time during this movement, it can use <i>bite</i> against that enemy. On a hit, the dragon slides the target up to 3 squares and the target falls prone.	
Effect: The dragon's <i>whirling winds</i> reverts to aura 1.	
TRIGGERED ACTIONS	
⬇ Storm Twist ♦ At-Will	
Trigger: The dragon takes lightning or thunder damage.	
Effect (<i>Opportunity Action</i>): The dragon becomes insubstantial and can shift up to its speed.	
Str 20 (+11)	Dex 23 (+12)
Con 21 (+11)	Int 16 (+9)
Wis 19 (+10)	Cha 17 (+9)
Alignment evil	Languages Common, Draconic, Primordial

Elder Tornado Dragon	Level 18 Elite Lurker
Huge elemental magical beast (air, dragon)	XP 4,000
HP 274; Bloodied 137	Initiative +21
AC 31, Fortitude 29, Reflex 30, Will 28	Perception +14
Speed 10, fly 10 (hover)	Darkvision
Saving Throws +2; Action Points 1	
TRAITS	
☀ Whirling Winds ♦ Aura 1	
The dragon has partial concealment against any enemy in the aura.	
STANDARD ACTIONS	
⬇ Bite (cold) ♦ At-Will	
Attack: Melee 3 (one creature); +23 vs. AC	
Hit: 2d8 + 8 damage plus 2d8 cold damage.	
⬇ Claw (lightning) ♦ At-Will	
Attack: Melee 2 (one creature); +23 vs. AC	
Hit: 2d6 + 8 damage, and ongoing 10 lightning damage (save ends).	
⬇ Double Attack ♦ At-Will	
Effect: The dragon uses <i>bite</i> and <i>claw</i> or uses <i>claw</i> twice.	
MINOR ACTIONS	
⬇ Expanding Aura ♦ Recharge when the dragon starts its turn and its <i>whirling winds</i> is smaller than aura 5	
Effect: The <i>whirling winds</i> aura expands by 2 squares.	
⬇ Twister Unleashed ♦ Recharge when the dragon starts its turn and its <i>whirling winds</i> is aura 5	
Effect: Any effect on the dragon that includes the immobilized, restrained, or slowed condition ends. The dragon becomes insubstantial and shifts up to its speed, and it can move through enemies' spaces. Each time the dragon enters an enemy's space for the first time during this movement, it can use <i>bite</i> against that enemy. On a hit, the dragon slides the target up to 4 squares and the target falls prone.	
Effect: The dragon's <i>whirling winds</i> reverts to aura 1.	
TRIGGERED ACTIONS	
⬇ Storm Twist ♦ At-Will	
Trigger: The dragon takes lightning or thunder damage.	
Effect (<i>Opportunity Action</i>): The dragon becomes insubstantial and can shift up to its speed.	
Str 21 (+14)	Dex 26 (+17)
Con 23 (+15)	Int 18 (+13)
Wis 21 (+14)	Cha 18 (+13)
Alignment evil	Languages Common, Draconic, Primordial

WILDFIRE DRAGON

“Fire lives but briefly. The dragon is its reincarnation.”

—Ang-tur, high shaman of Imix

A spark is struck on a bone-dry plain, touching off the sere fields in a sudden blaze. Smoke towers against the sky as flames push toward the nearby trees. Before long, an entire forest is aflame, its panicked creatures in flight. Embers fall on thatched roofs, igniting villages and cities in the ravenous fire's path. But more fearsome than the conflagration is the creature that spawned it. From the wildfire's heart rises a serpentine form, spreading blazing wings in mockery of the phoenix's rebirth. It sings with the roar of devouring flame and the savage joy of incineration.

A wildfire dragon appears to spring to life from the intense heat of a forest fire or the storm of smoke and flame that rises over a burning city. An observer can scarcely distinguish whether the dragon creates the flames or is summoned by them. Its wavering shape of flame is wreathed in cinders and smoke, barely constrained by a draconic form. While quiescent, a wildfire dragon's heat is encased in mounds of embers, deceptively calm. But in a flash, its monstrous flames explode to all-consuming fury.

Lore

Arcana DC 25: When the dragon god Io was slain, the dragons that witnessed the event were driven to insane revenge. The mightiest of Io's children were the ancient reds and golds, whose flame scoured the battlefields across which they pursued Io's killer, the primordial EreK-Hus.

Fearing that the wrath of the dragons would eventually grant them the upper hand, EreK-Hus forged an alliance with Imix the Fire Lord, who yearned to control the dragons of fire. The enraged dragons pursued EreK-Hus to the portal of Imix's ever-burning kingdom—a portal that granted entrance but no exit.

Ancient Tornado Dragon	Level 23 Elite Lurker
Huge elemental magical beast (air, dragon)	XP 10,200
HP 338; Bloodied 169	Initiative +24
AC 36, Fortitude 34, Reflex 35, Will 33	Perception +17
Speed 10, fly 10 (hover)	Darkvision
Saving Throws +2; Action Points 1	
TRAITS	
☀ Whirling Winds ◆ Aura 1	
The dragon has partial concealment against any enemy in the aura.	
STANDARD ACTIONS	
⬇ Bite (cold) ◆ At-Will	
Attack: Melee 3 (one creature); +28 vs. AC	
Hit: 2d10 + 9 damage plus 2d10 cold damage.	
⬇ Claw (lightning) ◆ At-Will	
Attack: Melee 2 (one creature); +28 vs. AC	
Hit: 2d6 + 9 damage, and ongoing 15 lightning damage (save ends).	
⬇ Double Attack ◆ At-Will	
Effect: The dragon uses <i>bite</i> and <i>claw</i> or uses <i>claw</i> twice.	
⬅ Blinding Wind (cold, thunder) ◆ Recharge ☄ ☄	
Attack: Close blast 5 (creatures in the blast); +26 vs. Fortitude	
Hit: 3d12 + 7 cold and thunder damage, and the target is blinded until the end of the dragon's next turn.	

Personality and Motivation

Tornado dragons are ferocious creatures of the air, soaring high above the earth and casting their ageless eyes on lands below to seek out prey and plunder. Humanoids of the frontier grasslands and savannah know these creatures as “sky demons,” “heaven's swords,” or “sword dragons.” A tornado dragon's destructive cyclone spins and dances, ripping up the ground as if the gods had reached down to carve up the world with blades of shrieking wind.

Elemental fury simmers just below the surface of every tornado dragon, and these creatures can explode with violence at the slightest provocation. They are quick to attack but just as quick to retreat, having no interest in fighting superior foes and losing interest in the destruction they wreak. They judge

MINOR ACTIONS

Expanding Aura ◆ **Recharge** when the dragon starts its turn and its *whirling winds* is smaller than aura 5

Effect: The *whirling winds* aura expands by 2 squares.

⬇ **Twister Unleashed** ◆ **Recharge** when the dragon starts its turn and its *whirling winds* is aura 5

Effect: Any effect on the dragon that includes the immobilized, restrained, or slowed condition ends. The dragon becomes insubstantial and shifts up to its speed, and it can move through enemies' spaces. Each time the dragon enters an enemy's space for the first time during this movement, it can use *bite* against that enemy. On a hit, the dragon slides the target up to 5 squares, and the target falls prone.

Effect: The dragon's *whirling winds* reverts to aura 1.

TRIGGERED ACTIONS

Storm Twist ◆ **At-Will**

Trigger: The dragon takes lightning or thunder damage.

Effect (Opportunity Action): The dragon becomes insubstantial and can shift up to its speed.

Str 24 (+18)

Dex 28 (+20)

Wis 23 (+17)

Con 25 (+18)

Int 20 (+16)

Cha 20 (+16)

Alignment evil

Languages Common, Draconic, Primordial

their enemies carefully, leaving larger creatures alone when smaller ones can satisfy the urge to hunt.

These creatures' fickle nature can easily land them in trouble. One nasty outburst against an underestimated foe can result in the dragon's destruction. As such, tornado dragons know not to tangle with other dragons, willingly showing deference to avoid a costly confrontation. They reserve their violence for smaller foes, making little distinction between humanoids and beasts in their perception of lesser creatures.



There, in a masterstroke of deceit, Eruk-Hus escaped and the dragons were captured by the Fire Lord.

The dragons' power fueled a great conflagration that left them as little more than wispy shapes of smoke and cinders. Imix's victory was short-lived, however, when he realized that the mighty red and gold dragons would not bend to his will even after bodily destruction. Furious, he cast them back into the world, where their thirst for revenge was reshaped into the need to unleash purifying flame.

Many wildfire dragons delight in the destruction of life, yearning to burn all green lands and humanoid settlements to ash. Others retain some of the goodness of their gold dragon forebears, but these wildfire dragons are no less destructive than their more furious kin. They see their fire as sacred, necessary to the cycle of birth, death, and regrowth. Such dragons become extremely knowledgeable about the environmental cycles of the territories in which they lair, watching the passing of seasons and years as they wait to unleash their cleansing fire.

Encounters

Wildfire dragons live in a variety of environments, from shallow burrows dug out from grassland to ancient ruins beneath a crowded city slum. They are interested only in their territory and its inevitable need to be reborn by burning. As such, wildfire dragons don't work well with others. Elementals and other creatures of fire are drawn to the presence of a wildfire dragon, hoping to take advantage of the conflagration it starts. Such creatures are never true allies, and a wildfire dragon might turn on those fighting alongside it after any opposition is defeated.

Humanoid cults revere wildfire dragons, but for very different purposes. Some worship the power of destruction that the dragon represents, anxious to see the world burn. Such cults are led by spellcasters and shamans specializing in fire powers, which they use in coordination with the dragon. Other cults turn to

worship, attempting to appease and control a wildfire dragon dwelling in settled lands. They believe that by engaging in the annual burning of croplands and forests, they can stave off the dragon's inferno for a time.

Wildfire Dragons in Combat

On the battlefield, a wildfire dragon is as ravenous and unpredictable as the firestorm it spawns. These creatures fight from the air, where they swoop down as a blast of living flame that burns all it touches. A wildfire dragon focuses its wrath on creatures that penetrate its scorching aura to deal it damage. Where foes mass against it, the dragon howls with delight as it easily moves through them, positioning itself so that its aura and attacks create the most destruction.

The freedom to move is vital to a wildfire dragon, which knows that its foes have no more chance to contain its fury than they have of grappling fire. As such, it reserves its most potent attacks for enemies that attempt to immobilize or restrain it.

Wildfire dragons are indiscriminate in their choice of targets, taking equal delight in watching all creatures burn. Deep in the core of each wildfire dragon, the memory of Io's fall and their corruption by Imix still burns. Though the primordials have long since been locked away, a wildfire dragon responds with immediate fury when facing any creature that serves the imprisoned primordials or seeks to advance their dreams of freedom.

Environs and Lair

Wildfire dragons are drawn to any place where plentiful tinder can be found. Forests dried by months of arid wind, summer-parched slums, desiccated desert villages, and sun-blasted grasslands can all become home to these deadly creatures.

To many observers, a wildfire dragon appears restless, lairing only long enough to leave a charred wasteland behind, then soaring away on the burning

Wildfire Dragon Wyrmling Level 1 Skirmisher
Medium elemental magical beast (fire, dragon) XP 100

HP 30; Bloodied 15 Initiative +6
AC 15, Fortitude 12, Reflex 14, Will 13 Perception +8
Speed 6, fly 6 (hover) Darkvision

TRAITS
☼ **Withering Heat (fire) ♦ Aura 1**
Any enemy that ends its turn in the aura takes 3 fire damage, and the enemy can take no actions until the start of its next turn.

Flash Fire
The dragon can enter enemies' spaces during its movement.

STANDARD ACTIONS
⬇ **Bite (fire) ♦ At-Will**
Attack: Melee 2 (one creature); +6 vs. AC
Hit: 1d8 + 4 fire damage.
⬇ **Claw (fire) ♦ At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +4 vs. Reflex
Hit: 1d6 + 4 fire damage, and the dragon can slide the target 1 square.
⬇ **Wyrmling Fury ♦ Recharge** ☼ ☼
Requirement: The dragon must be bloodied.
Effect: The dragon uses *bite* and *claw*.

TRIGGERED ACTIONS
Sudden Conflagration (fire) ♦ At-Will
Trigger: The dragon takes fire damage.
Effect (Opportunity Action): The dragon shifts up to half its speed. Each time the dragon enters a creature's space for the first time during this movement, that creature takes 3 fire damage.

Str 12 (+1) Dex 18 (+4) Wis 16 (+3)
Con 14 (+2) Int 11 (+0) Cha 12 (+1)
Alignment unaligned **Languages** Draconic, Primordial

Young Wildfire Dragon Level 6 Elite Skirmisher
Large elemental magical beast (fire, dragon) XP 500

HP 146; Bloodied 73 Initiative +10
AC 20, Fortitude 17, Reflex 19, Will 18 Perception +12
Speed 8, fly 8 (hover) Darkvision
Saving Throws +2; Action Points 1

TRAITS
☼ **Withering Heat (fire) ♦ Aura 1**
Any enemy that ends its turn in the aura takes 5 fire damage, and the enemy can take no actions until the start of its next turn.

Flash Fire
The dragon can enter enemies' spaces during its movement.

STANDARD ACTIONS
⬇ **Bite (fire) ♦ At-Will**
Attack: Melee 3 (one creature); +11 vs. AC
Hit: 1d10 + 8 fire damage.
⬇ **Claw (fire) ♦ At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +9 vs. Reflex
Hit: 1d8 + 8 fire damage, and the dragon can slide the target 1 square.
⬇ **Double Attack ♦ At-Will**
Effect: The dragon uses *bite* and *claw* or uses *claw* twice.

MINOR ACTIONS
Expanding Aura ♦ Recharge when the dragon starts its turn and its *withering heat* is smaller than aura 5
Effect: The *withering heat* aura expands by 2 squares.
⬅ **Spreading Inferno (fire) ♦ Recharge** when the dragon starts its turn and its *withering heat* is aura 5
Effect: Any effect on the dragon that includes the immobilized, restrained, or slowed condition ends. The dragon shifts up to its speed. Each time the dragon enters an enemy's space for the first time during this movement, it can use *claw* against that enemy. On a hit, the target also takes ongoing 5 fire damage (save ends).

TRIGGERED ACTIONS
Sudden Conflagration (fire) ♦ At-Will
Trigger: The dragon takes fire damage.
Effect (Opportunity Action): The dragon shifts up to its speed. Each time the dragon enters a creature's space for the first time during this movement, that creature takes 5 fire damage.

Str 15 (+5) Dex 21 (+8) Wis 19 (+7)
Con 17 (+6) Int 14 (+5) Cha 15 (+5)
Alignment unaligned **Languages** Common, Draconic, Primordial

Adult Wildfire Dragon Level 11 Elite Skirmisher
Large elemental magical beast (fire, dragon) XP 1,200

HP 232; Bloodied 116 Initiative +14
AC 25, Fortitude 22, Reflex 24, Will 23 Perception +15
Speed 8, fly 8 (hover) Darkvision
Saving Throws +2; Action Points 1

TRAITS
☼ **Withering Heat (fire) ♦ Aura 1**
Any enemy that ends its turn in the aura takes 5 fire damage, and the enemy can take no actions until the start of its next turn.

Flash Fire
The dragon can enter enemies' spaces during its movement.

STANDARD ACTIONS
⬇ **Bite (fire) ♦ At-Will**
Attack: Melee 3 (one creature); +16 vs. AC
Hit: 1d12 + 12 fire damage.
⬇ **Claw (fire) ♦ At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +14 vs. Reflex
Hit: 1d8 + 12 fire damage, and the dragon slides the target up to 2 squares.
⬇ **Double Attack ♦ At-Will**
Effect: The dragon uses *bite* and *claw* or uses *claw* twice.

MINOR ACTIONS
Expanding Aura ♦ Recharge when the dragon starts its turn and its *withering heat* is smaller than aura 5
Effect: The *withering heat* aura expands by 2 squares.
⬅ **Spreading Inferno (fire) ♦ Recharge** when the dragon starts its turn and its *withering heat* is aura 5
Effect: Any effect on the dragon that includes the immobilized, restrained, or slowed condition ends. The dragon shifts up to its speed. Each time the dragon enters an enemy's space for the first time during this movement, it can use *claw* against that enemy. On a hit, the target also takes ongoing 10 fire damage (save ends).

TRIGGERED ACTIONS
Sudden Conflagration (fire) ♦ At-Will
Trigger: The dragon takes fire damage.
Effect (Opportunity Action): The dragon shifts up to its speed. Each time the dragon enters a creature's space for the first time during this movement, that creature takes 10 fire damage.

Str 18 (+9) Dex 24 (+12) Wis 21 (+10)
Con 20 (+10) Int 16 (+8) Cha 18 (+9)
Alignment unaligned **Languages** Common, Draconic, Primordial

Elder Wildfire Dragon Level 16 Elite Skirmisher
Huge elemental magical beast (fire, dragon) XP 2,800

HP 316; **Bloodied** 158 **Initiative** +18
AC 30, **Fortitude** 27, **Reflex** 29, **Will** 28 **Perception** +19
Speed 10, fly 10 (hover) **Darkvision**

Saving Throws +2; **Action Points** 1

TRAITS

☼ **Withering Heat** (fire) ◆ **Aura** 1
Any enemy that ends its turn in the aura takes 5 fire damage, and the enemy can take no actions until the start of its next turn.

Flash Fire
The dragon can enter enemies' spaces during its movement.

STANDARD ACTIONS

⬇ **Bite** (fire) ◆ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 4 (one creature); +21 vs. AC
Hit: 2d6 + 16 fire damage.

⬇ **Claw** (fire) ◆ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 2 (one creature); +19 vs. Reflex
Hit: 1d12 + 16 fire damage, and the dragon slides the target up to 2 squares.

⬇ **Double Attack** ◆ **At-Will**
Effect: The dragon uses *bite* and *claw* or uses *claw* twice.

MINOR ACTIONS

Expanding Aura ◆ **Recharge** when the dragon starts its turn and its *withering heat* is smaller than aura 5
Effect: The *withering heat* aura expands by 2 squares.

⬅ **Spreading Inferno** (fire) ◆ **Recharge** when the dragon starts its turn and its *withering heat* is aura 5
Effect: Any effect on the dragon that includes the immobilized, restrained, or slowed condition ends. The dragon shifts up to its speed. Each time the dragon enters an enemy's space for the first time during this movement, it can use *claw* against that enemy. On a hit, the target also takes ongoing 10 fire damage (save ends).

TRIGGERED ACTIONS

Sudden Conflagration (fire) ◆ **At-Will**
Trigger: The dragon takes fire damage.
Effect (Opportunity Action): The dragon shifts up to its speed. Each time the dragon enters a creature's space for the first time during this movement, that creature takes 10 fire damage.

Str 20 (+13) **Dex** 27 (+16) **Wis** 23 (+14)
Con 22 (+14) **Int** 18 (+12) **Cha** 21 (+13)

Alignment unaligned **Languages** Common, Draconic, Primordial

Ancient Wildfire Dragon Level 21 Elite Skirmisher
Huge elemental magical beast (fire, dragon) XP 6,400

HP 400; **Bloodied** 200 **Initiative** +22
AC 35, **Fortitude** 32, **Reflex** 34, **Will** 33 **Perception** +22
Speed 10, fly 10 (hover) **Darkvision**

Saving Throws +2; **Action Points** 1

TRAITS

☼ **Withering Heat** (fire) ◆ **Aura** 1
Any enemy that ends its turn in the aura takes 5 fire damage, and the enemy can take no actions until the start of its next turn.

Flash Fire
The dragon can enter enemies' spaces during its movement.

STANDARD ACTIONS

⬇ **Bite** (fire) ◆ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 4 (one creature); +26 vs. AC
Hit: 2d8 + 20 fire damage.

⬇ **Claw** (fire) ◆ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 2 (one creature); +24 vs. Reflex
Hit: 2d6 + 20 fire damage, and the dragon slides the target up to 2 squares.

⬇ **Double Attack** ◆ **At-Will**
Effect: The dragon uses *bite* and *claw* or uses *claw* twice.

☼ **Enveloping Torch** (fire) ◆ **Recharge** ☼ ☼ ☼
Attack: Area burst 2 within 10 (creatures in the burst); +24 vs. Reflex
Hit: 4d6 + 20 fire damage.

wind. After it does so, a wildfire dragon returns to a former lair when the once-devastated landscape begins to show signs of new growth and life, where it observes the earth's renewal and potential. A quiescent dragon sinks into the scorched soil and mingles with the ash of whatever once stood there, extending its awareness over the entire area. In a state of semi-consciousness, it remains sensitive to the cycles of the land and its seasons, waiting for the chance to renew that cycle again.

Personality and Motivation

A wildfire dragon exults in the inferno it creates. As the flames mount higher, the dragon dances on the burning air, singing in a voice that echoes the rush of

MINOR ACTIONS

Expanding Aura ◆ **Recharge** when the dragon starts its turn and its *withering heat* is smaller than aura 5

Effect: The *withering heat* aura expands by 2 squares.

⬅ **Spreading Inferno** (fire) ◆ **Recharge** when the dragon starts its turn and its *withering heat* is aura 5

Effect: Any effect on the dragon that includes the immobilized, restrained, or slowed condition ends. The dragon shifts up to its speed. Each time the dragon enters an enemy's space for the first time during this movement, it can use *claw* against that enemy. On a hit, the target also takes ongoing 10 fire damage (save ends).

TRIGGERED ACTIONS

Sudden Conflagration (fire) ◆ **At-Will**

Trigger: The dragon takes fire damage.

Effect (Opportunity Action): The dragon shifts up to its speed. Each time the dragon enters a creature's space for the first time during this movement, that creature takes 15 fire damage.

Str 23 (+16) **Dex** 30 (+20) **Wis** 25 (+17)

Con 24 (+17) **Int** 21 (+15) **Cha** 23 (+16)

Alignment unaligned **Languages** Common, Draconic, Primordial

wind at the heart of the blaze. For the dragon, cleansing fire is the purpose of existence.

A wildfire dragon embodies the enduring and destructive nature of flame. The speed with which it can unleash its devastating power seems contrary to the length of time it can lie dormant. After becoming established in a particular area, a wildfire dragon can quietly remain for several humanoid generations.

These creatures are fascinated by the natural world and its growth. They also see the world in terms of its movement toward the tipping point where destruction is necessary, and as the source of the fuel with which that destruction can be shaped.

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The DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® game isn't any single play experience. Not only has the game been through several editions, but it also has appeared in the form of electronic games, choose-your-own-adventure books, board games, card games, dice games, and more. Add to that variety the version of the game played at each individual table, and you can begin to appreciate the rich array of possible play styles. We all create our own D&D® experiences through play.

This article offers new rules options to aid a variety of play styles. Options presented here run the gamut from classic concepts to elements from previous editions to wild ideas for fundamentally changing your game experience.

The purpose of these rules is to fire your imagination and show you different ways to play. It's your game. Play it in the way that's the most fun for you and your friends.

FUMBLES

Few die rolls are more frustrating than a 1 on a d20. An automatic miss means an opportunity lost, a resource spent, and an enemy alive. For some players, these results are bad enough. But others argue that a 1 ought to carry an additional result—especially since a natural 20 almost always means a critical hit.

Fumbles are to 1s as critical hits are to 20s. Just as each roll of a die gives you a chance to deliver a powerful hit, it also provides an equal chance that you'll

be in a bad position for responding to enemy attacks. The following rules options present different ways to handle natural 1s.

Characters relying on close and area attacks have more chances to roll 1s than do characters favoring single-target melee and ranged attacks. Although the wizard might have more chances to fumble, he or she also has more chances to score a critical hit.

Basic Fumble

Whenever you roll a natural 1 on an attack roll, after resolving all the other attack rolls for a close or area attack, your turn ends. You grant combat advantage until the start of your next turn.

Fumble Tokens

You can have fumbles change fate by using fumble tokens. Whenever a player rolls a natural 1 on an attack roll, the DM gains a fumble token. Whenever the DM rolls a natural 1 on an attack roll, the player group gains a fumble token.

When anyone scores a critical hit, the other side can spend a fumble token to treat the critical hit as a normal hit. In addition, anyone who rolls a natural 1 on an attack roll can spend a fumble token to reroll the attack roll after the other side gains a fumble token.

Random Fumble

The charm of a fumble is its unpredictability. Whenever you roll a natural 1 on an attack roll, after resolving all the other attack rolls for a close or area attack, make a saving throw and compare the result to the Random Fumbles table.

RANDOM FUMBLES

Roll	Result
1	You are stunned until the end of your next turn.
2	You are dazed until the end of your next turn.
3	You are weakened until the end of your next turn.
4	You are immobilized until the end of your next turn.
5	You provoke an opportunity attack from one enemy.
6	You fall prone.
7	Your turn ends, and you grant combat advantage until the start of your next turn.
8	You grant combat advantage until the start of your next turn.
9	You are slowed until the end of your next turn.
10+	No effect

INJURIES

Although the damage from a critical hit is impressive, it's just damage, and unless it's sufficient to drop or bloody the target, the critical hit has no other lasting consequences.

The injuries rules option boosts the effects of a critical hit by imposing a condition that hampers the foe's ability to fight and protect itself against further attacks. The following rules options supplement the normal rules for critical hits.

Just as fumbles are worse for creatures that can make multiple attack rolls each round, rules for injuries can benefit such creatures.

Basic Injury

Whenever you score a critical hit that bloodies the enemy, that target becomes injured (save ends). While injured, the target takes a -2 penalty to attack rolls and grants combat advantage.

Random Injury

For unpredictable results for injuries, whenever a critical hit bloodies a creature, the bloodied target must make a saving throw and compare the result to the Random Injuries table. The creature that scored the critical hit is the attacker.

RANDOM INJURIES

Roll	Result
1	Target is stunned until the end of the attacker's next turn.
2	Target is dazed until the end of the attacker's next turn.
3	Target is weakened until the end of the attacker's next turn.
4	Target falls prone.
5	Attacker pushes the target up to 1d4 squares.
6	Target grants combat advantage and takes a -2 penalty to attack rolls and to saving throws until the end of the attacker's next turn.
7	Target grants combat advantage and takes a -2 penalty to attack rolls (save ends).
8	Target grants combat advantage and takes a -2 penalty to attack rolls until the end of the attacker's next turn.
9	Target grants combat advantage until the end of the attacker's next turn.
10+	No effect

GROUP ACTION PHASE

After combat starts, it can be difficult to end without one side slaughtering the other. If you want to parlay, you risk doing nothing else during a round. If you want to flee, all it takes is one ally deciding to stay and fight to drag everyone back into the fray.

If one character wants to talk peacefully with the villain, all the other characters must cease hostilities, or the villain isn't liable to react well. Then, if the villain still fights, the characters have either wasted their turns or reset all their initiative counts into one big clump of readied actions.

If the players want to retreat, each character must leave on his or her initiative count. And unless everyone readies an action to flee when the last character's initiative count comes up, the initiative order could leave one character as the focus of all the enemies' attacks. If the group uses this tactic and someone is immobilized, slowed, or otherwise hung up, the whole party has wasted a round during a fight that probably wasn't going well in the first place.

Conscientious players can help avoid these troubles through good communication and a focus on fair play, but a DM might or might not take advantage of the players' plans. A good DM can sense when the story and excitement of play might be better served by letting the fight end, but that call can sometimes be hard to make.

Enter the group action phase! This rules option provides a phase at the end of each round wherein both sides decide if they fight, parlay, or flee. Using the group action phase is likely to result in more role-playing and more running away.

Parlay: If both sides want to parlay, the fight (but not the encounter) ends, and the interacting starts. If one side decides to parlay but the other chooses to fight, the fight continues as normal.

Flee: If one side decides to flee, and the other side allows it or also wishes to flee, the fight ends and the

interaction starts. Each side removes its incapacitated members from the scene if possible, and communication can occur in the meantime. Either side can later decide to pursue the other, resulting in a chase or tracking scenario (perhaps a skill challenge). The encounter ends only when both sides have separated.

If one side chooses to flee and the other side chooses to fight, then the fight continues as normal. The side that wishes to disengage then has to rely on the normal rules to do so.

ACTION OPTIONS

In the 3rd Edition of the game, some combat actions were options for any character. You can bring these options back to the table with the following material.

Overrun

Overrun lets you move through an enemy's space and keep moving without provoking opportunity attacks.

Overrun		Attack
<i>You power forward to break through the enemy ranks.</i>		
At-Will		
Standard Action	Personal	
Effect: Move up to your speed. Each square you enter must be farther from where you started this movement. During this movement, you can use the following secondary power.		
Secondary Power		
Free Action	Melee 1	
Trigger: You enter a square adjacent to an enemy, and you have enough speed remaining to move through the enemy's space without ending there.		
Target: The enemy you moved adjacent to		
Attack: Strength vs. Fortitude		
Hit: You can move through the target's space, but you can't end there. Your movement doesn't provoke opportunity attacks from the target until the end of your current turn.		
Miss: Your movement ends, and you provoke an opportunity attack from the target.		

Improved Overrun

You can knock foes out of your way as you move.

Prerequisite: Strength 13

Benefit: When using *overrun*, you gain a +4 feat bonus to the attack roll. If you miss with the attack made as part of your *overrun* attempt, you do not provoke an opportunity attack from your target.

Trampling Overrun

You run foes over as you move.

Prerequisite: Strength 13, Improved Overrun

Benefit: When you hit with the *overrun* attack, the target also falls prone. In addition, the secondary power of *overrun* requires no action (rather than a free action) for you, potentially allowing you to move through more than one creature's space.

Trip

Trip lets you knock an enemy prone.

Trip		Attack
<i>You knock your enemy from its feet.</i>		
At-Will		
Standard Action	Melee 1	
Target: One creature		
Attack: Strength or Dexterity vs. Fortitude or Reflex (target's choice)		
Hit: The target falls prone.		
Miss: You provoke an opportunity attack from the target.		

Improved Trip

You know how to knock your foes down.

Prerequisite: Dexterity 13 or Strength 13

Benefit: When using *trip*, you gain a +4 feat bonus to the attack roll. If you miss with the attack made as part of your *trip* attempt, you do not provoke an opportunity attack from your target.

Knock Down

When you put an enemy down, you can make it want to stay down.

Prerequisite: Dexterity 13 or Strength 13

Benefit: When you make a melee attack against an enemy adjacent to you and score a critical hit, you can use *trip* as a free action. If an enemy adjacent to you uses the stand up action, you can make a melee basic attack against that enemy as an immediate reaction.

Disarm

This edition of the game lacks a disarm maneuver because of the problems it can cause and because it's a tactic that few have the skill to employ. But if you like the idea and are willing to adjudicate what happens when someone loses a weapon or item, consider adding the following disarm rules to your game.

Disarm		Attack
<i>You rip your enemy's weapon away.</i>		
At-Will		
Standard Action	Melee weapon	
Target: One creature		
Attack: Strength or Dexterity vs. Fortitude or Reflex (target's choice)		
Hit: The target drops one item it is holding (your choice).		
Miss: You provoke an opportunity attack from the target.		

Improved Disarm

You've become an expert at disarming opponents.

Prerequisite: Dexterity 13 or Strength 13

Benefit: When using *disarm*, you gain a +4 feat bonus to the attack roll. If you have a hand free when you successfully disarm a target, you can take the item in your hand rather than causing the target to drop it. If you miss with the attack made as part of your *disarm* attempt, you do not provoke an opportunity attack from your target.

Sunder

A monster's equipment has little impact on its combat capabilities. Items are listed to help players visualize what the monster is doing. When you use *sunder*, however, you reduce the effectiveness of a foe's equipment instead of dealing damage.

Sunder

Attack

Rather than strike at your foe, you attack an object it carries.

At-Will ♦ **Weapon**

Standard Action **Melee weapon**

Target: One item that is not an artifact that a creature is holding or wearing

Attack: Strength vs. Reflex

Hit: Choose one of the following effects.

Weapon or Implement: A creature takes a cumulative -1 penalty to attack rolls using the weapon or implement until the end of the encounter. On a critical hit, the penalty equals 1d4 + 1. If the penalty equals -5 - the item's enhancement bonus, or worse, the item is destroyed.

Armor: A creature takes a cumulative -1 penalty to AC until the end of the encounter. On a critical hit, the penalty equals 1d4 + 1. If the penalty equals -5 - the item's enhancement bonus, or worse, the item is destroyed.

Other Items: The DM determines the effect. For instance, a potion bottle might shatter.

Miss: You provoke an opportunity attack from the creature holding the target.

Improved Sunder

You've become an expert at breaking items.

Prerequisite: Strength 13

Benefit: When using *sunder*, you gain a +4 feat bonus to the attack roll. If you miss with the attack made as part of your *sunder* attempt, you do not provoke an opportunity attack from the creature holding the target.

ACTION POINTS

Action points joined the D&D game in 3rd Edition's **EBERRON**® campaign setting. Their inclusion allowed players to nudge the game toward a more cinematic experience. Originally, you could spend an action point to add a variable number to any roll of a d20. *Unearthed Arcana*, from the same edition, offered additional options for players to boost feats and take special actions. All in all, action points proved an awesome resource for giving player characters an edge in combat.

Fourth Edition brought action points forward. Instead of adding to a die roll, action points now grant extra actions. Paragon paths grant extra benefits for spending action points, and feats and class features might modify action point effects even further.

The following rules options offer expanded effects for spending action points. Use as many of them as you find suitable for your game. If an option allows you to spend an action point to gain a benefit, you do not gain an extra action when you spend an action point in that way.

No Limits

During a combat encounter, a character can spend as many action points as he or she has.

The limits on action point expenditures help constrain their impact on combat encounters and ensure that play moves quickly, and they discourage hoarding for an important encounter.

If you choose to allow unlimited action point expenditures, paragon path and epic destiny features that allow characters to spend two or more action points per encounter should grant a character one extra healing surge instead.

Roll Bonus

When you make an attack roll, saving throw, ability check, or skill check, you can spend an action point to add 1d8 to the roll.

Damage Bonus

Whenever you roll damage, you can spend an action point to deal 1[W] extra damage if the attack was a weapon attack, or 1d8 extra damage if it wasn't. Only one target of the attack takes this extra damage.

Regain Encounter Power

When you miss with an encounter attack power, you can spend an action point to regain the use of that power. If you have the Psionic Augmentation class feature, you can spend an action point to regain the power points expended when you miss with an augmented at-will attack power.

Spend Healing Surge

You can spend an action point to spend a healing surge to regain hit points.

Cancel a Critical Hit

You can spend an action point when an enemy scores a critical hit against you. The enemy then treats the critical hit as a normal hit.

VARIABLE DEFENSES

Combat in the D&D game works with attack rolls made against static defenses. A creature's AC, Fortitude, Reflex, or Will gives a target number that the attack roll must meet or exceed. But what if you did it the other way around?

In concept, the switch is simple. Instead of having the attacker make an attack roll, assign all attacks a base value of 10 and apply the normal attack

modifiers. It's as if everyone rolls a 10 on the d20 when attacking.

Then apply the reverse logic to defenses. Instead of a defense of 10 plus modifiers, the defense is a d20 roll plus modifiers. A result that is equal to or lower than the attacker's static attack number is a hit. A roll of 1 on a defense roll makes the attack a critical hit. A roll of 20 makes the attack a miss, regardless of the attacker's attack number.

This change might not seem significant, but it can have interesting psychological effects upon how you view combat.

First of all, when your character makes an attack, you and the other players are watching the DM roll to defend. Likewise, when it's the DM's turn to make attacks, those targeted must actively roll to defend. Attention shifts from attacker to defender every turn. This play style can help everyone stay more engaged.

Secondly, you might start to see combat as less about how much you can bash down your foes and more about whether you can dodge and survive. This attitude shift can make some players more likely to avoid battle, even though the essential nature of combat remains unchanged. The net result of using variable defenses might be that combats in your campaign become less common and more interesting.

Rolling a 20 has been a cornerstone of the D&D game's culture for decades, but with the introduction of this mechanic, that result becomes less important. A critical hit actually happens when your enemy rolls a 1. Your roll of 20 just means that an attack misses you, and it probably wouldn't have hit if you had rolled a 15 or more.

This rules option essentially places the onus of the action on the defender. Instead of a critical hit representing an exceptionally well-delivered blow or powerful effect, it represents the target somehow fumbling its defense—ducking into the uppercut or dropping a shield just in time for the *fireball* spell's explosion.

The same attitude shift holds true for regular attacks as well. Because everyone uses a static attack value, every attack seems like the defender's opportunity to dodge rather than the attacker's opportunity to take control of the situation. The narrative focus shifts from what the attacker does to how the defender reacts. It's natural with variable defenses to describe how you duck out of the way rather than how you stab your enemy.

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DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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The Night Thelva Clovenaxe Flew

By Ed Greenwood

Illustrations by Zoltan Boros & Gabor Szikszai and Adam Danger Cook

CHAPTER 1: IN THE HOUSE OF THIRST

Folks called Ruthgulur Clovenaxe “the Bearded Barrel” for good reason. It didn’t take a keen eye to notice that he was larger around than he stood tall. Moreover, he was getting larger, and he lurched through most days with at least one strap of his suspenders flying free. All those suspenders had seven

straps of the stoutest leather he could find, and his best pair had nine.

His wife Thelva was even larger. Between her magnificent bosom and her girdle-girt hips, her tummy thrust out at the world like the bulging flank of a well-fed ox. This comparison was not, as Ruthgulur had learned, one that was safe to voice in her hearing.

Neither of the Clovenaxes was built for running, forging, climbing, or mining. They were best suited for what they did—working long days and nights as

strong spirits blenders in Dlarthen’s House of Thirst in Trades Ward. Though neither had been sober for as long as either could remember, their inebriation was a condition reached honorably. While awake, they were nigh constantly sipping to judge the tastes of Dlarthen’s specialty blends.

Ohlmar Dlarthen, a dashing young dwarf entrepreneur, had developed a system for getting the most from his liquor investment. For the past nine summers, he had been buying up odd ends of liquid cargoes cheaply from creaking holds and forgotten corners of warehouses, spicing them with the contents of casks salvaged from the waves (often tainted with seawater), and then blending the results with known better quaffs. In this way, he stretched otherwise wasted swill into vats of acceptable throatslake that could fill many a tankard.

This technique had made Dlarthen quite rich, but he couldn’t have done it without the Clovenaxes, and they knew it. They were proud of their work, and well paid—yet like many dwarves, they were dedicated to getting as rich as they could, as fast as they could.

To that end, on this particular stormy, rain-drenched night hard on the heels of Halaster’s Highharvesttide, the rotund dwarf couple sat in the cavernous back room of the House of Thirst. Though sunset had come and gone hours earlier, the Clovenaxes were still belching and mumbling their way through a long line of tankards, in hopes of hitting upon the right blend to fill the large, sagging vats looming behind them.

“Well?” Thelva asked hopefully.



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Ruthgulur spat what he was tasting into the battered funnel whose attached hose led through the stained and much-patched floorboards and down into the sewers—where, he suspected, dozens of drunken eels greedily clustered unseen. “Tastes of owlbear eggs. And dung,” he announced sourly.

His wife’s bristling eyebrows shot upward. “I’ll not ask how you know the taste of that particular combination,” she replied. “Increasingly, I’m *glad* you’ve never shared the details of your wild youth with me.”

Ruthgulur snarled something she didn’t quite catch (and was rather grateful she hadn’t), then added, “I’ll be needing yon bucket to clear my mouth of *that* foulness. Your turn.”

Thelva handed him the bucket of diced raw turnip, picked up her tankard, and made a note on the parchment in front of her. “Three parts *I Love Eberon*, one part *City of Doors*, one part *Watershallow*, and one part *Pixie Lich*. Here goes.”

“That’s *Pixie Lick*,” Ruthgulur corrected, around a mouthful of turnip.

Thelva sighed, nodded, and wrote down the correction. Making sure her false beard was hanging on a hook a safe distance away, she hefted her tankard, tried to ignore the ominous bubbles arising from it, and took a cautious sip.

Ruthgulur watched her face harden. She couldn’t suppress a shudder.

“Bitter. Way bitter. Strong, warm, hearty aftertaste, but. . . .” Thelva shook her head. “Too bitter for Waterdeep. Humans like to taste more than just their first sip of the night. Bucket.”

Ruthgulur handed back the turnip bucket and read out his own blend as he wrote it down. “*Essence of Vampiric Chicken, Good Gravy, More Than Fifty Shades of the Minions of a Gray Succubus*—where *do* distillers come up with these names? Oh, and *Blind Seers Smell the Future*—all equal parts. Now I’m stirring *The Druid Ducks* into it—one part.”

Together they watched the new mixture erupt in a sudden shower of bubbles, then emit a thin plume of smoke that swiftly faded away in winking sparks. “What’s up?” Thelva asked suspiciously. “Duck?”

Ruthgulur shrugged. “I’m getting paid for this,” he mumbled, and took a sip. His face twisted, he swayed, then he slammed one fist down on the table in agony before spitting into the funnel and pouring the rest of the mixture into it. “A decided ‘no,’” he announced when he could speak again, writing down that same judgment with emphatic strokes.

Thelva chuckled. “The question is, are we getting paid enough?”

“At times like this,” Ruthgulur replied gloomily, “you know the answer.” He surveyed the line of waiting casks. “So, is *The Druid Ducks* the problem here? Is there *anything* we’ve managed to blend it with? Er, successfully?”

His wife ran one pudgy finger up the long, long list of blends and verdicts. “*Underscribe of the Understair* and *The Merry Maid of the Middens*,” she reported at last, “but that mix ate the bottom out of a cast iron tankard and dissolved the glaze on a fired one, so we got rid of it—fast. I *liked* the taste, but—and I quote myself—my gut felt like the last thing the right hand of Vecna touched.”

“So, not successful,” Ruthgulur pointed out. He looked at the casks again. “How much of *The Druid Ducks* do we have?”

“Too much,” Thelva replied after a brief examination of the cask markings. “That old battered one, and both of these big ones here.”

“Too much to pour away.”

“Oh?” Thelva waved a hand, as if to encompass the whole room. “Less than pouring away everything else here—and if it ruins everything we mix with it, that’s just what we’ll end up doing. Dead loss for the House of Thirst.”

Ruthgulur sighed. “Well, we don’t have to decide just yet. Not with all these tankards to get through.

Speaking of which—enough stalling, Shieldbearer of My Heart. Your turn.”

“I’m *aware* of that, Softbeard Mine.” Thelva consulted a scribbled note, then dictated aloud her latest addition to the list. “Equal parts *Shaking Spears in the Park*, *Satirical Fakir*, *Topiary Dragon*, and *A Fighter and a Thief Walk into a Bar*—with just a dash of *Kobolds Punting Kobolds*.” With a flourish, she speared her pen back into the sea-sponge that served as its holder, saluted Ruthgulur with her tankard, took a cautious sip, smiled . . . and started to glow. Her eyes took on a faraway look as she chugged the contents of the tankard, head tilted so she could gaze fixedly at the ceiling, as if she saw something miles beyond the walls of the room.

Ruthgulur stared at his wife. Was she getting . . . taller? She must be, because she was at least a head above him now.

The blue-white glow radiating from her skin waxed beacon-bright, and Thelva Clovenaxe floated up into the air, her favorite pointed-toe buckle-boots kicking gently at nothing at all as she rose up—and up.

“*Thelva!*” Ruthgulur shouted, bounding up onto the table to make a grab at her. Fortunately for him, she had a lot to grab. Her empty tankard bounced off his already-battered nose on its way to the floor, but he kept his grip, digging his fingers like claws into her best leather breeches. Thelva’s belt groaned under the strain of Ruthgulur’s weight as she rose obliviously toward the bare-beamed ceiling, silently staring at nothing at all.

Ruthgulur rose with her, dragged up into the air as if by a mighty, unseen titan or giant. She was as bright as any ceiling-wheel of lanterns now. The fierce glow came from her very skin, apparently all over. As Ruthgulur marveled at the brilliant light his wife gave off, her belt-clasp groaned, loud and long, and slowly undid itself.

A sudden, sickening descent followed as the breeches dropped to her ankles, Ruthgulur with

them. He tried to claw his way up Thelva's legs, but he was slipping. He kicked wildly in an effort to gain enough momentum to clamber up her body, just as her arms and legs jerked in a sudden violent spasm. The toe of one boot caught the Bearded Barrel hard under his chin.

The edge of the table was hard. So was the full cask from which Ruthgulur's head rebounded during his tumbling plummet to the floor. The floor wasn't any too soft, either.

* * * * *

Ruthgulur Clovenaxe blinked up at the exposed rafters, wondering dazedly just how long he'd been lying here. Sunlight filled the room—er, no. The light came from his wife, shining brightly in her oblivious silence, floating amid the beams, breeches dangling from her feet.

"Thelva!" he groaned. "Thelva?"

She gave no sign of having heard him. Ruthgulur stared wildly around the room. It had no windows, thank the gods. Heavy casks stood atop the two old dump-hatches that led down into the sewers. She was far too large to fit down the spit-funnel, and the room had only the two doors, one of which was securely barred.

Ruthgulur stumbled unsteadily to his feet and made for the other door. He could bar that one from the outside, and he intended to do so. Then he planned to run like he'd never run before, to do something he'd sworn he'd never do—hire a wizard.

CHAPTER 2: ALL OUR PIGEONS ARE MISSING

"The Watchful Order of Magists and Protectors is not a cat rescue service," Maerlus the Magnificent

informed the old woman coldly. "We deal with magical crises, threats to the very existence of the Realms, wild creeping horrors that seek to devour all Waterdeep—that sort of thing. We do *not* fetch down cats from balconies where they've fled because their owners wanted to bathe them in fish oil. Fish oil is best used for romancing mermaids."

"And you have to go somewhere of-fish-al to get it!" quipped a much-scarred man waiting in line right behind the old lady. As she turned slowly and fixed him with a withering glare, he chuckled and added eagerly, "Get it? Heh-hah! Get it?"

"You're not helping," Maerlus told him frostily. Then, as his first step in ignoring the insistent and catless woman, he looked past her and addressed the scarred man. "And what are you here for?"

"Lost a bet," the man replied cheerfully, "and now I have to provide the winner with a chocolate syrup elemental or a mermaid succubus who's human from the waist down—by nightfall tomorrow."

"Or—?"

"Or I get turned into a lawn gnome. Or a myconid holding a selection of vegetables while endlessly filling a fountain bowl—you know, by watering it with his fleshy waterer. Mushroom men do have waterers, don't they?"

Maerlus sighed. Duty nights on the Order Desk were getting wilder and wilder. "And with whom were you wagering?"

"The Blackstaff," replied the scarred man. "Khelben Arunsun."

"Really?" Maerlus replied witheringly, making his disbelief plain to everyone in the room. "He called himself that, did he? Describe him for me."

"Pepper-and-salt beard, snotty manner, black wizard's robes, rings on his fingers, and staff floating around upright just behind his left shoulder. Oh, and he said he owned the Dungeon of the Crypt and would be happy to entomb anyone who crossed him in it, without them necessarily being dead first."

Maerlus sighed. "The description fits, but no one has seen the Blackstaff for *many* years, and the general consensus is that he's dead."

"So?" countered the scarred man. "Death hasn't seemed much of a career handicap for wizards, has it? All right, let's put it another way: I lost a bet with someone who looks like the Blackstaff, calls himself the Blackstaff, and has magic enough to be the Blackstaff, and I need to bring him the sweet brown elemental or the sucking mermaid—and I'm willing to pay!"

Maerlus nodded. "For the appropriate fees we can provide you with a short-term semblance of either. But just how do you know this obvious impostor has magic enough to be the Blackstaff?"

"He summoned a flying island. He said a spell and the sky tore open to let in this island with a blamed big castle on it, then patched itself up all blue again. One of the other jacks at the gaming table said anyone with enough coins could buy an illusion of anything, so a flying island was proof of nothing. The Blackstaff said that was true enough—said it with a nasty smile, too—and teleported us all into the throne room of the castle. He told us to look out the windows back down at where we'd been standing, so we would know he wasn't fooling.

"But we weren't alone. On the throne sat a cloud giant, who threw a raging fit—shouting, pounding on things, and coming at us. He wanted us all dead in a hurry, so we got teleported back again. Then the Blackstaff waved his hand and sent the island away, turning end over end through the sky. He called it the lost Netherese enclave of Orbrorth, *and* warned us that the last person who'd doubted his power and defaulted on a wager ended up as a mutant zombie leprechaun hoarder who's still cleaning private museums around Waterdeep with his tongue. So here I am."

"All very interesting, but what about my cat?" the old woman snapped. "I've paid my taxes for seventy-two summers, and this is the first time I've ever

expected anything in return. I don't care about foolish wagers with wizards or rude lawn ornaments, I want—"

"Wants are what turns the wheels of commerce in Waterdeep, madam, but I find myself asking if I'm being petitioned for a rescue, or hearing a boast about wanton cat abuse," Maerlus said dismissively. "The Order must investigate."

"My darling Talonamono can't wait years for wizards to invest—"

Maerlus stood up, fixed her with a glare, swept one arm out dramatically—causing several people in line to cower—and pointed. "See that young man sitting beside the door? Take him home with you, show him your balcony-adorning cat, and be guided by his wise counsel."

"Wise? He looks about ten years old!"

"He is, in fact, twelve—and in matters of the Art, brilliant. If your problem is beyond his powers, have no doubt he'll report as much back to me, and the full might of the Order shall be brought to bear. Go, madam. Go *now*. There's no telling what mischief an unattended cat can get into on a balcony."

"That's true," the old woman agreed glumly. She turned and headed for the young man by the door, who blanched visibly and sent Maerlus an imploring look.

Maerlus sent him back a look of cold promise and turned back to the idiot who wagered with wizards. No wonder the man had such an impressive collection of scars.

"You, saer, had best go down that hall, open the third door on the left, find a wizard hight Angrobal in the room beyond, and *politely* ask him to provide his choice of the two, ah, creatures you've mentioned. Pay whatever he asks without dispute, and don't be surprised if he and half a dozen other Order members accompany you to meet with Blackstaff—or the man calling himself Blackstaff. If it is a man at all."

The man nodded, gave Maerlus a cheerful smile and wave, and headed for the indicated door.

"Not the second door, if you want to live," Maerlus called out after the retreating man. Then the wizard put on his flimsiest false smile for the next person in line. "Yes?" he asked. "And how may the Watchful Order help you this fair night?"

That next person was a short, bearded man who was bare-chested under his cowled full-cloak. Catching a glimpse of something odd, Maerlus peered at him more closely. "What are you?"

"A cook. A *gourmet* cook," came the dignified reply.

"No, I meant what race are you?"

"A satyr," the cloaked figure snapped, pulling up the cloak to reveal one raised hoof. "So, yes, before you descend to the tired jest, I'm a galloping gour—"

"Let's neither of us descend there," Maerlus interrupted him heavily. "Just tell me why you're here. I haven't got all night."

"That much is certain," the satyr replied. "I bring a litany of problems before the Order.

"First, every last pigeon in the city has gone missing. It might be prudent to find out why.

"Second, you know they've taken to burying pets in the graveyard out east of the city? Well, a tiger has risen from the dead and is devouring people out there right now. Judging from the number who fled toward our gates, it's headed this way right now.

"Third: a portal opened in the sky above Mount Waterdeep, and something called a warforged fell through it, pursued by half a dozen rust monsters. Two of them survived the fall and pursued the metal man into the sewers. Presumably they are all still at large, and should be dealt with before your sewer gates and gratings are all destroyed.

"Fourth, it seems a band of outland adventurers on holiday paid a visit to the Blushing Mermaid to taste some mermaid charms at the same time a wemic claiming to be a captain in the City Guard did. We've received word from Yeveldra's orphanage in South Ward that seven or eight half-mermaid bundles of joy, plus a half-wemic, are now showing up

on the orphanage porch every morning. A halfling appeared among them one morning, but they're fairly certain he wasn't all that young—only small. He's suspected of busily making babies disappear—perhaps down into Skullport, through a hidden hatch in the wall of his bedroom, an adjacent jewelry shop, and a secret passage from the shop to Down Below. When we questioned him about it, he wanted you to know that one of the mermaids in the Blushing Mermaid is really a magically changed beholder, and—"

"Hold on," Maerlus interrupted. "Who's this 'we,' and who specifically are you? A satyr and a cook—*gourmet* cook—yes, but who are you that you can hear or see all these things? Or are you merely delusional?"

"I," the satyr said flatly, "am Ederic Jhellowshooturs, and I work for the Folk for the Ethical Treatment of Dragons."

"The *what*?"

"A union begun by—well, all dragonkind clear across the Realms, to work against dragonslayers. We want to see the taking of a dragon's life made a crime, with the harshest punish—"

Maerlus beamed down at him from the high podium. "Thank you, Ed. I am *so* glad you came to the Order before any of these threats to our fair city got further along. Your valuable counsel will enable us to begin work on proper laws regarding attempted dragonslayings, and counter these insidious threats to the city. But you must hurry down yon hall and open the black door at the very end there, where the most senior Order members on duty are waiting to talk to you. Just tell them everything you've told me, all right? And please accept our *deepest* thanks and gratitude. If all citizens were as diligent and civic-minded as you—"

"*The world would be a better place!*" the satyr roared. Maerlus joined in the last few words heartily enough to bring a smile onto Ederic's face. The satyr fairly galloped down the hall, and Maerlus watched him go.

Ederic was just opening the black door when the public door of the ready-room, behind the line of waiting Waterdhavians, banged open, and the Bearded Barrel burst through it.

“Help!” he panted frantically, reeling as he sought to slow down and keep his balance. Citizens turned; the reek of spirits emanating from the dwarf was like a mighty invisible wave of alcoholic fury.

“It’s my wife! She’s flying—it was something she drank! Wild runaway magic! You’ve got to come help, before she goes out a window or something, soars aloft, and is *gone!*”

Maerlus sighed. Oh, it was going to be one of *those* nights.

CHAPTER 3: HUMORING ALL WAITING WATERDEEP

“And is your wife a dwarf?” Maerlus asked carefully, casting a swift glance down the hall to make sure the satyr had indeed gone through the black door—which did not, in fact, conceal an endless supply of on-duty Order mages. A tenday back, a novice had been killed by an angry housecat tossed into his face by an angrier owner, leaving the Order offices more shorthanded than ever. Satisfied, Maerlus turned his attention back to the latest arrival. Perhaps he was a simple drunkard who was seeing things, thanks to what he’d imbibed. Perhaps.

“Yes,” the rotund dwarf gasped. “Looks just like me. Except, you know—” He waved at his chest. “Oh, and she took off her false beard for the tastings.”

“The tastings?”

“We—uh, Thelva and me, that is—I’m Ruthgular Clovenaxe. We’re the blenders at Dlarthen’s House of Thirst. We mix and taste.”

“Tough work.” Maerlus tried and failed to keep the dripping sarcasm out of his voice. Judging by the

various murmurs from the waiting line of petitioners, many of them felt just as he did.

“Saer Wizard,” the dwarf said fiercely, “whatever you may think of my employment, you’ve *got* to help me. I’m desperate.”

“So am I!” someone waiting in line snapped.

“Aye,” someone else agreed. “I’m desperate, too!”

“So am I,” rumbled a third citizen. “Some druid cast veganism on me! Me, a half-orc sorcerer, reduced to munching leaves!”

“I kill chickens for a living,” said a fourth Waterdhavian mournfully, “and someone accused me of murder most fowl. The Watch was on the way, so I ran here. Desperate, see?”

“That’s nothing!” said the man behind him. “I’m a bard, but some fiend made me deaf with a spell, and his magic changes what I look like all the time! One moment an ugly old man, the next a fetching young lass! I—I’m *desperate!*”

Maerlus rose to his feet and made quelling motions with both hands. “You see?” he told the dwarf. “Desperation abounds; you’ll just have to wait in line.”

The dwarf stared at him. “Thelva’s in danger right now! Moments count! How long—?” He peered along the line, spat out something that sounded Dwarven and very rude, then threw up his hands, wheeled around, and ran for the door.

Maerlus shrugged as it banged in the dwarf’s wake. Everyone was in so much of a hurry, these days, so convinced their needs must come before all else, so—

“Lord saer wizard,” the foremost man in line said wearily, “I know it’s hard dealing with all Waterdeep bringing its troubles through these doors, but my problems aren’t going to go away with more waiting time.”

Maerlus sat down again, nodded glumly, and said, “Thank you for being so understanding, citizen. And just what might your troubles be?”

“I have two feuding merchants staying in my rooming-house, and the situation is getting

nasty—*magic* nasty. The Watch told me to consult the Order, so here I am.”

Maerlus tried and failed to suppress a sigh. “Tell me more about these two merchants.”

“One is from Westgate. He says he represents an order of paladins who ride only carnivorous apes, and he is looking to fill their order for a dozen matching apes. Oh, and another of his clients wants breeding pairs of pygmy carnivorous tree elephants.”

“So he came to Waterdeep.”

The man shrugged. “All Faerûn does, right? The other merchant is from Amn—I *think*. He can speak full sentences only when he’s standing on his head, so most of the time he just gets a few words blurted out. *He* claims to have several picky clients. One is a rakshasa trying to learn how to juggle, who needs just the perfect balls of yarn to do so. Another is a mermaid succubus paladin who says the Lords of Waterdeep have retained her to “entertain” at a new park somewhere in the city, which they’ll establish when they’ve gathered taxes enough to pay for it. She wants the merchant to find her an otyugh to serve as her mount, because she “desperately loves” otyughs. Another of his clients is a mind flayer belly dancer, who of course wants brains—ettin brains, for choice. Failing that, she wants the brains of madwits people who think they’re one person part of the day and other folk at other times. The more crazed the better, of course.”

“Of course,” Maerlus said dryly. “Do you regard either of these merchants as particularly dangerous? You mentioned nasty magic; they can both use the Art?”

“Can’t everybody, these days?”

Maerlus bit back an angry dismissal and decided to humor Waterdeep again, so he sighed instead. He was doing a lot of sighing, these days.

* * * * *

Ruthgulur burst through the door of his third tavern, fought for breath, then lurched to the bar and gasped, “Is there a wizard here I could hire? I can pay!”

The tavernmaster stared at him, then raised his voice to bellow across the crowded taproom, “Is there a wizard in the house? Dwarf here, looking to hire!”

A moment of silence ensued, and then the hubbub of normal hearty converse started up again, without any reply. The tavernmaster tried again. “Sam-rathren? Ilingruil? Anyone?”

Once again, his query received no reply. The tavernmaster gave Ruthgulur a shrug.

The dwarf fished his chest-purse up into view by hauling on its chain and removed the heaviest gold coin in it—a thundraer, the best old Clan Flamefist minting, as thick as a grown human’s little finger. “I’m *desperate*,” he said, tossing it across the bar.

The tavernmaster slapped one hairy hand down on the coin, examined it, and made it disappear. Holding up a “wait right there” finger, he hastened down the bar.

He returned moments later dragging a tipsy little pixie along the bar, as drinkers hastily snatched their flagons and tankards out of the way. She might have been more alluring if her skin hadn’t been wrinkled, gray, and beyond rotten. Here and there, it bore stains that looked as if mildew had been scrubbed away. She stank of strong perfume that was obviously covering a worse reek.

“This,” the tavernmaster announced, “is Dreetha.”

The pixie regarded Ruthgulur sourly. “Before you ask, I’m a lich—a pixie lich. And a secret army of faery zombies does my bidding, so don’t cross me.”

Ruthgulur shook his head. “Lady Dreetha, I’d not dream of it. I just want to hire a wizard to rescue my poor wife. Can you help?”

“Take a spell off her?”

“I—” Ruthgulur shrugged. “You tell me. She drank something that made her float up to the ceiling. If she

gets out of the blending room, she could blow away anywhere. She’s scared stiff.”

“Wise of her.” The pixie tapped her own nose in thought. “Not my specialty, I’m afraid. Let me think who might serve.”

“Norgluth?” the tavernmaster suggested.

She shook her head dismissively. “He got hired by a treant hungry for a fix of elemental fire, and hasn’t been seen since.”

“Amalaree?”

The pixie snorted. “Came to a sticky end, as one might expect for an arcane trickster obsessed with magically snapping her fingers against behinds from a distance. She goosed the wrong person and got blasted clear through a wall. I understand they’re still finding small scraps of her.”

“Lathangoleir?”

“Now that’s a sad, sad story. Got turned into a gelatinous cube, couldn’t get turned back, and tried to kill himself. Became something of a hero. Got a broadsheet to print a banner proclaiming his desire for ‘a solid relationship’—and some mermaid paladin showed up to answer it. He fled from her and ended up at an orphanage, where he donated himself to be served up as dessert to the orphans. They refused at first, of course, but someone in Mistshore gave the orphans poisoned candy. So they gave tiny slices of him to the dying as a desperate curing attempt—and it worked; eating him got rid of the poison. He sacrificed himself and saved them all.” The pixie lich shrugged. “So, no more Lathangoleir.”

The tavernmaster threw up his hands. “Can’t you think of anyone?”

“That we can *find*, hereabouts, on short notice?” the pixie lich snarled. “Don’t want much, do you, Hulburk? Why, I doubt we could—”

She stopped, blinked, snapped her fingers, and said, “Jhalang. Jhalang the Crazy. Come, desperate dwarf.”

She was down off the bar and darting through a forest of legs in a twinkling. Ruthgulur lowered his head and charged after her.

The tavernmaster watched startled drinkers surge into the air in a line, right across the room, and flung up one large and hairy hand to hide his grin. Dreetha was something when she got going. And that dwarf looked more like a walking barrel than anything else. “Mind you come back and tell me what befalls!” he shouted.

A good tale would entertain his patrons for an evening. Hulburk knew that his job entailed both quenching the thirst and entertaining the befuddled minds of all Waterdhavians who walked through yon doors. His task was to humor them, amid all their passing troubles.

In the wake of the hastening dwarf, men whose drinks had spilled came down wet and angry and looking for someone to blame. “Humoring all waiting Waterdeep, that’s what I do,” he muttered, watching the fights break out.

Someone hurled a spell through the growing fray, and he sighed. *Of course* there’d be a wizard here now. Never one when you wanted one, but underfoot and everywhere when you didn’t.

He reached under the bar for his secret weapon, just in case—not that he’d use it yet. The Watch would be less than pleased to learn he owned a rod that turned all targets into dinosaur-riding halflings—if that’s what it really did. Wizards selling magic gewgaws were liable to claim just about *anything*.

CHAPTER 4: IN THE HOUSE OF CURSES UNLEASHED

Ruthgulur Clovenaxe was clear out of breath and staggering. It had taken him the better part of two ill-lit city blocks to rid himself of the angry half-drunk humans draped over him, with their curses and reeking sweat and wild punches. All that time the undead pixie ahead of him had raced along like lightning in a hurry to be elsewhere.

He'd only *just* managed to keep her in sight, and right now she was plunging into the heart of what seemed to be an illicit late-night street meeting of shady traders trying to trade useless wares with other shady traders.

"Ah, but it's past time for a new *Cookbook of the Realms!*" the nearest one was saying excitedly, waving a thick chapbook. "I've new cockatrice recipes, and a dessert that calls for self-dividing, swashbuckling gelatinous cubes! The waiting world shouldn't be deprived of such culinary brilliance one moment longer!"

"Just one? You amaze me! Now, *I* have here in my very own hand something that should consume far more than just one moment of anyone's life! See this globe? Gaze into it, and you'll see moving scenes of bared lust that'd arouse even a mind flayer with amnesia! Certain backsliding clergy in this city can't get enough of these globes! This one shows lovemaking among the merfolk of Waterdeep Harbor; we call it 'splash fiction'! It even has a plot! The mermaids are guarding a nine-sided icy crystal, determined to keep it from an underwater druid and his snarky dolphin companion—and you know what jerks dolphins can be! And it's a steal, too! Not since a thieves' guild went on strike have there been prices as low as ours! And if children walk into the room, one word—*one word*—can have the globe showing games of musical chairs with

wemics! It's unbelievable, and not available in any shops! It—"

Ruthgulur's stumbling hurry thankfully took him out of earshot, but right past someone who was issuing a dire warning. "There's more need for our talismans than ever before! Why, the myconids are as mad as the Nine Hells, and they're just not going to take it anymore! And in Red Larch—yes, *that* perilously close to the city—they just had an avalanche! It was the latest in a veritable plague of landslides, all started by intelligent pebbles that gather together and start their own avalanches. Seems some of them dream of joining the traveling circuses and are trying to get noticed. Makes you wonder who these pebbles were, before some mad mage shapechanged them into little rocks."

Ruthgulur shook his head and ran on. Ahead, down a more deserted street, the pixie lich had turned to make sure he saw which door she was about to open and step through. He forced his weary legs to take him along even faster.

"Get it here! *One Hundred and One Uses of a Magic Dagger of Minor Healing!* Be the first in your ward or town to know just what to do with a knife besides stick it in someone! Why, this book can transform your life!"

That voice faded as a new and deeper one drowned it out. "Ah, but this particular greatsword can *think!* It has a great admiration for archers, but is insanely jealous of their bows! And you can have it, this night only, for a mere—"

The voice of that last trader faded away behind Ruthgulur as he plunged through the still-open door—into a scene out of nightmare.

What looked like a naked and near-skeletal mummy—mere brown, shriveled skin wrapped around long, grotesque human bones—was sitting at a table laying out cards like a fortune teller. Above each card swirled a plume of what might have been smoke—if there'd been a fire to generate smoke, and if



smoke had held tiny sounds and gleaming lights and momentary vivid glimpses of scenes from afar.

The pixie lich was standing on the edge of the table at the mummy's elbow, watching long brown skeletal fingers unhurriedly place card after card. "Jhalang the Crazy," the undead pixie announced to the breathless dwarf.

A skull that had wisps of long hair clinging to its brown scalp plates turned to regard Ruthgulur with eye sockets that held twinkling black flames. "At your service," it said, in a husky, disturbingly sexy contralto. "If you can pay, of course."

* * * * *

"Gods above and below, but I was glad to see the end of that shift," Maerlus the Magnificent said sourly, shaking his head. "You won't believe what walks through our door, demanding the Watchful Order drop everything and deal with their particular wild problem right now, before the Realms explode and burn! Why, we even had a dwarf come running in, wanting to hire us to cure his wife of flying after she drank some unlabeled potion or other!"

"We had him in here, too," the tavernmaster replied, setting the wizard's preferred tippie before him. "The one they call 'the Bearded Barrel.' Fair desperate he was. Dreetha took him to see Jhalang the Crazy."

Maerlus cursed. "The Hells she did!" He drained the bubbling flagon in a single long pull, then gasped and shuddered involuntarily as he set it blindly back down on the bar, his shaking hand making it clang and rattle. Then he half-fell off his stool and made for the door. "The last time Jhalang took on a mission, we lost a dozen warehouses in Dock Ward, with twenty dead, and gained a mass breakout from the dungeons under Castle Waterdeep! If anyone from the Watch, the Guard, or my Order comes in here this night, Hulburk, tell them I've gone to deal with Jhalang and need all the help I can get!"

"How will they know where to find you?"

"The warehouses and bodies being blasted into the sky ought to provide them with a subtle clue!" Maerlus called back bitterly. Then he was out the door and gone.

The tavernmaster watched it swing closed and frowned. There'd been a time when he could keep up with doings in the city and know where he stood, but these days . . .

"Hulburk! Hulburk! I'll have a Fire-Throwing Troll, and Ethla here wants to try a Druidical Pet Cemetery! Oh, and mix us both a Fifty Hues of Force Gray, for after, will you?"

The tavernmaster shook his head. He was getting too old for this.

* * * * *

"I can pay good gold," Ruthgulur panted.

"Oh, but it's not gold I want," the mummified thing at the table replied, its jawbone somehow shaping an eerie smile. "It's a little of your life."

"What?" The dwarf felt a frisson of fear.

"A little of your life force, so I can live again for a brief time."

"And if I do that, you'll make my Thelva safe again?"

"No one in Faerûn is safe, Stalwart of the Clovenaxes, or ever can be," Jhalang replied. "But I can make her stop flying. You might want to carefully dispose of whatever she drank that produced this effect—or better still, sell it to me."

"I—I'll do it. Take some of my life force," Ruthgulur said in a rush. "Do it."

"A little up front," the mummy-thing replied, "and the rest when we're done. Come sit here beside me." Skeletal fingers patted an empty stool.

Ruthgulur clambered up onto it, trembling. Icy fear was clawing at his heart now, sinking cold fingers into his innards. He forced himself to hold still and keep his eyes open as that skull loomed nearer, and nearer.

What felt like dry paper brushed against his lips, growing softer and more yielding in an instant. The contact was so cold that he was shocked frozen, unable even to swallow, and he couldn't have drawn a breath to save his soul. Then the cold lips locked against his, and a tongue like an icicle was thrusting into his mouth.

Ruthgulur found himself on the floor, feeling sick and weak and, well, *drained*, with a nasty ache at the back of his head where it had just met unyielding flagstones. He stared up at a brown and mummified skeletal thing that now had a long-haired feminine face of dancing-eyed beauty, and a throat and shoulders to match.

"I'm sorry," it told him huskily, with a tone of true regret. "I couldn't stop myself. So *hungry* . . . I took all you should yield, Ruthgulur Clovenaxe; I'll be taking no more from you later. Be welcome in the House of Curses Unleashed, and come sit beside me again. I promise I'll take no more from you. Please."

The pixie lich looked from Jhalang to Ruthgulur, and tittered. "I think she *likes* you," it told the dwarf on the floor.

"I . . . if she can cure my Thelva," the Bearded Barrel growled grimly, clawing his way up the stool, "then I like her, too. Very much."

He looked at Jhalang, eye to eye, managing not to tremble. "So, when can we get going?"

Jhalang smiled. "I go nowhere. Not with what's left of these joints." She pointed with still-skeletal fingers. "The cards. I work my magic through the cards."

The dwarf followed her pointing finger to a card on the table, and the scene swirling above it. "What is that?" he asked, astonished despite himself.

The cards were laid out on the table in a complicated array that shaped nothing he could identify. Each was the size of a chapbook—much larger than the cards with which he'd played various games of chance, and a scene limned in glowing smoke hovered and swirled above each of them.

The one he was staring at showed two bearded men floating in midair, faces contorted in anger, hurling wildly colored lightning bolts at each other.

“That,” said Jhalang the Crazy a little sadly, “is how foolish wizards die.”

CHAPTER 5: THE TURN OF CARDS FRIENDLY AND OTHERWISE

“I’m going,” Dreetha announced abruptly. “It’s not safe for me to be this close to you, ah, cards.”

“True enough,” Jhalang agreed. She and the dwarf watched the pixie lich scuttle back out the door and vanish into the night. The door glowed briefly around its edges as it closed and resealed itself.

One of the dueling wizards convulsed as his foe’s lightning bolt burst through a half-seen glowing magical shield and thrust into his midsection. His head briefly became that of a lion, and his hands became tentacles that writhed in pain. Then he melted away—but not before the horrified Ruthgulur had witnessed his blood boiling off, his flesh and innards splaying out into tatters that became blobs and then brief drifting flames, and worse.

He winced. “My Thelva,” he murmured, shaking his head.

“Look at that card instead,” Jhalang suggested soothingly, pointing at another. She picked up and moved the card that now had just one miniature wizard dancing triumphantly in midair above it.

Ruthgulur looked, obediently. “A dung heap?”

“Yes, but it’s more than that. It’s a neo-otyugh with ambitions. Notice the tentacle there? It’s watching us now; see the twinkle in its eye? It wants to attend New Ollamh.”

“And become a bard?” Ruthgulur asked faintly. “Surely you’re jesting?”

“No, Stalwart of the Clovenaxes. I’m telling the truth. Faerûn is, I fear, far stranger than you’ve hitherto imagined. That very strangeness is one of the reasons these cards can gather so much energy from the Weave and work magic for me, such as taking the flight from your Thelva from afar.”

Slowly and thoughtfully, Jhalang started to move cards. As Ruthgulur watched, she identified the people in the scene floating above each one.

“That’s Ormitrar, high priest of Mask as the Lord of Mischief, and he’s talking with Rauthin the Crazy—yes, I’m not the only one—and Thoulloor.”

“Who’s which?”

“The bald old man is the priest, the bearded beggar is Rauthin, and Thoulloor is the faerie he-dragon who can’t resist stealing pendants—hence the collection of them hanging from him. Rauthin is a wise sage but looks like a beggar because few folk pay him for his advice. He always qualifies everything he says, usually contradicting himself. Ormitrar mistrusts both of them, so he must be desperate for guidance or aid. I suspect the god he serves is giving him a bad day—which may explain what befell your Thelva, come to think. Let me spend a little magic here.”

Jhalang drew a card from a row of face-down cards along the darkest edge of the table. It flared with a sudden milky radiance, like moonlight, as she turned it over and slid it under the card depicting the priest, the sage, and the little dragon. The sound of their voices faded into hearing.

“The worst day of my life,” Ormitrar was saying bitterly. “I am bidden to work practical jokes and pranks to venerate the Masked Might I serve—and every last one of them I’ve attempted, this day, has gone wrong. Every one. Mask must be mightily displeased with me.”

“How can you be certain it’s His displeasure?” the sage asked. “Do the Lords of Chaos not do battle from

time to time, thwarting each other’s servants with their own, or even directly interfering with one another’s plans? And does not what befalls during Halaster’s Highharvesttide spur such a struggle every year?”

The faerie dragon giggled, its merriment a high glissade of chiming bells. Whatever it started to say after that was lost as all sound faded. Jhalang looked sharply at the card she’d drawn and slid underneath. Its glow had flickered into dimness.

“Warded. Ormitrar must have a ward up against scrying,” she muttered, and returned to rearranging cards on the table. “Patience, good Ruthgulur. We’ll soon reach out from this room to Thelva, in hers.”

The dwarf nodded, then frowned at the scene above the card she was moving. “What’s that?”

“Blackstaff Tower,” replied Jhalang. “Gone purple, perhaps for good. The apprentices have been experimenting with color magic, and it’s been disastrous.”

“Color magic?”

“Faerûn is stranger than you thought it was, remember? Now *this* particular chaos is inside Blackstaff Tower, right now. It seems some overly ambitious fool of a mage thought he’d take the shape of the notorious Volo, then show up to help the apprentices toss out old broken furniture and the leavings of yesteryear—probably in the hope of pilfering something more valuable. That banner they’ve just wrapped him in is a relic of the Seven Sisters saving some whales, a century or so back. And the man in black who’s helping trundle him out was one of the Blackstaff’s much-maligned manservants—his staff-polisher, among other things.”

“He served the *Blackstaff*? How *old* is he?”

Jhalang shrugged. “Some centuries. I’m not sure he’s entirely human. Khelben summoned him with what he liked to call his ‘uppity servant spell.’ He’s the one who once proposed that lands no longer pay their debts in gold, but rather in hats.”

“Hats?”

"I did tell you strangeness abounds in the world, Ruthgulur. Now, if his idea had been adopted—"

"That would have been strange," the dwarf agreed, trying not to let his impatience show. Thelva was alone and terrified, and if anyone walked in on her, with the sea breezes rising as they did most nights, his wife would be gone.

Jhalang moved another card. "Here we have a cemetery that may soon become a park. Most of the monuments are so old that they're nigh buried, and the folk entombed beneath them have been forgotten. The dead were greengrocers, most of them, but that odd-looking one commemorates a centaur who fell in final battle against his mortal enemy—a flight of stairs. The one next to it marks an ettin who lost a weight-lifting contest with himself. When he picked up a boulder larger than he was, it bore him down and gave him just one headache, but it was a big one. Once, this burial ground was exclusive to those who served Chaos."

Ruthgulur peered. "Does that headstone say 'Fluffy'?"

"Yes. Some pets are buried there. The cemetery didn't stay exclusive."

She moved another card.

"A dwarf?" asked Ruthgulur.

"And not just any dwarf. This is the infamous Galathen the White—he who forged the Sword of Tunes. You can see he's an albino, but what you can't see is what the illithids hunted him tirelessly to get. Seven different dwarves live inside Galathen's head. And he's wearing the Cursed Talisman, which forces you to voice your innermost thoughts, no matter how inconvenient and imprudent the timing. He's guarding a long-forgotten portal linking where he stands with Selûne."

"The moon?"

"Indeed, the moon. Some children found it by accident. The individual he's warning away from the portal is the only half-elf, half-dwarf scholar mage I know of."

"Half-elf, half-dwarf?" Ruthgulur shook his head, then added, "Looks like a barbarian."

"For the very good reason that he is a barbarian. Almost done; just a few cards more."

"What's *that*?"

"Look away; that chaos is from the past. It shows a cursed day when everyone had to speak in rhyme, or sing lies. A day when a miscast spell turned the most powerful wizards in the world into toddlers with fingers too small to work most spells. The day when Lord Piergeiron made an inadvertently funny joke. A day when alcoholic drinks of all kinds were banned in Waterdeep for a tenday, until the citizens rioted—"

"I'll bet!"

"—and Khelben, Volo, the young lord Danilo Thann, and Elminster in his female guise of Elmara all got temporarily imprisoned in a magic vault by an unknown prankster. Some say it was Fzoul Chembryl, who vanished for almost a month and later claimed to have been on vacation. But I met him once, and I doubt he had either the wits or the magical might."

Jhalang moved one last card. "And this is a cursed lanceboard game that's still going on somewhere in the Moondark Mountains. Once you start playing, you can't stop or depart until the game is done. All the pieces are living creatures. The unicorn moving right now is something of a philanthropist and has always claimed to have a halfling mother. I don't credit the tale, though; this same unicorn also swears the King of Cormyr was replaced with a bear in a fez, magically disguised to look like the real Obarskyr, and no one noticed for ten years."

"Right," Ruthgulur said, rather dazedly. "And just how is all this going to help my Thelva?"

"Feel the power, radiating above the cards? If I've arranged them right, we'll have called quite a bit from the Weave—and when I start turning cards face down, that power will be concentrated above the few that are left. Then I'll send it out through your Thelva and ground her—literally, as it happens."

"Let it be soon," Ruthgulur said fiercely. "Sooner or later, someone will see that door I barred from the outside, and wonder why, and open it. And if she gets out of the blending room, on a night this windy—"

"Is anyone likely to see the door in these wee hours? I'm familiar with the street down one side of the House of Thirst, but what stands on its other side?"

"A pickle factory, where orphans work night and day," the dwarf said bitterly. "They get into *everything*."

Jhalang turned a card face down. A muted snarling was audible in the air above the others—a roiling of power that looked like tiny blue lightnings flickering amid the swirling smoke.

Nodding as if satisfied, she turned over another card, which promptly burst into flame. A tongue of fire soared to lick at the ceiling for a moment, and then was gone, leaving behind nothing but ashes and a terrible reek.

Jhalang sat back, looking grim. "That's not good," she said quietly. "Does your Thelva have any enemies? Anyone who can wield magic?"

"N-no," Ruthgulur said doubtfully. "None that I know of. We rarely set foot outside the House of Thirst, these days—very rarely, for her. No. No foes I know of."

A second card burst into flame while Jhalang's fingers were still poised over it, and she breathed a soft curse that froze Ruthgulur's heart. She sounded both awed and scared.

CHAPTER 6: OF RUST MONSTERS, WARFORGED, AND MAGICAL MELEE

"Just where are you headed in such haste?" Dreetha asked menacingly, her tiny withered hands raised. One of those hands held a glowing rod, pointed

directly at the wizard before her. “I very much doubt Jhalang invited the likes of you to her home—or would welcome you.”

“Out of my way, undead meddler!” Maerlus the Magnificent snarled. “I’m on official Order business!”

“Oh, no,” the pixie lich replied softly. “You don’t frighten me, and I happen to like these particular cobbles I’m standing on. Take your official Order business elsewhere, and leave my friends alone.”

Maerlus raised his staff. “I’ve warned you!”

“So you have, and I’ve warned you. Which of us will prove wisest, I wonder?” The cobbles shifted under the pixie lich’s feet as she fell into a stance, giving the Watchful Order magist a wintry smile.

He strode toward her, leveling his staff like a spear. Blue-white flame raced along its length, gathering at its head in a whirling ball of magical fire.

“Rod of one-minute monkeys,” Dreetha murmured quickly, “empty yourself.” She knelt and pointed her rod at the cobblestones in front of her. Suddenly, the street was full of monkeys, all looking intently at Dreetha. She smiled, hefted one of the cobbles, pointed the rod at the onrushing Maerlus, and ordered, “Quick, my minions! Fling!”

With one accord, the monkeys plucked up cobbles larger than their own bodies, swaying under the weight, and banded together in trios and quartets to throw the stones at the wizard. Maerlus dodged, stumbled as a hail of cobbles struck his legs and ankles, howled in agony as the rocks crushed some of his toes, and finally went down. More cobbles thudded off his hastily raised arms and staff.

Maerlus started to roll in an undignified and hasty retreat, cursing weakly between moans of pain. Then his staff flashed brightly, and he let out a gasp of relief.

“Healed,” he snarled, “and less than pleased, lich! He clambered to his feet, staff blazing blue fire from end to end once more. “This is quite enough defiance to justify your destruction by the Order, and when

I’ve—” Maerlus broke off as all the monkeys simply faded away.

Only the smiling Dreetha stood facing him, intoning a swift incantation.

“Magic missile, fast and quick, hit proud Maerlus in the—elbow.”

Blue-white fire raced to meet blue-white fire. The Watchful Order magist roared in pain, his elbow afire, and one suddenly numbed hand let go of his staff.

Maerlus kept hold of the staff with his other hand, but its head swung high and wild. The bolt of lightning that cracked out of it sprang up through the sky to smite a flagstaff atop a nearby building, rather than the pixie lich in front of him.

“Flesh to gelatin,” Dreetha purred, and Maerlus felt his body begin to sag and flow. His staff clattered onto the cobbles, and the pixie lich raced over to kick it away down the street.

Snarling incoherent rage as his robes collapsed around him, Maerlus flung his arms around Dreetha’s racing legs—or tried to. What actually happened was that two wet, drooping cylinders of goo slapped around the lich’s legs and toppled her.

Just at that moment, a Watch patrol burst around the corner, lanterns swaying. “Help!” Dreetha shrieked. “Help! I’m being accosted by this horrible monster!”

Maerlus tried to snarl a denial, and found to his horror that what came out of his mouth was a wordless roaring.

“Are you hurt, miss?” the Watchcaptain shouted.

“Oooh, yes! He touched me with a gelatinous appendage, and it was all I could do to keep from swooning! I—”

“Back off!” a Watchman snapped at her, raising his staff warningly. “You—you’re undead!”

“And *this* looks like Maerlus the Magnificent,” another Watchman remarked, holding his lantern high and peering at the gelatinous heap on the cobbles. “What have you done to him?”

Dreetha sighed. “You’re too stlarned quick. That’s the trouble with you Watchmen.”

Glaring at her, the Watchcaptain snatched his horn from his belt and blew it, loud and long.

The pixie lich backed away. “Sorry, Jhalang,” she murmured, “I bought you all the time I could.” Then magic sang around her, and motes of light winked out of nowhere to swirl about her body. When they winked out again, the cobbles where Dreetha had stood were empty.

“She’s gone, captain,” a Watchman observed unnecessarily.

“I can see that, Valarthaun,” the Watchcaptain snarled. “Form a ring around Maerlus until one of his colleagues gets here—all of you. Face outward, and if you see that lich, yell right quick! She might be lurking, awaiting a chance to finish him off.”

“She’s not,” a grim voice said out of the night, “but I am.”

The Watchmen turned in unison to behold a dwarf larger around than he stood tall striding to meet them. He looked tired, and some of his suspender straps were undone and dangling. He clutched a wizard’s staff in his hand.

“It’s the Bearded Barrel!” one of the Watchmen exclaimed. “Well now, you’re a long way from the House of Thirst!”

“And just when,” the Watchcaptain barked, “did you become a wizard?”

Ruthgulur Clovenaxe regarded him balefully and raised the staff. “There’s just one way to find out, isn’t there?”

The gelatinous heap strained to say something—something angry, exasperated, and utterly unintelligible.

The thunder of hurrying booted feet and more bobbing lanterns heralded the arrival of another Watch patrol. A young Watchful Order magist darted forward from among them to peer at Maerlus, then ordered, “Stand back, everyone!”

When everyone obeyed except the dwarf, the magist looked up and snapped, “You too!”

Ruthgulur aimed the staff in his hands at the young magist and muttered, “The Nine Hells I will!” To his utter astonishment, the staff roared into life, shooting out a wall of ravening magic that washed over the Watchmen in a bright flood and then was gone again, as suddenly as it had appeared. In its wake lay more than a dozen sprawled and senseless men, several shattered lanterns and as many intact but rolling ones, a gaping but unharmed young magist, and Maerlus the Magnificent—restored and whole again, but red-faced with rage and struggling to rearrange his clothing.

“Give me that!” he roared at Ruthgulur, making a grab for his staff. Rather than yielding it, the dwarf sidestepped and swung it viciously at both magists’ ankles, low and sideways. Two icons of the Watchful Order promptly toppled in wildly shouting unison.

“Enough!” a new voice bellowed. The magic that slammed down the street to accompany this demand lifted Ruthgulur Clovenaxe off his feet and left him floating in midair, wide-eyed and oblivious. The roiling amber radiance that suddenly surrounded his stout body floated the staff gently out of his slack hands and sent it drifting away.

A strong young hand beckoned it through the air, then caught it. The owner of that hand regarded Maerlus and the young magist with withering scorn.

“A dwarf who doesn’t know one word of the Art bests you *and* two Watch patrols in the open street! And you call yourself Watchful Order magists!”

“There was a lich,” Maerlus muttered, purple with rage and shame.

“Sure there was. And a paladin of the god of apathy, no doubt, leading an army of rust monsters in love with an even larger army of plate-armored warriors, led by several forgotten gods. Pull the other one.”

“Lady Shalaerla, I swear it was a lich! A pixie lich named Dreetha, who—”

“A *pixie* lich. Maerlus, are you *sure* it isn’t time for you to go on leave for some sorely-needed rest? For, say, a summer or two?”

“Ask the dwarf. Use spell-tell,” Maerlus said sullenly. “I’ve some unfinished business yonder, in the House of Curses Unleashed—”

“—which can wait while I question the dwarf,” Lady Shalaerla finished. “I want to know what’s *really* going on before you rush about Waterdeep destroying parts of it—again.”

Maerlus flushed a brighter crimson. “That was a misunderstanding, as I’ve told the Order time and time again, and—”

“And you have heard our judgment of the matter, time and time again. *Stay right here*, Maerlus, unless you want to be dismissed from the Order here and now. Meanwhile—as you suggest—I will spell-tell the dwarf. And no, you won’t get your staff back until I’m finished, so stop making grabs for it.”

Lady Shalaerla, Senior Investigatrix of the Watchful Order, turned her back on the glowering Maerlus, faced the floating Ruthgulur, and murmured an intricate incantation under her breath that ended with the calm command, “Speak.”

Ruthgulur Clovenaxe went on staring into nothingness, but his mouth fell open and then started to move, shaping words. “The orphans refuse to eat their vegetables, but beware the invisible stalker who remembers nothing less than ten years old. The Unseen Battle rages, as two invisible flying godlike turnip monsters fight a cosmic struggle for the fate of all the realms.”

The dwarf paused, then continued. “I have seen the halfling, and she is very pregnant. She craves spicy mustard and pickles and ices delivered by a chocolate syrup elemental, though I doubt such a thing truly exists.”

Maerlus started to speak, but stopped when he saw Lady Shalaerla’s glare.

“I pass the same drunken street-singer every day, and I wish he didn’t know only bad drinking songs.”

“So do I,” mumbled a groggy Watchman.

The dwarf continued, oblivious to the interruption. “For a dragon and a gnome were wed, but as they sought consummation, the high priest of the God of Mischief kept pulling the stepladder out from under the gnome. Be glad the couple wasn’t a rust monster and a warforged! But as I recall, there was that rust monster that thought all the warriors trying to carve it with their swords were flirting, just offering it metal.”

Ruthgulur drew breath again. “School the children by sending them on a field trip into the Dungeon of the Crypt. The drow, now, chide their tutors for not flogging their children enough, and decry the bad influence of rock music, made by striking stalactites in the deep caverns—”

“Bah!” Maerlus spat. “This is getting us nowhere! Nonsense, all nonsense.”

“Be *still*,” Lady Shalaerla commanded severely.

The floating dwarf raved on. “It’s all stiff, I tell you! An entire new school of magic, all gelatin spells—for who doesn’t want to be loved and accepted by all? This whole thing is freaking me out, man!”

“He said that in a different voice!” the young Order magist exclaimed.

Lady Shalaerla nodded, holding up a hand for silence.

“The first wizard uttered a power word ‘blond,’ but the other responded with the word ‘shun,’ and the first responded with ‘brown,’ which in turn was answered with ‘kilt.’ Then came a bolt of lightning that twisted the gender of all who stood too near.”

Ruthgulur droned on. “Apparently, *flesh to stone* is a marital aid.” Maerlus smirked, but did not interrupt the babbling dwarf.

“They found a magic item: Thrargul’s thrice-used cheesecloth cloak, that renders its wearer invisible but gives off a horrendous stench.

“All the noble ladies of Sea Ward and North Ward wanted the new hairstyle, but it was just an illusion spell, so it lasted not long.

Lady Shalaerla frowned as Ruthgulur continued. “The adventurers tried to flee, but at every turn they found the roads dug up.

“She had a flirtation with Khelben Arunsun, who said, ‘I have reason to believe you can light my fire,’ but she believed him not.” The young magist blushed.

“He was addicted to gambling, but lost bet after bet,” droned the dwarf.

“The paladin of Sune was a succubus. She admitted her mount did all the work yet was never credited. She further claimed that her mount did not spend all its time as a horse. An angel, that succubus, and a rooster went into a bar, so that was truly dead cock walking. . . .”

Maerlus frowned and muttered, “My joke!”

“ . . . and at the scene of the crime lay a wagon wheel, a wineglass, and half a body. The left half.”

Eyes narrowing, Lady Shalaerla flung up her other hand, and the dwarf fell silent, his head slumping as if someone had severed cords holding it up.

“That was the crime scene I just left to come here,” she spat. “Someone is toying with us.”

“That,” a steely-soft voice replied, “would be me.”

Everyone of the Order and the Watch who was awake enough to stare gaped at a skeletal woman whose bones were wreathed in brown, mummified flesh, but whose head and shoulders looked whole and alive. Her smile was wintry as she locked gazes first with Shalaerla, and then with Maerlus.

“Sometimes,” she told them, “the Watchful Order makes unfounded assumptions, rushes in, and does wrong. This dwarf was fighting to rescue his lady—or rather, to buy time for me to do so. I succeeded. Ruthgulur, be released.”

The orange glow around the floating dwarf abruptly vanished, and Ruthgulur Clovenaxe fell to the cobbles with a groan. Shaking his head, he turned

to look at Jhalang, saw who was peeping shyly from the doorway behind her, and bellowed delightedly, “*Thelvaaaaa!*”

They met at a dead run, squealing as they thudded solidly into each other and clinched, rocking and laughing and trying to kiss each other through their laughter.

“Awwwww,” came a comment from behind the stirring, still-dazed Watchmen. Dreetha stood smiling—a smile that went away in an instant as Maerlus and Shalaerla turned to see who’d spoken. The pixie lich had two rods in her hands this time, aimed right at the senior Order magists.

“Why don’t we just let everyone be, this time?” Dreetha suggested. “Just to keep my rods from going off, here.”

“The Watchful Order,” Lady Shalaerla replied stiffly, “does not overlook, nor make exceptions. We’re charged to safeguard Waterdeep and its folk from just such perils as you offer.”

“Ah. Well, then,” Jhalang said gleefully.

The magists whirled around to face her—just as a furious cloud giant on a truly massive throne suddenly appeared right in front of them. It roared in rage and sprang from its seat to charge at them.

“Safeguard away,” Jhalang told them merrily and waved her hands. Instantly she was surrounded by an eerie halo of whirling, glowing cards.

Lady Shalaerla spoke a word that numbed every ear, and the cloud giant froze in mid-charge, hanging helplessly in midair.

Something blotted out the moonlight. Overhead, a castle on a cloud came tumbling end over end through the sky, dangerously low over Waterdeep. A moment later, a startled, rotund dwarf couple was soaring up into it.

Jhalang and Dreetha waved, Lady Shalaerla and the Watchmen all stared in open-mouthed astonishment, and Maerlus the Magnificent burst into sudden tears. “It’s so—so romantic,” he sobbed, as the Senior

Investigatrix of the Watchful Order transferred her astonishment to him.

“So it is,” Jhalang agreed. “But it seems no one is looking after the blends at the House of Thirst just now, and I for one am thirsty.”

About the Author

Ed Greenwood is the man who unleashed the FORGOTTEN REALMS® setting on an unsuspecting world. He works in libraries, plus he writes fantasy, science fiction, horror, mystery, and romance stories (sometimes all in the same novel), but he is happiest when churning out Realmslore, Realmslore, and more Realmslore. He still has a few rooms in his house in which he has space left to pile up papers.

ED GREENWOOD'S
Eye on the Realms

That Which Slithers

By Ed Greenwood

Illustration by Christopher Burdett



The old sage looked up sharply. “What’s that? You’ve not tried to open it, I trust? Beware lone abandoned chests in cellars of this city. They’re all too often left behind for a reason. What waits inside could turn you to jelly—or worse.”

Slithering Cults

Though the word “slithering” could more properly apply to snakes or creatures that drag themselves along by their tentacles, the phrase “Slithering Cults” has recently entered Faerûnian gossip to apply to worshipers of slimes and oozes, after the publication of an anonymous chapbook that has become widely circulated along the trade routes: *Perils We Should All Beware*. According to the author, Slithering Cults are among the worst of those perils.

Most folk in the Realms have heard of Juiblex, in various scary tales told to the young about what happens to the reckless and foolish who stray where they shouldn’t.

According to many, cults in the Realms that worship slimy, oozing, amorphous elemental evil have “had their day.” They have been mighty in the past but are almost unheard-of now. That powerful past

is true enough, according to the writings of some scholars and learned clergy.¹ Some even claim slithering cults and a now-vanished (or -hidden) prevalence of slimes and oozes may be why no last-kingdom rose and flourished along the trade routes of the Heartlands between the Sword Coast and the Sea of Fallen Stars.²

Yet being obscure now does not mean these cults are extinct or reduced to a few handfuls of deluded and powerless believers.

Rather, the Slithering Cults are flourishing—in Athkatla and Priapurl particularly, but to a lesser extent in all the Sword Coast ports. And they are spreading rapidly along the trade routes into Sembia, Gulthandor, and beyond.

The most currently powerful of these cults are the Tessaerlee (well-rooted in Athkatla and seeking to covertly gain power throughout Amn) and the Yimmur (centered in Priapurl and reaching into the southern Sembian ports and the Dragonreach).³

The Tessaerlee have more than sixty members in Athkatla, many of them from wealthy and long-established families, and twenty-some members scattered throughout Amn. Their leader is the Returned One Tholomond Hlael of Athkatla (a wealthy, urbane

wizard and scholar of arcane tomes who dwells in a fortified mansion in the Gem District), and those who are not members can contact the Tessaerlee by leaving word at the Antlers of Andurl hunters' (dining) club (and festhall) in the Trades District of Athkatla.

The Yimmur are some eighty strong, with a dozen Returned Ones forming an inner circle of governors and messengers to the rest. These "Lal-Yimmur" are said to be led by a wizard named Heldryn Arlhee and his two consorts, the darkly beautiful Tarsemmra Dahaeron and the fire-haired Velakra Samril (though the ruthless slayer Hezind Morlor is the menacing messenger most cultists see). They allow no public contact in Priapurl, but they deal with outsiders through the jovial, wine-loving dockside merchant shipper Paeroppur "Poppur" Dlarthlee in Saerloon.⁴

Cult Rites

Long ago the Slithering Cults developed rites to magically reconstitute mammals that were dissolved in slimes and oozes, so they emerge as themselves, to live again⁵—though forever weakened and changed, so they constantly hunger to merge with those slimes and oozes.⁶ These rites have passed into general use among such cults (and entered the "temple secrets" of a few religions; magic cast only in return for large tithes to a temple or priesthood).

Recently, some Slithering Cultists crafted spells that bring pleasure to these "Returned Ones" (magically reconstituted worshipers) by temporarily assuaging their endless hungers.⁷ Word is spreading of this, and seekers-of-pleasure (including clergy of Sharess) are becoming interested.

Most Slithering Cults have leaders who are Returned Ones, and the fortunes of such cults rise and fall with the energy, ambitions, scheming brilliance, and accomplishments of such individuals.⁸

Such creatures certainly exist, despite claims by some sages and books of lore that all slimes and oozes are non-intelligent. In fact, they may well be

far less rare than at first believed, because they seek to escape the attention of other sentient races, hiding behind their kin.

They are physically larger than non-sentient slimes and oozes, and they have more abilities (as yet largely uncodified). They can sense the distance and direction of former parts of themselves severed from them by their own doing, by battle, or by third parties.

Slithering Cults typically seek to influence the minds of rulers, courtiers, local authorities, and socially influential individuals. They avoid clergy, because their activities are so readily detected in prayer and by the watchful servants of a deity. In such endeavors they enjoy limited or strictly local success, at best.

If a Slithering Cult has access to a "patron" slime or ooze that's more intelligent than the usual mindless specimens,⁹ and if this slime or ooze is willing to work with the cultists to gather ever more worshipers under its sway, it can gain power with astonishing—frightening—speed.

This growth is especially swift and lasting if bolstered by opportunistic illithids, doppelganglers, skulks, and other creatures that dwell in hiding among the populations of human-dominated Faerûnian cities.¹⁰

This is what has befallen the Tessaerlee, the Yimmur, and a newer public cult of the Border Kingdoms called the Marauth, which began as a cabal of unscrupulous and daring human merchants working with certain large sentient oozes. They are all growing swiftly as they co-opt adventurers, outlaws, and brigands across the Realms.

Deadly Lures

One recruitment tactic used by sentient slimes and oozes is to leave parts of themselves, that they can dimly sense and control from afar, in chests and cofers distributed across a city by cult members, placed where individuals the cult would like to "welcome"

will find them (such as in a vault or treasure cache owned by such a target creature). Even if someone else happens upon such a lure first, the sentient slime or ooze is likely to extend its reach—hopefully afar, with the intent of corrupting many.

Wherefore, thieves and the overly inquisitive alike should beware what might lie forgotten in a chest. Such chests are usually impressive in appearance, and rumors may be spread about their magical or extremely valuable contents ("literally hundreds of rubies!"). They are also usually unlocked, with the slime or ooze waiting in the gems or supposedly magic items for an unwary opener to touch.¹¹

Of course, anyone coming into contact with such an outlier slime or ooze will typically be overwhelmed as the creature thrusts itself up into their eyes, nose mouth, and ears, seeking to dissolve and absorb them, and thereby grow.

Cult members typically check the locations of such "lure chests" often, and when they find an outlier has claimed victims, they perform the rites that "return" such unfortunates to rise as Returned Ones.

Such individuals—no matter how hostile they may initially be to the cult or to the outlier slime or ooze—hunger to rejoin the creature that dissolved them, and will usually (sometimes eventually and reluctantly) join the cult or at least cooperate with it, to gain access to a slime or ooze again.

The Maeramanta

Among sentient slimes and oozes in Faerûn, a belief arose long ago that in a time to come, if various slimes and oozes increased their size and power, one would arise who could join many together in a shared mind and body extending for great distances in the subterranean Realms. This "Maeramanta" would telepathically dominate nearby lesser creatures, and so rule.

According to this belief, this ruling was the rightful destiny of thinking slimes and oozes—just as it was

their rightful destiny to subsume and conquer non-sentient slimes and oozes. Some day all Faerûn would be the domain of the Maeramanta and all creatures its playthings. Through controlling them, the Maeramanta would learn the ways to other worlds and in time dominate them and Rule All.

The origins of this belief have been lost to time, though more sages¹² believe it came from Juiblex or a deity than ascribe it to any mischief of, say, a human, elf, or dwarf¹³ cleric or other individual who used magic to communicate with slimes and oozes to spread a fabricated tale that became a belief among slimes and oozes.

Though the idea of predatory, self-interested slimes and oozes cooperating seems far-fetched, it was spread, long ago, by a being whose mental powers were so great that it could not only dominate and convince those oozes it encountered—it could give them a taste of easy mind communication that allowed them to work with other kinds of slimes and oozes for mutual benefit. Whether this being was divine or not, it may still exist, commanding a colony of cooperating slimes and oozes—and posing a grave danger to any humans who happen to come into contact with it.

Hundarr

Word has begun to spread among the Slithering Cults active in the coastal lands of the Sea of Fallen Stars of a gigantic ooze known as Hundarr. This creature is as intelligent and cunning as many a veteran human adventurer. Resembling a gray ooze in hue and initial (flat, with no mouths or eyes showing) appearance, Hundarr is amorphous but can grow (or thrust forth into surface visibility and use) up to a dozen fanged jaws and two score eyes of various sizes, at a time. Hundarr dissolves the flesh of those it comes into contact with as a black pudding does, but it also uses its jaws to disable or remove the limbs or wielded weapons of foes.

It can also, like green slime and most sentient slimes and oozes, cling to walls and ceilings with a grip akin to the *spider climb* spell, and so haul itself up and out of ceiling vents, uncovered pits, cisterns, and the like.

Hundarr has an ability (of unknown range and strength) to command ochre jellies, gray oozes, and black puddings to obey it utterly (including fighting for it against hopeless odds). It has been observed to gather mixed groups of oozes and slimes to serve it as bodyguards and strike forces.

Hundarr bows to no creature, but pursues its own plots and aims, which seem to center on scouring out specific areas of city sewers and parts of the Underdark that underlie surface cities of drow and creatures allied to the drow. Why it's doing this and what it intends in the future are anyone's guess. Though Hundarr has strong telepathic abilities, attempts to magically or psionically communicate with it have resulted in unsettling contact with a mind that seems chaotically, screechingly insane—though Hundarr's actions display cunning and patient mastery of purpose.

NOTES

1. The generally acknowledged “experts” on this esoteric topic bicker constantly over many details of what's known about sentient slimes and oozes. Six individuals, across Faerûn, are held to stand above all others: the she-elf scholar of plants and animals Raloelra Imblar of Zazesspur; Venerable Eye of Silvanus Dararra Elhorn, the wandering (Wealdath-based) human female druid; the human female sages (and bitter rivals) Handratha Delverhand of Tantras and Szorsaera Thundruth of Lyrabar; and the human male scholars Belgur Ralantoth of Selgaunt and Deskryl Aramanuld of Delzimmer.

2. In the later 1100s DR (from about 1156 to 1189 or so), a slime- and ooze-worshipping cult flourished in

the central Heartlands of Faerûn, dominating many cities and towns. Known as the Hæld Himmurr (“Venerators of Himmurr”), it worshiped a gigantic amethyst-hued sentient jelly or pudding known as Himmurr, which could cast arcane spells as a sorcerer does. Himmurr brought about the downfall of lords, barons, and other petty rulers throughout the Heartlands, destroyed any army or large mercenary band assembled in the region, and “erupted out of the earth itself” to disrupt more than one battle (large and small). It desired to prevent tyranny and war, preferring a rather lawless “peace” of no strong governors, so its followers could dominate and influence at will. These followers included haughty and corrupt purple-robed “Speakers for Himmurr” (self-styled priests) such as Hargoad of Iriaebor and Yastrel of Triel. They made alliances and suggested policies to the Sword Coast and Inner Sea city-states and realms—but were ultimately spurned, when their demands neared graspings for open rule (something they had already achieved in many small settlements along the Heartlands trade routes). An alliance of adventuring bands slew Himmurr in 1188 DR, and though the cult has proclaimed that Himmurr has risen once more to life more than a dozen times, this cult collapsed into a mere handful of wandering believers by 1190 DR.

3. In the opinion of the majority of sages, though there is heated disagreement on such matters.

4. Some recent reports speak of schisms developing within the Yimmur, involving bloody skirmishes and secret pacts.

5. Sometimes referred to in sages' writings as “Aumthurr,” thanks to a sound made by one giant ooze while some of this magic was in use around it.

6. These rites are sequences of spells cast in a specific order and manner, and this manner varies slightly with the sort of slime or ooze and the way in which a subsumed victim was absorbed. Over the years, some cults have derived a lucrative income from adventurers paying handsomely to have fallen members “brought back again” from being dissolved by a slime or ooze. Sometimes the payments involve the adventuring band successfully undertaking an illicit or dangerous mission for the cult.

7. These “rapture” spells are augmented healing magic (the curative spells widely known to many faiths, and long used by clergy) that go by such names as *tingling peace* and *touch of rapture*. They not only relieve the hunger Returned Ones feel (for some days), but they bring on intense, sometimes debilitating sensations of pleasure. Even non-Returned Ones who’ve had these spells cast on them say they bring a sensation more intense than any other pleasure, a sensation they want again (and are usually willing to pay much or do much for).

8. Returned Ones usually look just as they did in life, except that their eyes become colorless and translucent (“eyes of water” is a typical description). The bodies of Returned Ones have been changed forever from their mammalian beginnings, though, and they can now breathe in water, quicksand, deep mud, and vats of dough. Whenever they get excited or stressed (wounded, for example), there’s a chance one or more of their limbs will collapse back into slime form—and they can choose to deliberately turn entirely back to slime, a swift process (often used to escape capture or physical danger). They can also reconstitute themselves from slime back to meat form at will (even if dissolved by contact with a monstrous slime or ooze), though this takes some time. Returned Ones who “fall to slime” find satisfaction in this form, but are soon surfeited and feel a need to return to more solid

form. After they do so, however, their hunger to “feel slime” returns, and grows slowly stronger until it becomes intolerable and they are forced to assuage their hunger (again and again, in a cycle). Returned Ones who fall to slime themselves feel less satisfaction, and return to hunger, much faster than those who are turned to slime again by an actual slime. When in slime or ooze form, no Returned One has the harmful-to-others dissolving properties of a true slime or ooze.

9. Over time, the numbers of sentient oozes seems to be increasing markedly. Some sages dispute this, but others not only accept it, they ascribe it to increased contact of oozes with arcane magic wielded by humans and others.

10. Sometimes such creatures try to join the cult or become open allies, but in other instances (notably that of the mind flayer Astelark, in Yhaunn), they have sought to aid, and then steer, the unwitting cult from behind the scenes.

11. Lying in prolonged contact with real magic items has affected some—but not others, with no discernable pattern—slimes and oozes. Some seem utterly unaffected, but others gain some properties of the magic items, somehow draining the items wholly or partially to gain them. Other slimes and oozes gain lesser variants of the magic items by a “sharing” process that doesn’t drain the items. And still others feed on the magic to augment their own existing abilities (gathering strength, range, and the like) rather than gaining any properties of the items. This is something the aforementioned Handratha Delverhand of Tantras and Deskryl Aramanuld of Delzimmer very much desire to study further (even to hiring adventurers as observers and sample retrievers).

12. Thanks to many human mages down the years, who experimented with both “monsters” and mental magic, learned humans have long known the Maeramanta tale. Such sages as the long-dead Elvaerund of Elturel (and current champions Welter Jorthryn of Waterdeep and Helezmur of Ankhapur) espouse the “Juiblex whispered this, spreading it willfully” view; the rival “it was an ambitious or mischievous mortal who began it” theory is advanced most strongly by Alavandur Helgulkh of Murann, and Thurendur Camaeloth, Holy Hand (traveling priest) of Oghma.

13. Interestingly, the Stout Folk have legends and “scare the younglings” tales of their own about slimes and oozes in the deeps of the Realm Below. These stories tell of how dwarves fought slime and oozes and finally either mastered them, or came to an agreement with them (depending on the tale). Some of these agreements imply that dwarves serve specific great oozes, but others claim that dwarves are their masters and can command them if the proper words (of an ancient oath) are used.

About the Author

Ed Greenwood is the man who unleashed the FORGOTTEN REALMS® setting on an unsuspecting world. He works in libraries, plus he writes fantasy, science fiction, horror, mystery, and romance stories (sometimes all in the same novel), but he is happiest when churning out Realmslore, Realmslore, and more Realmslore. He still has a few rooms in his house in which he has space left to pile up papers.

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