

# *Dungeons & Dilemmas*

*The Dungeon as a Narrative Framework  
and Encounters as Moral Puzzles*

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# *Introduction*

It is commonly said that the typical fantasy adventure game is about “killing things and taking their stuff” – so much so that the player characters are often referred to as “murder hobos.” The deepest critiques of this form point out the harmful colonialist narratives underlying the idea of going into the homes of “savage,” “inherently evil” and “lesser” races to kill them indiscriminately.

*Dungeons & Dilemmas* presents a process for building dungeon scenarios that are more emotionally engaging and morally complex while retaining a focus on exploration, action and adventure. Context matters. A richer context can make even the most basic trap or combat encounter raise compelling questions for the players.

This process is not meant to reduce or eliminate violence as a viable solution to problems in your adventures. It is intended to give violence greater meaning and ground it in real stakes. Sometimes the best solution to a problem is to punch it in the face, even if we recognize that might be a tragedy.

This adventure creation process will be examined in three layers of detail:

- > Backstory – How to craft a compelling dungeon history.
- > Structure – How to view the dungeon’s layout as a narrative flow.
- > Details – How to infuse individual encounters with emotional weight.

The outcome of this process is an adventure that will take on personal meaning for the players. It’s not just a place to be explored; it is a place to be understood and judged. Fantasy adventurers often wield incredible power, and a location boiling over with unresolved passion challenges them to use that power wisely.

The second section of *Dungeons & Dilemmas* is a small campaign toolkit designed to help scale your ideas. It explains how to go from a singular dungeon to a world full of meaningful adventure. It details how to make every expedition a significant choice, and how to mold every town into a little ethical puzzle in its own right. It’s about making the world a hydra of expanding and escalating problems that force the players to prioritize a seemingly unending set of crises.

The final section explores some topics common to many fantasy adventure games, however, some may or may not be relevant to your game of choice or play style. Consider it a collection of thoughts for your reference on how certain mechanics can be used to greater effect in the framework provided.





# **B**uilding A Storied Dungeon

*"...we could just say that Gothic fiction is characteristically obsessed with old buildings as sites of human decay."*

*—Chris Baldick, The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*

The following is a process for building a dungeon that has an engaging back-story and an active conflict that the players can uncover and interact with as they explore it. This process is presented as a series of steps. Each step is layered over the previous one, the same way you might construct a painting.

However, you don't need to do all the steps. You can stop at any time in sequence or pick and choose which layers are appropriate to your specific dungeon. The more steps you use, the more emotionally engaging and morally challenging the adventure becomes.

## *A NOTE TO THE READER*

This is not intended as an introductory or beginner text. It assumes the reader is familiar with the basic format of a role-playing game involving a Game Master, who is typically responsible for presenting a fictional situation and adjudicating rules, and Players who are typically in charge of declaring their fictional characters' actions toward that situation.

It also assumes basic familiarity with the structure of location-based adventures that are typically prepared in advance of play by drawing a map and keying that map with encounters in each area.

Finally, it assumes familiarity with common terminology such as Player Character (PC) and Non-Player Character (NPC) found in a wide variety of similar games.

**STEP 1: SOMEONE BUILT THIS PLACE FOR A PURPOSE**

All buildings are constructed for a reason. In most cases, those reasons are to serve a community’s political, cultural or religious needs—and often they’re built on the whim of the wealthy or the zealous. In any case, they exist for a reason relevant to their time and place—even buildings thousands of years old hold the context of their construction.

However, this is the realm of fantasy and myth. A fantastic building is born of an extreme, and exaggerated expression of ordinary human emotion. Start by picking any common emotion, drive, or need and imagine how someone might design a building in service to those desires. Be over the top. Think in terms of true obsession or devotion to a singular purpose.

Do a little day dreaming about the details. You don’t need to draw a map yet, just make small lists about the rooms and things that might be contained within a place built with such a specific focus.

**Table 1: Feelings**

d6	Emotion	Example
1.	Fear	A place to lock away or hide from the source of fear.
2.	Love	A place to house everything related to the focus of love.
3.	Curiosity	A place to learn and gain a deeper understanding of a problem or object.
4.	Devotion	A place to spread knowledge and gain followers of an idea or person.
5.	Greed	A place to stockpile a grand collection focused on a specific theme.
6.	Sorrow	A place to memorialize or soothe the pain of a great loss.

**Table 2: Types of Places**

d6	Building
1.	Temples and Shrines
2.	Tombs, Crypts and Mausoleums
3.	Castles, Keeps and Manors
4.	Monasteries, Abbeys and Convents
5.	Libraries and Laboratories
6.	Theaters

**Example:** *The Library of Forbidden Feelings.* Imagine a cult that believes the primary source of human suffering and conflict is humanity’s ability

to feel strong emotions. Such a cult might build a library to hide away all the tomes and manuals that inspire passion in the hearts of those who read them. These dangerous texts would be placed under heavy guard.

### **STEP 2: SOMETHING BAD HAPPENED HERE**

Over time, the building's purpose becomes so extreme, so corrupted, or completely co-opted by outsiders, that a great tragedy befalls its inhabitants or regular caretakers. This nearly always results in one or more deaths. There is usually the elimination or great reduction in the number of people invested in the location's upkeep. Finally, if the place has any ties to a wider community, those ties are severed, and the members of that community go to great lengths to disassociate themselves from the building and its inhabitants. Perhaps, the place is even quarantined in some fashion.

This is the point at which the building falls to ruin. It exists only as a monument to its former purpose and the tragedy that befell it. It is marred by the events that led to its demise and the passage of time.

Sketch out the events of this great tragedy. Who set it in motion and why? Who was harmed the most? Why did the survivors flee or distance themselves from the building's former purpose? How did the greater community, if any, react?

Now think of the place as a time capsule or even a crime scene. Scattered around is physical evidence of both the building's original purpose and the tragedy that occurred there. Make a list of a few concrete details that the players might eventually discover that hint at the location's history.

**Table 3: Origins of Tragedy**

<b>d6</b>	<b>Inciting Event</b>	<b>Example</b>
1.	A Lover's Quarrel	A passionate falling out leads to a murder/suicide.
2.	A Betrayal or Revolt	Cultists turn on their leader.
3.	An Experiment or Ritual Gone Wrong	An arcane ritual causes an explosion, killing everyone.
4.	A Family Feud	Two noble houses go to war resulting in mass bloodshed on both sides.
5.	Misguided Justice	An innocent is blamed and executed for a crime they didn't commit.
6.	Revenge	A wronged party retaliates in a manner that harms more than just their target.



**Example:** *The Temple of Consumed Concepts.* A cult worships a god capable of eating ideas and removing them from the world. Over time, the cult factionalizes over what ideas are worth feeding to the god. A summit of the various sect leaders is called and one sect decides that the god's power is too great. They betray and murder their fellows before tricking the god into eating the idea of itself, and therefore forgetting why they were there in the first place.

### **STEP 3: SOMETHING LINGERS**

Even though the building is largely empty and lies in ruins, something volatile still dwells there. Think of the tragedy that happened like a chemical reaction. It was explosive but a new compound has formed in the process. It's a radioactive compound burning with the unaddressed injustices of the tragedy.

Up until this step, the dungeon has been empty — it stands only as a record of its own history. This is a good place to introduce a major monster, powerful artifact, or potent magical effect as your first, current, and active element. Whichever element you choose, it needs to reflect the nature of the tragedy that created it.

Ask yourself how this thing has survived and gone undetected in the time since the tragedy occurred. How does its motives (or effects) reflect the injustice of the past? In what ways does its presence affect the immediate surrounding area? What rumors, folk tales, or legends do the locals know that hint at this thing's nature?

**Table 4: Tragic Lingerings**

<b>d6</b>	<b>Remnants</b>	<b>Example</b>
1.	A Monster	A vampire who gives birth after she feeds.
2.	A Sleeping Threat	A forgotten god or demon in need of new followers to be awoken.
3.	Tools of Destruction	An artifact that manufactures an army from the nightmares of children.
4.	A Haunting	A ghost who can't leave his library seeks a host to carry on its work.
5.	Psychic Disturbances or Magical Manifestations	Those who sleep in the location experience disturbing dreams urging them toward dark deeds.
6.	A Curse	Anyone who eats or drinks the food produced at the location slowly transforms into giant snakes.



**Example:** *The Buried Citadel of the Slaughtered Servants.* A noble, while abandoning his underground fortress, collapses the entrance tunnel trapping his servants inside. The servants swear an oath that even death will not prevent their vengeance. As they die, their corpses bind together and create a centipede-like creature that is capable of burrowing through rock; it can also add bodies to itself, growing in size and power as it does so.

#### **STEP 4: SOMEONE REAPPROPRIATES THE SPACE**

Over time, a new person or group moves into the space and attempts to use it for their own purposes. Abandoned buildings make good hideouts for outlaws or cultists. They also attract fortune seekers or distant relatives staking a claim.

Make a few notes about who these new arrivals are and why they believe this new space suits their needs. Remember their needs can be just as extreme and passionate as the reasons for constructing the building in the first place. Make a list of ways they might begin to alter the environment to fit this new purpose.

**Table 5: New Arrivals**

<b>d6</b>	<b>Outsiders</b>	<b>Example</b>
1.	Outlaws	A pair of brothers meeting in secret to plan a heist.
2.	Cultists	Followers of a shadow god seeking a dark place to construct a portal to the twilight realm.
3.	Nobles	A recently exiled noble with his few remaining loyalists in need of a hideout.
4.	Mercenaries	Soldiers looking for a hidden base to stage an attack on a nearby target.
5.	Fortune or Knowledge Seekers	A wizard seeking the magical secrets this place once held.
6.	Innocent Wanderers	A pair of children lost in the woods, in want of shelter for the night.

**Example:** *The Silver Mine of the Sorrowful Siren.* A bandit king falls in love with a mermaid and kidnaps her from her people. He constructs a water tank on wheels for her to live in and takes her and his gang into an abandoned silver mine that is rumored to be haunted. Surely, no one will think to look for a mermaid in a silver mine?

**STEP 5: A BAD INTERACTION OCCURS**

Eventually, the new outsiders encounter the thing that lingers from the past. This interaction creates a new threat that is worse than either of them alone. Often, one co-opts or weaponizes the other one towards its own goals. Or sometimes the two things combine to create a different problem entirely. It can be as simple as the two things come into conflict which gravely impacts nearby innocents.

Imagine what the worst possible outcome of these two forces meeting could be. Make a few notes about how either or both are changed by this interaction. Think about how this physically impacts the space. Make lists of concrete details that might forewarn of this amplified force.

**Table 6: Terrible Pairings**

<b>d6</b>	<b>Bonds</b>	<b>Example</b>
1.	A Pact	A playwright reclaiming an old theater agrees to dedicate his works to a forgotten goddess of tragedy.
2.	Subjugation	A ghost possesses a bandit king and uses his troupe to continue on its mission from life.
3.	New Experiments or Rituals	After discovering a living puppet, two children begin to experiment with bringing other toys to life.
4.	A Feud	A holy knight begins a crusade against a shadow demon disrupting the day/night cycle of the world.
5.	An Offspring	A noble who inherits his ancestral keep discovers a necromancer's artifact and uses it to turn the long dead orchard into an army of undead trees.
6.	The Attention of a Third Party.	A curious scholar discovers an old cult's method for becoming a human-plant hybrid. A local nature priest mistakes him for a god.

**Example:** *The Halls of the Weeping Woman.* An exiled cultist discovers a mountain citadel haunted by an undead priestess who still mourns the death of a child she had in life. The cultist kidnaps a child and offers to help the priestess raise it as her own if she will teach him the powers of her order so that he may gather new followers under their united leadership.

**STEP 6: IT ALL BOILS OVER INTO THE OUTSIDE WORLD**

Finally, the dark things dwelling in the dungeon begin to impact the surrounding area in a concrete way. Innocents come to harm, rumors abound, and powerful people look for ways to profit from the new strange circumstances. These are the ways the players first come into contact with the dungeon and develop motives for exploring it.

Write down a few ways the land or the people in the nearby areas are negatively impacted by the current activities at the location. Think about how the locals might speculate on the causes of these problems.

**Table 7: External Manifestations**

d6	Bonds	Example
1.	Disappearances	People who go into the woods never return.
2.	Murders	People are found slaughtered by some kind of giant animal.
3.	Disease	People are falling ill to some mysterious plague.
4.	Cultural Shift	People have started leaving their worldly possessions at the crossroads in the middle of the night to ward off "bad spirits."
5.	Mysterious Benefit	A local innkeeper becomes immensely wealthy when he starts serving a soup no one can resist.
6.	Oppression	A local magistrate forbids anyone from going into the local silver mine for any reason bringing the local economy to a standstill.

**Example:** *The Keep of the Blood Countess.* Wealthy merchant families are found drained of all their blood. Their homes have been stripped of all valuables, seemingly overnight. The local magistrate offers a bounty to anyone willing to explore the bricked up keep rumored to be home to a vampire.





# ***T***he Dungeon as a Narrative Structure

“Story” and “Narrative” are problematic words when it comes to RPGs. They mean very different things to different people. For now, put aside familiar media like books, comics, movies, and television shows. We are going to break apart the dungeon as its own form of structure, looking at it on its own terms, with its own unique form.

In many games, exact distances are important and for those games, detailed maps giving the exact size and shape of each area within the dungeon are important. But before laying out that level of detail, you can think of a dungeon like a graph which consists of a collection of nodes connected by edges. From a narrative perspective, the exact size of each node and the length of each edge doesn't really matter. A node could be a giant dining hall or a tiny bedroom. An edge could simply be a connecting door or a lengthy hallway.

This more abstract view of the dungeon allows you to more easily identify the flow of the adventure. In this regard, it is not dissimilar to a pick-a-path style narrative where each node is a discreet experience that offers branches to other experiences depending on how the players choose to explore.

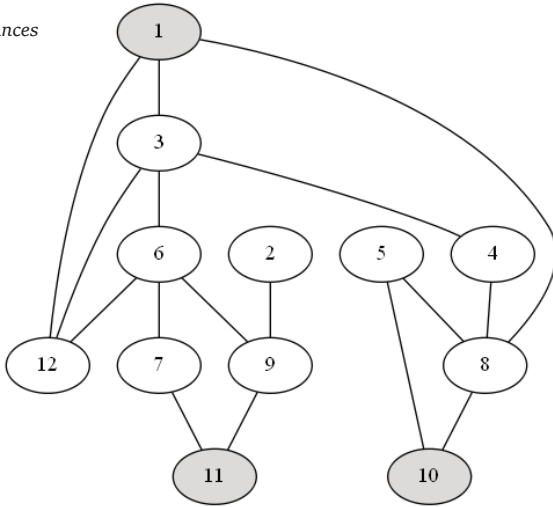
## ***ENTRANCES***

Entrance nodes can be thought of as beginnings. Think about what information or choices you want the players to experience up front. Is this a node that starts to reveal what came before? Or is it a node that right up front shows the players what's wrong right now?

In the first diagram below, Nodes 1, 11, and 10 make interesting choices for entrances. Node 1 seems to present choices that would branch into either of two distinct halves of the dungeon. Nodes 11 and 10 would be direct entrances into those distinct clusters.

You could choose one, or use all three. Having multiple entrances is like having multiple beginnings. Depending on where the players choose to enter the dungeon is drastically going to color their first impression of the place.

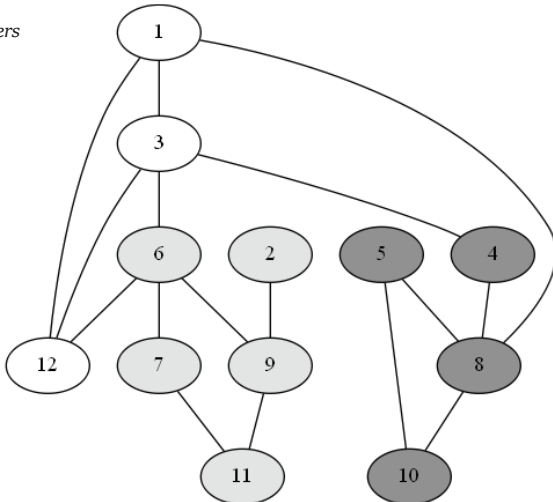
Diagram 1: Entrances



**CLUSTERS**

This abstract view of the dungeon also allows you to visually identify node clusters. Clusters are groupings of nodes that are all interconnected by multiple edges. You can then assign topics to these groups. One group might be more about the tragedy of the past while another group might be more about the current active threat.

Diagram 2: Clusters



In diagram 2, two distinct clusters are clear. If each of these two sections are themed differently, you can see how entering from Node 11 versus Node 10 would present radically different points of view on the dungeon.

**CRITICAL PATHS**

Another thing to look for in these dungeon diagrams are the shortest paths you can take from the entrance to any interior node. In particular, you can take note of the *longest* possible shortest path. The end of these paths is a good choice of placement for your most critical NPCs and toughest encounters. These can be thought of as climaxes to the narrative experience.

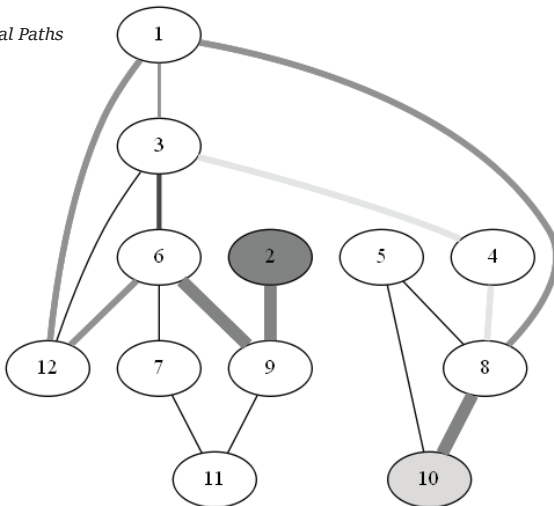
The players enter these climatic encounters with all the knowledge and consequences of decisions from the previous nodes. By finding the longest of these paths you can guarantee a minimal set of experiences the players will have from entrance to climax. These are the critical paths through your dungeon.

You can place the most need-to-know information and encounters directly along these critical paths. Sometimes there are multiple such critical paths. Like clusters, these can be themed differently to present different experiences going into the climatic situation.

Let's consider the diagram again, only from the perspective of an entrance at Node 10. The longest-shortest path is seven nodes from Node 10 to Node 2 and there are three variations:

- > 10 -> 8 -> 4 -> 3 -> 6 -> 9 -> 2
- > 10 -> 8 -> 1 -> 3 -> 6 -> 9 -> 2
- > 10 -> 8 -> 1 -> 12 -> 6 -> 9 -> 2

Diagram 3: Critical Paths



You'll notice that Nodes 10, 8, 6, 9 and 2 appear on ALL of them. There is no way for the players to reach Node 2 without passing through those nodes. Anything that is critical to the players' experience of the dungeon should be placed in those rooms.

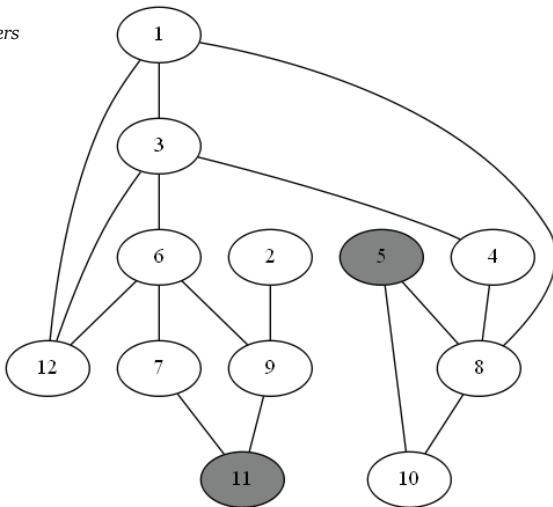
Node 8 offers a significant branching point. Consider making the contents of Node 4 significantly different from the contents of Node 1 and 12. Node 3 is particularly interesting because it represents a potential merging of the branches. An interesting idea would be to put the elements of the two branching themes into conflict in this room.

### **OUTLIERS**

One more feature of interest are the nodes located the furthest off the critical path(s). These outlier nodes are good places to put the most **useful** information or treasures. If the critical path reveals to the players the most surface level understanding, then the side paths should provide a deeper and richer understanding. They reward thorough exploration by empowering players to make more informed decisions when they encounter the real active problems of the dungeon.

Building off the previous graph, we can see that Node 5 and Node 11 lie furthest from the critical paths between Node 10 and Node 2. Interestingly, that's one in each of the identified clusters. These are the best nodes to place encounters that express the deepest and most nuanced expressions of the themes for their respective clusters.

Diagram 4: Outliers





**STRUCTURE REVISITED**

While there is no fixed narrative to exploring a dungeon, it does not mean there is no structure at all. Starting with an abstract graph allows you to more easily see these structures and sub-structures. Beginnings and endings are clear. Critical paths and encounter dependencies are more easily identified. It becomes possible to assign meaning and emotional value to these components. In short:

- > Entrances are like beginnings
- > Clusters are thematic groups
- > Critical Paths are the core experience of exploration
- > Outliers provide nuanced understanding.



# ***E**mootional Encounters*

Now that you have a map that shows you the overall shape and flow of the adventure, you can start taking a close look at each individual encounter. At this level, it's important to consider that every encounter presents some combination of information, choices, and consequences. Note that not all three must be present in every encounter.

It is also important to evaluate encounters for **potential** rather than absolute fixed ideas. The game is a live, active experience. Players make unexpected choices which may lead to unexpected consequences. They may even draw unexpected conclusions from otherwise static information. The point is to make sure your dungeon is primed with emotional and narrative energy. During play, the players are the catalyst that discharges that energy as a result of their decisions and actions.

Let's take a look at various common encounter types. We're going to look at each one as a potential source of narrative energy.

## ***EMPTY ROOMS***

Empty rooms are never just cubes of featureless walls. All rooms of the dungeon once had purpose and may have been recently adapted to new purposes. They reflect the location's history, both old and recent. Events happened in them, and the detritus of those events are still lying around.

Empty rooms act as a form of exposition. They convey information to the players through objects and evidence of activity. If this is the room where a murder happend, perhaps an ancient bloodstain is still spread across the floor; perhaps a dust covered dagger is casually tossed aside or maybe a hanging portrait of the victim or aggressor is marred in some way.

The things in the room should raise questions. Why is this here? Who built this place? Is this recent or old? What future dangers does this portend? An evocative empty room should invoke speculative table chatter. Even if the players haven't seen a single monster, trap or treasure, they will be emotionally engaged with curiosity, wonder and dread.

Empty rooms also act as a way to build passive tension—each one provides only partial information and it's up to the players to make sense of it. So long as the picture is incomplete in the players' minds, unease and suspense will hang over the whole adventure.

In play, there's no need to rush through an empty room. Let the players poke, prod, and question it. The players don't know there isn't a trap, monster, or treasure lurking in the darkened corners. This is a great opportunity to improvise additional details to deepen and clarify the information and feeling the room is meant to convey. Once the players have turned everything over to their satisfaction, they may leave the room wondering if they missed something. This only further adds to the tension building purpose of the encounter.

### ***MAGIC ITEMS***

Frequently, magic items act as mechanical boosts or give the player additional firepower. Functionally, this makes many magic items a kind of technology; a simple piece of tactical gear. Magic items, however, can be a lot more when you think about how their effects can fundamentally transform a situation and what the costs of doing so might be.

Consider a magic item that grants limited but specific mind control powers or one that brings forth or constructs a terrible monster. Imagine an item that can utterly destroy something normally indestructible such as an idea or a feeling, or causes any other drastic and permanent alterations to the status quo.

Additionally, think about adding transgressive costs associated with using the item. Who or what must come to harm for the item to function? Perhaps a necromantic lab capable of raising the dead needs a living sacrifice or maybe an orb that spawns an army of monsters requires the suffering of children by locking their minds into endless nightmares. The effects of a magic item can be quite dramatic if the actions required to use it are equally dramatic.

This turns a magic item from a simple tool into an ethical dilemma. When and why do they use it, if at all? This can be deepened further if the history and effects of the item are linked to the backstory of the dungeon. The magic item becomes a temptation to repeat the tragedies of the past and it offers this moral challenge to the players: Can you do better than those who brought ruin to this place or those currently using its power?



## **TRAPS**

There is a temptation with traps to be clever, to try to anticipate and outwit how the players will approach them. The desire to earn a satisfying “gotcha” moment is great. Ignore it. Do not fall prey to the tyranny of clever.

Traps are built for a purpose. Common purposes would include to kill, to capture, to frighten, and to warn. Less common purposes might include to humiliate, to mock, or to delay. These are by no means the only purposes. The idea is that when you place a trap you should give some thought to its motive. What is it trying to accomplish?

Traps also reflect the personalities and priorities of their maker. Think about who built the trap and how that trap reflects them. A necromancer might build life-draining arcane traps while a bandit is more likely to construct workman-like traps out of basic materials.

Trap builders also place traps to guard the things they value most. Note that these things may not be items that are commonly valued by anyone else. A scholar might build a trap to guard a portion of the library that contains sensitive research and a priest might want to heavily ward a chamber containing a benign artifact that is viewed as heretical.

Putting these ideas together means that traps can serve as a powerful form of foreshadowing. They show the players parts of major characters both past and present before they meet them. A trap might hint at its builder’s capabilities or reveal and raise questions about their values and motives. Even an unusual trap guarding something of seemingly little value is engaging beyond just its immediate threat.

## **MONSTERS**

Monsters are the result of decay. Sometimes that decay is expressed literally, like when giant spiders move into the belfry or rats dwell in the larder or a carnivorous fungus spreads wildly across the cellar floor. As buildings fall to ruins, creatures both natural and unnatural assert themselves.

More interesting monsters are the byproduct of moral decay. In a fantastic world, monsters allow the players to confront the personified remnants of injustice, both past and present. The following are ways a monster can be carrying on a legacy of injustice.

### **A monster can be perpetuating a past injustice directly.**

Consider a woman who preys on young children to ritualistically maintain her youth. After her trial and execution, she rises as a vampire to continue preying on the young.

**A monster can be enacting unrestrained retribution for injustice.**

Imagine a man executed for a crime he did not commit rising as a revenant and hunting down everyone related to those who framed him.

**A monster can amplify a current injustice.**

Think about a demon brought forth during an ancient family feud striking a new bargain with bandits granting them powers to more frequently and boldly terrorize the nearby populace.

**A monster, having been abandoned, can enact its own injustice.**

Envision a golem created as a war machine. In the absence of directed purpose, it seeks out and destroys those it deems the “enemy” by now outdated standards.

The point is to infuse the monster’s purpose and drive with the moral weight of the ordinary human conflict that spawned it. It is the toxic waste of human transgression given form and agency and it allows the ruin of the past to exist actively in the present. The monster becomes a thing to be considered in the greater context of the location as a whole.

This surprisingly opens up more options for dealing with the monster than simply seeking its destruction (although that may prove simplest). Perhaps the monster can be satiated? Perhaps it can be repurposed? There are multiple ways to heal the wound the monster represents.

## **VILLAINS**

Other than monsters, villains are what give a ruined location dynamic life in the present moment. Dramatically engaging villains have two key components. First, they have an ideological point and second, they have a plan that will work if no one intervenes. Let’s take a closer look at each of these.

While some villains are motivated by personal greed and the pursuit of power, more interesting villains are likely trying to address a social problem or seeking restitution for an injustice they have suffered. However, their methods are misguided, extreme, and to the detriment of those around them. Good villains are justified sinners. Their causes are righteous, but their methods are questionable.

Once you understand what the villain wants, you can think about how they’re going to go about achieving it. Think about the concrete mechanisms of the villain’s progress. Understanding these details helps with preparing other aspects of the dungeon.

What monsters now serve the villain or what new monsters have the villain’s actions spawned? What traps has the villain constructed and what are they

protecting? What magic items—past or present—are being adapted to the villain’s plans? What other evidence of these plans may be lying around the dungeon?

When the villain has an agenda and an actionable plan, it puts the players in a position of judgment. Just how bad are they? What needs to happen to really fix the problem? Is the problem really as bad as the villain says it is? As the players explore the dungeon, they should get a sense of the villain’s motives and plans long before they actually find them. The more information the players acquire, the more meaning the final confrontation will have.

#### *ONE LAST THOUGHT ON MONSTERS AND VILLAINS*

I want to make it clear that these ideas are not necessarily about making your dungeon adventure less combat focused. It may very well be that killing the monster is the simplest way to bring closure to the tragedy that spawned it and fighting the villain may be the best way of stopping their plan. The point is to lend context and meaning to the action.

The players will be left with the resonance of the unanswered questions raised by the circumstances of the dungeon. Does killing the monster truly represent restitution for the past? What of the now unaddressed justifications for the villain’s plans? Parts of your campaign may revisit these ideas, but sometimes it’s enough just to let them linger in the hearts and minds of the players.

#### ***THERE’S NO SUCH THING AS BEING OVERPOWERED***

Altogether, these techniques make the players’ actions within the dungeon consequential even if those consequences are only emotional echoes in the players’ own minds. A storied dungeon raises questions and leaves an impression even away from the table—the players will take your adventure home with them.

Under these conditions, issues of power balance become less of a concern. If a monster or villain is too difficult to straight up fight there are usually other ways to come at them. If the players have overwhelmingly more power, there are questions about how to use that power appropriately.

It’s fun to hand the players awesome power, place them in an emotionally haunting location with empathetic monsters and villains, and then offer them transgressive paths to even MORE power. If they slash and blast their way through it, so be it. But now, that’s a specific choice with meaning. The question is not too much or too little power, but what will you do with it?





# Campaigns & Conundrums

The previous sections have been focused on constructing a single dungeon adventure with emotional and ethical weight. This section expands on those techniques to construct a campaign environment that will keep the players engaged and struggling to keep up with the demands of a complex and evolving world.

It is worth mentioning that there is an underlying assumption to this section: *The PCs are the only viable adventurers in the area, perhaps even the world.* Most people are just ordinary folks who aren't martially or magically gifted. Even the nobility are only powerful by virtue of their wealth and status. People who obtain power comparable to the PCs in terms of skill and prowess usually go corrupt and become villains.

This can be considered to be a meta-conceit. There is no need for an in-world explanation and it requires no special attention drawn to it. It is simply a fact of the game state.

What this does is place all responsibility for the world becoming a better place squarely at the feet of the PCs. Without their intervention, injustices will go unaddressed, the powerful unchecked, and the wounds of the vulnerable untended. The world is dark, and the only spotlight is on them.

## **PREPARING MULTIPLE DUNGEONS**

A benefit of the six-step process described in “Building a Storied Dungeon” is that it is entirely a brainstorming method. Each step can be expressed as a one or two sentence bullet point. This makes it both fun and easy to describe multiple dungeons very quickly, without needing to worry about details like maps and individual encounters.

Once you understand step six (It All Boils Over...) for a handful of dungeons, you have a well from which to throw “tip of the iceberg” problems at the PCs. Maybe they come across some cultists out on a mission for their dark master. Maybe they are hit by frequent bandit attacks aided by unusual weapons or perhaps they experience some strange haunting phenomenon



that only happens after dark. You can think of all kinds of environmental or social damage being wrought by the activities in the nearby dungeons. Even better, you can functionally add a Step 7 to the process.

**STEP 7: THE BOILING OVER CREATES A MORE COMPLEX PROBLEM**

Think about how the various problems caused by the dungeons begin to interact in the outside world. Do two forces start warring over a local resource? Do they form a new, more powerful alliance? Does one start harming things the other actually cares about helping? Do their actions accidentally create some third problem?

As always, think about how the vulnerable are hurt by these interactions and how the powerful seek to exploit or profit from them. The local populace is never “neutral” on these problems. The need for adventurers arises when the vulnerable are wounded and the powerful choose to do nothing, or worse, profit from their plight.

*RUMORS*

One of the classic ways of letting players know that problems in the world exist is through rumors. People talk about the things they’ve heard, seen or experienced. Rumors, however, are never just facts. They are filtered through the emotional biases of the speaker.

**A rumor might be a plea for help, even indirectly.**

When people suffer injury they tend to complain about it to anyone who will listen, even if they don’t initially expect that person to do anything about it. And these stories usually center the speaker’s personal pain even if there’s a bigger story to be told.

**A rumor can also be spun from the speaker’s personal assumptions.**

Consider a cult making sacrifices to a spider god. Bodies might be found drained of blood and someone with a particular background might jump to the conclusion that there are vampires around and begin seeking undead hunters even though they are wrong.

**A rumor can be spun from a place of fear.**

Someone might witness something benign, but because of their personal beliefs, report the activity as malignant. Consider someone witnessing a friendly water spirit helping a child cross the river. Someone might report this event as a demon trying to drown local children.

Biased rumors are a great way to play around with the characterization of the local populace. Are they particularly religious or superstitious? Are they suffering great harm frequently? Is there some phenomenon they have vastly misinterpreted? Who are these people and what are their priorities? How they choose to describe their problems to the PCs reveals much about their culture.

### *MAKING THE PROBLEMS PERSONAL*

It is not uncommon for the GM to use “quest giver” NPCs to both direct players to sources of adventure, and to help motivate them to go there by offering rewards and other incentives. When the environment is swimming with emotionally charged information (via rumors), and the characters are experiencing the direct effects of the problems through local encounters, they are more likely to seek out the source of these problems through their own motivation.

One technique is to have these problems directly affect people, places or things the PCs care about. I do not recommend killing, or destroying these things outright, as that tends to simply crush the player’s investment. Instead, threatening or inflicting addressable harm on PC adjacent characters and things is a great way to engage a player emotionally in the growing dangers of the region.

### **THE TIMELINE**

So, how much do you throw at the players at once? You don’t want them to be overwhelmed right away. In fact, getting them started with just one problem and a concrete source of that problem is a good way to open a campaign.

You can think of the region as a hydra of problems; just as the players are about to wrap up one problem, introduce two or more problems through either direct encounter or rumor. They will then have to choose which problem to address next. Then, just as they are about to wrap up that problem, again, introduce two or more new ones. Repeat this until the entire region of problems is revealed. It’s simple to keep a campaign rolling this way because you can always use the six step process to quickly outline new adventures.

### *DUNGEON ESCALATION*

Consider how the problems of a dungeon worsen over time if the PCs do nothing. Since you only need to worry about fleshing out the dungeon when the players commit to exploring it, it becomes easy to revise the concept of a dungeon without needing to redraw or rekey maps.

When the players commit to exploring a dungeon, look at all the ones they are choosing NOT to address. Think about how the contents of steps four through seven get deeper, more complex, and more threatening to the region while the PCs are off on another adventure. If the world is falling into ruin around the players, it puts pressure on them to choose their adventures wisely.

It even makes engaging in downtime activities a choice to carefully consider. When the PCs spend sufficient time on personal business, everything around them automatically gets worse. Monster attacks increase, villains progress their plans, and allied forces become more aggressive. These escalations turn time into a moral resource.

#### *BUILDING ON THE FALLOUT OF AN ADVENTURE*

Often, all the problems within an adventure don't get resolved. An artifact may go undiscovered, a villain might get away or strike a deal with the PCs, or there might be a monster set free and left to wander without purpose. You can use these dangling elements of an adventure as the basis for a future adventure.

If you want to push off the unresolved element to later in the campaign and for it to be a slowly growing seed, you can use it as the basis for steps one through three in the process. The element becomes the reason for a new location's purpose or construction, beginning the cycle again. Or perhaps it wanders into a thriving location and is the reason it falls to ruin.

If you want the element to come back a little sooner, it can become the basis for step four. The element finds a way into a ruined space and begins to repurpose it for its new needs. Reflect on how the players did or didn't interact with it, and how that shapes its future goals.

By building new adventures from the unresolved elements of previous adventures, it shows the players that their actions have consequences on a world scale. It also adds a rolling sense of life to the campaign. No adventure is ever really "complete." From one adventure's ashes rises another as one more head on the hydra.

#### *PRIORITIZATION AND FATIGUE*

When the problems of the world are too great in number for PCs to handle, they have to prioritize. When choosing to solve one problem causes the problems they choose to neglect to worsen, and when some of the solved problems simply beget new problems, the "quest log" becomes more than just a to-do list. It is a thing burning with moral urgency.

Players must confront the question of harm reduction. Whose suffering can be put off and whose must be addressed now. What consequences are they willing to risk by choosing to prioritize one problem over another? It becomes a game of adventure triage.

This brings us to the existential crux of the matter. There is a real world phenomenon known as Compassion Fatigue. It has the following definition according to the Oxford English Dictionary: *Indifference to charitable appeals on behalf of those who are suffering, experienced as a result of the frequency or number of such appeals.*

With the world laying so much at the PC's feet, it is possible that the characters (and perhaps even the players) will become jaded within the context of play. This brings us to what is perhaps the ultimate dilemma: When can the hero rest? When can the warrior put down the sword? How many good deeds is enough? How much pain can you witness, and violence can you engage in, before you say, "No more."

There is the GM dream of the epic campaign that builds to some final climactic confrontation against a big bad. You can certainly do that with the process and ideas discussed here. Simply limit how many adventures you roll out, and order them to build on each other in some meaningful way.

However, I'd like to offer an alternative option: Start small, stay small. There is no mastermind or ultimate evil. There are only innumerable haunted houses of human tragedy leaking suffering into the world and every time one is plugged, a new leak springs somewhere else. The world is just an unending sandbox of sorrow. You can't fix it entirely. You can't solve humanity with blade, book, and blessing. So when do you stop? Let the players decide.

Eschew climaxes in favor of respite. Let them build their keeps, and towers and temples. Let them hang up their swords and shelve their spellbooks. Let them choose when to rest and perhaps their successors will be able to pick up where they left off. A hero only has so much to give.







# **A**dvanced Dungeons & Dilemmas

This final section contains additional, optional ideas that may or may not be relevant to your game of choice or preferred style of play.

## **THE JOURNEY**

Sometimes the characters have to take long trips to get from their current base of safety to an adventure site. Encounters along the way are a good time to introduce those “tips of the iceberg” problems discussed in the previous section. Let them encounter dangers that are spilling out from a nearby dungeon they don’t know about. Or have them encounter victims of such attacks or people fleeing from bad situations further away.

## **TOWNS**

You can think of every town and village along a journey as an opportunity for a little dramatic encounter. Here’s a short process for quickly generating these types of micro-narratives.

1. Pick a person, place, or thing that two or more NPCs have conflicting stakes in.
2. Decide what material harm the NPCs involved have already caused to either each other, the thing at stake, or the greater community.
3. Figure out how a monster is involved. Good options include:
  - a. As one of the NPCs with a stake in the conflict.
  - b. As a servitor of the NPCs involved.
  - c. As a side-effect of the material harm that has already happened.
  - d. As someone who feeds on or profits from the conflict indirectly.
4. Think of the weirdest way to signal to the players that something is wrong in the town.

You can also tie these things to the problems created by nearby dungeons. Once one of these local problems has been tackled by the PCs, you can use the fallout to repeat this process for the next time they come through. Like dungeons, if the PCs don't address the problem, you can think about how the problem gets worse, and reveal to them the consequences of their negligence upon their return.

**Example: The Winter Hag**

1. Three brothers are fighting over the family farm after their father dies without a will.
2. On a hunting trip in the mountain one of the brothers attacks and mortally wounds the other two, leaving them for dead.
3. One of the dying brothers bargains with a mountain hag for vengeance.
4. The hag keeps the entire town buried in a snow blizzard so that nothing grows on anyone's farm.

***A MORAL MODEL OF MONSTERS***

This text periodically refers to “monsters.” I have difficulty conceiving of entities that have culture or an ecosystem as “monsters.” Therefore, I tend to either just treat fantasy humanoid species as people with their own complex cultures or exclude them entirely, focusing on diverse human civilizations instead.

This means that I tend not to use humanoid species as the “something that lingers” in a dungeon, nor do I think of them as an invasive element of the ruined environment. They are better used either as part of a location's backstory, or as the people who repurpose it later. In other words, give them the full range of complex human motivations even if they are a villain.

I also conceptually place monsters into groups with distinct narrative purposes. Here are some useful categories.

*CASTOFFS OF HUMAN TRANSGRESSION*

Constructs, Demons, Eldritch Things, and Undead can all be the product of human agency. These creatures are often created, summoned or bargained with to serve some human agenda. Or they can be sparked in the final violent moments of a tragedy. Therefore, they make excellent candidates for things that linger or can be the product of bad interactions.

Lycanthropes can sometimes be included in this category depending on the source of the affliction. Even if the “disease” still spreads through injury, perhaps it has its origin in a curse or pact.

### *MONSTROUS NATURE*

This category includes everything from giant forms of normal animals, to carnivorous plants and fungi, to oozes, to downright strange creatures of myth. Any creature that is primarily driven by the baser instincts of food and shelter and not much else fits here. These creatures are best used to accent the ruin that has befallen a location. When humanity moves out, these creatures move in. Additionally, they may be cultivated as guardians or servitors of a villain.

### *THE FEY*

The fey are tricky because they ride the line between humanoid species and the mystic other. Generally, I try to divide them into two categories. If they have culture and society then I treat them like people, just like any other humanoid species.

If they are solitary, or come in small groups that only seem to serve one purpose, like a single-minded embodiment of the divine wild, then I treat them more like nature-aspected demons. They are ripe for causing trouble by making deals with foolish mortals, or enacting vengeance for human crimes.

### *DRAGONS*

Dragons present a unique moral problem. They have too much agency to be considered monstrous nature and are too monstrous to really work as people. Therefore, I leave it as an exercise to the reader to decide how they best serve the narrative goals of the dungeon.

### ***RANDOM ENCOUNTERS***

Some games use random encounter charts. A useful metaphor is to think of the charts as a “color palette” for the dungeon or area. Only put things on the chart that reinforce the themes you are building. For dungeons, these are things related to the dungeon’s past, the things that linger, and servants of any active villains. For wilderness areas, these are “tip of the iceberg” encounters that hint at the conflicts within nearby locations.

Try to embellish random encounters and build them up into little active situations rather than just wandering creatures. What are they up to? What activity might they be engaged in that serves some agenda, such as a villain’s plan? What goals do these entities have besides simply attacking the PCs?

A useful trick is to roll on the encounter chart twice and then consider how these two groups might interact. This is very useful for demonstrating the bad interaction step of dungeon creation or to show how the problems of two different nearby locations are clashing, or amplifying each other to cause even larger problems.

## **SKILLS**

Some games provide methods for handling PC knowledge, perception, intuition, and social skills that the players themselves may not have. *Dungeons & Dilemmas* is predicated on generously giving the players information so they can make interesting decisions about what to do. This section contains advice on when, and when not to make these kinds of rolls.

### *KNOWLEDGE & INTUITION*

If a player asks a “do I know...” question, stop and consider the components of their character whether that’s class, background, skill set, or whatever else the game at hand provides. If it is at all reasonable that the knowledge falls within the character’s experience, just tell them.

It’s best to save knowledge rolls for when there’s something unusual, obscure or fantastical going on. A nature explorer is going to know all the basics about rat behavior and life. But he might not know that rats can sense necrotic magic and are drawn to it. To see if in all their worldly travels they might have encountered this phenomenon, it’s worth a roll.

### *INVESTIGATION & PERCEPTION*

When players examine or look for things, be generous in what they see or find. Even if something is small or slightly obscured, consider any effort to find something enough for it to be found. The general principle is always show the surface, and save rolls for looking deeper.

These kinds of “do I notice...” rolls are best for when some other entity with agency has put in effort to hide or obscure things. A common example is the secret door; the architect of the place didn’t want that room found. Another example might be a weapon or secret document deliberately sealed behind a loose brick in a fireplace.

The other time these kinds of rolls are useful is when the player is trying to discover a connection between two things they might not otherwise notice. An example here would be noticing that the handwriting matches between a journal and a set of letters. Footprints might be obvious, but the fact that they were made by elven boots might not be.

*PERSUASION & INTIMIDATION*

When a dungeon is populated with entities that have clear motives and agendas, such as villains with justifiable goals and reasonable plans, then it can be extremely tempting to try to simply dissuade them of their plan. Outside of certain types of magic, social skills are not mind control. You can not persuade someone of something in a vacuum.

The key is leverage—you have to offer them something they want. With persuasion, that is usually giving them something they desire. With intimidation, it is usually threatening them with something they fear. Without leverage, no amount of charming song and dance is going to persuade anyone of anything.

This is where role playing really comes into the equation. A GM must really understand their NPCs and their motives to properly evaluate leverage. This simply comes from taking the time to think about and reflect on the NPCs as having their own agency with their own needs and desires.

***Leverage***

No leverage	No roll, auto failure
Perfect leverage	No roll, auto success
Imperfect, but tempting, leverage	Make the roll (maybe with modifiers)





# *For the Love of Life and Death*

*A Dungeons & Dilemmas Adventure*

## **BACKGROUND**

Deep in the woods near the village of Gred lies a monastery built by the Order of St. Beatrix. The Order believed a plant's ability to live on soil, water and sun alone was the secret to ending humanity's endless conflicts over resources. They sought methods for humanity to become one with plants.

Many decades ago, one of The Order's members, Giovanni Baglioni, succeeded in cultivating a human-plant hybrid "daughter" named Cobamina. Due to the nature of her creation, Cobamina was bound to the central garden of the monastery's west wing. She would wither and die should she walk on any ground other than the special soil created by Giovanni.

Encouraged by his success, Giovanni was quick in trying to imbue the other members of the Order with Cobamina's plant-like qualities. He fermented her blood into wine and offered it to his fellows. One by one, the Order members became enthralled to Cobamina because the drink linked their consciences to hers. Through them, she could see and feel as they did. Cobamina exploited her control and sent them out into the world so she could experience it through their senses.

Desperate to see more and more of the world beyond the monastery walls, Cobamina urged her "father" to make more of this wine. He agreed and soon all the members of The Order had been sent out to live the life Cobamina would never have.

Alone in the silent halls, Giovanni continued to experiment on himself, slowly turning his flesh into tangles of moss and vines until little that was human remained. Ashamed at the shambling horror he had become, Giovanni turned away from his "daughter" and crawled into the darkness of the monastery catacombs, hoping for death's sweet release.

Soon, Cobamina's thralls began to die. One by one, they succumbed to the world and with them Cobamina's window into it slowly closed. When the last living member of the Order met his final end, Cobamina found herself trapped in the empty monastery garden, forever alone.

Recently, the abandoned and ruined monastery came to the attention of the Mortis Amorea, a cult that believes the dead are lonely in their graves and in need of love. They seek out burial sites, use necromantic rituals to reanimate the interred, then care for them as if they were their own family members. Valentina Sephtis, the cult's matriarch, eager to expand her "family," led her followers deep into the monastery ruins and began cataloging the dead in the forgotten catacombs below.

Among the dust of the old winery, intact bottles of Cobamina's blood-wine were found. As the unsuspecting cultists consumed it, Cobamina instantly gained awareness of their presence. Perceiving them as a threat to her home, she used these new thralls to assault Valentina and the rest of the Mortis Amorea, forcing Valentina to strike down the sudden traitors in shock.

Instead of burying their dead, Mortis Amorea normally enacts their dark rituals of unlife to return them to the family. However, when Valentina and her followers attempted this on the recently slain thralls, flowers bloomed from their lifeless eyes and vines crawled from their open mouths and wounds.

These flowering corpses gave off an intoxicating pollen that created a deeper feeling of love between them and their living "family". Stunned by this development, Valentina was convinced this was a blessing from her god and immediately began to investigate the cause so that she could replicate this effect in other corpses.

Valentina is not aware of Cobamina's presence in the monastery, nor does Valentina realize or understand that Cobamina still has control over these floral undead. However, Cobamina has discovered that the spores these creatures spawn allow her to walk on ground that has been sufficiently soaked in them, providing her a path to freedom.

At night, unbeknownst to Valentina, Cobamina has been sending her undead thralls out into the world. Using their entrancing pollen, they lure living people back to the monastery where they are coaxed into drinking Cobamina's blood-wine and then led to be slaughtered by the Mortis Amorea who, in turn, raise them as more flowering undead. Valentina does not realize she and her followers are being used by Cobamina to slowly build an army she desperately needs to gain her freedom.

### ***REASONS TO GET INVOLVED***

- > A magistrate offers a bounty to anyone who can stop the disappearances.
- > Someone the PCs care about goes missing.
- > The PCs are lured to the monastery by a group of flowering corpses.

## ***Dramatis Personae***

### **GIOVANNI BAGLIONI**

*Description:* Giovanni is sadly still alive and remains as a vaguely humanoid shaped pile of vines and moss. He can crawl around by undulating his body. He is capable of speech but it has a watery, gargling quality to it.

*Drive:* Deep down, Giovanni has a personal death wish but he also still cares for his “daughter”. Although he spends all his time wallowing in his own tomb, he would come to his daughter's aid or avenge any harm that comes to her.

*Abilities:* He is capable of using his plant-like body to grab, engulf and smother enemies.

### **COBAMINA**

*Description:* Despite being many decades old, Cobamina appears to be a relatively young woman. She has olive-colored skin with visible, green veins underneath. She has white hair with a light green sheen and her eyes are amber in color.

*Drive:* Cobamina desperately wants to leave her garden. She needs Valentina to animate more corpses that have consumed her blood (or the wine made from it). These creatures give off a pollen that makes the ground safe for Cobamina to walk on. However, it requires a lot of pollen and so she needs as many undead as she can trick Valentina into making.

*Abilities:*

- > She can burrow down into the earth of her garden.
- > Her touch is poisonous and causes an itchy, painful rash.
- > She can exhale a blinding pollen.
- > She withers and dies if her feet leave untreated ground for more than a few minutes.
- > The GM should feel free to give her any other plant-like powers they feel are appropriate.

### **VALENTINA SEPHTIS**

*Description:* Valentina is a pale woman with dark hair and even darker eyes. She dresses in a black robe adorned with red trim with a silver cord around her waist that serves as a holster for her ceremonial dagger. She wears the holy symbol of the Mortis Amorea around her neck: a skeletal hand holding a human heart.



*Drive:* Valentina wishes to liberate the dead beneath the monastery from their lonely existence. This requires research as she needs to put names and life stories together with bodies as well as evaluate the physical integrity of the corpses. She will not animate partial corpses or anyone she does not believe lived a worthy life. She does not wish to be discovered and will fight to maintain the secrecy of her cult. However, she is not an unreasonable woman and is unaware that Cobamina is the architect of the recurring “assaults” on her cult.

*Abilities:* Valentina is a powerful necromantic sorcerer.

- > She can animate corpses (She does not do this lightly. Those she animates are family).
- > She can cause flesh to rot with a touch.
- > She can heal her own wounds through drinking blood.
- > She can pull a person’s soul out of their body by locking eyes with them.
- > The GM should feel free to give her any other powers consistent with necromancy.





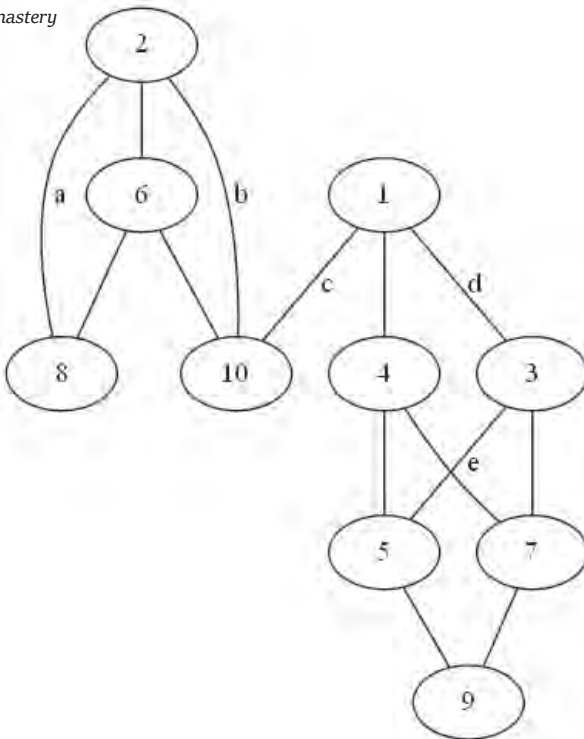
## **The Monastery of Saint Beatrix**

The monastery is built from stone that is being overtaken by vines, grass, and moss. It consists of a main building attached to eastern and western wings via connecting hallways. The eastern wing lies completely in ruins with only a few walls and doorways standing on the otherwise bare and cracked foundation. Most rooms with exterior walls have windows which admit sunlight but are too narrow to crawl through.

### **ENTRANCES**

- > Into **Area 1**: Up a short set of steps lies the double wooden doors into the main entrance. These doors are barred from the inside.
- > Into **Hallway d**: The east end of this hallway has crumbled away and is wide open to the ruined foundation of the eastern wing.
- > Into **Area 9**: Behind the monastery is a small garden. The garden is enclosed by a short wooden fence and the gate can easily be unlatched and opened.

*Diagram 5: Monastery*



## 1. MAIN ENTRANCE

*Description:* The floor is bare dirt and the walls are lined with planters that overflow with long dead vines. Dry fonts sit on either side of the front doors. Two floor-to-ceiling stained glass panels are on either side of the southern doors. Light shines through them suggesting that the interior room has a source of illumination. The panels depict a man and woman being sensually cradled in vines.

### > EXITS

- To the north are a pair of plain wooden doors that are barred from the inside. These are the exterior doors and lead outside.
- To the south are a pair of wooden doors ornately carved with vinework and flowers beyond which is **Area 4**.
- To the west is a simple, closed but unlocked wooden door that leads into **Hallway c**.
- The simple wooden door that once occupied the east wall has fallen off its hinges. Through the now open archway lies **Hallway d**.

## 2. GIOVANNI'S WORKSHOP

*Description:* There are many potted, but dead, plants in this room. All of them have disturbingly human features, such as leaves that look like hands, faces in the bark, and eyes where flowers would be. There are a few workbenches and cabinets stocked with lab equipment and dusty books.

### > TRAP

- One of the cabinets is locked and if opened will release a toxic gas distilled from poisonous plants. The gas will cause frightening and psychically painful hallucinations.

### > TREASURE

- The locked cabinet contains books describing Giovanni's attempts at making human-plant hybrids. These books cover everything from Cobamina's creation and the wine experiments to Giovanni's ill-fated final experiments on himself.
- A skilled herbalist or alchemist could use the notes in this room to create doses of **Giovani's Elixir**. It takes about a week of work to make a single dose.
- There is a single dose of **Giovani's Elixir** in a cork sealed bottle. The liquid itself is dark green in color.

### > EXITS

- To the south, a pair of glass paneled doors sit closed but unlocked. They lead out into the courtyard of **Area 6**.

- A simple, closed and locked wooden door on the east wall connects with **Hallway b**.
- Another simple, closed and locked wooden door on the west wall connects with **Hallway a**.

### **3. DINING HALL**

*Description:* The floors of this room are planks of wood lightly covered in sawdust and straw. There are several long wooden tables with benches on either side of them. A likeness of St. Beatrix's face woven from vines and branches hangs above a large stone hearth set into the west wall.

#### > *ENCOUNTER*

- If it is day, a few Mortis Amorea Cultists are here, having a meal (about 2 to 3 per PC). At night, the cultists convert this room into barracks and there will be many more (about 4 or 5 per PC) with their undead family members keeping watch (about 1 or 2 per PC and 1 or 2 of those will be flowering corpses). The cultists will initially view the PCs as outside invaders and will be concerned about maintaining their presence a secret. If the players manage to talk them down or get them to surrender, a cultist named Amara Kalavan, will speak for the group during the day. At night, Valentina herself is likely to be here.

#### > *EXITS:*

- A simple, closed but unlocked wooden door on the north wall leads into **Hallway d**.
- A swinging, hinged wooden door in the middle of the south wall leads into **Area 7**.
- A simple, closed and unlocked door at the southern end of the west wall leads into **Hallway e**.

### **4. MAIN CHAPEL**

*Description:* This long hall has bare dirt floors and is humid like a greenhouse. The roof is mostly made of glass that is cracked and broken in a few places. Stained glass windows depicting a man and a woman embraced by vines are on either side of the doors at the north end. Running down the hall are trees spaced out at even intervals. Circular patches of grass grow around the base of each tree and collectively their branches form a tunnel. At the southern end of the tunnel lies a rock outlined ritual circle around the largest tree whose trunk has been carved into the image of Saint Beatrix.

> *ENCOUNTER*

- The hall has several flowering corpses wandering around (about 3 per PC). At night there is a 2 in 6 chance that there will be about one third less of these creatures because Cobamina has sent them out to lure another villager to the monastery. Cobamina will try to use the flowering corpses in this room to lead the PCs through the secret door in the east wall and into the kitchen. There, they will attempt to entice them to drink the wine. If the PCs refuse, the flowering corpses will attempt to force the PCs to drink. If the PCs fight the creatures in the chapel during the day, the cultists in Area 5 will come to investigate. If the PCs fight the creatures in the kitchen at any time the cultists in Area 3 will come to investigate.

> *EXITS:*

- To the north are a pair of wooden doors ornately carved with vine-work and flowers. Beyond them is **Area 1**.
- Just below the middle of the east wall is a secret door that can be easily opened by pushing on the stone. Beyond the door is **Hallway e**.
- Two simple wooden doors that are both closed but unlocked are in the east and west corners of the southern wall. Both lead into **Area 5**.

## 5. **THE LIBRARY**

*Description:* This wood paneled room is lined with shelves filled with books and scrolls on various forms of plant life. The middle of the room is filled with scribing desks. On a couple of the desks are dusty, dirty logs that stand out from the other tomes. These are death records that have been brought up from the catacombs.

> *ENCOUNTER*

- During the day, Valentina is here with a few other cultists (about one per PC), and a couple of their undead “family” (about half as many PCs). At night, there is a 2 in 6 chance that Valentina is alone here, working late. Valentina will assume the PCs are more intruders and will fight to preserve the secrecy of her presence. She is not unreasonable and can be talked down especially if the PCs present evidence of either Cobamina’s existence or that the flowering corpses are not entirely what they seem.

> *TREASURE:*

- Valentina carries the key to **Area 8**.
- Many of the documents in this room would be valuable to herbalists and apothecaries.

> *EXITS:*

- Two simple wooden doors that are both closed but unlocked lie at the east and west ends of the north wall. Both lead into **Area 4**.
- A heavy wooden door that is barred on this side opens onto a short set of stairs down into the open air of **Area 9**.
- At the northern end of the eastern wall a simple wooden but unlocked door leads into **Hallway e**.

## 6. COBAMINA'S COURTYARD

*Description:* This central courtyard is open to the sky and the dirt feels like spongy flesh. The trees and plants that grow here have odd human-like features. The foliage is interspersed with simple stone benches. In the southern alcove is a stained glass window depicting a woman blooming out of a flower.

> *ENCOUNTER*

- Cobamina spends most of her time resting beneath the soil of this courtyard. Her primary goal is to be able to leave her courtyard and live her life. She currently sees no other way of accomplishing that other than amassing enough flowering corpses to pollinate a significant area. If attacked, she will call any surviving flowering corpses from **Area 4** to her aid.

> *EXITS:*

- Set into the northern wall, a pair of glass paneled doors are closed but unlocked. They lead into **Area 2**.
- An open archway to the southeast leads into **Area 10**.
- In the southwest corner lies a heavy wooden door that is closed and locked barring the way to **Area 8**.

## 7. KITCHENS AND WINERY

*Description:* This room is divided into two distinct sections. The western half is a simple kitchen space equipped with a wood-fired cooking hearth, a preparation space and a small built-in pantry. Most of the food in containers is old and rotten but some items appear fresh and new. The eastern half is outfitted for making wine. The wine racks are sparsely stocked but still contain a number of sealed bottles. A few recently drunk empty bottles are discarded nearby.

> *ENCOUNTER*

- If it is late at night or near dawn there is a 2 in 6 chance that a villager is here who has been enticed into drinking the wine. Cobamina will influence this person to attack people in the hopes that they will be killed and then raised by the Mortis Amoraе cultists.



> *EXITS*

- A swinging, hinged wooden door in the middle of the north wall leads into **Area 3**.
- In the middle of the west wall, a simple closed and unlocked door opens into **Hallway e**.
- In the middle of the south wall is a simple, closed and unlocked wooden door that opens onto a short set of stairs down into the open air of **Area 9**.

## **8. CATACOMB STAIRS**

*Description:* This room has no exterior windows making it very cold and dark. There are sconces for torches but none of them are lit. A creaky wooden staircase descends into the earth. If it is daytime, a faint flickering light can be seen down below.

> *TRAP*

- The staircase is lined with headless skeleton torsos with arms intact. When someone not wearing a Mortis Amoraes holy symbol attempts to descend the stairs, the skeletons grab the person and attempt to strangle them.

> *EXITS*

- On the north wall is a closed and locked door made of dark wood beyond which lies **Hallway a**.
- In the northeast corner lies a heavy wooden door that is closed and locked barring the way to **Area 6**.
- The creaky wooden staircase leads down to **Area 3** of the **Catacombs**.

## **9. THE BACK GARDEN**

*Description:* This vegetable and fruit garden is surrounded by a low wooden fence. The plants are overgrown but appear to be thriving. A closer inspection reveals that the fruits and vegetables in this garden all appear to have features suggestive of human anatomy such as faces, hands, eyes or ears.

> *SPECIAL*

- Anything eaten from the garden bleeds and has a distinct coppery taste.

> *EXITS*

- At the east end of the north wall, a latched gate opens out into the forest around the monastery.
- Up a short flight of stairs, In the middle of the north wall, is a simple, closed and unlocked wooden door that leads into **Area 7**.

- Up another short flight of stairs, in the middle of the west wall, is a heavy wooden door that is barred on the inside. Beyond it lies **Area 5**.

## **10. THE WEST VESTIBULE**

*Description:* This transition chamber connects the main monastery with the western wing. Vine iconography outlines the doorways and simple stone benches line the walls. The ground is covered heavily with pollen and small, feminine foot prints lead out of the central courtyard, up to the eastern door and back again.

### > *SPECIAL*

- The pollen has been left by flowering corpses. It has taken many nights to cover just this small vestibule with enough of it to allow Cobamina to take her first few steps of freedom.

### > *EXITS*

- To the east is a closed and unlocked simple wooden door that leads into **Hallway c**.
- A closed but unlocked wooden door in the north wall leads into **Hallway b**.
- An open archway to the northwest leads into the open air courtyard of **Area 6**.

# **Hallways**

## **a. WEST WING WESTERN HALLWAY**

*Description:* This hallway runs primarily north-south with an eastern turn at its northern end. Windows to the outside run along its western wall.

### > *EXITS*

- At the southern end is a closed and locked dark wooden door beyond which lies **Area 8**.
- At the end of the eastern turn is another closed and locked wooden door that leads into **Area 2**.

## **b. WEST WING EASTERN HALLWAY**

*Description:* This hallway runs primarily north-south with a western turn at its northern end. Windows to the outside run along its eastern wall.

### > *EXITS*

- At the southern end is a closed but unlocked wooden door beyond which lies **Area 10**.
- At the end of the western turn is another closed and locked wooden door that leads into **Area 2**.

**c. WEST WING CONNECTION**

*Description:* This east-west hallway connects the central building with the west wing. The north and south walls are lined with windows to the outside.

> *EXITS*

- At the west end is a closed but unlocked simple wooden door that leads into **Area 10**.
- At the east end is a closed but unlocked simple wooden door that leads into **Area 1**.

**d. EAST WING CONNECTION**

*Description:* This east-west hallway once connected the central building with the east wing. The north wall is lined with windows to the outside.

> *EXITS*

- The eastern end has entirely collapsed and opens up directly into ruins.
- The simple wooden door that used to occupy the west end has fallen off its hinges leaving only an open archway into **Area 1**.
- A simple closed but unlocked wooden door in the south wall leads into **Area 3**.

**e. INTERIOR HALLWAY**

*Description:* This north-south interior corridor is dark and narrow.

> *EXITS*

- A simple, closed and unlocked door at the northern end of the east wall leads into **Area 3**.
- About half way down on the east wall is a simple, closed and unlocked door beyond which lies **Area 7**.
- About half way down the west wall is the backside of a secret door into **Area 4**. On this side of the wall, the door stands out as a hinged section of stone.
- At the southern end of the west wall is a closed but unlocked simple wooden door, beyond which lies **Area 5**.

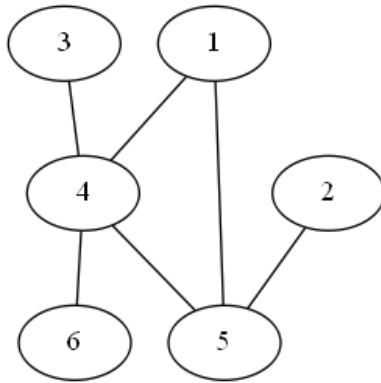
## The Catacombs

The catacombs beneath the monastery are where the Order of Saint Beatrix buried their dead. The dead were interred either directly in the earth of the walls or in lidless, planter-like stone sarcophagi filled with dirt. In all cases some part of the body, usually a hand, but sometimes a leg or even the head were left exposed like a budding plant.

### ENTRANCES

- The only way down is via the stairs that connect **Area 8** on the main floor with **Area 3** in the catacombs.
- Technically, there is a crack in the ceiling of **Area 2** which admits sunlight from the outside above, but it would take dedicated searching of the grounds above to find it followed by a great deal of work to crack it open wide enough to allow admittance.

Diagram 6: Catacombs



### 1. CATACOMBS NORTH

*Description:* The dirt walls of this chamber have been filled with dead members of The Order of St. Beatrix. However, Mortis Amorea cultists have been excavating the dead and laying them on the ground. Near each body are scrolls with notes attempting to identify each corpse.

#### > ENCOUNTER

- The removal of the bodies has attracted the attention of giant grave worms (about one per PC) and some bodies have already been damaged by them. The worms, however, are more than happy to have access to fresher meat.

> *TREASURE*

- Some cultists have also left small valuables as gifts to these potential new “family” members. These are mostly in the form of bracelets, necklaces, and rings.

> *EXITS*

- A dark, dirt passage trails off to the southwest and eventually connects with **Area 4**.
- Another long, dark, dirt passage heading to the south eventually connects with **Area 5**.

## **2. GIOVANI’S TOMB**

*Description:* From a crack in the ceiling, a beam of sunlight (or moonlight) falls upon an open sarcophagus filled with dirt. A plaque on one side of it reads, “Giovani Baglioni.” Draped across the sarcophagus is a pile of vines and moss that is vaguely humanoid in shape. It appears to be thriving but is straining to reach the light.

> *ENCOUNTER*

- The plant is all that is left of Giovani. It is capable of speech and ultimately has a death-wish. However, it still cares about Cobamina and will do anything to help, defend, or avenge her.

> *EXITS*

- A long dirt tunnel to the west connects this chamber with **Area 5**.

## **3. CATACOMB ENTRANCE**

*Description:* The walls are lined with shelves stocked with musty scrolls and tomes. These are the original death records of the monastery kept by the Order of Saint Beatrix. Lanterns have been strung up by ropes along the edges of the ceiling. While the majority of the walls are dirt, the eastern wall is made of stone.

> *ENCOUNTER*

- During the day, the lanterns are lit and a single Mortis Amorea cultist named Mabuz Achlys is here going over the records. Regardless of the time of day, this room is also guarded by two animated skeletons armed with axes.

> *TREASURE*

- Mabuz Achlys carries the key to the iron door in this room.

> *EXITS*

- A rickety wooden staircase leads up to **Area 8** of the **Main Floor**.
- A locked iron door is set in the eastern wall. Beyond it lies **Area 4**.



#### **4. CATACOMB VESTIBULE**

*Description:* Along the north wall of this chamber is a workbench stocked with tools for preparing a body for interment. Above the workbench is a shelf lined with jars filled with mold and fungus. In the middle of the room is an open, empty sarcophagus about halfway filled with dirt. Unlike the rest of the room, the western wall is made of stone.

> *TRAP*

- The passage to the south is lined with large mushrooms that emit poisonous spores when stepped on or near. The members of The Order of Saint Beatrix knew how to safely navigate this passage.

> *EXITS*

- In the middle of the stone wall to the west is a locked iron door that leads to **Area 3**.
- A dark, dirt passage trails off to the northeast and eventually connects with **Area 1**.
- Another dark, dirt passage leads off to the southeast and connects with **Area 5**.
- A slightly shorter passage lies to the south and connects with **Area 6**.

#### **5. CATACOMBS SOUTH**

*Description:* The dirt walls of this chamber have been filled with dead members of The Order of St. Beatrix. At regular intervals, a hand, foot, or occasional head protrudes from the walls.

> *EXITS*

- A dark, dirt passage trails off to the northwest and eventually connects with **Area 4**.
- Another long, dark, dirt passage heading to the north eventually connects with **Area 1**.
- A dirt tunnel to the east connects with **Area 2**.

#### **6. TOMB OF THE ELDERS**

*Description:* This chamber contains five sarcophagi for the original founding members of The Order of St. Beatrix. They are arranged such that the exposed body parts (one in each sarcophagi) suggests a single whole body.

> *TREASURE*

- Over time, members of The Order of St. Beatrix would pay their respects by leaving gifts on the sarcophagi. Many of these gifts are organic in nature such as braided bracelets, but some are woven with valuables such as copper and silver charms or semi-precious gemstones.

> *EXITS*

- To the north, a dark, dirt passage connects with **Area 4**.

## ***Other Characters and Creatures***

### **MORTIS AMOREA CULTIST**

*Description:* Mortis Amorea is diverse in membership but relatively uniform in dress. They wear black robes along with holy symbols in the shape of a skeletal hand holding a human heart. They also carry silver ceremonial daggers.

*Drive:* Mortis Amorea members are fiercely loyal to Valentina and deeply protective of their undead “family” members who they refer to as “loved ones.”

*Abilities:* Most Mortis Amorea cultists are capable of defending themselves or their “loved ones” with their daggers. A few might know minor necromantic magic. Otherwise, they are largely religious scholars skilled in researching and cataloguing the dead.

*Treasure:* Each member typically carries 6 to 12 coins of the local currency at any given time.

### **FLOWERING CORPSE**

*Description:* Animated corpses wrapped in vines that spill from their mouths (and any open wounds) and flowers blooming in their eye sockets.

*Drive:* When not being directly controlled by Cobamina, the corpses can be coaxed by Mortis Amorea cultists into doing simple tasks.

*Abilities:* In addition to simple grabbing, punching and biting, these corpses give off an intoxicating pollen that is calming, alluring, and euphoric. It takes about a day’s worth of pollen from a single corpse to make a ten foot area safe for Cobamina to walk on.

### **OTHER ANIMATED DEAD**

*Description:* These range from fleshy walking dead to skeletons. These are the ordinary undead created by Mortis Amorea.

*Drive:* They simply follow the will of their cultist creators.

*Abilities:* They can fight with teeth and claws and rudimentary weapons. Otherwise, they can only carry out menial tasks.

## **GIANT GRAVE WORMS**

*Description:* These worms are about six to eight feet long and about ten to twelve inches around. They have a large tooth-filled maw that is stronger than you would expect.

*Drive:* They eat corpses in their entirety including crushing and grinding up the bones. They are not against eating the living.

*Abilities:* They can burrow through the ground quickly and their bites can take a chunk out of an arm or leg. They are also capable of grabbing and constricting their prey.

## ***Lamentable Libations***

### **GIOVANI'S ELIXIR**

Each dose of the elixir grants the current benefit, drawback and physical transformation listed for 24 hours. However, the previous dose's effects recur and become permanent. The exception is the fourth and final dose. Its effects are immediate and permanent, along with all other prior effects.

<b>Dose</b>	<b>Benefit</b>	<b>Drawback</b>	<b>Transformation</b>
1	No longer requires food if exposed to at least 4 hours of sunlight per day.	Requires twice as much water in a day.	Eyes and skin turn green.
2	Can emit a blinding, choking pollen around them.	Becomes vulnerable to fire damage and hot environments.	Hair turns to flowering vines.
3	Skin secretes a toxin that when ingested induces prophetic hallucinations.	Becomes vulnerable to cold damage and freezing environments.	Skin turns entirely to moss and fungus.
4	Can smother enemies that are successfully grappled.	Can only crawl at half speed.	Bones lose all rigidity.

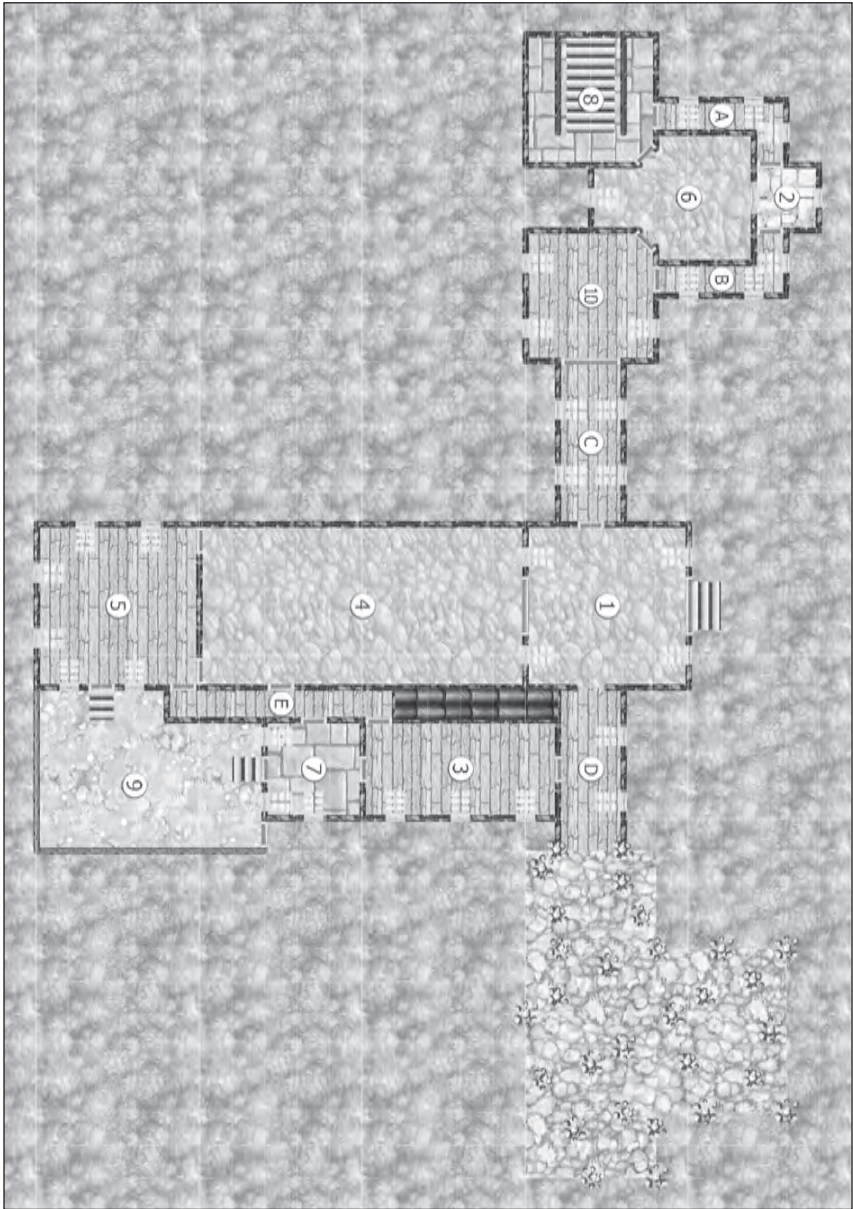
### **COBAMINA'S BLOOD-WINE**

Drinking any amount of this wine forms an instant psychic bond with Cobamina. She sees and feels everything the imbiber does. It is difficult (though not impossible) for the drinker to distinguish between Cobamina's thoughts and their own. Emotionally, it is hard for the drinker to regard Cobamina as anything other than an extremely close and valued family member. If Cobamina dies, anyone sharing a psychic bond with her experiences immense, nearly fatal pain.

# Appendix: Maps

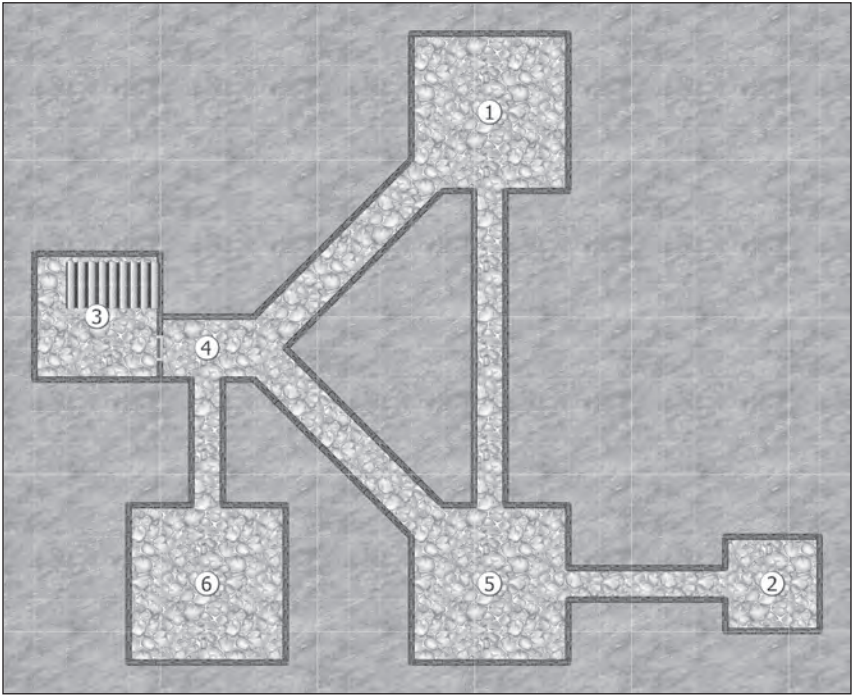
**MAIN FLOOR, MONASTERY OF ST BEATRIX**

Scale: 1 sq. = 10 ft.



**CATACOMBS, MONASTERY OF ST BEATRIX**

Scale: 1 sq. = 10 ft.





# *Inspiration*

## **BOOKS**

- > The Works of Ann Radcliffe (*A Sicilian Romance*, *The Romance of the Forest*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, *The Italian*): There is more dungeon crawling in old Gothic romances than in most fantasy stories.

## **GAMES**

- > *Dogs in the Vineyard* by Vincent Baker: The dungeon creation process was heavily influenced by the Town Creation rules in this game.
- > *Trollbabe* by Ron Edwards: The town encounter process was inspired by the adventure creation technique in this game.
- > *Bluebeard's Bride* by Whitney “Strix” Beltran, Marris Kelly, and Sarah Richardson: Every play session of this game produces a location completely in line with *Dungeons & Dilemmas*. I highly recommend it.

## **FOR THE LOVE OF LIFE AND DEATH**

- > *A Rose for Emily* by William Faulkner
- > *Rappaccini's Daughter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne
- > *The Disinterment of Venus* by Clark Ashton Smith
- > *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson
- > *Weeds* a.k.a. *The Lonesome Death of Jordy Verrill* by Stephen King

*You are exploring a tomb in search of a mirror fabled to foretell the future. You discover the tomb is inhabited by an undead queen and her spectral knights. In your exploration you have learned that she was murdered by the patriarchal structures of her own holy order. The method of her execution has denied her eternal rest.*

*She plans murderous vengeance against the living but offers mercy under two conditions. First, help install her as an eternal monarch upon the religious throne. Second, eradicate the bloodline of those who betrayed her.*

*What do you do?*

\* \* \*

***Dungeons & Dilemmas*** is a collection of system agnostic techniques for designing dungeon-based adventures that engage the players on an emotional and ethical level. The process within approaches dungeons as their own unique narrative structure, and individual encounters as moral puzzles.

***Dungeons & Dilemmas*** treats deeper emotional engagement as an additional dimension of play on top of the exploration, hazard avoidance, monster fighting, treasure collection and other traditional elements of fantasy adventure games. All the ideas, tools, and techniques presented speak to the strengths of existing rule systems in common use. GMs and players won't have to hand-wave away or house rule their games to accommodate this material.

