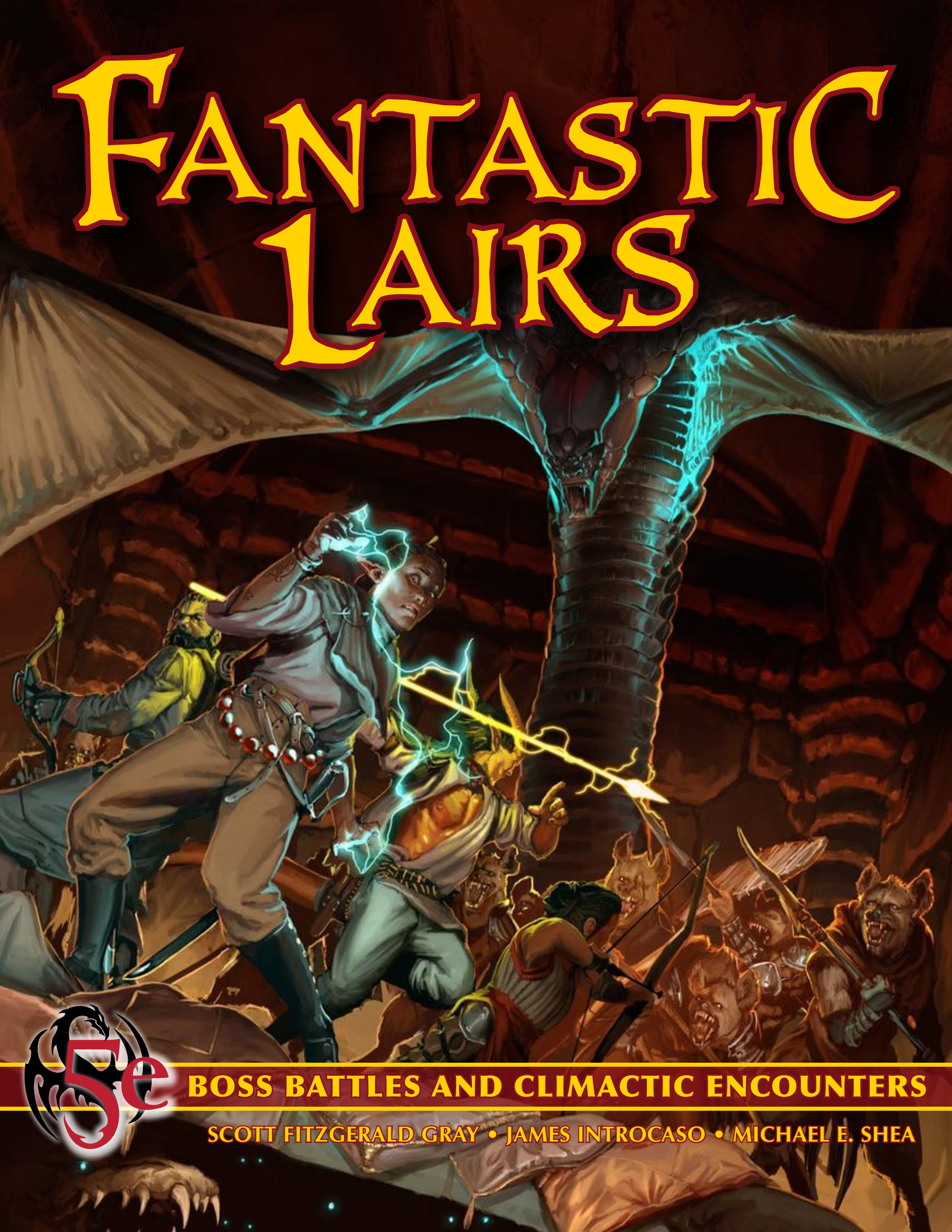


FANTASTIC LAIRS



BOSS BATTLES AND CLIMACTIC ENCOUNTERS

SCOTT FITZGERALD GRAY • JAMES INTROCASO • MICHAEL E. SHEA

SCOTT FITZGERALD GRAY • JAMES INTROCASO • MICHAEL E. SHEA

FANTASTIC LAIRS

BOSS BATTLES AND CLIMACTIC ENCOUNTERS

DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT

James Introcaso, Michael E. Shea, Scott Fitzgerald Gray

EDITING

Scott Fitzgerald Gray

SENSITIVITY EDITING

Tanya DePass

COVER AND BACK COVER ART

Jack Kaiser

INTERIOR ART

Xavier Beaudlet, Allie Briggs, Nikki Dawes, Jack Kaiser,
Enmanuel Martinez, Victor Leza Moreno, Thomas Perkins

CARTOGRAPHY

Elven Tower, Diana Muñoz, Alex VanDerAa

COVER AND INTERIOR GRAPHIC DESIGN

Marc Radle

LAYOUT

Scott Fitzgerald Gray

Thanks to our amazing playtesters and Kickstarter backers

Copyright © 2020 by James Introcaso, Michael E. Shea, and Scott Fitzgerald Gray

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
CAVES OF THE COCKATRICE (1st Level).....	5
TEMPLE OF THE CENTIPEDE CULT (2nd Level)	10
THE LAIR OF LORD WHISKERS (3rd Level)	15
LAST CALL AT NEVERMIND (3rd Level).....	20
NATURE’S RAGE (4th Level).....	25
ASHSNARL’S SECRETS (5th Level).....	30
STICKY TOFFEE (5th Level).....	36
BUMPY RIDE (6th Level).....	41
THE LAMIA JOB (6th Level)	47
ITHRIX BLACKBILE (7th Level).....	53
THOSE WHO ARE ABOUT TO DIE (7th Level).....	59
ZENGRAN’S GAME (7th Level)	66
THE BLOOD PALACE (8th Level).....	74
CURSE OF BLACK ICE (8th Level)	80
KORRINGTON ACADEMY (9th Level).....	85
THE REMEMBERED GOD (10th Level)	92
DRAGON MUMMY’S RAGE (12th Level)	97
VALENTYNE’S LEGACY (14th Level).....	102
THE WORLD EATER (14th Level).....	108
THE FORGE OF SIZZLE DEATH (16th Level).....	115
BLADE QUEEN’S THRONE (17th Level)	121
HELLS’ HEART (20th Level)	127
PUT THE MONSTER BACK (20th Level).....	133
BUILDING A BOSS LAIR	140

INTRODUCTION

Boss battles are hard. Although many GMs are able to get away with improvising much of their RPG campaigns—even combat encounters—running climactic battles against powerful villains almost always requires a good deal of preparation.

Most of the time, our games don't need to be filled with complicated tactical battles featuring three or more types of opponents, a half-dozen ways to modify a battlefield, some major environmental shift, and a detailed map full of interesting nooks and crannies. If all our encounters are this complicated, our prep work can often end up thrown away as characters find the means to circumvent obstacles or challenge their foes in unexpected ways. Simple battles work great most of the time, and can be built around scenarios as simple as a single monster guarding a valuable treasure in a cave.

But sometimes we want something special.

The characters come face to face with a powerful bandit captain in her private tavern—built within a titan's skull. A local village comes under attack by a deadly war machine, driven by a villain bent on murder and destruction. A forgotten evil lures adventurers into an ancient temple, intent on feeding the heroes to a monster hidden away for long years. Although we can improvise many parts of our RPGs as GMs, improvising these kinds of complex, climactic boss battles is a lot harder to do.

This book is here to help you carry the load.

Fantastic Lairs: Boss Battles and Climactic Encounters features a full range of deadly battlegrounds, secret sanctums, and villainous hideouts built for confrontations with powerful boss monsters. This book is your catalog of boss battles, ready for you to choose, pilfer, customize, and drop into your own fifth edition game. You want an amazing climax to an adventure or a campaign? A crescendo that builds the excitement of your game to its peak, and where the thrill of total victory or the agony of defeat lies along a razor's edge? These lairs are designed to give you just that.

UNIQUE YET USABLE

All of the lairs in this book are designed to be interesting on their own, but also to be usable in a wide variety of situations. They span the full level range for a fifth edition campaign, from a 1st-level adventure in which the characters come up against a fey-touched cockatrice, to 20th-level showdowns against a corrupted gold dragon and the legendary tarrasque.

Each lair is designed to be a unique experience against a dastardly foe, and yet be universal enough to plug into your home campaign. Not every lair will fit perfectly into the adventures you want to run. But hopefully even those lairs can be used for ideas and inspiration, fueling your creativity and giving you what you need to build exciting adventures and campaigns.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Skim through this book. Enjoy the art and maps, and note the lairs that capture your interest. Hopefully you're running an existing campaign or have one in the planning stages, allowing you to mix and match these lairs with your own ideas. Mark and note the locations, boss monsters, and fights that catch your eye. Later on, when your campaign shifts gears or it's time to start up a new campaign, pick the book up again and see what catches your eye the second time around. *Fantastic Lairs* is a book you can come back to often, grabbing new locations and boss battles each time you need one. With some reskinning, you might even find yourself using the same lairs over and over again, making them your own each time you run them.

Though each entry in *Fantastic Lairs* has been built as a climactic encounter that can be dropped into a longer adventure or campaign, that isn't the only way you can use this book. All of these boss battles also make excellent one-shot adventures. If you're looking to play a quick game focused on exciting combat, just select a lair, have the players grab some pregenerated characters, drop in one of the hooks provided with each encounter (or use those hooks to inspire your own), and have fun.

LAIR DESIGN

This book uses a common design for each of its lairs and climactic encounters. Each lair begins with a short description that sets up the action to come, then is broken down into the following sections.

BACKGROUND

The background section talks about what came before. Depending on the encounter, this might include the history of the lair, the plots of the boss, and how the boss's forces have been gathered. The background also includes plenty of ideas that can help you connect the encounter to the backstory of your own campaign.

INTEGRATING THIS LAIR

This section describes how you might fit the lair into an existing adventure or campaign. It gives sample

hooks that can bring the characters to the lair, or advice on how they might approach it. It's not expected that these suggestions will be used as-is when running a lair as part of your game. Rather, you can use them as starting points, fueling your creativity to build hooks customized for your players and their characters. And while each of these lairs has been designed as a climactic boss battle, you're totally free to use them as one-shot adventures, or even as exciting starting encounters for a longer adventure arc or campaign.

APPROACHING THE LAIR

This section describes the different ways the characters might approach and get inside a lair. For many lairs, the initial approach is straightforward. For others, different setups and entry points might bring the characters into the lair in very different ways. Though all the lairs in this book are built around exciting combat options, most also feature lots of options for roleplaying, sneaking in unnoticed by the villains, and so forth.

LAIR FEATURES

This section describes the overall characteristics of a lair, including its construction, lighting, and other notable features.

LAIR AREAS

Each lair includes descriptions of the notable locations found within it. All of these locations include descriptions of features and information to be revealed to the players, plus notes just for the GM's knowledge and use. The initial entry points and most important areas of a lair might include text meant to be read aloud or paraphrased to the players, to help them visualize what their characters are seeing.

CREATURES

Throughout the lair, you'll find references to the monsters and NPCs meant to challenge the characters—including the encounter's boss monster. Where you're meant to refer to a creature's combat statistics, you'll see that creature's name in **bold text**. Sometimes, this tells you to look to your monster reference book for a creature's default stat block. Other times, the encounter explains how to make new monster using modifications to an existing stat block.

ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTY

Though each lair is tuned for a particular level of play, this section offers easy and straightforward suggestions for scaling encounters for lower- or higher-level characters, or for a party with fewer or more characters. In some cases, the advice given in this section can bring a lair into an entirely different tier of

play, so that a 3rd-level face-off with a bandit gang can be easily scaled up into a 6th- or 7th-level showdown.

The "Encounter Difficulty" section often makes use of four simple and powerful ways to tune an encounter to fit the power of the characters: modifying the number of monsters, modifying the hit points of those monsters, adjusting the number of attacks monsters can make, and adjusting the damage of those attacks.

TUNING HIT POINTS AND DAMAGE

In general, as a GM, you can keep your hands on two dials when tuning encounters: one dial for monster hit points and one for monster damage. This lets you make changes to the hit points of monsters and the damage those monsters deal either before you run a lair or while the lair adventure plays out.

If the characters are killing monsters too easily, feel free to increase those monsters' hit points up to the maximum based on their hit dice—or even higher if you don't mind bending the rules. If the characters aren't suitably threatened in these lairs, you can increase monster damage by adding more dice to the roll, bumping average damage, or giving monsters additional attacks when they use the Attack action.

Even if you're playing a lair at its optimal level, if a battle becomes too hard and hopeless, you can turn the dials the other way, reducing hit points and letting monsters hit less hard as needed. Alternatively, if what should be an optimized battle feels too easy and the players are getting bored, increase the monsters' hit points and damage output to dial up the danger.

TREASURE

Treasure found in the lair is summarized in this section. Many lairs present a number of different options for how treasure can be found or awarded, to make it easier for you to work the encounter into your ongoing campaign.

EXPANDING THIS LAIR

This final section helps you think about how you might expand the story and the situation set up in a specific lair to drive future adventures in your campaign. Lairs can introduce new villains, new magic, new secrets, and many other adventure elements that you can use as your own. If you and your group enjoyed the outcome of a particular lair, use this section as inspiration for continuing the threads of that lair beyond what you find in these pages.

MAKE THESE LAIRS YOUR OWN

Our goal with this book is to make it easy for you to run fantastic boss battles. These lairs are yours now. Take from them what you will, and let these boss battles help you build fantastic stories of high adventure.



CAVES OF THE COCKATRICE

ALLIE BRIGGS

A cockatrice and her twisted offspring have long laired in a cavern complex rumored to be a site of ancient fey magic. Treasure hunters, explorers, and underground wanderers are drawn to seek this mysterious site—and are never seen again.

This lair is optimized for four to five 1st-level characters.

BACKGROUND

Many centuries ago, creatures from the Feywild crossed over from their world into the Material Plane. A cave that bordered those two realms became the sanctum of druids and wizards of the unseelie fey, who followed a powerful fey lord known as the Shadow King. They built a doorway between worlds through which they and other servants of the Shadow King could travel. It was even said that the Shadow King would step through the gateway from time to time, enjoying the pleasures of the natural world before returning to his dark court.

But over centuries, the Shadow King and his court turned their attentions elsewhere. The magic of the gateway faded and the doorway closed, though the

remnants of the Shadow King's power did not wholly pass from the world.

Decades ago, a wandering cockatrice found the abandoned cave and made it her lair. Over long years, the descendants of this cockatrice became twisted by the unseelie magic of the cave, which they continue to inhabit to this day.

INTEGRATING THIS LAIR

You can use the following hooks to integrate this lair into your campaign, whether as part of a longer adventure or as the focus of a single play session:

- The lair might be a location the characters stumble upon or which they've been sent to in order to recover an item, a person, or information. The cockatrice caves might be a contained site, or could be just one part of a larger underground complex of natural caverns, perhaps with some other connections to the fey.
- This location might be a section of a larger underground complex avoided by intelligent humanoids. Evil dwarves who live in a nearby city might shun these haunted caverns. The petrified humanoids in the lair might be bandits, orcs, or

hobgoblins who wandered away from their more secure lairs and ended up here. The characters might also stumble upon these caves while seeking an alternative secret entrance into an underground city.

- As an encounter intended for 1st-level characters, this lair might stand as its own full adventure. Characters of 1st level need little more than a battle against some cockatrices and their offspring to bring them up to 2nd level and get them ready to adventure onward. Setting the lair up as a one-shot adventure could involve a local settlement sending the characters out to investigate the recent disappearances of farmers or hunters who veered too near the haunted cavern.

APPROACHING THE COCKATRICE LAIR

This lair can be set up as a deep underground cavern, or might be found close to the surface world with a tunnel entrance leading directly into the cockatrice's caves. When the characters approach the lair of the cockatrice, read or paraphrase the following to set the scene:

The rough-walled tunnel opens up to a series of larger caverns ahead. Numerous pieces of broken stone lie on the ground, many appearing to be finely carved. One piece is recognizable as a stone humanoid hand, broken off at the wrist.

COCKATRICE CAVES FEATURES

The areas of the cockatrice's lair have the following general features:

- Tunnels in the lair are 6 feet high.
- Larger caverns have ceilings rising to 12 feet high.
- All areas of the lair are unlit.

COCKATRICE HATCHLINGS

Throughout the lair lurk the cockatrice's hatchlings. These hatchlings might be indifferent to the characters or hostile toward them, as you desire.

Whenever you see a bold reference to a **cockatrice hatchling**, use the **lizard** stat block with the following changes:

- It has a Constitution of 6 (–2), and 1 (1d4 – 2) hit points.
- Its lack of object permanence grants it disadvantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks and a –5 penalty to its passive Wisdom (Perception) score.
- The hatchling has the following attack instead of the lizard's bite attack:

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +0 to hit, reach 5 ft., one creature. *Hit:* 1 piercing damage, and the target must succeed on a DC 8 Constitution saving throw against being magically petrified. On a failed save, the creature begins to turn to stone and is restrained. It must repeat the saving throw at the end of its next turn. On a success, the effect ends. On a failure, the creature is petrified for 1 minute.

- It has a challenge rating of 1/8 (25 XP).

COCKATRICE CAVES

The following encounter areas are keyed to the map of the cockatrice lair.

C1. CAVERN ENTRANCE

A statue of a dwarf stands at this junction of four rough-walled natural tunnels, its face staring down toward its two broken arms on the ground. A successful DC 12 Wisdom (Perception) check made to inspect the statue confirms that it is very lifelike—and most likely a petrified humanoid. (This unfortunate explorer is dead and cannot be restored from their petrified state. See area C5 for more information.)

Any character inspecting the cracked tunnel walls to the north notices gentle wisps of wind blowing through the cracks, through which can be heard the faint sound of running water. A character who succeeds on a DC 13 Wisdom (Perception) check to search the tunnel walls notices an Elven glyph on the cracked stone of the north wall.

With the glyph spotted, a successful DC 14 Intelligence (Arcana or History) check recognizes it as the mark of the Shadow King, a dark lord of the fey. If an elf or half-elf touches the glyph, the wall around it fades into shadow for 1 minute, revealing a tunnel into area C2.

The cracked wall can also be broken through with a successful DC 14 Strength (Athletics) check. The noise of doing so alerts the cockatrice and her hatchlings in area C4 to the presence of intruders.

MIKE'S THOUGHTS: BE NICE AT 1ST LEVEL

This lair has been designed for 1st-level characters, who are much more fragile than characters of any other level in the game. Be nice to 1st-level characters, who are weak enough that death can come as an unwelcome surprise to the whole table at once. Though the cockatrice and her hatchlings in this encounter are dangerous, they don't necessarily need to fight optimally if the characters are having too tough a time. Go easy on the characters at 1st level. You can always dial up the danger later on. When they hit 7th level and above? That's the time to bring on the pain.



C2. THRONE OF THE SHADOW KING

A large sinkhole in the center of this cavern leads to an underground stream flowing west to east, 20 feet below the cavern floor. The western branch of the stream is fed by the waterfall in area C3. The eastern branch leads out to beyond these caverns.

A cracked statue of an elf sits atop an ornate stone throne in the northwest corner of the cavern. A successful DC 12 Intelligence (History or Nature) check reveals that this is not a petrified creature, but a centuries-old statue depicting the Shadow King, a dark lord of the fey.

A glyph-marked darkwood bracelet rests in one hand of the statue of the Shadow King. The bracelet is an uncommon magic item whose wearer can cast the *dimension door* spell, but who has the poisoned condition while in contact with iron or other metal. Once its spell is cast, the bracelet crumbles into ash.

This bracelet is attuned to the fey gate in area C4, as are the cockatrice and her offspring. As such, the wearer of the bracelet has advantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks made to notice those creatures.

C3. WATERFALL

A narrow waterfall flows down from the upper reaches of this 20-foot-high cavern into a 20-foot-deep sinkhole in the floor, then out through a tunnel connecting area C3 to area C2. A single **cockatrice hatchling** wanders around in here, looks curiously at the characters, and attempts to nibble on one character's foot.

C4. HATCHERY

A bubbling pool of hot mud fills this small cavern with humidity. Piles of cockatrice eggs lie along the edges of the cave, which is home to two **cockatrice hatchlings** per character.

When the characters first approach this area, they see a statue of a dwarf against the far wall turn from stone back to flesh and curse loudly. The dwarf is then swarmed by the hatchlings, who quickly turn it back to stone again.

Any creature that enters the hot mud for the first time on a turn or starts its turn there takes 3 (1d6) fire damage.

C5. CAVERN OF FROZEN FEAR

This rough-walled cavern is the main lair of the cockatrice, which feeds on ever-present insects and other vermin when not hunting the humanoids that wander into this cavern. As the characters approach this area, the cockatrice lurks amid the broken statues of its previous victims, hoping to catch them unawares while they investigate the unseelie pull of the ancient fey gate.

A dozen humanoid statues, many of them broken, decorate this broad cavern. Tall columns of stone rise to the rough ceiling, and a rune-decorated gateway of worked stone stands before the rock wall to the north, swirling with magical energy.

Two podiums flank the gateway, holding glowing crystals of violet and green. The green crystal has a large crack in it, and sends intermittent pulses of arcane energy arcing into the stone of the wall and floor.

FEY-TOUCHED COCKATRICE

The fey-touched cockatrice, the central boss of this lair, resides here. Its proximity to the unseelie gate has twisted the creature's nature, so that it uses the **cockatrice** stat block with the following changes:

- It has proficiency in the Stealth skill, giving it a +3 modifier on Dexterity (Stealth) checks.
- It can cast the *misty step* spell as a bonus action, no components required.
- It has a challenge rating of 1 (200 XP).

TACTICS

If it becomes aware of intruders, the cockatrice attempts to hide among the statues, flies out to attack its foes, and then uses *misty step* to return to the shadows. If the characters manage to sneak up on it, the cockatrice is pecking at the leg of an undamaged statue of an elf (see the section on Celestria Avondel for details).

The cockatrice is accompanied by two **cockatrice hatchlings** for each character in the party above two.

The cockatrice and the hatchlings all have darkvision and prefer to fight in the dark. They first attack any character holding a light, attempting to extinguish it so they have an easier time hunting their prey.

STATUES

The cockatrice's petrification ability normally does not petrify creatures permanently. However, the proximity of the chaotic magic of the fey gate means that creatures that suffer mortal wounds while petrified in this area die and become mundane statues. Roughly half the statues in this area have suffered this fate, and are missing arms, legs, or heads. Other statues, however, have been petrified more recently and are still alive. These statues take the forms of wandering villagers, hapless explorers, or other NPCs specific to your adventure, all of whom have become trapped in this cavern and repeatedly petrified by the cockatrice and her brood.

A character or a cockatrice can attempt to topple a statue onto a creature within 5 feet of the statue. Doing so requires an action and a successful DC 12 Strength (Athletics) check, and forces the targeted creature to make a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw. On a failed save, the target takes 7 (2d6) bludgeoning damage and is

JAMES'S THOUGHTS: LET THE DICE DECIDE

The lower levels of the game, especially 1st level, are meant to be deadly. While I don't (usually) endorse an adversarial style of running games, character death is part of the game—and in most cases, is only really meaningful at lower levels. Starting at 5th level, characters get access to magic that can bring them back from the dead with a single spell slot. If your group is okay with it and it won't wreck anyone's enjoyment, don't pull any punches. Roll out in the open, and let the dice and the characters fall where they may.

knocked prone and restrained under the statue (escape DC 12).

NATURAL COLUMNS

The two natural columns of stone within the cavern can be used as cover. Because the cockatrice hatchlings have trouble maintaining focus on other creatures, whenever a character goes out of sight behind a pillar, any hatchlings aware of the character immediately forget about them, and go off in search of other targets.

FEY GATE

The fey gate here was once a portal to the unseelie realms of the Feywild, but has become unstable over long centuries. The nearby podiums, which once powered the gate, now send chaotic energy arcing into nearby objects and creatures.

Any creature that moves within 15 feet of the gate for the first time on a turn or starts its turn there must succeed on a DC 12 Dexterity saving throw or take 3 (1d6) lightning damage.

REANIMATED STATUES

Once the threat of the cockatrices is removed, each intact and still-living statue reanimates within 1d12 hours. Depending on how you've set up this lair and the scope of the adventure around the encounter, these petrified NPCs might include any of the following:

Dawson the Gray Hunter. An elf **assassin** who decided to lie low in this "harmless" cave while hunting for a noble lord.

Myla Rosewood. A young halfling **commoner** whose far-ranging explorations have taken her to this cavern.

Alec Thornripple. A human **scout** whose quarry fled into the cave.

Gundra Blackboot. A dwarf **bandit** following rumors of a cave full of treasure.

Lord Marvell Thoroughgood. A human **noble** who planned to impress his love interest by cutting off the head of a mystical monstrosity.

Sevel Grayblossom. An elf **cultist** who came to the cave to find the Shadow King's throne and bracelet in area C2.

CELESTRIA AVONDEL

The final statue is that of an elf **mage** named Celestria Avondel. Celestria arrived here from the Feywild more than 150 years ago, and was caught unawares by the first cockatrice to make its lair in this cavern. She has since remained permanently trapped in the cave, living for only seconds each day as generations of cockatrices

SCOTT'S THOUGHTS: WHERE'S THE FUN?

The question, "How lethal should 1st level be?" is best answered with another question: "Who are your players, and how will character death affect them?" For experienced players, the fragility of starting characters can be one of the best parts of the game, and countless players have shared in the hilarious collective memory of 1st-level would-be heroes dying spectacularly. But newer players—and especially young players—are often in a different head space than tabletop veterans in terms of their relationships with their characters.

Newer players can invest a lot of time and emotional energy in their characters, and even more so in their very first characters. Likewise, a player's very first game often establishes the baseline of what RPGs mean to them, for good or for bad. As such, nothing can turn a new player away from the tabletop RPG experience faster than having their very first character die like a mook.

The goal of every GM is to make sure that everyone at the table has fun. So try to judge how character death at 1st level is likely to affect the fun, based on the players' relationships with their characters, or on your own conversations with the players. If character death and having fun are at odds for a particular group, don't be afraid to give the 1st-level characters a break. But if the players are ready and willing? Well, no one said this hero thing was going to be easy.

and their offspring continually repetrify her each time she returns to life and tries to flee.

Celestria is overjoyed at finally being freed from her captivity, though she is dismayed at the amount of time she has lost in her petrified state. She is equally dismayed at the state of the fey gate. She thanks the characters, gifting them the sword she carries (see below), and then spends her days researching how to repair the fey gate and return to her home in the Feywild.

TREASURE

If rescued, Celestria rewards the characters with the magic scimitar she carries. She was never particularly good with the blade, she explains, and feels that its story will take a brighter turn in the hands of such valiant adventurers.

The blade is an uncommon *magic scimitar* that requires attunement, called Windharrow. A wielder attuned to Windharrow can use an action to cast the *gust of wind* spell. When attuned by a character of 5th level or higher, Windharrow becomes a rare *+1 scimitar* whose wielder can use an action to cast the *invisibility* spell. If attuned by a character of 10th level

or higher, Windharrow becomes a very rare *+2 scimitar* whose wielder can use an action to cast the *ice storm* spell. If attuned by a character of 15th level or higher, Windharrow becomes a legendary *+3 scimitar* whose wielder can take 1 minute to cast the *wind walk* spell.

Once the scimitar's spell is cast, it can't be cast again until the next dawn.

ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTY

You can adjust the difficulty of this lair in a number of different ways. For more difficult encounters, consider any of the following options:

- Add one or more additional fey-touched cockatrices with the modifications described in area C5.
- Add more cockatrice hatchlings.
- Give one or more cockatrices maximum hit points.
- Increase the damage dealt by the fey gate and any toppled statues.
- Replace the cockatrice and her hatchlings with other monsters known for their petrification attacks, including **basilisks**, **medusas**, or **gorgons**.

To reduce the difficulty of the lair, consider any of the following options:

- Reduce the hit points of the cockatrice
- Remove the cockatrice hatchlings, or make them strictly noncombatants, or both.

EXPANDING THIS LAIR

You can expand this lair by building on or modifying any number of the hooks found within it:

- Rescuing Celestria can introduce a new NPC to the campaign who might offer the characters quests meant to help her return to her Feywild home.
- You might put the characters in charge of figuring out whether the fey gate is still active, or how it might be activated after a search for special components or rituals.
- The Shadow King might become a prominent part of your adventure or campaign, having felt the presence of the characters as they approached his throne or came near his gate.
- If the fey gate is ever opened, it can become a connection point between your world and the unseelie world of the Feywild, offering all kinds of possibility for adventure.



TEMPLE OF THE CENTIPEDE CULT

A deranged group of cultists believe that the giant centipedes infesting a ruined temple are beings that can grant them eternal life. With their minds broken by the centipedes' poison, the cultists worship these creatures and regularly bring them sacrifices, working to repurpose a sinister hidden temple built by devil-worshipping duergar for their evil deeds.

This lair is optimized for four to five 2nd-level characters.

BACKGROUND

Centuries ago, a group of duergar dwarves built a temple to Asmodeus, Lord of the Nine Hells. Long wars with the drow and nameless tentacled abominations saw the duergar slain or enslaved in the end, leaving the temple to fall to ruin and decay for more than a thousand years. The ruins have long since been claimed by the beasts of the underworld, including a pack of giant centipedes that wormed their way into the duergar's vaults.

A few years ago, a starving human named Connerath Glynt stumbled into the centipede lair. Overcome by the fiendish imagery within the temple, Glynt was

then nearly killed when a giant centipede attacked and poisoned him with its bite. Managing to hide from the creature before it killed him, Glynt fell into a fugue state in which he came to believe that the centipedes were divine beings, and that he had been spared to worship them. Sensing that the creatures called to him for sacrifices, Glynt began to lure victims to the centipede lair, maiming them with his dagger, then dragging them screaming to the altar in front of the arthropod monsters. The centipedes have long since grown used to this treatment, instinctively sparing those who feed them raw meat.

Glynt's ravings soon brought more broken-minded cultists to his side, each poisoned into madness by the centipede's sting. Calling themselves the Children of a Thousand Legs, the cultists have recently begun to ramp up their kidnapping and sacrifice to the giant centipedes in the unholy temple.

INTEGRATING THIS LAIR

You can use the following hooks to integrate this lair into your campaign, whether as part of a longer adventure or as the focus of a single play session:

- The cult kidnaps an NPC dear to the characters, and the carapace of a giant centipede's head is left behind in the NPC's place. An investigation leads the party to the lost temple, where they face the cult and recover their friend.
- A dwarf associate of the characters tells them about the mysterious fiendish temple of the duergar who once harried this region. Talk of treasure supposedly remaining in the temple's halls draws the characters to the site, but they discover the cultists when they arrive.
- A cultist is killed during a botched kidnapping operation. The characters find a jeweled centipede ring on the body, along with a map depicting the location of the fiendish temple.
- A young hawkler sells the characters a map to a treasure vault supposedly found in the nearby mountains—but the hawkler is secretly working the cult by luring victims to the lair. If found out, the hawkler divulges that many other map-sellers can be found in nearby towns, plotting to send hundreds of would-be adventurers to fall under the holy centipedes' poisoned stingers. The characters must root out the cult if they wish to save all those who might be lured to the lair.

APPROACHING THE TEMPLE

The temple of the centipede cult can be set in any remote location. You might place it in a lost valley deep within the mountains, have natural caverns lead down from the surface to the forgotten ruins, or establish the temple as one part of a large underground complex of worked stone construction.

Though the cultists spend much of their time working with new sacrifices and worshipping the centipedes in the main temple described in this lair, you can establish living quarters for them in neighboring caves or adjacent duergar ruins.

TEMPLE FEATURES

The areas of the temple have the following general features:

- All areas are made of worked stone that is crumbling in spots.
- Hallways are 12 feet high.
- Rooms have ceilings 20 feet high.
- Rooms and halls are all dimly lit by guttering torches set into sconces along the walls.

TEMPLE OF THE CENTIPEDE CULT

The following encounter areas are keyed to the map of the cult's lair.

T1. UNHOLY NARTHEX

Having passed through whatever entryway to the temple you set up, the characters arrive in the narthex. Grim statues of oversized duergar dwarves stand in each corner of the chamber, and a stone rack stands against the east wall.

A rune-scribed circle is set into the floor around a large glowing symbol. A character who speaks Infernal or who succeeds on a DC 13 Intelligence (Religion) check recognizes that the symbol and the runes around it are related to that fiendish language.

Ceramic cylinders sit within the stone rack, many of which have broken to deposit ash onto the floor. These urns hold the remains of long-dead cremated duergar priests. Some of the urns have been replaced with the dead carapaces of giant centipedes, carefully pieced together and etched with Infernal glyphs.

ANCIENT GUARDIANS

When the characters first arrive here, the spirit of a duergar dwarf named Kaxon Ironspine rises from the scattered ashes. Kaxon uses the **specter** stat block but can speak Common, Dwarvish, and Undercommon.

When he appears, Kaxon asks the characters in Common to name the one true god. If they fail to say "Asmodeus," the specter laughs and disappears as the statues in the room begin to animate—one statue for every two characters in the party. Each statue uses the **animated armor** stat block but has AC 16. All animated statues fight until destroyed. The noise of this combat alerts the cultists in area T2, who prepare for the characters' arrival.

If any character says "Asmodeus" in response to Kaxon's question, the specter begrudgingly lets them pass, muttering about them potentially "lying like the others." A character who attempts to speak to Kaxon and succeeds on a DC 12 Charisma (Persuasion) check convinces the specter to open up to them. Though the centipede cultists were able to guess the correct answer to Kaxon's question, the specter is angry that they are worshipping a false god in the temple. Assuming the characters treat Kaxon with respect, he describes the secret hallway of area T3 and how to bypass the poison gas trap within it, so that the characters can bring vengeful death to the cultists.

BRACELET OF PAIN

Any search of the stone rack turns up an urn that conceals a cold-iron bracelet with spikes on the inside. The bracelet radiates evocation magic to a *detect magic* spell. When a creature dons the bracelet, the spikes dig in to deal 2 (1d4) piercing damage, and the creature's hit point maximum is reduced by this same amount until the bracelet is removed. While wearing the bracelet, a creature can cast the *scorching ray* spell with

a +7 bonus to the ranged spell attack roll. The bracelet's magic fades and it shatters once the spell is cast.

NORTH DOOR

The doorway to area T4 is locked. Kathera in area T2 and Connerath Glynt in area T4 both carry keys that can unlock it. The lock can also be picked with a successful DC 16 Dexterity check using thieves' tools, but the door is too strong to be forced. A character who listens at the door and succeeds on a DC 16 Wisdom (Perception) check hears Connerath Glynt preaching to the cultists in area T4, describing his own version of the events detailed in the "Background" section.

T2. GRIM SACRISTY

A large stone table stands at the center of this chamber, while an iron-barred cage is set in the northeast corner. Relief carvings on the walls depict a hellish world of fire and iron ruled over by devils and their duergar servants.

CENTIPEDE CULTISTS

A number of centipede cultists are at work in this chamber, cutting up the body of a dead prisoner to feed the centipedes in area T4. If they are aware of the characters, they cannot be surprised and attack at once.

Kathera the Stinger is a chaotic evil human **cultist** with 20 hit points. She leads a group consisting of one **cultist** for every two characters. Kathera has a **giant centipede** she calls Kaliv wrapped around her waist, which moves and attacks with her.

THE PRISONER

Wilma DeGray, a neutral good human **commoner**, is imprisoned in the iron cage. Kathera and Connerath Glynt in area T4 carry the keys for the cage, which can be picked with a successful DC 13 Dexterity check using thieves' tools or broken open with a successful DC 16 Strength (Athletics) check.

The cultists grabbed up Wilma and three of her companions a few days earlier, all of whom have already been murdered and fed to the centipedes in area T4. Wilma has been poisoned by the cultists and remembers little of her captivity. If a character succeeds on a DC 14 Charisma (Persuasion) check, Wilma can describe her capture and the fate of her companions. She also remembers seeing a ghostly dwarf entering this area and passing through the wall to the north. (This was Kaxon wandering through from area T1, and hinting at the location of the secret door to area T3.)

SECRET DOOR

A well-hidden secret door leads from this room to the hallway of area T3. The door and its mechanism can be spotted by any character with a passive Wisdom

(Perception) score of 16 or higher, or who succeeds on a DC 16 Wisdom (Perception) check. Even if the characters have been made aware of the door, they must still locate its mechanism to open it. When a specific brick is pulled out, turned 90 degrees, and pushed back in, it activates counterweights in the walls that draw the door up into the ceiling. The door descends and the mechanism resets after 1 minute.

T3. FORGOTTEN HALLWAY

Thick dust and cobwebs fill this hallway, which is unknown to the cultists and has been undisturbed since the time of the duergar. The walls depict scenes of battle and conquest by the duergar, led by powerful devils of the Nine Hells.

TRAPPED FLOOR

Two-thirds of the way down the hallway, a 10-foot section of trapped floor tiles triggers the release of poison gas through small valves in the wall, filling an area 40 feet long and centered on the trap. A creature that succeeds on a DC 16 Wisdom (Perception) check made to search the hallway can see that the section of floor tiles has a deep groove around it. A character who succeeds on a DC 14 Intelligence (Investigation) check made to search the hallway recognizes that the section of the floor is connected to intricate mechanisms that run beneath it and into the walls. The triggering section of tiles can be jumped over, or the trap can be disarmed with a successful DC 16 Dexterity check using thieves' tools.

If the trap is not detected, the first creature walking down the hall sets it off. Each creature caught in the gas must succeed on a DC 12 Constitution saving throw or take 7 (2d6) poison damage.

HIDDEN DOOR TO T4

Where the hallway turns to the northeast, it dead-ends at a wall, with a peephole looking into area T4. Hinges on the far side of a narrow gap in the wall identify the end of the corridor as a hidden door that moves the statue on the other side of it, opening up into area T4. A character listening at the door can hear Connerath Glynt praying to the cultists' dark god, describing some of the history detailed in the "Background" section.

A character can push the statue door open wide enough for Medium creatures to squeeze through into area T4, but it takes a successful DC 11 Dexterity (Stealth) check to do so without alerting the distracted cultists in the temple. This check is made with disadvantage unless the hinges of the door are oiled first. If the characters go unnoticed and attack immediately, the cultists are surprised.

T4. TEMPLE OF A THOUSAND LEGS

When the characters arrive in this area, read or paraphrase the following:

Four burning braziers bathe this vaulted temple in flickering green light. A wide pit opens up at the center of the chamber, with a stone-slab altar covered in blood and gore to the north of it. Deep cracks cut through two large pillars standing south of the pit.

Three statues of devils stand against the north, east, and west walls. The central devil has a humanoid body, four clawed arms, great bat-like wings, and goat-like legs. The west statue depicts a horned lizard-like devil, while the east statue depicts a large insect-like devil holding a glaive. However, each statue's head has been broken off and replaced with the twisted carapace of a dead giant centipede. The dead heads of four giant centipedes are held in the hands of the central statue.

If the characters come through the south door, the cultists are immediately alerted to their presence. If they successfully sneak in through the hidden west secret entrance, they might catch the cultists unaware (see area T3 for information).

CENTIPEDE CULTISTS

Cult leader Connerath Glynt is here, conducting a ceremony before the four-armed statue to the north—a representation of Asmodeus. The eviscerated body of a captured victim lies on the altar, their blood flowing down the slab and across the floor into the central pit. Glynt uses the **cult fanatic** stat block and is accompanied by one **cultist** for each character in the party.

Glynt begins the battle between the altar and the north statue, casting *spiritual weapon*, which appears as a twisting ethereal centipede burrowing out of the ground, and *sacred flame*, which bathes its victim in a sickly green light. He then casts *inflict wounds* using a 2nd-level spell slot on any character who gets within 5 feet of him, or casts *command* on an enemy in a position to be attacked by other cultists, ordering that enemy to lay prone before their skittering god. If Glynt is cornered by enemies, he uses a bracelet he wears to summon a **giant centipede** to his aid (see “Treasure” below for more information).

The cultists begin spaced out around the pit. They draw their scimitars and attack as soon as they are aware of the characters, focusing on defending Glynt or slashing those with lighter armor.

1 square = 5 feet



CENTIPEDE PILLARS

The two pillars on the south side of the chamber are hollow. As the battle begins, one **giant centipede** for every two characters in the party crawls out from the pillars and attacks.

CHILD OF THE CENTIPEDE GOD

On the second round of combat, Glynt calls out to something called “the Child of a Thousand Legs.” In response, a massive giant centipede crawls out of the central pit and attacks the characters, acting immediately after Glynt in the initiative order. This creature uses the **giant centipede** stat block with the following changes:

- Its size is Large.

- It has 30 hit points.
- It has a challenge rating of 1 (200 XP).

UNHOLY ALTAR

The altar in the north part of the chamber fills Connerath Glynt with unholy energy. While he is within 5 feet of the altar, Glynt is surrounded by a green glow clearly emanating from the altar, granting him advantage on spell attack rolls, and imposing disadvantage on saving throws against any spells he casts. A *detect magic* spell reveals that the altar radiates necromancy magic.

A creature can disrupt the altar's magic by calling down divine wrath upon it with a successful DC 13 Intelligence (Religion) check, or by casting any spell upon it that deals radiant damage. The altar can also be attacked (it has AC 14, 20 hit points, and resistance to poison and psychic damage), or shattered with a successful DC 13 Strength (Athletics) check.

CENTRAL PIT

The central pit is 20 feet wide and 20 feet deep. In addition to being the lair of the Child of a Thousand Legs, the pit is filled with two **swarms of insects (centipedes)**. Any creature that falls into the pit takes 2d6 bludgeoning damage and is attacked by the swarms, which take the Ready action and wait for prey to come to them. The pit's slimy walls mean that it takes a successful DC 14 Strength (Athletics) check to climb out of it.

BRAZIER

Each of the braziers in the four corners of the temple can be tipped over with a successful DC 14 Strength (Athletics) check. When tipped, a brazier sends out hot coals and ash in a 15-foot cone. Any creature in the area of the coals and ash must make a DC 12 Dexterity saving throw, taking 10 (3d6) fire damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

TREASURE

When the characters have overcome the cultists, any search of Connerath Glynt reveals that he wears a magic bracelet shaped like a golden centipede. This is an uncommon magic item that requires attunement. A creature attuned to the bracelet can use an action to speak its command word and throw it on the ground within 10 feet of them. When thrown this way, the

bracelet becomes a **giant centipede** under the wearer's control that acts on its own initiative count. After 1 hour or when it is reduced to 0 hit points, the giant centipede returns to its bracelet form. The bracelet can't be used again this way until the next dawn.

ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTY

You can adjust the difficulty of this lair in a number of different ways. For more difficult encounters, consider any of the following options:

- Increase the number of cultists and giant centipedes.
- Add **spies**, **berserkers**, or **veterans** to the final encounter. These brutal killers call themselves the Black Spines, and might be cannibalistic guardians of the cultists.
- Make Connerath Glynt a **priest** or a **mage**.
- Use the **cult fanatic** stat block for Glynt's followers.

To reduce the difficulty of the lair, consider any of the following options:

- Make Connerath Glynt a **cultist** or an **acolyte**.
- Decrease Glynt's hit points.
- Reduce the number of cultists and giant centipedes.

EXPANDING THIS LAIR

You can expand this lair by building on or modifying any number of the hooks found within it:

- This lair might be just one part of a larger ruined duergar city, and Connerath and the centipede cultists might be just one of the many sinister groups that have taken root in the place.
- Rather than worshiping centipedes, the cultists might engage in their own twisted interpretation of the duergar's devil worship.
- The cult might have already progressed past kidnapping individual sacrifices to engage in evil plots that pose a threat to all civilized folk in the surrounding areas.
- The temple might be just one part of a much larger Cult of a Thousand Legs, whose agents use distilled giant centipede poison to twist the minds of those who ingest it, converting them to the cult's cause.



THE LAIR OF LORD WHISKERS

ALLIE BRIGGS

All lycanthropes fear and despise silver, but the wererat crime boss known as Lord Whiskers nurtures a hatred for this metal that is legendary. He wants to be rid of the stuff. All of it. Forever. So having recently found the perfect lair down in the city sewers, Lord Whiskers has set a master plan in motion. First, he'll steal all the silver he can. Second, he'll feed it to his new favorite friend, an otyugh named Angoq. That glutton will eat anything.

This lair is optimized for four to five 3rd-level characters.

BACKGROUND

Since the fall of Abrim Grayheart, boss of the Seven Knives—the most powerful criminal enterprise in the city—dozens of gangs have been vying for power, each aiming to take their slice of the pie. After serving Grayheart as a low-level spy and enforcer, Vayshe Whiskers took on a new title after the boss's death. Now Lord Whiskers, the wererat has built up a criminal gang known as the Longwhiskers, and has hatched a plot to destroy the weapons that might harm him.

Lord Whiskers believes that if he can rid the city of all silver, he can rule over it. The blades of rival gangs, the arrows of archers, the longswords of the city watch—nothing can threaten him if he can control the supply of silver, allowing him to become king of the city. For months now, people have been robbed by Longwhiskers enforcers stealing only silver. Gold, jewels, and the rest have been thrown back at victims, while less valuable silver necklaces, earrings, and coins are bagged up and taken away. Silversmiths have been murdered, their shops stripped of all their wares, even as other shops nearby were left untouched.

INTEGRATING THIS LAIR

You can use the following hooks to integrate this lair into your campaign, whether as part of a longer adventure or as the focus of a single play session:

- A relic made of silver that is dear to the characters or an NPC acquaintance has been stolen by one of Lord Whiskers's thieves. Clues, interrogations or eyewitness reports direct the characters to Lord Whiskers's lair in the depths of the sewers beneath the city.

- A laborer of modest means comes to the characters and explains that her grandmother's silver earrings were taken from her by Longwhiskers enforcers. She begs the characters to hunt down the missing earrings, speaking of their great sentimental value. After learning that the enforcers left gold coins behind and took only the silver earrings, the characters learn of other similar robberies. Their investigation ultimately leads them to the lair of Lord Whiskers.
- During another adventure, the characters find themselves in the sewers underneath a major city. Fighting the Longwhiskers gang within the lair leads to the discovery of Lord Whiskers's plots.

APPROACHING THE LAIR OF LORD WHISKERS

The characters are most likely to enter the lair of Lord Whiskers from the northeast stairwell of area W1. However, they might also reach area W3 through the sewer channel to the north. The lair might be part of a complex sewer system under a large city, the central junction of a smaller city's sewers, or even a forgotten grotto beneath a town or village.

If you decide to locate the lair outside of a city, you might modify it to feature natural walls and tunnels as part of a cave complex instead of a sewer system.

SEWER FEATURES

The areas of the lair of Lord Whiskers have the following general features:

- Rooms and chambers are 10 feet high.
- The caverns are lit with torches set in iron sconces for those members of Lord Whiskers's band that cannot see in the dark.
- The walls and floors of the lair are old, wet worked stone.
- The noise of water flowing through the area masks the sound of combat in areas W1 and W3.
- The whole place smells of sewage and rot.

LAIR OF LORD WHISKERS

The following encounter areas are keyed to the map of Lord Whiskers's sewer lair.

W1. FLOODWATER CISTERN

This cavern serves as the primary entrance into Lord Whiskers's lair, with characters descending the northeast staircase to the room's higher eastern side, then climbing down the ladder to the lower west side of the room. The ceiling here is stepped to match the floor.

Read or paraphrase the following to set the scene when the characters arrive:

The main part of this chamber is dominated by a deep cistern set with a rusted ladder, half-filled with fetid water. Barely visible within the murky pool, a wide drainpipe runs to the west. An iron door is presently slid into the wall to the southwest, leaving its doorway open.

LONGWHISKERS BRIGANDS

A human Longwhiskers enforcer named Jack the Spike (use the **berserker** stat block) watches over this area, along with one **bandit** for each character in the party. When the characters arrive, these brigands are tormenting a half-elf silversmith **commoner** named Tristan Garvukan.

Jack has a rope tied around Tristan's feet and is dunking him into the fetid water of the cistern while the other bandits egg him on. Each time he pulls Tristan up, Jack asks where the silversmith has stashed the rest of his loot. "Instead of just your silver, we'll be feeding *you* to Angoq!" the enforcer roars. Any character can tell that one or two more dunkings into the foul water might prove fatal to the prisoner.

If the characters get the drop on the villains here, they can loot them for their valuables. See "Treasure" at the end of the lair.

CISTERN

The cistern is 20 feet deep and half-filled with foul runoff from the larger fetid pit in area W3. A creature that enters the water of the cistern for the first time on a turn or starts its turn there must succeed on a DC 12 Constitution saving throw or become poisoned for 10 minutes.

A large pipe half-submerged and 10 feet down from the top of the cistern leads west into Angoq's lair in area W3.

IRON DOOR

The iron door leading into area W2 is presently slid into the wall to leave the doorway open. If the battle turns against them, Jack and the bandits run through the doorway to warn Lord Whiskers of the attack, and to prepare the traps in area W2.

W2. KILLING ROOM

This hallway protects Lord Whiskers's sanctuary in area W3 from intruders. Depending on whether Jack the Spike or any of the bandits ran through here, Lord Whiskers might be aware of and prepared for the characters' imminent arrival.

Two large iron pipes cross the ceiling of this area, running north to south. Each features a large valve that is currently closed, and which is controlled from area



W3. Two narrow slits open up in the north wall, and the doorway leading to area W3 is open.

BROKEN DEATHTRAP

When Lord Whiskers or his minions become aware of the characters, they attempt to trap them in this area. Lord Whiskers's bandits pull the lever in the section of area W3 immediately north of this chamber when they believe they can trap the most characters here. Doing so is intended to slam both of the iron doors shut, lock them, open the valves in the ceiling, and rain sewage down upon the intruders. The trap doesn't work as intended, however, and though the east door slams shut and locks, the west door remains open.

When the east door between area W1 and area W2 is closed, the characters can see no obvious sign of how to open it. It takes a successful DC 12 Intelligence (Investigation) check to discover the door's latch, which can be unlocked with a successful DC 14 Dexterity check using thieves' tools, or forced with a successful DC 14 Strength (Athletics) check.

Characters stuck in area W1 when the door slams and locks, and who are unable to pick the door's lock or force it open, can use the pipe in the cistern in area W1 to enter area W3 through Angoq's lair.

ARROW SLITS

Once the east door is shut, bandits in the section of area W3 north of this area fire crossbows through the arrow slits. The angular cut of the arrow slits gives the bandits advantage on their attack rolls, and imposes disadvantage on attacks made through the arrow slits against them.

SEWAGE TRAP

When the valves in the ceiling pipes are opened by the bandits, raw sewage rains down upon all creatures in this area. Any creature that ends its turn in area

W2 while sewage rains down must succeed on a DC 13 Constitution saving throw or take 3 (1d6) poison damage and become poisoned for 10 minutes. A creature can repeat the saving throw at the end of each of its turns, ending the poisoned condition on itself on a success.

W3. SANCTUM OF LORD WHISKERS

When the characters arrive in this room, read or paraphrase the following:

Wind whistles from deep cracks in the south and west walls of this worked-stone chamber, which features a huge channel opening up in the north wall that feeds a steady stream of sewage into a large pit. A makeshift crane made of wood, leather, and iron juts out over the pit, a large leather bag hanging from it. A slow trickle of silver coins spills from the bag where the silver tip of a sword has cut out through one side.

A throne built of warped wood rests atop a stone platform in the northwest corner of the room. A dirty tarp covers a large object in the southwest corner.

LORD WHISKERS'S ENTOURAGE

This room is the central lair of Lord Whiskers, a **wererat** who commands one Longwhiskers **spy** for every two characters. Lord Whiskers sits atop his throne with his weapons close at hand. If alerted, two of his spies are in the narrow area north of area W2. Otherwise, only one of them is stationed there.

The cracks in the south and west walls conceal one **swarm of rats** for every two characters. If pressed, Lord Whiskers can use a bonus action to call the rat

swarms into action and draw them out from the cracks. If he isn't having too hard a time, he'll let the rats sleep.

Lord Whiskers's pet **otyugh**, Angoq, is in the central pit awaiting a feast of tasty silver.

TACTICS

Lord Whiskers relies on his minions as his front-line defenders, staying away from melee and using his magic crossbow, Twitch, to pepper his foes. Twitch allows him to cast *expeditious retreat* on himself before the characters enter this area, allowing him to take the Dash action as a bonus action. (See "Treasure" below for full statistics on Twitch.)

If his defenders begin to fall, Lord Whiskers activates the porcupine (see that section below) as a final defense. If he finds himself in further trouble, he transforms into a rat and scurries into one of the cracks in the walls (see below), dragging Twitch with him. He calls his rat swarms to defend him before he pops back out and starts firing on the characters again.

CENTRAL PIT

The central pit is 20 feet deep and filled with sewage and refuse. Angoq the **otyugh** rests in one of the deeper areas of the pit, mostly submerged beneath the foul water, but awakens and becomes agitated at the sound of combat above. The otyugh climbs up a refuse pile so that it can reach the top of the pit, then takes the Ready action to make tentacle attacks against any creature that comes within 5 feet of the edge.

Angoq has been trained to eat silver, not people, so it holds and shakes anyone it grapples, hoping to devour the creature's loose change. If it takes 10 or more damage on a turn, the otyugh uses its reaction to drop anyone it's holding and slips back down to the bottom of the pit.

If the characters sneak into this area through the sewer pipe leading in from the cistern in area W1, they arrive in the pit to find the otyugh sleeping. With a successful group Dexterity (Stealth) check contested by the otyugh's passive Wisdom (Perception) score of 11, the creature remains asleep. On a failed check, the otyugh wakes up and attacks, attempting to grapple and shake down characters for silver.

CRANE

The rickety crane holds a large bag filled with silver coins, tableware, jewelry, and a silvered shortsword. A character can climb up the crane and along its swing arm to reach the bag with a successful DC 13 Strength (Athletics) or Dexterity (Acrobatics) check. Failure results in the crane breaking and sending the character and the contents of the bag into the pit below.

STAGES OF A BOSS BATTLE

Using the advice in the "Tactics" section, you can think of this battle as a multistage affair. In stage one, Lord Whiskers fires his crossbow while his spies attack. In stage two, Lord Whiskers activates the porcupine. In stage three, Lord Whiskers transforms into a rat and calls his rat swarms to defend him. You are free to activate these stages in order or use only some of them, depending on how the battle is going. Put yourself in the mind of Lord Whiskers, and ask yourself how you would act in his place given the circumstances.

Above all else, though, you want to give the players a good time, and stomping an evil wererat is often a good time. Don't play Lord Whiskers so smart that the characters never have the chance to pummel the crime boss.

Angoq the otyugh uses its bite attack to devour all the silver items except the sword, using its tentacle attacks against any characters who fall into the pit.

A creature next to the crane can use an action to swing it at a creature within 5 feet of the edge of the pit. The target creature must succeed on a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw or take 7 (2d6) bludgeoning damage and fall into the pit.

CRACKS IN THE WALLS

Small creatures, including Lord Whiskers in giant rat form, can crawl through the cracks in the walls and use them to reposition themselves in the room. However, the cracks are too confined to allow for combat, and sewage constantly leaking from the walls makes them unsuitable for use as a long-term hiding place.

PORCUPINE

Lord Whiskers's secret weapon in this area is a porcupine—a large multidirectional, area-effect siege crossbow—hidden under the tarp, which he uses as a last resort. His wererat immunity to damage from nonmagical weapons means that Lord Whiskers doesn't fear the weapon, and his megalomania means he doesn't care if it hurts his allies.

As an action, Lord Whiskers fires his crossbow at the porcupine to trigger it. The weapon then fires crossbow bolts outward in all directions, initially shredding the tarp, and covering the full area of the room. Each creature in the room must make a DC 12 Dexterity saving throw, taking 7 (2d6) piercing damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one. The porcupine requires 10 minutes to reload, and thus can be used only once in this battle.

TREASURE

As the foes in the lair are defeated, the characters can claim their treasure. The minions serving Lord Whiskers carry loot they've liberated before sending it to the otyugh pit—a total of 34 sp, a silver candelabra (worth 20 gp), two silver-plated dining plates (10 gp each), and a jeweled silvered dagger (50 gp).

Lord Whiskers carries a +1 *crossbow* called Twitch—a rare magic item that requires attunement. As an action, a character attuned to Twitch can cast the *expeditious retreat* spell. The crossbow can't be used again in this way until the next dawn.

If the characters save the bag hanging from the crane, the coins, tableware, and jewelry are worth a total of 70 gp. The silvered shortsword is worth 50 gp.

Any search of the throne reveals a small cache of treasure hidden by Lord Whiskers—62 gp and five gemstones worth 10 gp each.

The characters can claim the porcupine crossbow if you want to allow them to use it. If you don't, you can describe the porcupine as badly constructed and have it fall apart when the characters try to move it.

ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTY

You can adjust the difficulty of this lair in a number of different ways. For more difficult encounters, consider any of the following options:

- Replace the spies with **wererats**, **berserkers**, or **veterans**.
- Give Lord Whiskers 66 hit points.
- Give Angoq the otyugh a climbing speed equal to its speed, allowing it to crawl out of the pit and attack creatures throughout area W2.

REUSING MATERIAL FOR OTHER ENCOUNTERS

We've designed every part of *Fantastic Lairs* to be modular. There's no wrong way to use this book. Do you like one of the bosses more than their sanctum? Grab that boss and throw them into your own lair. Do you want a small location for a quick game? Pick out a map that grabs you and re flavor it to suit your needs. Does a particular piece of art fill your mind with your own story? Take it and run with it.

Though all of these fantastic lairs can be run as short adventures if you want, they're primarily designed so you can expand, contract, raise, lower, repurpose, and reskin them however they might best fit into your own campaign. There is no "being true" to these lairs. They're yours to change as you see fit. So take them and make them your own.

- Give Lord Whiskers the **veteran** or **assassin** stat block, with the wererat's senses, damage immunities, and Shapechanger trait.

To reduce the difficulty of the lair, consider any of the following options:

- Use the **bandit** stat block for Lord Whiskers's defenders.
- Remove Angoq's Multiattack action.
- Reduce the damage of Lord Whiskers's porcupine, or have it malfunction and fall apart when he tries to trigger it.

EXPANDING THIS LAIR

You can expand this lair by building on or modifying any number of the hooks found within it:

- Lord Whiskers might have more complicated reasons for wanting to get rid of the city's silver, perhaps working under the orders of an alchemist mage. This mysterious figure plans on using purified digested silver excreted by Angoq to build a magically empowered silver golem (a reskinned iron golem) or shield guardian.
- Lord Whiskers might still be part of a larger criminal syndicate led by a noble and assassin who moves between the political sphere and the criminal underworld. This noble might use Lord Whiskers's strange obsession to create the sense of a sinister threat in the city, bolstering their own protection racket.



LAST CALL AT NEVERMIND

A unique roadhouse constructed within the skull of a fallen titan, the tavern called Nevermind serves as the headquarters of the Dead Roses, a notorious gang of cutthroat bandits. Members of the violent gang can always be found in Nevermind, gambling, drinking, preparing for their next big score—and waiting for the characters as they arrive to either take on or do business with the bandits.

This lair is optimized for four to five 3rd-level characters.

BACKGROUND

Millennia ago, a being of great size, great age, and great power laid down and died. For centuries, its remains rotted away deep in the wilds, until the skull of the massive titan eventually became the cavernous den of beasts and monsters alike. As civilization began to encroach on the site, the hollowed-out skull became a hideout for brigands, murderers, and cultists. Then, two decades ago, the most notorious of those brigands claimed the site and took it public. Within the titan's skull, the Dead Roses bandit gang has set up the best-

known seedy dive in the realm, overseen by the gang's leader, Adelia Rose, and known as Nevermind.

INTEGRATING THIS LAIR

You can use the following hooks to integrate this lair into your campaign, whether as part of a longer adventure or as the focus of a single play session:

- The characters might have a connection to or be hired to retrieve an NPC kidnapped by the Dead Roses or a valuable relic stolen by the gang. Gathering intelligence on the Dead Roses suggests that going in with swords drawn might not be the best option, so sneaking in or bargaining with the bandits might be the only way to make it out alive.
- An evil group the characters have been pursuing during the campaign are revealed to have been courting the Dead Roses to join their side. The characters might come to Nevermind to see if their enemies' overtures were successful, or to attempt to steer the Dead Roses in another direction. The villainous ambassador might be the dead necromancer in area N2 or tied to the lost communication crystal in area N3.

- A spy named Blink (see area N4) has come across documents that prove that a local lord's heir is illegitimate. The lord has hired the characters to hunt down this spy, which has brought them to Nevermind where the Dead Roses protect him. To make matters more complicated, Blink has hidden the documents, promising that they'll be publicly released if he's imprisoned or killed.
- Adelia Rose's blade might have found the throat of an NPC loved by one of the characters. The pure need for revenge thus brings the characters to the doors of Nevermind, where only blood and steel can end this unfinished business.

APPROACHING NEVERMIND

Nevermind might be located in a swamp or forest cut off from nearby or surrounding settlements, or it might be set right in the middle of a city or village that's grown up around the legendary titan's skull. It might be a well-known landmark in the seedier side of town, or it could be hidden away in a secluded wood, known only to the Dead Roses and those they trust with the information.

Making changes as necessary for the tavern's ultimate location, read or paraphrase the following to set the scene when the characters first see Nevermind:

The huge bleached skull of some sort of enormous titan lies embedded in the ground, its sightless eye sockets staring up at the sky above. Firelight can be seen flickering in those hollow pits, and loud conversation and drunken laughter rises from within. The skull's lower jaw is missing, while its upper jaw forms an archway that opens up to a set of large ironbound doors flanked by skull-shaped lanterns.

The characters have three potential ways to enter Nevermind, with the front door being the most obvious. A natural cave entrance found nearby leads down into the ghoulish pits in area N1. This route is dangerous, but it can allow the characters to enter Nevermind without being noticed.

A secret entrance near the outhouse of area N3 is barred from the inside of the tavern. Aside from noisily forcing it open (see that area for details), the characters might wait for someone to come out, or they could try to bribe someone to leave the secret door unbarred, allowing them to sneak in through the back.

NEVERMIND FEATURES

The areas of Nevermind and the adjacent caverns have the following general features:

- The tunnels are 6 feet high and unlit.

- The larger underground caverns have 12-foot-high ceilings and are unlit.
- The tavern has a 30-foot-high ceiling and is brightly lit by skull-shaped lanterns.

NEVERMIND

The following encounter areas are keyed to the map of the Dead Roses' tavern lair.

N1. GHOUL PITS

A series of tunnels beneath Nevermind have been taken over by a pack of ghouls that the Dead Roses use to get rid of bodies. A network of natural tunnels connects the ghoulish pit with the outside world. A 20-foot-deep well in the northwest corner of the main tavern (area N4) connects the pit to Nevermind.

As the characters approach this area, they hear a crunching sound echoing from the caves ahead, as the ghouls gnaw on the remains of the most recent victims discarded down the well. The air here smells of rot and decay, and the bones of beasts and humanoids lie scattered about.

CLIFF WALL

The cliff on the west side of the main cavern is 15 feet high. The Dead Roses have covered the wall with mud and oil rendered from decayed animal fat to prevent the ghouls from escaping. The slickness of the wall makes it impossible for a single creature to climb without special equipment, but two Medium creatures or three Small creatures working together can climb out by boosting one creature up, then having that creature help lift creatures below. With their lack of intelligence, and with a steady food supply coming down from the tavern, the ghouls have long since given up their own attempts to climb up the wall and escape from the pit.

HUNGRY GHOUL

A **ghoul** sits in the center of this area's main cavern when the characters first arrive, devouring a humanoid arm. Its lack of attention gives it a passive Wisdom (Perception) score of 5 if any characters attack from or attempt to sneak down from the cliff top. If attacked from the cliff top, the ghoulish flees into area N2. If the characters make it down into the main cave before attacking, the ghoulish howls to call the other ghouls from area N2, which race in and attack. If the ghouls in area N2 are aware of the characters, they watch from the corridor and attack when two or more characters descend into the cave, as they are cunning enough to avoid an ambush from the cliff top.

WELL

The well shaft leading up to the tavern (area N4) is 20 feet high and opens up within the ceiling of the rough



tunnel leading up to it. Muted voices and drunken laughter can be heard filtering down from above. The bandits in area N4 throw food scraps, bones, and the occasional body down this shaft to the ghouls below. The walls of the shaft are covered with the same mix of mud and oil that covers the western cliff, making it impossible to climb without teamwork or special equipment.

Because the Dead Roses bandits don't worry about the ghouls climbing up, the grate is not secured. At some point when the characters are investigating the well, a bandit in area N4 opens up the grate and dumps a large amount of trash down on whoever happens to be below. Unless the character makes a loud response, the bandit doesn't notice them.

A character who reaches the top of the well and pushes open the grate must succeed on a DC 11 Dexterity (Stealth) check to avoid the notice of Blink, the spy sitting on the stage in area N4. If he notices the grate moving, Blink hops down from the stage to investigate, believing that the ghouls have managed to somehow climb up to the grate.

N2. FEEDING CHAMBER

Three **ghouls** sit in this room, devouring the body of an elf in torn red-and-black robes. Add one additional ghoul if the party contains five characters, or two additional ghouls if there are six characters in the party.

The body was once an elf apprentice necromancer who threatened Adelia Rose and was summarily thrown down into the well. It wears a grimy silver skull necklace that radiates necromancy magic to a *detect magic* spell. The necklace is a rare magic item that allows a creature wearing it to use an action to cast the

vampiric touch spell (+6 spell attack). The necklace's magic fades once the spell is cast.

N3. OUTHOUSE

This is the private outhouse for Adelia Rose, her lieutenants, and special guests of the Dead Roses. It is accessed through a hidden doorway in the northeast corner of the tavern (area N4). The secret door is barred from the inside, but can be broken down with a lot of noise and a successful DC 16 Strength (Athletics) check. The outhouse holds only a tattered and dirty chapbook (left here for multiple purposes)—and a **gray ooze** lurking down in the bottom of the cesspit.

The ooze is currently attempting to devour a five-inch piece of magical glyph-marked crystal. A creature that looks down into the cesspit with any light can easily see the crystal, even as the ooze remains indistinguishable from its foul surroundings. The character feels a weak telepathic connection from the crystal that calls out, "Hello? Who's there?", but cannot make any reply.

If a character attempts to lasso the crystal or seize it with a grappling hook, the hook or the rope is immediately destroyed by the gray ooze. Attempting to use a *mage hand* cantrip or similar magic to pull up the crystal suggests that it is somehow stuck and

Who's This?

A character who holds the *telepathy crystal* found in the outhouse immediately establishes telepathic contact with an NPC of your choice. This NPC might be an important villain, a powerful archmage wondering what happened to the apprentice who lost the crystal, an assassin eager to hear about a recent hit, or any other character connected to the story hooks for this lair or to your wider campaign.

impossible to move (the gray ooze has a strong hold on it). Repeated attempts to claim the crystal, or any character starting to descend into the cesspit, results in the gray ooze climbing up into the outhouse and attacking.

TELEPATHY CRYSTAL

The crystal held by the gray ooze is one of a matched pair, both of which radiate evocation magic and which make up a single rare magic item. A creature holding one of the crystals can communicate telepathically with a creature holding the other crystal for 1 minute. The crystals can't be used again in this way until the next dawn.

N4. TAVERN

When the characters arrive in this area, read or paraphrase the following, making adjustments as necessary if the characters don't arrive through the main doors to the south:

A half-dozen round tables surround a large black skull staring up at the domed ceiling that is the top of the titan's skull. Fire burns within the mouth and eyes of the skull, which matches another skull set into a fireplace on a raised stage across the room. A wooden throne sits behind a long table atop the stage, while twin staircases rise fifteen feet to balconies set along the east and west walls.

THE DEAD ROSES

Adelia Rose and the members of the Dead Roses bandit gang spend most of their downtime in the tavern, laughing, gambling, and tormenting prisoners. Adelia Rose is a neutral evil **bandit captain**, and is seen sitting in her throne on the stage when the characters enter. Her two lieutenants sit at her side—Blink, a one-eyed neutral evil dwarf **spy**, and Kora, a half-elf enforcer (use the **berserker** stat block). Two Dead Roses **bandits** per character are also here when the characters arrive, sitting at the tables across the floor, and with one or two up in each of the balconies.

TACTICS

Adelia doesn't order her followers to attack until she feels as though she has the upper hand. Instead, she waits for the characters to fully enter the tavern, whether they appear intent on attack or detente. Even if the characters challenge her immediately, she might invite them in to have a drink before suddenly calling for combat.

When the fight begins, Adelia sends in her bandits first to test the mettle of her assailants. The bandits on

RUNNING A BAR BRAWL

This encounter has a lot of combatants, and if all those foes act optimally, it could be real trouble for the characters. It's important to remember that the bandits have been drinking beforehand, and might not be ready for a fight.

This encounter is a great opportunity to show the chaos of battle. Steins of ale might become improvised weapons. Tables can be flipped over. Bandits who are tossed around might fall onto the skull fire pit and run out the door in flames. Embrace chaos.

the balconies take advantage of their position to rain ranged attacks down on the characters, while bandits on the floor press into melee.

If the bandits can't cope with the characters, Adelia attacks, along with Kora and Blink. If things go badly for Adelia, she attempts to flee out the secret door to the northeast.

BALCONIES

The balconies stand 15 feet above the main floor. The railings of the balconies are reinforced with thick wooden slats, offering three-quarters cover against attacks from opponents on the main floor.

TABLES

Each of the tables in the room can be flipped over as an action to grant half cover from ranged attacks.

BURNING SKULLS

The blackened skulls in the central fire pit and the fireplace on the stage were claimed from fallen fire giants, and each absorbs and radiates great heat. Any creature that comes into contact with a skull for the first time on a turn or starts its turn touching a skull must make a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw, taking 10 (3d6) fire damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

A character who wants to smash a skull must succeed on a DC 14 Strength (Athletics) check as an action—whereupon the skull explodes. Each creature within 10 feet of the skull must make a DC 14 Dexterity saving throw, taking 14 (4d6) fire damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

WELL GRATE

The grate covering the well leading to area N1 sits in the floor west of the stage, and is unlatched and unlocked. See area N1 for more information on the well.

OUTHOUSE EXIT

A character with a passive Wisdom (Perception) score of 12 or higher, or who succeeds on a DC 12 Wisdom

(Perception) check, notices a secret door hidden behind a tapestry along the northeast wall of the tavern. The door is barred from the inside, and is used by Adelia Rose, Blink, Kora, and special guests to reach the private outhouse at area N3. See that area for more information.

ADELIA'S TREASURE CACHE

A character who succeeds on a DC 14 Wisdom (Perception) or Intelligence (Investigation) check made to search the stage area finds a secret drawer under Adelia's wooden throne. The drawer is protected by a poison dart trap that can be spotted with a successful DC 16 Intelligence (Investigation) check. If the check is 18 or higher, a character also notes a tiny lever underneath the throne. The trap can be disarmed with a successful DC 14 Dexterity check using thieves' tools, or by turning the tiny lever.

If a character opens the drawer without disarming the trap, or if the check to disarm the trap fails, the trap fires out a cloud of poison darts in a 5-foot radius. Each creature within the area is struck by 1d4 darts, each of which deals 2 (1d4) piercing damage and 3 (1d6) poison damage.

See below for information on what the drawer holds.

TREASURE

In addition to the *telepathy crystal* that can be found in the outhouse, the drawer beneath Adelia's throne holds a bag of ten mixed gemstones (worth 10 gp each), a jeweled hairbrush (50 gp), a *potion of gaseous form*, and a *potion of clairvoyance*.

ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTY

You can adjust the difficulty of this lair in a number of different ways. For more difficult encounters, consider any of the following options:

- Turn Blink into a **mage**.
- Double Adelia's hit points.
- Use the **berserker** or **veteran** stat block for Kora.
- Replace one or more bandits with **spies**.
- Increase the number of ghouls in area N2 to one per character.

NEVERMIND THE VAMPIRES

You can double down on the unnerving look of a tavern built within a titanic skull by building a vampire-themed version of this lair for characters of 11th level or higher. Just make the following changes:

- Turn Adelia and Blink into **vampires**. Only Adelia has the use of her legendary actions.
- Replace the bandits with **vampire spawn**.
- Increase the number of ghouls in area N2 to five per character.

To reduce the difficulty of the lair, consider any of the following options:

- Use the **bandit** stat block for Adelia, giving her 20 or more hit points.
- Use the **bandit** stat block for Blink or Kora.
- Reduce the number of **bandits**.
- Replace the ghouls with **zombies**.

EXPANDING THIS LAIR

You can expand this lair by building on or modifying any number of the hooks found within it:

- Depending on their reasons for coming to Nevermind, the characters could become allies of the Dead Roses, using them as muscle or a dark intelligence-gathering operation during their own adventures.
- Making contact with the characters through the lost sending crystal in the outhouse might lead the NPC holding the other crystal to assume that the party is responsible for the disappearance of the NPC's associate. Fearing that the characters have learned all about their secret plots, the NPC sends a band of spies or assassins after the characters.
- Once Adelia and the Dead Roses are defeated, the characters might claim Nevermind as their own private headquarters.



NATURE'S RAGE

XAVIER BEAUDLET

Murder most foul comes to a noble's estate when a druid takes over a menagerie of exotic animals—and sets in motion a plan to take revenge on the enemies of nature.

This lair is optimized for four to five 4th-level characters.

BACKGROUND

The druid Carese Itel abhors the nobles whose business interests cut down forests and carve mines into the earth, and who hunt animals for sport. She believes that these so-called rulers are a poison slowly killing the world—and that she is the antidote.

Recently, Carese took over Gilfred Manor, home of a reclusive noble family. After slaying the family members and their servants, she fed their remains to the fantastic menagerie of animals the Gilfreds kept in the private zoo on their estate. During the day, the druid and her animal companions live in the zoo. By night, they sneak out to murder other nobles whose avarice causes the land to bleed, with those victims ending up as meals for Carese's pets.

INTEGRATING THIS LAIR

Gilfred Manor's zoo is a walled compound on the same property as the now-deserted nobles' house. The encounter areas presented here could be the entire zoo, or simply part of a much larger area.

If you want to set up an initial exploration of the estate as a precursor to the encounter with Carese, the house contains several active constructs, as well as magical and mechanical traps that the reclusive Gilfreds used to guard their valuables.

You can use the following hooks to integrate this lair into your campaign, whether as part of a longer adventure or as the focus of a single play session:

- The characters investigate the disappearances and murders of a number of nobles with ties to successful lumber and mining businesses. All the evidence points toward exotic animals being involved. In time, the characters catch one of these beasts in the act and chase it back to Gilfred Manor.
- The characters are asked to deliver a message or package to Gilfred Manor, making sure that Lyla Gilfred, the matriarch of the family, receives it personally. After exploring the house and surviving

its threats, they meet Lyla's ghost, who promises to reveal the location of her family's secret treasure rooms if the characters avenge her murder.

- The characters are asked to guard a traveling noble who runs a lumber or mining company. Their caravan is attacked several times by animals, not all of which are native to the region the caravan is moving through. The group also comes across the aftermath of other attacks along the road, with survivors reporting exotic animals killing and capturing nobles before fleeing. The noble who hired the characters offers them more money to look into the attacks. Pursuing the fleeing animals leads the characters to Gilfred Manor.

APPROACHING THE ZOO

As the characters approach Gilfred Manor's zoo, read or paraphrase the following to set the scene:

There is no mistaking the smell of large animals coming from ahead. Set within the black stone walls that edge the estate, a second set of higher white marble walls mark the location of the zoo.

ENTERING THE ESTATE

The black walls that enclose the Gilfred estate are ill maintained and 10 feet high, requiring a successful DC 12 Strength (Athletics) check to climb. This outer wall's only gate is barred from inside, and requires a successful DC 22 Strength check to force open. The wooden gate has AC 17, 50 hit points, and immunity to poison and psychic damage. However, any attack made to smash the gate alerts the creatures in areas R3 and R4 that trouble is coming. These creatures hide in their pens, wait for the characters to enter the zoo, then attack in the hope of surprising the intruders. A character looking for trouble who succeeds on a DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check notices the hidden beasts before they attack.

If you don't want to develop the abandoned house as part of the adventure, the druid Carese eventually comes to greet any characters who knock on the doors or call out to see if anyone is around. Worried that the characters could ruin her plots, Carese pretends to be a member of the Gilfred family, invites them to see the zoo, then attacks with her animal allies. See "Carese Ite!" at the end of the lair for more information on roleplaying the druid.

ENTERING THE ZOO

The smooth marble walls that enclose the zoo are 20 feet high and require a successful DC 15 Strength

(Athletics) check to climb. The iron gate that leads into the zoo is unlocked.

At your discretion, the area between the outer estate walls and the zoo walls is patrolled by two **giant scorpions** that Carese has brought with her to the estate. See "Zoo Animals" for more information.

ZOO ANIMALS

Carese has used her magic and natural leadership abilities to convince the animals in the zoo to join her cause. The beasts attack any humanoid other than the druid that they see. If an animal can see Carese, it fights to the death or until she flees. If an animal cannot see Carese, it fights until reduced to half its hit points or fewer, then flees.

If Carese is not present when a beast attacks, a character can attempt a DC 15 Wisdom (Animal Handling) check as an action to convince the beast to stand down. Offering the beast food grants advantage on the check.

Once a beast has been convinced to stand down, a character can attempt another DC 15 Wisdom (Animal Handling) check to control it in combat. On a success, the animal attacks a target the character indicates, fighting to the death. However, the animals cannot be persuaded to attack Carese, and immediately return to her control if ordered to do so.

A ritual Carese performs in the zoo (see "Zoo Features") has given all the animals darkvision out to a range of 60 feet. Unless otherwise noted, all the animals in the zoo leave their pens to attack.

ATTACK WAVES

If combat breaks out in the zoo, the lion and the rhinoceros in areas R3 and R4 attack during the first round of combat. During the third round of combat, the crocodile and the apes in areas R1 and R2 join the fray. If the elephant in area R5 has not already been woken up, she wakes and joins the fray during the fifth round of combat.

If Carese is not in the fight already, she emerges from area R7 during the eighth round of combat, having taken beast form and ready for battle. The druid brings her swarm of poisonous snakes with her. See area R7 and the "Carese Ite!" section for more information.

GILFRED MANOR ZOO FEATURES

The areas of the Gilfred Manor zoo have the following general features:

- The latches and locks on all the doors are broken.
- There are no light sources in the zoo.
- Trees in the zoo are 10 feet high and can be climbed with a successful DC 10 Strength (Athletics) check.



- Humanoid body parts and bones litter the animal pens. All the animals have been corrupted by Carese to eat humanoids, and have gained darkvision out to a range of 60 feet through a nightly ritual Carese performs with the blood of her victims.
- The grass in the zoo is animated and has turned blood red thanks to Carese's ritual. A *detect magic* spell reveals that the grass radiates an aura of transmutation magic. Whenever a creature that is not Carese, a beast, or a plant starts its turn touching the blood-red grass, that creature must succeed on a DC 12 Dexterity saving throw or be restrained by the grass until the start of its next turn. A creature can use its action to make a DC 12 Strength check, freeing itself or another creature restrained by the grass within its reach on a success. A patch of grass holding a creature has AC 12. Dealing 5 slashing damage to the grass frees a restrained creature without harming it.

GILFRED MANOR ZOO

The following encounter areas are keyed to the map of Carese's lair.

R1. CROCODILE POND

A thin border of rubble around this area is all that remains of a low stone wall that once surrounded a muddy, 10-foot-deep pond. A **crocodile** named Chompers lurks in the pond, along with a **swarm of quippers**. In battle, Chompers attempts to bite and drag a character back into the water so he and the quippers can finish them off.

R2. PRIMATE CAGE

This 15-foot-high enclosed iron cage is home to Bananas and Mango, two **apes**. Four trees stand within the cage, connected by crisscrossing ropes set 10 feet off the ground. Unless they flee or are ordered to leave the cage by Carese, the apes stay within the trees and hurl rocks through the bars of the cage at intruders.

Whenever an ape hurls a rock at the characters, roll a d6. On a 6, the ape instead hurls a **poisonous snake** it finds in the trees, using the same attack bonus as for its rock attack. If the attack hits, the snake automatically bites its target.

CAGE

The bars of the cage are set four inches apart. A creature inside the cage has half cover against attacks made against it by creatures outside, and vice versa.

ROPES

A creature without a climbing speed must make a DC 15 Strength (Athletics) check to move along the ropes. With a success, the creature moves at half its speed. If the check fails by 5 or more, the creature falls off the ropes.

R3. LION PEN

A **lion** named Tyrus lives in this pen, which is mostly enclosed by a 3-foot-high stone wall. A 15-foot-high iron gate leads into a den built to give Tyrus privacy, or to hold him while the rest of the pen is being cleaned. A second 15-foot-high iron gate at the north end of the privacy area opens onto the top of a grassy hill that leads 10 feet down to the pen's main living area, which includes a 10-foot-deep pond.

Tyrus uses his Pounce trait whenever possible, preferring to target creatures restrained by the blood-

red grass, or creatures engaged with his allies to make use of his Pack Tactics trait.

R4. RHINOCEROS PEN

A **rhinoceros** named Stomp lives in this pen, which is surrounded by a 3-foot-high stone wall. The pen contains a 2-foot-deep watering hole and a 15-foot-high stone enclosure with a hay-covered floor and a 10-foot-high open doorway, where Stomp sleeps.

Stomp prefers to use her Charge trait to knock her enemies prone into the grasping grass, so she can continually gore them while they are restrained.

R5. ELEPHANT PEN

Trumpet, an **elephant**, lives in this pen, which is surrounded by a 3-foot-high stone wall. The pen contains a 5-foot-deep pool and a 20-foot-high stone enclosure with a hay-covered floor and a 15-foot-high open doorway, where Trumpet sleeps.

Trumpet is an elderly elephant, and spends most of her time sleeping. Unless a battle has roused her (see “Attack Waves”), she remains asleep unless a creature attacks her or uses an action to shake her awake.

Flashy magic enrages Trumpet, so she focuses her attacks on anyone she recognizes as a sorcerer, a warlock, or a wizard. She uses her Trampling Charge trait whenever she can, attempting to knock spellcasters prone, then stomp them.

R6. STORAGE ROOM

This 10-foot-high storage room contains hay and crates of animal feed, along with mops, lawn scythes, ladders, and other tools used by the Gilfred’s servants to maintain the zoo.

TREASURE CRATE

Any character who investigates the crates and succeeds on a DC 10 Wisdom (Perception) check notices that one particularly heavy crate jingles when handled. This crate contains a **swarm of insects (spiders)** that attacks any creature other than Carese that opens the crate. It also holds coins and gems stolen from nobles the druid has murdered (see “Treasure” below).

R7. REPTILE HOUSE

The ceiling in the reptile house is 10 feet high. When the characters enter this area, read or paraphrase the following to set the scene:

Shelves on the walls of this one-room stone building are covered with broken glass and withered grass where a number of terrariums have been smashed.

If the characters have not already encountered Carese Itel (see “Entering the Estate” and “Attack Waves” above), she is here feeding a **swarm of poisonous snakes** that once lived in the terrariums. Add the following if so:

At the center of the room, a human in her twenties stands over a wriggling mass of serpents. Her bloodstained hands throw severed fingers and toes toward the snapping snakes, and she sings a lullaby as she drops each morsel into venomous jaws.

If the characters met Carese at the gate and defeated her there, the snakes are here alone.

CARESE ITEL

Carese Itel has little patience for the characters however she meets them. She is suspicious of other humanoids who are not druids, and immediately attacks if the characters harm her beast allies or act hostile toward her in any way. The druid fights until reduced to 10 hit points or fewer, then flees with any surviving animal allies as long as the animals are free to do so. If any of the animals are captured or cornered by the characters, Carese refuses to leave until her pets are also safe.

Carese uses the **druid** stat block with the following changes:

- Her alignment is neutral evil.
- She has 100 hit points.
- She can speak and understand Common, Druidic, and Sylvan.
- She has the Change Shape action option, which she can use as a bonus action in the zoo as a result of the blood-fueled ritual she performs here.

Change Shape (2/Day). Carese magically polymorphs into a beast with a challenge rating of 1 or less, and can remain in this form for up to 2 hours. She can choose whether her equipment falls to the ground, melds with her new form, or is worn by the new form. She reverts to her true form if she dies or falls unconscious. Carese can revert to her true form using a bonus action on her turn.

While in a new form, Carese retains her game statistics and her ability to speak, but her AC, movement modes, Strength and Dexterity are replaced by those of the new form, and she gains any special senses, proficiencies, traits, actions, and reactions (except class features, legendary actions, and lair actions) that the new form has but that she lacks. She cannot cast spells with verbal or somatic components in her new form.

- She has a challenge rating of 4 (1,100 XP).

Carese makes use of her Change Shape action as early and as often as she can. Her favorite forms are the **brown bear, dire wolf, giant eagle, and giant**

hyena. She also favors becoming a **giant octopus** if any characters end up in the ponds during the battle.

If captured, Carese has no qualms admitting to the murders. She believes that her cause is righteous, and that all who harm the earth must die.

TREASURE

The following treasure can be found in the treasure crate in area R6:

- Coins worth 200 gp.
- Seven gems—a carnelian, three citrines, and three zircons—each worth 50 gp.
- A silver crown bearing symbols from the Common, Draconic, Dwarvish, Elvish, Gnomish, Halfling, and Orc alphabets, which acts as a *helm of comprehending languages*.

ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTY

You can adjust the difficulty of this lair in a number of different ways. For more difficult encounters, consider any of the following options:

- Carese has 180 hit points and can use her Change Shape action to become a beast with a challenge rating of 3 or less.
- Replace the crocodile with a **giant constrictor snake** or a **giant crocodile**.
- Replace the apes with **giant spiders**.
- Replace the lion with a **saber-toothed tiger**.
- Replace the rhinoceros with a **giant scorpion** or a **triceratops**.
- Add a second elephant, or replace the elephant with a **mammoth**.

To reduce the difficulty of the lair, consider any of the following options:

- Use the normal **druid** stat block for Carese with no changes.
- Replace the crocodile with a **giant frog**.
- Replace the apes with **baboons** or **hawks**.
- Replace the lion with a **panther**.

- Replace the rhinoceros with a **black bear** or a **giant toad**.
- Replace the elephant with a **giant boar**.
- Replace the swarm of poisonous snakes with a **swarm of bats**.

If you swap any animals at the zoo, change up the details of the pens and the animals' tactics accordingly. For instance, the Gilfreds would have built a higher stone wall to contain a giant scorpion, and hawks can zoom in and out of their cage to attack, then retreat behind cover.

EXPANDING THIS LAIR

You can expand this lair by building on or modifying any number of the hooks found within it:

- If Carese gets away, she gathers more beasts, monstrosities, plants, and druids to her cause. While she establishes a new lair, she makes a point of sending these creatures after the characters as well as the nobles she hates.
- Carese could be the disciple of an archdruid with the same goal. This archdruid leads cells of murderous druids hidden around the world, all of which are plotting a night of havoc and simultaneous murders.
- A larger zoo (expanded beyond the area detailed as the lair) or the Gilfred house holds nobles kidnapped by Carese. These victims have been left alive so that she can question them regarding new victims to murder. To rescue the nobles, the characters need to contend with more of Carese's guardians and a number of devious traps she's devised.



ASHSNARL'S SECRETS

ENMANUEL MARTINEZ

Inside a cunningly lifelike mechanical dragon, Lady Tharandra Everflame commands her kobold servants to raze the settlements and roast the people of the realm that once shunned her chromatic dragon heritage.

This lair is optimized for four to five 5th-level characters.

BACKGROUND

The half-dragon Tharandra Everkind's mother was the brave knight Lady Rahinda Everkind of Filton. While pregnant, Lady Rahinda killed the great red wyrm Cinderfall, whose blood mingled with that of the wounded knight to create Tharandra's draconic heritage.

As a child, Tharandra trained hard for knighthood, but her fire breath accidentally killed her mother. The people of Filton shunned the half-dragon thereafter, and Tharandra desired revenge. She trained for battle and gave herself a knight's title and a new name—Lady Tharandra Everflame. The half-dragon conquered a warren of kobold inventors known as the Fire Smelters, who now follow her. The kobold inventors' greatest achievement is the mechanical red dragon they built

for Tharandra, called Ashsnarl, which the half-dragon now uses to burn and plunder Filton and the lands around it.

INTEGRATING THIS ENCOUNTER

Deciding what sort of settlement or realm Filton is (or replacing it with an existing location in your campaign) can help establish the characters' connection to this encounter.

You can use the following hooks to integrate this lair into your campaign, whether as part of a longer adventure or as the focus of a single play session:

- The characters find out about Ashsnarl by seeing the aftermath of the dragon's destruction first hand. The leaders of Filton offer them a reward (see "Treasure") for the head of the dragon (which all believe to be a living creature), and the characters set out to follow Ashsnarl's destructive trail. In every ruined settlement, they find Fire Smelter kobolds and their construct creations, left behind to deter would-be heroes from tracking the dragon.
- One or more of the characters knew Tharandra as a child, and returns home to Filton just after Ashsnarl attacks. Surviving witnesses know that the

dragon carried off captives in the direction of the nearby mountains where the Fire Smelters dwell. The characters confront the Fire Smelters in their caves to free the captives, but Ashsnarl is already out destroying the next settlement. The characters must race to battle the dragon if they hope to end its destruction.

- If you prefer to build a single-session adventure around this lair, the characters are visiting Filton when Tharandra attacks, and are drawn into the fray by bystanders screaming for help.

APPROACHING ASHSNARL

The machine that Lady Tharandra Everflame uses to raid settlements looks exactly like an ancient red dragon. When the characters first notice Ashsnarl, they should think that they face a dragon rather than a mobile lair. Read or paraphrase the following to set the scene:

An enormous red dragon shoots jets of flame from its mouth and nostrils as it crawls steadily forward, marring and shaking the earth with its giant claws. Its massive wings are furled, the dragon seemingly content to plod along at a casual speed.

Wherever you set up the start of this lair, give the party appropriate cover. If the characters succeed on a DC 10 group Dexterity (Stealth) check, the creatures inside Ashsnarl do not notice them as they approach.

OUTSIDE ASHSNARL

Tharandra and the Fire Smelter kobolds control Ashsnarl from inside the dragon's head (area A3), looking out through one-way window eyes. A creature piloting Ashsnarl can speak into a tube to make their voice sound monstrous and send it out through the machine's mouth, making it sound as if the dragon is speaking.

Ashsnarl is 20 feet high, 130 feet long from head to tail, and 30 feet across the widest part of its body. The machine has AC 19, 250 hit points, a damage threshold of 10, and immunity to fire, poison, and psychic damage. Each round, Tharandra or a kobold piloting the machine can use an action to make use of one of the following options:

- Ashsnarl moves 40 feet.
- Ashsnarl attacks one creature within 5 feet of it with a claw. The machine has a +6 bonus to the attack roll and deals 11 (2d6 + 4) slashing damage on a hit.
- Ashsnarl shakes from side to side. Each creature climbing or riding the outside of the machine must succeed on a DC 13 Strength saving throw or be

hurled to the ground within 10 feet of the machine and knocked prone.

- Ashsnarl spews fire in a 30-foot cone. Each creature in that area must make a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw, taking 24 (7d6) fire damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one. Once this option is used, the machine cannot spew fire again for 5 minutes.

REALIZING THE TRUTH

The characters can recognize Ashsnarl's true nature in a number of ways:

- Any character who can see Ashsnarl, is within 10 feet of it, and has either proficiency with tinker's tools or a passive Wisdom (Perception) score of 15 or higher notices the bolts that hold the dragon's joints together.
- A character who succeeds on a DC 12 Intelligence (Arcana or Nature) check or who has interacted with a true dragon before notices that Ashsnarl acts unnaturally. The creature's movements and attacks are slower and more stilted than those of a typical dragon, and its breath weapon is too small for a dragon of its size.
- A character who hears the pilot's voice come through the machine and succeeds on a DC 13 Wisdom (Insight) check recognizes that some other creature is speaking through Ashsnarl.
- Any character who touches Ashsnarl notices that the dragon feels surprisingly oily and metallic.

ENTERING ASHSNARL

While Ashsnarl is being piloted, a creature can climb onto and up the outside of the machine with a successful DC 13 Strength (Athletics) check. A creature on top of Ashsnarl can lower a rope to grant other creatures advantage on this check. If the machine is inactive, no check is required to climb it.

Once on top of Ashsnarl, the characters can enter the machine in the following ways:

- An easily noticeable 5-foot-square hatch on top of the dragon's back is locked by a wheel from the inside. The hatch has AC 19, 18 hit points, and immunity to fire, poison, and psychic damage. A successful DC 17 Strength (Athletics) check forces the hatch open, and a successful DC 15 Dexterity check using thieves' tools or tinker's tools unlocks it from the outside. The hatch leads to area A1.
- Particularly crafty characters (especially those who have fought Fire Smelter kobolds in the lead-up to this encounter) might attempt to convince the kobolds inside Ashsnarl to open the top hatch. With suitable roleplaying or a successful DC 14 Charisma

(Deception) check, one of the kobolds in area A1 can be duped into letting the characters inside.

- Ashsnarl's eyes are 2-foot-diameter windows with AC 13, 4 hit points, and immunity to fire, poison, and psychic damage. Breaking through the windows brings characters into area A3. Medium and Small creatures must squeeze to pass through the windows. Large and larger creatures cannot enter the machine this way.

ASHSNARL FEATURES

The interior areas of Ashsnarl have the following general features:

- Ceilings in the machine are 8 feet high.
- Small jets of flaming gas shooting from metal pipes along the walls fill all areas of the interior with bright light. A creature that touches these flames for the first time on a turn or starts its turn in contact with them takes 2 (1d4) fire damage.
- While Ashsnarl is active, its engine and gears clank and whirl loudly, making it difficult to hear anything else. Wisdom (Perception) checks that rely on hearing are made with disadvantage.
- The metal walls of Ashsnarl are covered in pipes, pistons, gears, switches, levers, and other mechanical parts. The critical components of the machine are behind the walls, so damaging the external components doesn't hinder Ashsnarl's operation. However, if any character interacts with the external components, a Fire Smelter kobold from area A3 comes to investigate.
- The metal interior of Ashsnarl is hot enough to fill the air with a shimmering haze. Creatures that do not have resistance or immunity to fire damage cannot rest while within the machine.

FIRE SMELTER KOBOLDS

The tough, red-scaled kobolds inside Ashsnarl attack intruders as soon as they notice them. The kobolds fight fiercely, but flee when there are fewer of them than there are characters, or if Tharandra falls.

Whenever you see a bold reference to a **Fire Smelter kobold**, use the **lizardfolk** stat block with the following changes:

- A Fire Smelter kobold is Small and has resistance to fire damage.
- They have 22 (5d6 + 5) hit points.
- They have an Intelligence score of 12 (+1).
- A kobold can climb on the gear-covered walls and ceiling of Ashsnarl's interior with a climbing speed equal to their walking speed.
- They do not have the lizardfolk's swimming speed or Hold Breath trait.

The kobolds know all the information contained in the "Background" and "Tharandra's Death" sections, and additional information about Ashsnarl's mechanical workings at your discretion. A kobold reveals what they know with a successful DC 10 Charisma (Intimidation) check.

At your discretion, some of the Fire Smelters might not be completely loyal to Tharandra, having grown tired of her bullying ways. Such kobolds might be convinced to aid the characters in some way with a successful DC 15 Charisma (Persuasion) check.

ASHSNARL

The following encounter areas are keyed to the map of the mechanical dragon.

A1. BELLY

A narrow ladder built into a freestanding wall near the center of this area leads up to a wheel-locking hatch in the ceiling. Large mechanical elements, including many fast-moving gears and blisteringly hot coils, take up much of this area. Many iron crates are haphazardly piled up around the area, some of which might contain treasure (see below).

HEATING COILS

The four coils at the center of this area generate the heat that fuels the dragon and its breath weapon. Any creature that touches a coil for the first time on a turn or starts its turn in contact with one takes 7 (2d6) fire damage.

GEARS

Large gears raised two feet off the ground spin and grind along the edges of this area. A creature that is pushed into the gears must make a DC 15 Strength saving throw. On a failed save, the creature takes 11 (2d10) bludgeoning damage and is restrained. On a successful save, it takes half as much damage and is not restrained. A restrained creature must repeat the saving throw at the start of each of its turns, ending the effect on itself on a success and taking the damage again on a failure.

A creature that is not restrained can use its action to attempt to free a creature it can reach that is restrained by the gears. Freeing a creature requires a successful DC 15 Strength (Athletics) check, or a successful DC 15 Intelligence check using tinkers' tools.

GUARDIANS

One **Fire Smelter kobold** per character works in this area, monitoring and adjusting the mechanical elements of Ashsnarl. The kobolds are accompanied by a mechanical dog that uses the **hell hound** stat block with the following changes:

- It is an unaligned construct.

- It doesn't have the Keen Hearing and Smell trait.
- It can understand Draconic but can't speak it.
- It is immune to fire and poison damage and the poisoned condition.

A2. CRAMPED HALLS

Small and smaller creatures can move down these narrow halls without any problem. Medium creatures must squeeze to move through, and Large and larger creatures cannot move through these areas.

While Ashsnaarl is active, both halls become dangerously hazardous. The creatures in areas A1 and A3 have worked inside the machine long enough to learn the timing of the hazards, and can avoid them without having to make saving throws.

A2A. PISTON HALL

Giant iron pistons regularly slam down from the ceiling to the floor of this hall. Each creature that enters this area for the first time on a turn or starts its turn there must succeed on a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw or take 5 (1d10) bludgeoning damage and be knocked prone.

A2B. FLAME HALL

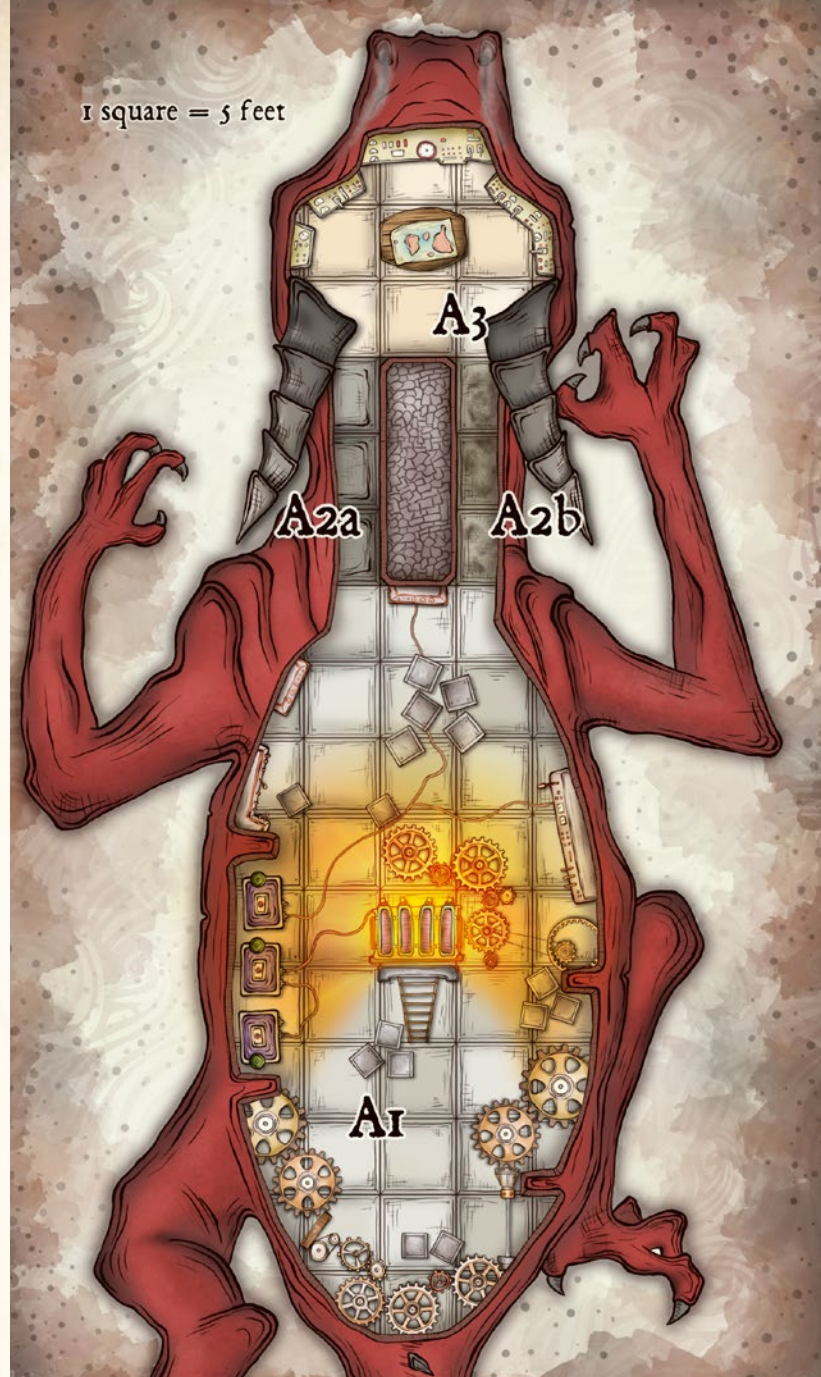
This hall intermittently fills with a giant cloud of flame that quickly dissipates. Each creature that enters this area for the first time on a turn or starts its turn here must succeed on a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw or take 11 (2d10) fire damage.

A3. HEAD

Two round windows hang above a large, curving console covered in switches and levers. A huge pendulum set into the ceiling swings back and forth across this chamber, narrowly missing a low table set with maps each time it descends. Gears, pipes, pistons, and other mechanical features cover the walls.

Unless the characters have managed to draw them out, Lady Tharandra Everflame and a number of kobolds are also here, controlling Ashsnaarl on its path of destruction.

A snarling draconic humanoid with red scales exhales a puff of flame as she barks orders in Draconic to a number of red-scaled kobolds working this area's controls and clambering along the walls. Around the half-dragon's neck, a glowing red ruby pulses on a chain.



CONTROL PANEL

The main control panel at the front of the head controls Ashsnaarl's movements and the traps in this area (see below). A *detect magic* spell reveals an aura of transmutation magic that connects the panel to Tharandra's necklace (see "Tharandra's Death" below).

A creature that can reach the control panel can use an action to attempt a DC 12 Intelligence (Arcana) check. (Tharandra and her kobolds automatically succeed on this check.) On a successful check, one of the following events occurs of the creature's choice:

- The creature can use any of the options noted in "Outside Ashsnaarl."
- Ashsnaarl's head shakes. Each creature in this area must succeed on a DC 13 Strength saving throw or be knocked prone.

- Jets of flame shoot down from the ceiling. Two creatures of the triggering creature's choice must each succeed on a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw or take 11 (2d10) fire damage.

Each event can occur only once per round.

Tharandra orders her minions to make full use of the control panel's flame jets to attack the characters.

The control panel also has a tube that allows a creature to speak as Ashsnarl (see "Outside Ashsnarl").

SCOTT'S THOUGHTS: THE HEROES' DILEMMA

Whether a fight is a straight-up brawl from the first moment the enemies are seen, or the final result of a failed attempt to prevent violence with diplomacy or negotiation, it's always possible to raise the stakes beyond the broadest strokes of victory or defeat by turning a victory condition into a dilemma.

In general terms, a dilemma is any situation where one is forced to choose between two undesirable alternatives, rather than pushing for a clearly positive outcome. In fiction and film, dilemma is often modeled as, "Damned if they do; damned if they don't"—the idea that no matter what choice a character makes, something bad will happen as a result. And this model of dilemma works great in RPGs.

Consider a scenario in which the characters have Tharandra on the ropes in this lair encounter—but they know that the magic of the exploding Ashsnarl might kill innocent bystanders around the mechanical dragon. Or what happens if Ashsnarl's destruction takes place while other groups of Fire Smelter kobolds are on a rampage, and the characters only have time to end one threat? Anytime the characters are set on a clear victory over a boss, you can ask yourself, "What's the worst thing that could happen as a result?", then make sure the players understand those stakes.

Playing with dilemma this way can raise the emotional tone of your game, by letting the characters engage in victories that aren't always clear-cut. However, the biggest difference between fiction and RPGs is that in a campaign, the characters are the avatars of real people—the players who bring those characters and the story of the campaign to life. In fiction, it's possible to engage at the highest level of interest with a character who faces dilemma after dilemma, constantly being pushed back before making a final victorious surge forward. But in an RPG campaign, that kind of structure can easily lead to disillusioned players who quickly lose interest in continuing.

So use dilemma to heighten the tension in key encounters and adventures, marking points at which you want to challenge the players as much as the characters. But make sure those dilemmas lead quickly to more straightforward victories and consistent forward movement in the campaign—even as they remind the players and the characters alike that the stakes of the campaign can be quickly raised in the most challenging ways.

KOBOLDS

This area contains two **Fire Smelter kobolds** for every character.

PENDULUM

Each time a creature crosses the center of this area, it must make a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw to avoid the pendulum. On a failed save, the creature takes 10 (3d6) bludgeoning damage and is knocked prone. Tharandra and her minions automatically succeed on this saving throw.

The pendulum has AC 19, 27 hit points, and immunity to fire, poison, and psychic damage. A character who is proficient with tinker's tools and succeeds on a DC 15 Intelligence check determines that the pendulum helps Ashsnarl maintain balance. If the pendulum is destroyed, Ashsnarl careens over onto its side and stops moving. Each creature inside Ashsnarl when this happens must make a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw. On a failed save, a creature takes 7 (2d6) bludgeoning damage and falls prone. On a successful save, the creature takes half the damage and does not fall prone.

LADY THARANDRA EVERFLAME

Lady Tharandra Everflame enjoys taking revenge on the people who wronged her. To the half-dragon, this gruesome work is cathartic, and a deserved punishment for her former neighbors. When she first sees the characters, she tells them to beg for mercy before ordering her kobolds to attack.

A character can try to stay the attack by begging for mercy, apologizing to Tharandra for the wrongs done to her as a child, offering to join her, or otherwise treating her with respect. Tharandra can be swayed by anyone using her proper knight title and succeeding on a DC 17 Charisma (Deception or Persuasion) check. She is not completely heartless, and might keep the characters tied up in area A1 or let them work alongside her as long as they agree to help purge the land of her former bullies. Unfortunately, nothing can change the vengeful half-dragon's mind about burning down her former home, meaning that the characters will eventually have to face Tharandra in combat if they wish to stop her.

Tharandra uses the **knight** stat block with the following changes:

- Her alignment is chaotic evil.
- She has resistance to fire damage.
- She has blindsight with a radius of 10 feet and darkvision with a radius of 60 feet, and can speak Common and Draconic.

- She gains the following action option:

Fire Breath (Recharge 5–6). Tharandra exhales fire in a 15-foot cone. Each creature in that area must make a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw, taking 24 (7d6) fire damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

- She has a challenge rating of 5 (1,800 XP)
Tharandra fights to the death, since she knows that her demise results in Ashsnarl exploding—a secret she does not willingly reveal.

THARANDRA'S DEATH

A character who succeeds on a DC 15 Intelligence (Arcana) check made to examine Tharandra's necklace senses the magic within it that connects her life force to Ashsnarl. A *dispel magic* spell cast on the necklace removes this enchantment. A character can snatch Tharandra's necklace from her with a successful DC 18 Strength (Athletics) check made as an action.

If Tharandra dies while wearing the necklace or if her necklace is removed, the machine's controls stop working, and its mechanical works begin to tick loudly, vibrate, and become even hotter. Ashsnarl explodes 30 seconds (5 rounds) later. Each creature inside the machine when it explodes automatically takes 33 (6d10) fire damage. Creatures outside the machine but within 60 feet of it must make a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw, taking 33 (6d10) fire damage on a failed save, or half the damage on a successful one.

Because the kobolds know what causes Ashsnarl to explode, they flee the moment the machine starts ticking. Tharandra does not fear a little fire damage, and stays to hinder the characters if she is alive. Fleeing kobolds attempt to kick out the windows in area A3 or open the hatch out of area A1, and will scream at the characters that the machine is going to explode if they cannot otherwise get away.

TREASURE

Treasure for this lair might come in the form of a reward for slaying Ashsnarl, given by grateful settlements in the region. Alternatively, the crates in area A1 might hold loot that Tharandra and her kobolds stole during previous raids. Either way, the characters earn the following:

- Coins worth 2,000 gp
- A ruby shaped like a red dragon's head, set on a gold chain (worth 500 gp)
- One *potion of climbing*
- One *potion of healing*
- A *flame tongue greatsword* with a hilt made of dragon bone, which roars when swung

If you use the *flame tongue greatsword* as treasure, it can be the weapon Tharandra uses.

ASHSNARL AS TREASURE

If the characters are clever, they might try to claim Ashsnarl as a prize. If you don't want to have the party riding around in a mobile fortress, you can decide that the battle with Tharandra left the machine damaged beyond repair. But you might alternatively decide that the characters driving around in a giant dragon machine is the fun way to go. Ashsnarl is not a subtle ride, though. The attention the characters will draw to themselves as the machine's new owners could lead to all sorts of adventures as the authorities, criminals, and monsters attempt to steal Ashsnarl.

ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTY

You can adjust the difficulty of this lair in a number of different ways. For more difficult encounters, consider any of the following options:

- Make Tharandra a **gladiator** or **assassin**, with the half-dragon changes noted above.
- Give some or all of the Fire Smelter kobolds their maximum 35 hit points.

To reduce the difficulty of the lair, consider any of the following options:

- Make Tharandra a **bandit captain**, **berserker**, or **spy**. Use the half-dragon changes noted above, but reduce the damage dealt by her breath weapon.
- Reduce the number of Fire Smelter kobolds in areas A1 and A3, or have some of the kobolds flee the fight.
- Use the **wolf** or **worg** stat block for the mechanical dog.

EXPANDING THIS LAIR

You can expand this lair by building on or modifying any number of the hooks found within it:

- The Fire Smelter kobolds could be a thorn in the characters' side long before this climactic encounter. The characters might continually find the kobolds harassing survivors and picking over the burned remains of settlements after Ashsnarl has passed through.
- A red dragon named Sulfinox—Cinderfall's daughter, who sees Tharandra as a sister—aided in Ashsnarl's construction. With Ashsnarl destroyed, Sulfinox vows to continue her sister's work and take revenge on the characters.
- Ashsnarl is merely the first in a long line of terrible war machines built by the Fire Smelters. Their ultimate plan is to create a five-headed mechanical dragon with multiple breath weapons.



STICKY TOFFEE

ALLIE BRIGGS

A charming candy shop has a sweet reputation. But unknown to all who purchase the shop's wares, those sweets have a sinister secret ingredient—courtesy of the night hag who runs the shop in the guise of an elderly matron. Characters who investigate the hag's activities are in for a number of surprises—and might meet a sticky demise.

This lair is optimized for four to five 5th-level characters.

BACKGROUND

Auntie Bea's Sweet Treats is a cozy little candy shop run by its namesake proprietor. The public has no idea that the seemingly innocent elderly woman whose sweets are in such high demand is actually Auntie Blistermouth, an evil night hag. The fiend weaves mind-warping enchantments into her candies, causing her customers to engage in despicable acts. However, such magic requires a powerful ritual with a secret ingredient: fragments of humanoid souls. To keep her supply fresh, Auntie Blistermouth captures the occasional visitor in her shop, keeping them encased in toffee as she slowly drains their life essence away.

Auntie Blistermouth doesn't work alone. Like most hags, she cuts deals with mortals in need of her magic—often to help right a wrong the person committed after eating the hag's candy. These deals always end poorly for the mortals, who wind up as candy constructs that serve the hag.

INTEGRATING THIS LAIR

Auntie Bea's Sweet Treats could be a candy shop in a small village or a busy city, or a cozy shack hidden in a forest. You can use the following hooks to integrate this lair into your campaign, whether as part of a longer adventure or as the focus of a single play session:

- The characters visit several settlements near Auntie Bea's, with each visit featuring an encounter with someone engaged in evil behavior thanks to the hag's treats (see the "Auntie's Candies" section). Some of these settlements might be in ruins as a result of the candy's evil influence. If the characters investigate, they discover that the trouble began after someone consumed a treat from Auntie Bea's. The characters might even be offered some of the candies themselves as a way to put the mystery together.

- A friend of the characters goes missing, and that person's loved ones contact the party asking for help with the search. As the characters investigate, they learn of other people who have mysteriously vanished, and that all the missing folk spoke of plans to stop at Auntie Bea's. (Some of these missing people could be the toffee statues in area S2.)
- The characters hear word of the amazing candy at Auntie Bea's, and are told they simply must try it. Alternatively, they are asked to purchase some of the candies for an NPC.

APPROACHING THE SHOP

Auntie Bea's Sweet Treats is a two-story building with a basement. Since the shop can be located in almost any setting, the following description focuses on the building and not its surroundings. Depending on the location and context, the shop might seem a bright, friendly place, or it could feel horribly sinister in comparison to its surroundings. Feel free to pepper in descriptions of a busy street, a dirt path, or a quiet forest, and embellish the shop's details as you read or paraphrase the following to set the scene:

The sweet smell of sugar wafts from a bright blue house with a pink roof and shutters. A large glass window shows the inside of a clean candy shop, stocked with brightly colored chocolates, taffies, brittles, peppermint wheels, and more. A wooden sign above the door reads: "Auntie Bea's Sweet Treats."

AUNTIE BLISTERMOUTH

Auntie Blistermouth is always in her humanoid form when she encounters customers, maintaining that form constantly during the day when the shop is open. She is also quick to don it after hours if she receives unexpected visitors. If the characters meet the hag in her humanoid form, read or paraphrase the following:

A cherubic old human woman with her hair in a bun and a pink apron over her blue dress gently hums a merry tune to herself, a twinkle showing in her green eyes.

If Auntie Blistermouth meets the characters in human form, she plays the part of a sweet old lady, calling herself Auntie Bea and offering samples of her candy. If the characters ask her about her wares or any missing persons tied to the encounter setup, she maintains that her treats are entirely normal and claims to know nothing about any mysterious business. A character

who succeeds on a DC 17 Wisdom (Insight) check knows that Auntie Blistermouth is lying.

Whenever Auntie Blistermouth reverts to her true form, read or paraphrase the following:

A horrid hag with gnarled, purple skin, small black ram's horns, and chapped lips covered in blisters unfurls her long claws, a devious look in her wicked yellow eyes.

PLOTS AND PLANS

During her first encounter with the characters, the hag's goal is to entice them to eat or purchase her treats, hoping to see what havoc adventurers might cause while under the influence of her magic. If the characters return a second time after buying the treats, or if they continually accuse her of wrongdoing or attack right from the start, she tries to lead them to area S2. There, the hag attacks with her candy constructs, hoping that the characters end up in the toffee pool.

Auntie Blistermouth uses the **night hag** stat block with the following changes:

- She has 165 hit points.
- She wears an apron that functions as a *cape of the mountebank*.

If she is reduced to 30 hit points or fewer, Auntie Blistermouth uses her apron to teleport to area S3, then drinks one of the *potions of greater healing* there. If she is reduced to 30 hit points or fewer again, she casts the *plane shift* spell to flee.

WHERE'S AUNTIE?

The area of the shop in which the characters encounter Auntie Blistermouth depends on when they arrive. During the day, the hag is in area S1 in her humanoid form, working behind the counter to greet customers and sell candy. At your discretion, there might be 1d4 **commoners** in the shop buying treats from the hag.

If the characters enter the shop at night, Auntie Blistermouth is in area S2, making more candy and harvesting soul fragments from her toffee-transformed captives.

AUNTIE'S CANDIES

Auntie Blistermouth has a wide array of candies available for sale: toffees, brittles, chocolate-dipped fruit, truffles, taffies, peppermints, candied apples, buttercreams, and other similar sweets. She sells the candies for 1 cp each, wrapping them up in pink heart-shaped boxes or colorful bags.

A *detect magic* spell reveals nothing unusual about the candy while it is inside the shop (courtesy of the

magic of the counter in area S1). Outside the shop, *detect magic* reveals that all the candy radiates an aura of enchantment magic. If a creature eats a piece of candy, it suffers no immediate effect. However, 10 minutes later, the creature must make a DC 13 Wisdom saving throw. On a failed save, the creature gains a flaw chosen from or rolled on the Hag Candy Flaws table, which lasts for 1 hour. A *lesser restoration* spell ends the effect early.

A creature can gain only one flaw at a time from eating the magic candy. A creature that succeeds on the saving throw is immune to the effects of the candy for 24 hours.

SWEET SHOP FEATURES

The areas of Auntie Bea's Sweet Treats have the following general features:

- Fireplaces on all three floors provide bright light. A creature that enters a fireplace for the first time on a turn or starts its turn there takes 5 (2d4) fire damage.
- The ceilings in the shop are 9 feet high. The doorways are 7 feet high.
- Doors in the shop are made of wood and have AC 15, 18 hit points, and immunity to poison and psychic damage. The inside doors are locked at all times, and the outside door is locked at night. A door's lock can be picked with a successful DC 15 Dexterity check using thieves' tools, or the door can be forced open with a successful DC 18 Strength (Athletics) check. Auntie Blistermouth carries a master key that opens all the doors in the shop.
- Climbing the outside walls of the shop requires a successful DC 13 Strength (Athletics) check.
- Windows in the shop have AC 13, 3 hit points, and immunity to poison and psychic damage.

AUNTIE BEA'S SWEET TREATS

The following encounter areas are keyed to the map of Auntie Blistermouth's lair.

HAG CANDY FLAWS

d8 Flaw

- 1 I compulsively expose the secrets of other people.
- 2 I am always sad, and if you try to cheer me up, I will find a way to hurt you.
- 3 I constantly make negative comments to others about their appearance and attitude.
- 4 I crave sugar, and will do anything to have more.
- 5 I care only for myself.
- 6 If I want something, I take it.
- 7 If I see someone who looks tougher than me, I have to pick a fight with them.
- 8 Violence is the only way to solve problems.

S1. MAIN SHOP

An L-shaped counter and display case show off the treats Auntie Blistermouth has to offer (see "Auntie's Candies"). Behind the counter, a table holds wax paper, boxes, bags, and ribbons for wrapping candies, next to a vat of what appears to be bubbling chocolate. The vat is actually built into the floor and extends beneath it, and can hold a volume of 10 cubic feet. The chocolate is a **black pudding** with 130 hit points, which follows Auntie Blistermouth's commands. The ooze guards the shop from intruders at night, fighting until destroyed. It is trained to not damage the shop or any of the hag's equipment.

Any loud commotion in this room, such as forcing or attacking the door, or combat with the black pudding, draws the attention of Auntie Blistermouth from any area of the shop.

NONDETECTION COUNTER

The counter and display case are imbued with powerful magic, which places all the candy in the shop under the effect of a continuous *nondetection* spell. The abjuration aura of this effect can itself be detected with a *detect magic* spell. If questioned about the magic, Auntie Blistermouth claims that it is there to keep her treats fresh.

S2. CELLAR

The door to the basement has a *magic mouth* spell cast upon it. When a creature other than Auntie Blistermouth opens the door, the message of her voice saying, "Hello, dearie!" can be heard throughout the shop. This message alerts Auntie Blistermouth to intruders, giving her time to change into humanoid form or prepare for a fight.

When the characters first descend the stairs to enter this area, read or paraphrase the following to set the scene:

A sickeningly sweet aroma and wet bubbling sounds rise off a giant pool of toffee set at the center of the floor. Several bins for sorting candy stand on the west side of the basement. On the south wall, two tables hold utensils, bowls, and molds for making candy. Three statues of humanoids stand near the tables. All are seemingly made of toffee, and have horrified screaming expressions on their faces.

TOFFEE GOLEM

A golem made of toffee is always on guard in this area, and rushes to the bottom of the basement stairs the moment the *magic mouth* spell is triggered. It uses the

flesh golem stat block with the following trait in place of the golem's Aversion of Fire trait:

Aversion of Cold. If the golem takes cold damage, it has disadvantage on attack rolls and ability checks until the end of its next turn.

The golem attacks intruders, attempting to push creatures into the toffee pool during combat. Unless the hag orders it to stand down, it fights until destroyed.

TOFFEE POOL

The toffee pool is 3 feet deep. A *detect magic* spell reveals that the toffee radiates an aura of transmutation magic.

A creature that enters the pool for the first time on a turn or starts its turn there takes 7 (2d6) fire damage. If the creature is a humanoid, they must also succeed on a DC 14 Dexterity saving throw or become restrained as the scalding toffee binds their legs. A creature that is not restrained can use its action to make a DC 14 Strength check, freeing a restrained creature within its reach on a success.

A humanoid restrained by the toffee that starts their turn in the pool must repeat the Dexterity saving throw, ending the restrained condition on a success. On a failure, the creature is petrified, becoming a hardened toffee statue that can no longer be damaged by the toffee pool. See "Toffee Statues" below.

Toffee Imps. If Auntie Blistermouth is in the cellar, she can use a bonus action on her turn to conjure an imp made of toffee from the pool. Each imp is loyal to the hag and uses the **magma mephit** stat block with the following changes:

- A toffee imp is a construct.
- It collapses back to harmless toffee if Auntie Blistermouth is destroyed.

Auntie Blistermouth can summon three imps at a time this way.

TOFFEE STATUES

Each statue is a petrified humanoid who fell into the toffee pool. The petrified condition for any toffee statues can be ended with a *greater restoration* spell

TOFFEE STATUES AND SOUL-SUCKING

When a humanoid is turned into a toffee statue, Auntie Blistermouth hauls the statue out of the pool, then continually harvests small pieces of its soul for use in her candy making. Each day at midnight, the hag harvests a piece of each petrified creature's soul, and each creature gains one level of exhaustion. If a petrified creature gains enough levels of exhaustion to kill it, the statue collapses to toffee shards and is destroyed.



or similar magic, and ends for all statues if Auntie Blistermouth is destroyed.

When the three existing toffee statues are restored, they are revealed to be the following:

Marjorie Wiselyn. Marjorie is a chaotic good human **veteran** in her fifties who discovered that the hag's candies were driving others to commit evil acts. If she is freed, she commits to finding and destroying all of Auntie Blistermouth's candies still in the possession of the hag's former customers (or assists the characters in doing so).

Ogden Mirrow. Ogden is a neutral evil **bandit** in his twenties who broke into the shop to steal, but was caught by Auntie Blistermouth. If freed, he flees as fast as he can, stopping only to stuff his pockets with candies that he hopes to sell at a premium.

Terrence Fiddlefop. This neutral lightfoot halfling noble in his forties insisted on seeing Auntie Bea's operation because he wanted to invest. Now all he wants to do is return home as quickly as possible.

CANDY BINS

The bins on the west side of the room contain sorted and unsorted enchanted candies (see "Auntie's Candies" above).

S3. AUNTIE'S QUARTERS

The door at the top of the stairs radiates an aura of evocation magic to a *detect magic* spell. When a creature damages the door, forces it open, or fails a check made to pick its lock, the door explodes in a burst of magical energy. Each creature within 10 feet of the door must make a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw, taking 28 (8d6) force damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one. The explosion destroys the door.

A character on the outside of the door who succeeds on a DC 15 Intelligence (Investigation) check notices that it has a small glyph carved into its bottom corner. A character who then succeeds on a successful DC 15 Intelligence (Arcana) check made to inspect the glyph knows that it is the source of the door's magic. A creature can deactivate this magic by succeeding on a DC 15 Dexterity check using thieves' tools, or any other sharpened tool or weapon. A failed check causes the door to explode.

When the characters first enter this room, read or paraphrase the following:

A musty odor hangs in the air of this small room, whose windows are covered with dirty, ragged curtains. An unmade bed sits along the far wall, behind a massive lump of stuck-together, brightly colored, chewed taffies. The door of an empty wardrobe on the west wall is partially open, and a dusty desk and chair sit to the northeast.

When a creature that is not Auntie Blistermouth enters this room, the lump of taffies comes to life and attacks. The lump uses the **shambling mound** stat block but is a construct. It fights until destroyed.

AUNTIE'S TREASURES

Any search under the bed locates a small black iron chest that contains Auntie Blistermouth's treasure (see below).

TREASURE

Auntie Blistermouth's shop holds the following treasure that the characters can claim:

- The hag's lacy pink apron functions as a *cape of the mountebank*.
- The box under Auntie Blistermouth's bed contains two *potions of greater healing*, a collection of gold and silver teeth (worth 1,000 gp total), a black pearl (500 gp), and coins worth 1,000 gp.

ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTY

You can adjust the difficulty of this lair in a number of different ways. For more difficult encounters, consider any of the following options:

- Make Auntie Blistermouth an **oni**, or give her one or more additional **night hag** sisters.
- Replace the toffee imps with toffee oozes that use the **ochre jelly** stat block.
- Use the **clay golem** stat block for the toffee golem.

To reduce the difficulty of the lair, consider any of the following options:

- Reduce Auntie Blistermouth's hit points to 80, or make her a **green hag**.
- Remove Auntie Blistermouth's ability to conjure toffee imps.
- Use the **ochre jelly** stat block for the boiling chocolate in area S1 and the lump of taffies in area S3.

EXPANDING THIS LAIR

You can expand this lair by building on or modifying any number of the hooks found within it:

- If Auntie Blistermouth gets away, she torments the characters, intruding upon their dreams. She hopes to fill their heads with doubt and fear so that they perform evil acts in the world. The hag makes this a nightly ritual, targeting a different character each time they take a long rest, until she is destroyed.
- Auntie Blistermouth was part of a night hag coven that seeks revenge for her destruction. These hags each specialize in a different food service of your determination, so that one might be a butcher, another might tend to an apple orchard, and so on. They send a succession of twisted food-based constructs after the characters and attempt to poison their meals.
- Though Auntie Blistermouth is gone, her candies and evil deals are still out in the world. The characters must hunt down her former customers and destroy what remains of the hag's product to avoid more chaos.



BUMPY RIDE

XAVIER BEAUDLET

An arrogant wizard has taken to destroying his competition with explosives dropped from an airship laboratory called *Bomb Justice*. His murderous rampage has already killed more than one wizard, and every mage in the land is a potential target—unless the characters can stop him.

This lair is optimized for four to five 6th-level characters.

BACKGROUND

The wizard Ezzinal de Karabas believes that magic is dangerous, and must be relegated into the hands of those intelligent and powerful enough to control its chaotic forces. And according to him, only his hands and the hands of mages who swear fealty to him are up to the task.

When previous attempts at subjugating other magic users to his will failed, Ezzinal built an airship called *Bomb Justice*, which features a lab within it for the creation of explosive devices. From the safety of this mobile fortress, the wizard drops those devices onto the homes and towers of those mages who refuse to serve him, reducing them and all their achievements to ash.

INTEGRATING THIS LAIR

These encounters take place on Ezzinal's airship, which you can place anywhere that suits your story needs. Though the locations detailed as part of the encounter are set up as the entirety of the ship, you could make use of a different map to make them part of a much larger ship. You could also establish that Ezzinal has a fleet of numerous identical airships, turning this lair into a number of related encounters.

You can use the following hooks to integrate this lair into your campaign, whether as part of a longer adventure or as the focus of a single play session:

- A friendly wizard asks the characters to look into whatever is blowing up the homes of other mages. The characters investigate the ruins of each explosion, which are being picked over by treasure-hunting monsters that don't want to share. At each site, the remains of letters indicate that all the dead mages were contacted by Ezzinal with an offer: Serve him, or die for the good of the world and magic.
- Ezzinal's dropped explosives kill an NPC mage the characters know. When the characters investigate the site, they find a clue that leads them to Ezzinal's old

laboratory—a sunken tower protected by many traps and construct guardians. The old laboratory yields plans for the airship, as well as a magic compass that points in the vehicle’s direction.

- While the characters are visiting an NPC wizard on other business, a magic note is dropped from on high that reads: “Submit or die! Last chance.—Ezzinal.” The NPC explains Ezzinal’s radical philosophy of magic while the airship circles overhead, and it’s up to the characters to stop the coming attack.
- If one of the characters is a sorcerer or a wizard, Ezzinal approaches them and demands fealty. By refusing, the character becomes Ezzinal’s next target. Or by pretending to agree, the character might gain easy access to *Bomb Justice* so that the party can end Ezzinal’s threat.

APPROACHING THE AIRSHIP

Ezzinal typically keeps *Bomb Justice* five thousand feet in the air, which makes the party’s approach far more difficult than for most lairs. Characters might get to the airship in any of the following ways:

- An NPC wizard ally casts the *fly* or *teleport* spell so the characters can reach the deck of the ship (area J1). If casting *teleport*, the NPC might know the deck of the ship well because they are a former apprentice of Ezzinal who was fired and replaced by the wizard’s flesh golems.
- An NPC with an airship allows the characters to borrow it so they can board *Bomb Justice*.
- An NPC inventor with a magic catapult launches the characters from the ground onto area J1 of the ship. Each character must succeed on a DC 15 Dexterity (Acrobatics) check or take 10 (3d6) bludgeoning damage and land prone when they hit the deck.

When the characters first see the airship, read or paraphrase the following:

A long, black iron warship without masts or sails moves through the sky, clearly propelled by powerful magic. Giant red letters printed on the side of the vessel read: “Bomb Justice.”

A character who examines the underside of *Bomb Justice* from a reasonably close distance and succeeds on a DC 15 Intelligence (Investigation) check notes the secret hatch that leads to area J3.

AIRSHIP FEATURES

The areas of *Bomb Justice* have the following general features:

- The ceilings below decks are 15 feet high.

AIRSHIP COMBAT

Though this lair isn’t designed to be a battle where one airship takes on another, your players might have other ideas. If the characters obtain an airship of their own to battle *Bomb Justice*, use your own favorite rules for aerial combat while the characters get in close to board Ezzinal’s craft and take the wizard on.

- The decks and walls are made of iron. Climbing the exterior of the ship requires a successful DC 15 Strength (Athletics) check.
- Lanterns hanging on the walls have had the *continual flame* spell cast on them, filling areas with bright light.
- The windows on the ship are one-way glass, allowing characters to see out but not in. Each window has AC 13, 5 hit points, and immunity to poison and psychic damage.
- The airship has a speed of 8 miles per hour, AC 17, 500 hit points, a damage threshold of 10, and immunity to poison and psychic damage.

BOMB JUSTICE

The following encounter areas are keyed to the map of Ezzinal’s lair.

J1. DECK

When the characters get onto the deck, read or paraphrase the following to set the scene:

The broad iron deck of the airship is surrounded by a low wall, and is set with a number of large crates strapped down with cable restraints. At the aft of the deck stands an iron ship wheel and a spiral staircase leading below decks. A thirty-foot-high mast carved with runes rises at the center of the deck, despite the fact that the airship has no sails.

FLESH GOLEMS

The deck of the ship is patrolled by a number of flesh golems serving Ezzinal (one golem per two characters, rounded up). Each golem uses the **flesh golem** stat block, but has the power to hurl thunder that grants it the following action option:

Thunder Javelin. *Ranged Spell Attack:* +7 to hit, range 120 ft., one target. *Hit:* 22 (4d10) thunder damage.

Ezzinal built the golems, which attack any intruders they notice and fight until destroyed. If they have the opportunity, the golems attempt to push the characters into the lightning rod, or to use the ship’s wheel to pitch the ship (see below for more information). The constructs have magnets bolted to the bottoms of their

MIKE'S THOUGHTS: FLYING AND FALLING

Depending on the capabilities of the characters, being thrown over the edge of a lair high above the ground might be just a minor setback—or it could be a complete catastrophe. Any time you're playing out a climactic encounter in midair, you'll want to gauge how well the characters can handle a long-distance fall, no matter whether they've been knocked off an airship or a flying castle, or been seized by a flying monster and dropped. If they aren't already prepared with appropriate magic, a max-damage fall can turn any encounter into a lethal encounter quickly. As such, feel free to pull your punches and avoid sending characters into free fall if you don't think it will be fun.

feet, which allows them to automatically succeed on saving throws when the ship pitches. They likewise have advantage on saving throws made to avoid being knocked prone.

The golems have a set patrol route, which a character can learn by observing the group for 1 minute. Once the route is known, any character can move their speed along the deck without being noticed by the constructs with a successful DC 12 Dexterity (Stealth) check.

CRATES

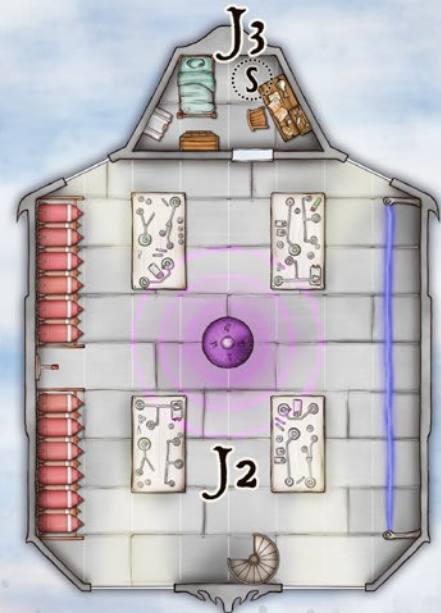
The iron crates contain alchemist's supplies, plate armor, rations, and the volatile components Ezzinal uses in his laboratory experiments and in his bombs. As an action, a character can loosen a crate's restraints to allow it to slide around the deck when the ship pitches, just as a creature does that fails its saving throw (see "Ship's Wheel" below).

Any crate that takes 10 or more fire damage explodes. Each creature within 10 feet of the crate must make a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw, taking 16 (3d10) fire damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one. Other crates within 10 feet of an exploding crate take full damage automatically, which can cause them to explode as well.

LIGHTNING ROD

What appears to be a mast at the center of the deck is actually a magic lightning rod, which radiates an aura of abjuration magic to a *detect magic* spell. A creature that can read Draconic recognizes the runes inscribed into the rod, and understands that the rod protects the ship by absorbing any lightning strikes, and that it stores the energy of those strikes. Any creature that touches the rod for the first time on a turn or starts its turn in contact with it takes 22 (4d10) lightning damage. The golems don't initially know that touching the lightning rod can heal them, but all of them learn this if a character pushes any of the golems against the rod.

1 Square = 5 feet



SHIP'S WHEEL

The aft wheel is used to steer the ship, but its altitude and velocity are controlled below deck in area J2.

A creature that is proficient with air vehicles or water vehicles can steer the ship as long as it is moving. (This includes the flesh golems, who have been trained to steer by Ezzinal.) If any creature steers the ship toward a collision or some other danger, Ezzinal and the air elementals in area J2 come to investigate.

While at the wheel, a creature able to steer the ship can use its action to pitch the vessel to one side: fore, aft, port, or starboard. When the ship pitches, each creature on the deck must succeed on a DC 10 Strength saving throw or slide 10 feet in the direction that the ship is pitching. A creature that slides over the edge of the deck can make a DC 10 Dexterity saving throw

with advantage. On a success, the character grabs onto the 4-foot-high wall surrounding the deck and stops their slide. The ship can be pitched only once per round, and has magic stabilizers that prevent it from being turned upside down.

J2. LABORATORY

When the characters enter this room, read or paraphrase the following:

A humming purple column set at the center of this area is carved with runes, and has a thick base covered in buttons. Four metal tables set around the column hold numerous bubbling bottles connected by glass tubes. On the port wall, steel canisters are strapped into two floor-to-ceiling shelves, and separated by a large red lever. An opaque cascade of sizzling blue lightning arcs across the starboard wall.

If Ezzinal and the elementals have not been encountered already, they are in the laboratory. If Ezzinal is not invisible (see his tactics below), add the following:

A bald human with a wild beard is working at the bubbling laboratory equipment, a jubilant grin spread across his face. Standing sentry at his side is an almost formless creature made of thick vapor.

LABORATORY FIGHT

The laboratory is defended by one **air elemental** for every two characters in the party, which attack as soon as intruders are seen. The elementals use their Whirlwind action as often as possible to hurl characters into the various hazards of the lab. You can pick a hazard, or roll a d6 to select one at random:

- 1–2. A creature is thrown into one of the tables and takes 3 (1d6) piercing damage from broken glass. There is a 30 percent chance that an unstable compound being created on the table explodes, dealing an additional 10 (3d6) fire damage to the creature.
3. A creature is thrown into the red lever, flipping it to the opposite position (see “Lightning Cage” below).
4. A creature is thrown into the port shelf closest to the front of the ship. There is a 10 percent chance that the canisters explode (see “Canisters” below).
5. A creature is thrown into the engine column (see “Engine Column” below).
6. A creature is thrown through the lightning cage and into the gelatinous cube lurking there (see “Lightning Cage” below).

JAMES’S THOUGHTS: FAIR WARNING IS YOUR ONLY JOB

First, let me state that I agree with Mike’s overall point about falling and flying in adventures: You should do what is most fun for your group. My preference is to give my players a warning, usually via a wise NPC, that their characters are going into combat high into the air, and that guaranteed death from falling out of the sky is a real possibility. So if the wizard subsequently chooses to prepare *magic missile* and *fireball over feather fall* and *fly*, or if the rogue decides to hide by hanging over the side of an airship by their fingertips, that’s on the players. If they fall, they fall.

This approach might sound harsh, but I like it because it makes the players’ choices meaningful. It lets them decide how lucky the characters are feeling. Yes, *fireball* ends the fight sooner—but *fly* makes sure the wizard stays alive if everything goes poorly. As long as the players have the knowledge of what could happen, a flesh golem shoving them off the side of an airship is fair game.

At the end of the day, it’s all about fun. So when characters do find themselves in free fall, I also allow them to try whatever they like to prevent taking damage. I favor what I call “action-movie physics” over the real thing, as I find it fits with the core rules of the game. Want to try to grab a passing giant eagle, swan dive perfectly into a lake, or grab a hanging branch just before you hit the ground? Let’s roll some dice to see if it works! This also gives a character who spends a round or more falling from a great height something to do on their turn.

Maximum falling damage is 20d6 bludgeoning damage, which seems like a lot. But on average, this translates to 70 damage—enough to knock out most characters between 5th and 10th level (depending on how beat up they are) but not necessarily kill them outright. This can create an exciting scenario as the one character who does have access to *feather fall* jumps off the side of a cliff with a *potion of healing* to save their unconscious friend. And many characters over 10th level can actually get up and walk away to tell the tale from a maximum-damage fall! So don’t be afraid to shove those characters to their doom!

EZZINAL DE KARABAS

Ezzinal is a lawful evil human who uses the **mage** stat block with the following changes:

- He has 72 hit points.
- He can speak and understand Auran, Common, Draconic, and Elvish.
- He knows the *shocking grasp* cantrip instead of the *light* cantrip, and has the *thunderwave*, *lightning bolt*, and *blight* spells prepared instead of *detect magic*, *fireball*, and *ice storm*.

Ezzinal also wears a pair of magnetic boots that allow him to automatically succeed on saving throws when

the ship pitches, and which grant him advantage on saving throws made to avoid being knocked prone.

Ezzinal casts the *mage armor* spell at the start of every day, and refreshes it as needed. When he first notices intruders, he casts *greater invisibility* on himself. He then casts area attack spells such as *cone of cold* and *lightning bolt*, wanting to harm as many enemies as possible while taking care to not detonate his canisters (see below). If Ezzinal can target only one enemy effectively, he uses the *blight* spell. The mage prefers to damage spellcasters while scolding them for their irresponsible use of magic. He uses his reaction to cast the *counterspell* and *shield* spells as needed.

When Ezzinal has been reduced to half his hit points or fewer, or if the ship begins to crash, he flees to area J3 and attempts to escape out the secret hatch, casting the *fly* spell on himself to get away. If the ship isn't already crashing and the gelatinous cube has not been freed when Ezzinal flees, he takes the opportunity to destroy the engine column and flip the red lever down if he can.

CANISTERS

The 5-foot-long, 2-foot-diameter iron canisters on the port shelves are used to make the explosive devices Ezzinal drops on his enemies. The shelf toward the stern of the ship holds ten empty canisters, which weigh 20 pounds each. The shelf toward the front of the ship holds ten full canisters, which weigh 50 pounds each and are completed explosive devices.

The canisters have AC 17 and immunity to poison and psychic damage. Each time a full canister takes any damage, there is a 50 percent chance that it explodes. If a full canister explodes on its own, each creature within 10 feet of it must make a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw, taking 22 (4d10) fire damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

If a canister explodes within 10 feet of the shelf of full canisters, all the canisters on that shelf explode. Each creature in the laboratory must make a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw, taking 44 (8d10) fire damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one. The explosion rips a 10-foot-diameter

BLOWN UP!

If you're worried that an air elemental hurling a character into the canisters and causing the ship to explode will take this encounter in the wrong direction, you can simply decide that it doesn't happen. Likewise, if you really want the canisters to explode, you can choose that hazard specifically, ignore the percentage chance, and blow *Bomb Justice* out of the sky!

hole in the port wall and destroys the engine column (see below).

ENGINE COLUMN

A *detect magic* spell reveals that the purple column in the center of this area radiates an aura of transmutation magic. Any creature that can read Draconic recognizes the runes scribed into the column, and understands that it is used to control the altitude and speed of *Bomb Justice*. Ezzinal knows how to use the control panel beneath the column, as does any creature that is proficient with air vehicles or that succeeds on a DC 15 Intelligence (Arcana) check made to assess the controls.

Any creature that touches the column above its control panel base takes 11 (2d10) lightning damage. The engine column has AC 17, 50 hit points, and immunity to lightning, poison, and psychic damage. If the column is destroyed, the airship begins to crash. Its magical flight systems struggle to stop it from falling at a fatal rate, holding it to a descent of 250 feet per round. When the ship crashes, each creature aboard must make a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw, taking 35 (10d6) bludgeoning damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

LIGHTNING CAGE

A *detect magic* spell reveals that the wall of lightning along the starboard side of the lab radiates an aura of evocation magic. A creature that touches the lightning cage for the first time on a turn or starts its turn there takes 5 (1d10) lightning damage. A creature can pass through the cage after touching it, taking another 5 (1d10) lightning damage to do so. Flipping the lever on the port wall to the down position causes the lightning cage to disappear, while flipping it back up activates the cage.

An enormous transparent ooze that is one of Ezzinal's experiments is kept in the cage. The ooze uses the **gelatinous cube** stat block with the following changes:

- It is immune to lightning damage.
- It has the following trait:

Amorphous. The ooze can move through a space as narrow as 1 inch wide without squeezing.

The Amorphous trait allows the ooze to stretch out across the interior of the cage, so that a creature entering the cage anywhere along its length enters the ooze's space and is subjected to its Engulf action. If the cage is shut down, the ooze reverts to its normal cube shape, keeping any creatures it has engulfed within its body.

J3. EZZINAL'S BEDCHAMBER

A bed made up with fine silk sheets, a wardrobe, a wooden desk, and a steel chest mark this area as Ezzinal's quarters.

A secret trapdoor that opens to the air beneath *Bomb Justice* is hidden in the floor. It can be found with a careful search of the chamber and a successful DC 15 Intelligence (Investigation) check.

TREASURE

Treasure for this lair could come as a combination of a reward for stopping Ezzinal's plots, and items the mage stores in his lab or bedchamber. Either way, the characters earn the following:

- Coins worth 3,000 gp
- A diamond-tipped solid gold wand (worth 1,000 gp)
- Two *potions of gaseous form*
- A *bag of devouring*

AIRSHIP AND EXPLOSIVES AS TREASURE

If the characters are clever or lucky, they might secure the airship and its explosives without destroying them. If you don't want the characters to have their own airship, you can decide that *Bomb Justice* becomes unusable after Ezzinal dies, because the wizard created a special ritual to recharge the ship's engine that only he knows. Alternatively, you might decide that giving the characters an airship is a fun idea and allow them to keep it. However, their new ride definitely attracts the attention of dragons, rocs, and other formidable flying creatures as it moves through the sky.

If you don't want the characters to have a trove of explosives, you can decide that after seven days, the magic of the canisters wears off to turn each bomb into a dud. Alternatively, the characters could realize that the explosives become unstable after seven days, and might explode any time the ship is jostled if they aren't disposed of.

ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTY

You can adjust the difficulty of this lair in a number of different ways. For more difficult encounters, consider any of the following options:

- Add more flesh golems to serve Ezzinal, or make them **clay golems** with the noted changes.
- Make Ezzinal an **archmage**.
- Replace one or more of the air elementals with **invisible stalkers**.
- Replace the gelatinous cube with a **shambling mound** that has the Amorphous trait.

To reduce the difficulty of the lair, consider any of the following options:

- Reduce the number of flesh golems, or swap them for suits of **animated armor**.
- Give Ezzinal 40 hit points, and set up that he has already used his 3rd- and 4th-level spell slots.
- Replace the air elementals with **minotaur skeletons**.

EXPANDING THIS LAIR

You can expand this lair by building on or modifying any number of the hooks found within it:

- Ezzinal led several other mages who believed that magic should be tightly controlled. This group continues his work by recruiting and killing other spellcasters, and its members make a point of avenging their leader's defeat.
- If Ezzinal escapes, he comes to the conclusion that no humanoid mages can be trusted with magic—except for him, of course. He thus turns to some of the oldest practitioners of magic, recruiting dragons to help him kill humanoid mages, and starting with any wizard or sorcerer characters in the party.
- If *Bomb Justice* crashes, it releases a burst of chaotic magical energy that kills many people in nearby settlements. The corpses become infused with magic, and soon rise as undead that plague the land.



THE LAMIA JOB

A lamia with a love of finery and riches has hit upon the perfect scheme. After charming a brass dragon and taking over the creature's ruined bank lair as her own, the lamia taps into ancient magic to restore the splendor of the Gilded Vault with illusion. She then hatches a plot to collect the fine art of unwitting nobles wanting to store their valuables securely—and to murder those nobles once their riches have been claimed.

This lair is optimized for four to five 6th-level characters.

BACKGROUND

A lamia named Lascal has recruited quite the band of soldiers using her supernatural charms. The crown jewel in her collection of brainwashed servants is Ignator, a young brass dragon held under the sway of the lamia's *geas* spell. When Lascal took over the dragon's mind, she also took up residence in his lair—a ruined bank built by dwarves. Using the power of a pair of magic gloves known as the *magician's fingers*, Lascal taps into the residual magic used to construct the bank, creating illusions that seemingly restore the site to a state before the dwarves abandoned it, and

before decay and looters stripped away the bank's beautiful appearance and gilded filigree.

Lascal reopened the bank, renaming it the Gilded Vault and advertising it as a place for wealthy patrons to store their most prized possessions. The lamia particularly values paintings, sculptures, and other beautiful art objects—which she keeps for herself after ordering her thralls to kill the bank's patrons after their deposits are made. In the aftermath, she eagerly devours the corpses of her former clients, as she does for anyone foolish to ask questions regarding the whereabouts of her victims.

INTEGRATING THIS LAIR

The Gilded Vault can be set up in any remote area, from an underground cavern complex to a desert wasteland. There should be a road leading to the site so nobles can easily travel to it, but there should be no settlement around it.

The bank might be represented mostly by the mapped area, or you could expand the encounter to fill a much larger complex that includes proper living quarters for Lascal's thralls. Either way, though, the north end of the vault should butt up against another

stone structure with no doors or windows, so that the characters can't easily recognize the setup of the false door in area L1.

You can use the following hooks to integrate this lair into your campaign, whether as part of a longer adventure or as the focus of a single play session:

- Several brass dragon wyrmlings start running amok in settlements near the Gilded Vault. The characters are hired to deal with the problem, and learn after questioning the wyrmlings that their father, a young brass dragon named Ignatior, suddenly disappeared—along with their secret lair. The dragons describe the ruined bank where they once lived, and talk of how they went out hunting on their own and came back to find a shiny new bank where the old one was, and their father gone. The wyrmlings think the humanoids living nearby must somehow be responsible for this, but agree to stop punishing people if the characters find out what happened to their father and their home.
- Earlier in their adventuring careers, have the characters face Vaxila (see area L2). Having taunted and tormented the characters, this villain suddenly disappears just before a final showdown. After searching extensively for Vaxila, the characters learn that she is working for an unknown master at the Gilded Vault.
- This lair could take a heist setup. The characters might find an incomplete map of the Gilded Vault, and find out more about the creatures inside as they plan to steal a particular treasure known to have been recently deposited at the bank.
- The odd setup of the Gilded Vault might attract the characters' attention. Seeing a well-guarded delivery wagon heading out along a road to nowhere might make clever characters suspect that something is amiss.

APPROACHING THE BANK

The Gilded Vault is a two-story windowless building. Since it might be found in almost any setting, include additional descriptions of dark caverns, giant desert dunes, or any other details of what's around the bank as you read or paraphrase the following to set the scene:

The entire outside of this building, from the great steps leading to its front entrance, to the massive columns surrounding it, is covered in shiny gold. A carved inscription above massive double doors reads, "Welcome to the Gilded Vault!"

The fine look of the bank's exterior and the welcoming inscription are actually part of a spell cast by Lascal (see "Lascal's Illusion" below).

LASCAL'S THRALLS

The creatures that serve Lascal are all under the effect of her *geas* spell, whose casting she staggers to allow her to regularly refresh the enchantment. To gain the maximum effectiveness from the spell, she gives each creature affected by it a slightly different command of servitude. These creatures are devoted to her because of the spell's charm effect, and fear the lamia because of the psychic pain the spell brings if they disobey her orders.

If the characters enter the bank posing as customers, the thralls treat them with kindness and exemplary customer service. They refuse to show the characters to any area of the bank other than area L1 "for security reasons." Bank employees also eagerly share the history of the bank, saying that until recently, a brass dragon named Ignatior occupied the building. They claim the dragon left just before the renovation, a lie that can be detected with a successful DC 15 Wisdom (Insight) check.

If the characters have nothing to deposit or are caught sneaking around in places they shouldn't be, the thralls ask them to leave. If the characters refuse, Lascal's thralls attack, shouting to raise the alarm. They might also attack if the characters have a magic item or art object Lascal would like, if the characters reveal that they know illusion magic covers the bank, or if any character tries to steal from or harm the bank or any thralls. Compelled to sacrifice themselves for Lascal, all thralls fight to the death.

NOTING A THRALL

A character who succeeds on a DC 15 Wisdom (Insight) check can tell that a thrall is affected by some sort of magical enchantment. With a subsequent successful DC 15 Intelligence (Arcana) check, a character knows that the spell affecting the thralls is *geas*. A thrall freed from its *geas* spell understands what has happened to it, and tries to flee. With a successful DC 15 Charisma (Persuasion) check, the characters can instead convince the creature to help them. Each thrall knows the layout of the bank, how to open the vault door (see area L2), and the history of Lascal contained in the "Background" section.

LOYAL EMPLOYEES

Mazzik the doppelganger (in area L1) and Melmarc Snurr the werebear (in area L2) are not Lascal's thralls. They simply serve the lamia because she is a charismatic leader who pays them well. If the characters have noted that some sort of magical enchantment affects the other employees of the bank, they can immediately tell that these two are not under any magical sway. However, a successful DC 20

Charisma (Intimidation) check or a bribe of 500 gp or more convinces Mazzik or Melmarc to betray Lascal and side with the characters.

BANK FEATURES

The areas of the Gilded Vault have the following general features:

- Ceilings in the bank are 20 feet high, with 10-foot-high doorways connecting chambers.
- Lanterns with the *continual flame* spell cast inside them hang by chains from the ceiling, filling the bank with bright light.
- Climbing the inside walls requires a successful DC 15 Strength (Athletics) check.
- Though they appear to be solid stone, the walls of the bank are actually stone-clad steel reinforced by abjuration magic imbued into them by the dwarves who built the vault. Each 5-foot section of wall has AC 20; 100 hit points; immunity to fire, poison, and psychic damage; and a damage threshold of 20.
- The entirety of the bank is affected by powerful illusion magic (see “Lascal’s Illusion”).

LASCAL’S ILLUSION

The Gilded Vault appears to be a magnificent, well-maintained building, but is in reality a cracked and crumbling ruin. Lascal has cast the *major image* spell multiple times to make the bank look richly renovated, enhancing the spell’s duration and potency thanks to her *magician’s fingers* (see “Treasure” at the end of the lair) and the residual magic lingering within the vault.

A creature that touches a wall, a column, or any other architecture of the bank notices that the surface feels different than it looks. However, the creature must then succeed on a DC 14 Intelligence (Investigation) check as an action to confirm the feature’s illusory nature. Even when a creature recognizes the illusion for what it is, they still cannot see through it.

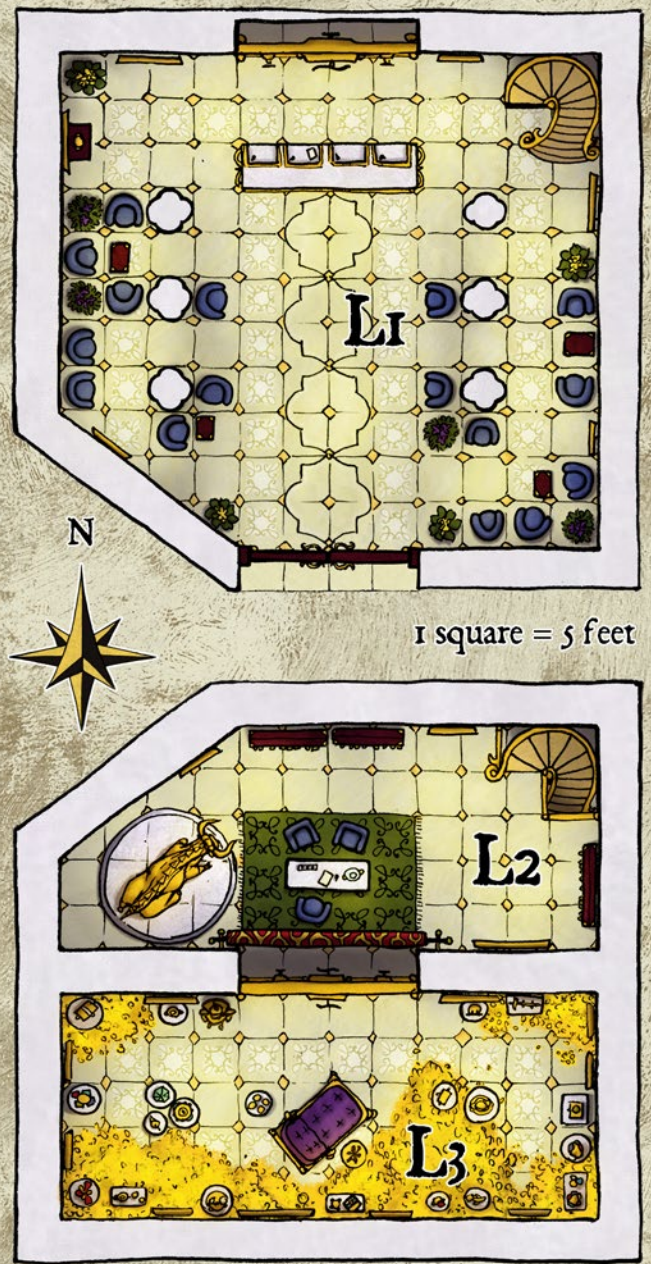
THE GILDED VAULT

The following encounter areas are keyed to the map of Lascal’s lair.

L1. MAIN BANK

When the characters enter the bank, read or paraphrase the following:

Two rows of huge columns hold up the ceiling of this arched hall, leading to a long marble counter. A massive, closed iron vault door is built into the stone wall behind the counter, alongside an ornate spiral staircase leading up. Around the columns and along the walls, plush cushioned chairs are set up for waiting customers.



One human **veteran** for every two characters (rounded up) roam this area of the bank as security. At your determination, another 1d4 **nobles** are also present, looking to deposit or withdraw items.

Mazzik, a **doppelganger** who willingly serves Lascal and takes the form of an elderly human named Chalmers, stands behind the 3-foot-high marble counter, waiting to serve customers. Chalmers greets the characters with a bow and tends to their every whim, even as he uses his Read Thoughts action to see if the characters have come to the bank for any reason beyond what they say. If the doppelganger uncovers a lie, the creature attacks and calls the veterans to join the fight. If the characters have a complaint, the doppelganger asks them to have a seat, then goes to fetch Vaxila in area L2, who comes down to meet with them.

If combat occurs in this area, the veterans or Mazzik activate the false door (see below) if they can hit one or more characters with it. At the start of the fourth round of combat, the creatures in area L2 come to investigate.

FALSE DOOR

The 20-foot-square iron vault door to the north of this area actually leads nowhere, opening up to a dead space and a solid wall. (The dead space ensures that if the door is struck, it sounds as though an open room is behind it.) A *detect magic* spell reveals that the door radiates an aura of transmutation magic.

When any creature touches the door, its magic causes it to slam outward in a straight line, crashing through the counter and straight into the south wall of the chamber. On the next initiative count 0 (losing initiative ties), the door flies along the same path back to its original position. Each creature in the door's path

TRACKING SUSPICION

Though this lair is set in a single small location, it's still set up to play to all the strengths of the game: combat, exploration, and interaction scenarios. Some groups will treat these encounters as a traditional heist, looking forward to using deception and stealth to get to the vault, rather than hacking their way through the guards. If this is the case with your group, give the characters time to research, stake out, and plan before entering the lair, and consider tracking suspicion points during the encounter.

Suspicion points are a new resource you can use when the characters enter enemy territory in disguise, or while hidden or appearing inconspicuous. Each time a character does something that would arouse their enemies' suspicion—typically failing an ability check related to staying in disguise or keeping a low profile—rather than having the villains immediately draw steel, secretly give the party 1 suspicion point. As they build up, these suspicion points represent the growing wariness of the characters' enemies. Whenever one or more characters make an ability check to influence or sneak by an enemy, add the party's total number of suspicion points to the check's DC. And even if they make these increasingly difficult checks, when the characters earn 5 suspicion points, the jig is up! Their enemies now see them for what they are and attack.

If you use suspicion points, not all of the characters' mistakes should be equal. For instance, if a character is seen dropping a vial of poison into an enemy's drink, this hostile act could add more than 1 suspicion point to the total, or immediately cause the villains to attack. It is up to you to decide how many points such big mistakes are worth. Likewise, you might decide that some enemies (such as Lascal in this lair) immediately see through the characters' deceptions and attack, no matter the number of suspicion points. This lair is about the lead-up to a climactic boss battle after all!

when it slams out in either direction must make a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw. On a failed save, a creature takes 22 (4d10) bludgeoning damage and is knocked prone. On a successful save, a creature takes half as much damage and is not knocked prone.

L2. MANAGER'S OFFICE

Characters who ascend the spiral staircase arrive in a second-floor office containing a stone desk built into the floor, a 20-foot-square tapestry hanging on the south wall that depicts a group of laughing jackals, and a 15-foot-tall gilded statue of a bull leaning forward as if ready to charge. (The statue and tapestry are both recent deposits that Lascal claimed for herself.)

LASCAL'S SERVANTS

Two of Lascal's servants work here—Vaxila and Melmarc Snurr. Vaxila is a neutral evil human **mage** and thrall of Lascal, who can speak, write, and understand Abyssal and Common. She stays in the office unless she is called upon by Chalmers, playing the role of bank manager, meeting with important nobles, and assuring and persuading them that the Gilded Vault can take on all their problems.

Melmarc Snurr is a lawful evil human **werebear** in his forties, and a willing follower of Lascal. He is Vaxila's bodyguard, following her wherever she goes. Melmarc enjoys singing to himself at all times, even in battle, though he cannot carry a tune. When not dealing with clients, he and Vaxila play cards to pass the time.

If the characters make it this far without a fight and combat then breaks out in this area, two veterans from area L1 come to investigate, while the other creatures in area L1 prepare to ambush the characters when they come back down.

Melmarc keeps a key on his belt that opens the hidden vault door (see that section below). The key is easily spotted, and can be stolen without Melmarc noticing with a successful DC 17 Dexterity (Sleight of Hand) check.

DESK

A character who searches the stone desk finds that all of its many drawers are empty except one. That drawer holds a note written in Abyssal on a piece of old parchment, which reads: "My key, then a malleable hand, then bear's voice. That order!" This note was written by Lascal as instructions for the enthralled Vaxila on how to open the hidden vault door without activating the gorgon statue.

The drawer also holds a bottle of salve that radiates an aura of abjuration magic to a *detect magic* spell.

A character who examines the salve and is proficient with alchemist's supplies or succeeds on a DC 15 Intelligence (Arcana) check knows that if a creature uses an action to pour the entire contents of the bottle onto a petrified creature, the petrified condition ends for that creature.

GORGON STATUE

A character who examines the bull statue and succeeds on a DC 15 Intelligence (Nature) check recognizes that the statue is not of a bull but a monstrous gorgon. A *detect magic* spell reveals that the statue radiates an aura of transmutation magic.

If any creature attacks or otherwise harms the statue, it comes to life and attacks all creatures in the room, fighting until destroyed. (Lascal's servants all know to flee in this event.) When it comes to life, the statue uses the **gorgon** stat block with the following changes:

- Its size is Huge.
- It has 147 hit points (14d12 + 56).

HIDDEN VAULT DOOR

The tapestry to the south covers a 20-foot-diameter iron door built into the wall. A keyhole is set into the front of the door alongside the graven image of a hand and an ear, each 5 feet above the floor.

The door is locked. It has AC 19, 150 hit points, and immunity to poison and psychic damage. A *detect magic* spell reveals that the door radiates an aura of abjuration magic.

If a creature damages the door, fails one of the checks related to unlocking it (see below), or works the door's three locks in the incorrect order, the gorgon statue roars, then breathes its Petrifying Breath to target as many creatures in front of the door as it can. That attack automatically recharges as the gorgon becomes inert again. The gorgon's roar brings all the servants of Lascal in area L1 to investigate.

Unlocking the Door. The locks on the vault door were broken when Lascal claimed the bank, so new ones were created with the help of Ignatior. To unlock the door, its three locks must be opened in order, as follows:

- Melmarc's key can be used in the keyhole to unlock the first lock. This lock can also be opened with a successful DC 20 Dexterity check using thieves' tools.
- The appendage of any creature with the Shapechanger trait or Change Shape action must be placed on the hand carving to unlock the second lock. The creature need not be alive. Mazzik (in area L1) or Melmarc fit the bill, as does an imp or quasit familiar.

JAMES'S THOUGHTS: HARD CHOICES

When the characters want to parlay with an enemy, I typically allow it as long as the villain has the capacity to do so. The characters saying, "Let's talk this out," is a signal to you that the players will have more fun talking than fighting—or at least that they'll have fun talking before fighting.

That said, just because a villain is willing to talk doesn't mean that a single Charisma (Persuasion) check is going to suddenly make a chaotic evil marilith act like someone with a lawful good agenda. Diplomacy and detente are all about quid pro quo. The characters want something, which the villain might be willing to give for a price. So when the characters negotiate, think about putting a hard choice in front of them. Are they willing to compromise their morals or do a favor for the villain if it means a village is saved? What about to get a rare item they need, or to have an NPC friend freed from prison? Such choices add drama to your story, allowing your characters to wrestle with their own morality. And if the deal doesn't work out, it also lets them stand up righteously, deny the offer, and draw steel in the face of villainy!

-
- Melmarc must sing or speak into the ear on the door to unlock the third lock. A creature that has heard Melmarc speak and succeeds on a DC 15 Charisma (Deception or Performance) check can mimic the werebear's voice well enough to unlock the lock. A *minor illusion* spell or similar effect employed by a creature that has heard Melmarc's voice also does the trick.

A note in the desk offers a hint for how to unlock the door.

L3. VAULT CHAMBER

This area is entirely soundproof, so that the noise of combat in area L2 can't be heard here. Read or paraphrase the following when the characters enter:

A creature with a lion's body and the torso and head of a dark-haired human woman reclines on a long purple chair, examining a gaudy gold necklace held in white-gloved hands. Sprawled on the floor alongside hanging paintings and pedestals displaying jeweled artwork, a dragon with gleaming brass scales prattles on endlessly about how beautiful all the art is.

LASCAL AND IGNATOR

Ignatior is a **young brass dragon** and a prized thrall of Lascal. The dragon has lived in the bank for more than ninety years, and can access the residual magic

still lingering here to create one of the following effects each round on initiative count 20 (losing initiative ties):

- A strong wind blows around Ignatior. Each creature within 60 feet of the dragon must succeed on a DC 13 Strength saving throw or be knocked prone.
- A cloud of sand swirls in a 10-foot-radius sphere centered on a point the dragon can see within 60 feet of him. The cloud spreads around corners. Each creature in the cloud must succeed on a DC 15 Constitution saving throw or be blinded until the start of initiative count 20 of the following round.

Lascal is a **lamia** with 120 hit points, and who wears a set of magic gloves called *magician's fingers* (see "Treasure" below). She has a weakness for works of art, particularly those incorporating gold and jewels—the flashier and more outlandish, the better. The lamia does not care about the lives of her thralls as long as she continues to live and be surrounded by beauty.

When the characters enter the vault, Lascal screeches that they have come to steal her jewels, then attacks using the pedestals for cover. She casts the *suggestion* spell from behind Ignatior to make the characters battle each other, while the dragon burns and tears intruders to pieces. If the *geas* spell that affects Ignatior ends, he immediately sides with the characters to attack Lascal.

The lamia prefers to play it safe behind the dragon, but if the characters steal or damage one of her works of art, she becomes enraged and charges into melee, fighting to the death.

TREASURE

All the art objects in the vault are worth a total of 6,000 gp. Many of the nobles who own these objects were killed by Lascal and her thralls, but a few are still alive (either ignored by the lamia or having sent couriers or agents who were killed in their stead). If Ignatior survives the encounter, he allows the characters to take some of these art objects as thanks, as well as the *magician's fingers*.

The *magician's fingers* are a set of magic gloves—a rare magic item that requires attunement by a spellcaster. A creature wearing the gloves can cast a spell as if it had been cast with a spell slot three levels higher than the slot actually used (to a maximum of a 9th-level slot). This property of the gloves can't be used again until the next dawn.

ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTY

You can adjust the difficulty of this lair in a number of different ways. For more difficult encounters, consider any of the following options:

- Use the **archmage** stat block for Vaxila.
- Use the **gladiator** stat block for the guards.
- Give Lascal the ability to cast the *fireball* spell three times per day.
- Give Ignatior 169 hit points, or make him an **adult brass dragon** or an **ancient brass dragon**.
- Especially if the characters deal with all the foes outside the vault before entering, give Lascal and Ignatior more **veteran** thralls in area L3 to aid them in battle.

To reduce the difficulty of the lair, consider any of the following options:

- Use the **priest** stat block for Vaxila.
- Use the **weretiger** or **doppelganger** stat block for Melmarc.
- Use the **guard** stat block for the guards.
- Give Lascal 97 hit points.
- Reduce Ignatior's hit points to 90 or fewer, or make him a **brass dragon wyrmling**.

EXPANDING THIS LAIR

You can expand this lair by building on or modifying any number of the hooks found within it:

- Benevolent characters might wish to return the art objects Lascal stole to the nobles who own them (or their heirs). Characters who do so receive a monetary reward, and might be asked to undertake other adventures by grateful nobles.
- Ignatior worries that his lair is no longer secret and safe, and asks the characters to help him find a new one. The dragon wishes to stay in the vault and defend his treasures while the characters search for a remote desert ruin to clear out. More of the dragon's hoard is the reward for such a task!
- One of Lascal's freed thralls continues the lamia's mission of taking beautiful objects and murdering their owners. The characters might hear about these crimes and recognize the pattern, or might be asked to deal with the problem if their success in ending the lamia's plots is well known.



ITHRIX BLACKBILE

EMMANUEL MARTINEZ

Ithrix Blackbile, a young black dragon, has bound a small band of trolls to his service by using his acidic breath as a weapon of terror and control.

After subjugating the trolls, Ithrix then took over their lair, a ruined fortress of a long-fallen kingdom, sunken and long-forgotten in a dismal swamp. Now, as the dragon's power grows, so too do the numbers of his followers—and his potential for evil.

This lair is optimized for four to five 7th-level characters.

BACKGROUND

Centuries past, a mighty empire spread across these lands, pushing back the dangers of the wilds and bringing peace and prosperity to all. A band of knights known as the Swords of the Lily served this empire, traveling across it to help citizens in need. But in the end, the empire fell not from enemies outside but from corruption within. The last emperor, wanting to rule forever, approved terrible experiments and pacts with fiends to extend his life unnaturally. Many Swords of the Lily fell in battle against the emperor or fled, while others became corrupted along with their king, their

souls damned as they turned their blades upon the helpless.

Over time, the world swallowed the remains of the empire, with festering swamps spreading to consume what had stood for centuries. Then, in more recent years, a band of trolls set their lair within one such imperial ruin—a fortress carved out within a remote mountain, known as the Sentinel. For years, the trolls ruled over this new domain, until they caught the eye of Ithrix the black dragon. Melting the trolls' mightiest warriors with his acidic breath, Ithrix convinced those who remained that he was a god manifested—vengeful, merciless, and demanding fealty.

Horrified by the dragon's power, the trolls swore to serve him, and now use his acidic breath to ritually scar their own skin in worship. The trolls continually battle and enslave other denizens of the swamps, including goblins and lizardfolk, even as they lay claim to relics retrieved from old imperial battlegrounds. At the same time, a troll priest of Ithrix named Gareth the Flayed has begun to learn the ways of dark divine magic—but has begun to suspect that the dragon is not the true source of his power.

INTEGRATING THIS LAIR

You can use the following hooks to integrate this lair into your campaign, whether as part of a longer adventure or as the focus of a single play session:

- The characters might come across Ithrix's lair during their travels through a vast swamp, first running into victims of Ithrix and his trolls, then meeting lizardfolk loyal to the black dragon, before encountering Ithrix's fanatical troll servants. Ithrix might first bring the fight to the characters outside the lair, hoping to soften them up before they finally face the dragon and his troll guardians within.
- Ithrix's lair might be set underground in a swampy cavern shaped of both natural and worked stone. The lair could be part of a vast underground grove, or part of an abandoned city filled with strange sentient creatures that worship the dragon as a god.
- Ithrix's treasure hoard might be known to include a magic item or other relic crucial to the characters' plans. You might set up a number of adventures in which the characters travel through the ruins of the empire before reaching the lair and facing the dragon.
- Ithrix's lair might be just one part of a vast ancient city half-buried in the swamps. Huge stone towers rise among the surrounding trees and marshes, while waterfalls flow into vast networks of sunken chambers and catacombs below. The characters could engage in numerous adventures in the city, locating ancient magic and facing foes both living and undead.

APPROACHING THE SENTINEL

The imperial ruin known as the Sentinel is set within a cleft opening up in a sheer mountainside, but the dangerous slopes of the mountain make an approach from above almost impossible for anyone unable to fly. If the characters want to attempt such an approach, Ithrix tries to make short work of them, targeting the weakest character first with hit-and-run tactics, and using his breath weapon, reach, and flying speed to keep away from attackers.

When the characters first approach the entrance to the ruins, read or paraphrase the following to set the scene:

Ruined statues depicting knights and nobles jut up at odd angles from the swampy ground. The bodies of a half-dozen lizardfolk are impaled on wooden spears set before a rough wall of worked stone. A large door stands closed, and is the only obvious entrance to whatever lies beyond.

SENTINEL RUINS FEATURES

The areas of the Sentinel have the following general features:

- The chambers and passageways of the lair are built of old and crumbling worked stone.
- All areas are unlit. By day, the open cleft of area X4 is dimly lit by sunlight filtering down from above.
- Chambers have 15-foot ceilings, and hallways are 10 feet high.

SENTINEL RUINS

The following encounter areas are keyed to the map of Ithrix's lair.

X1. HALL OF DEAD KINGS

Three statues sit atop large stone thrones along the north wall and in the southeast and southwest corners of this chamber, each set with a bundle of rotted meat bound with thorns wrapped around its head. Murky brown water is puddled within a large stone fountain along the east wall, and a heavy ironbound door is set into the west wall.

Three former lords of the empire are depicted by the statues atop the thrones—an armored warrior, a young person in royal dress, and a robed elderly figure.

TROLLS

Two **trolls** occupy this room when the characters enter—one binding a head's statue with rotten meat and thorny vines while the other critiques their binding technique. If the party approaches this area quietly, a character who speaks Giant and who succeeds on a DC 12 Wisdom (Perception) check hears the trolls talking about trying to channel the strange power within the statues (see the "Thrones" section below). The trolls attack any intruders, pursuing them out of the room if necessary.

Once the trolls are dealt with, a character who speaks giant and who listens at the west door with a successful DC 12 Wisdom (Perception) check overhears Garesh in area X2 questioning whether Ithrix really is the god he was supposed to be, or if another god is bringing Garesh his power.

THRONES

If a character removes the rotten meat binding the warrior's head, then cleans the statue of gore, a pulse of light flows from the statue into the character, who gains the benefit of the *bless* spell for 1 minute. Cleaning up the other statues offers no benefit.

FOUNTAIN

A character who succeeds on a DC 13 Wisdom (Perception) check made to inspect the fountain can hear the sound of its murky brown water trickling out. A grate at the bottom of the fountain is covered in bones and slime, and can be lifted with a successful DC 14 Strength (Athletics) check. A character who fails this check slices open their hand, taking 3 (1d6) slashing damage. The character must then make a DC 11 Constitution saving throw, taking 10 (3d6) poison damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

When open, the grate leads down into the tunnel of area X3.

X2. TEMPLE OF ITHRIX

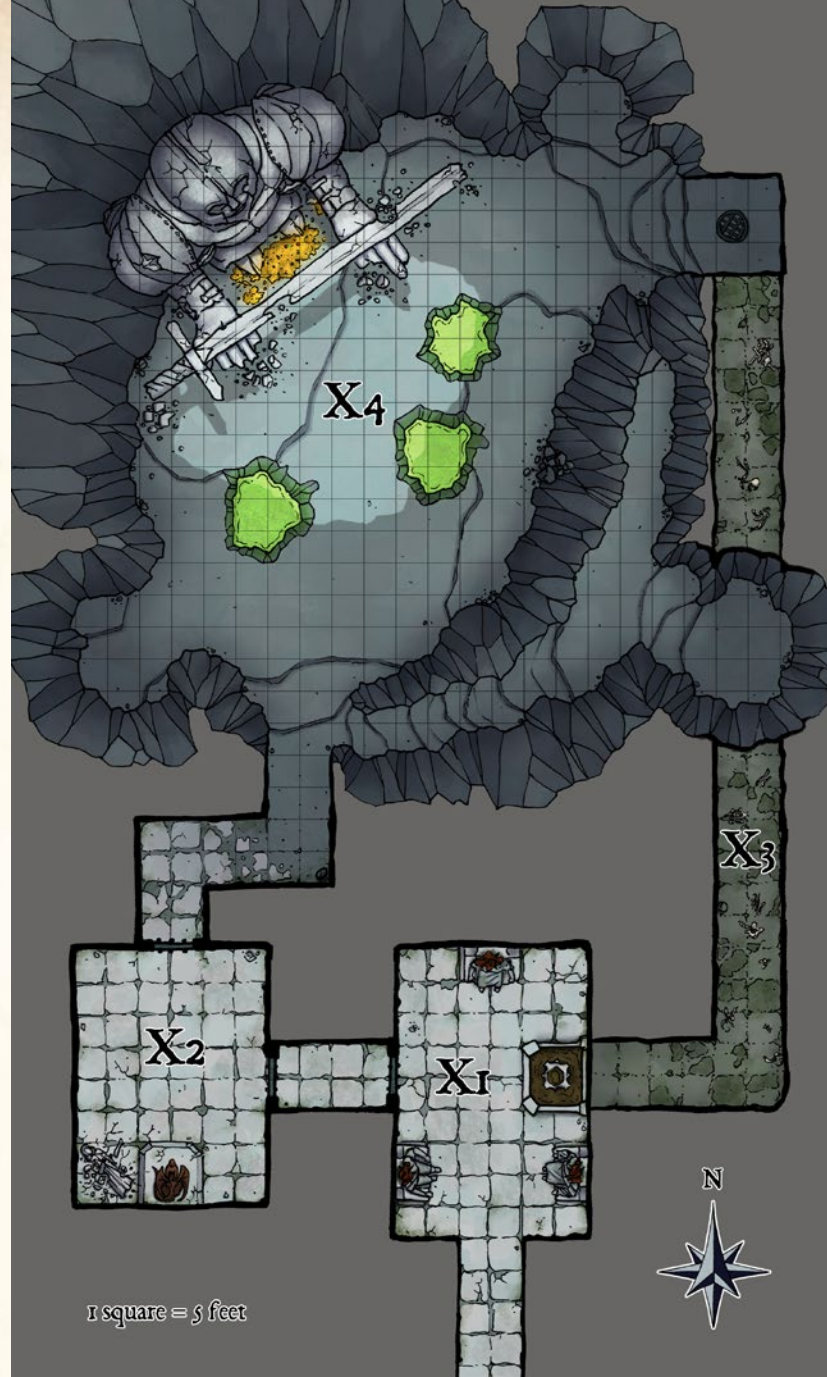
The walls of this room are covered in diagrams and strange writing. A draconic effigy built of wood, bone, and leather stands ten feet high atop a cracked stone altar on the south side of this chamber, opposite a door to the north. The wreckage of a statue depicting a robed figure lies in the corner next to the altar.

This chamber is the lair of Garesh, Ithrix's high priest. Garesh has recently begun to receive spells through a divine source, and has come to believe that this source isn't Ithrix. The priest has covered the walls in notes as he tries to understand what is happening to him. A character who reads Giant and who succeeds on a DC 14 Intelligence (Religion) check made to scan the notes recognizes that Garesh isn't getting his power from Ithrix, but from an evil draconic deity.

GARESH THE FLAYED

When the characters enter, Garesh is kneeling in prayer to the effigy on the south wall. The priest uses the **troll** stat block with the following changes:

- He has 120 (11d10 + 55) hit points.
- He has a Wisdom of 16 (+3) and a passive Wisdom (Perception) score of 16.
- Garesh speaks Common and Giant.
- He has the following trait:
Spellcasting. Garesh is a 5th-level spellcaster. His spellcasting ability is Wisdom (spell save DC 14, +6 to hit with spell attacks). He has the following cleric spells prepared:
Cantrips (at will): *light, sacred flame, thaumaturgy*
1st level (4 slots): *guiding bolt, inflict wounds*
2nd level (3 slots): *lesser restoration, spiritual weapon*
3rd level (2 slots): *branding smite, dispel magic, spirit guardians*
- He has a challenge rating of 8 (3,900 XP).



DIVINE INSIGHT

Garesh does not attack the characters on sight if he is not attacked first. Instead, he questions their motivations for coming to the lair and proselytizes about his draconic deity, though he appears confused as to which deity he actually worships. Any character who succeeds on a DC 14 Wisdom (Insight) check can see that the troll's faith is wavering. A character who succeeds on a DC 16 Charisma (Deception or Persuasion) check convinces Garesh that his powers don't come from the dragon at all. In response, Garesh can pass on useful information to the characters of your determination (the overall layout of the lair, the number of trolls on guard in area X4, some of Ithrix Blackbile's combat tactics, and so forth). The troll priest then leaves the lair to seek his own path toward further enlightenment.

TACTICS

If the characters do not convince Garesh of the truth behind his divine power, or if they attack the troll, he begins combat by casting *spiritual weapon* and *sacred flame*. In the second round, he casts *spirit guardians*, with those guardians appearing as wrathful dragons. If engaged in melee, Garesh casts *branding smite* to augment his claw attack, or uses his action to cast *inflict wounds*.

DRACONIC EFFIGY

While Garesh fights within 30 feet of the effigy, tendrils of black energy flow out from it to surround him, granting him advantage on attack rolls and saving throws. The source of this power is clearly visible to the characters. A character can use an action to attempt to physically destroy the effigy with a DC 14 Strength (Athletics) check, to sanctify it with a DC 14 Intelligence (Religion) check, or to draw out its negative energy with a DC 14 Intelligence (Arcana) check. A success with any of these checks disrupts the power of the altar, as does destroying the effigy in combat. The effigy has AC 12, 40 hit points, and immunity to poison and psychic damage.

X3. FORGOTTEN SEWERS

The drain beneath the fountain in area X1 leads into an ancient sewer tunnel with a 6-foot-high arched ceiling and a heavily cracked floor covered with muddy water. Halfway down the tunnel, a body in heavily corroded black armor sprawls across the floor, a black sword driven through its chest. A character who succeeds on a DC 16 Wisdom (Perception) check notices that the armor bears the symbol of a lily.

UNDEAD KNIGHT

If the characters pass by, attack, or investigate the body, it suddenly tears the blade free from its chest and rises to attack. The undead knight uses the **wight** stat block with the following changes:

- It has AC 18.
- It has 90 (12d8 + 36) hit points.
- It has advantage on saving throws against spells and other magical effects.
- It is protected by a permanent *fire shield* spell that deals necrotic damage instead of fire or cold damage.
- Its Multiattack action is replaced by the following:
Multiattack. The undead knight makes three longsword attacks or three longbow attacks. It can use its Life Drain in place of one longsword attack.
- Its longbow and Life Drain attacks are +7 to hit.
- Its longsword attack is +7 to hit and deals an extra 10 (3d6) necrotic damage on a hit.
- It has a challenge rating of 9 (5,000 XP).

The undead knight wields a magic longsword that can be claimed as treasure. See that section below.

X4. CRUMBLING HERO

A huge statue of a knight carved of crumbling stone dominates the northeast wall of this natural-stone cleft, whose sheer sides rise more than a hundred feet to the open sky above. Pools of green liquid are set into the ground between the statue and a narrow path leading up to a twenty-foot-high cliff to the southeast. Shadowy caves open up like alcoves to the southwest and northeast, and atop the cliff path. A large pile of treasure lies at the base of the statue, including a gleaming gold-and-blue shield.

This open cavern is the lair of Ithrix Blackbile. The dragon's treasure lies at the feet of the towering statue, including a gleaming gold-and-blue kite shield emblazoned with the image of a white lily. The treasure serves as bait to draw intruders into the cavern before Ithrix and his trolls attack.

TROLL GUARDIANS

Ithrix is guarded by one or more trolls—a single guardian if the party has four characters, two trolls for five characters, and three trolls for six characters. These trolls lurk in the alcove caverns to the northwest, southeast, and southwest, covered in mud for camouflage and pressed back against the walls. With a successful DC 16 Wisdom (Perception) check, a character spots the hidden trolls or hears them slathering on more mud.

Ithrix's guardians use the **troll** stat block with the following changes:

- A troll gains the following action option:

MIKE'S DIRTY TRICK: ADDING RANGED ATTACKS

Trolls are one of a number of monsters that have no ranged attacks in their standard stat block. Encounter design often expects that creatures with ranged attacks will back up creatures without them, so when a group of creatures without ranged attacks fight together, it can limit your options for running combat. Sometimes the lack of a ranged attack makes sense for a monster. But in other cases, as with the troll, there's no reason that it wouldn't be smart enough to pick up some rocks or equip some javelins to hurl at faraway enemies. You can keep these kinds of ranged attacks in your back pocket, improvising them during the game whenever it makes sense for a monster to pick up something and hurl it at a character trying to stay out of melee.

Javelin. *Melee or Ranged Weapon Attack:* +7 to hit, reach 10 ft. or range 60/240 ft., one target. *Hit:* 11 (2d6 + 4) piercing damage.

- Their Multiattack action is replaced by the following:
Multiattack. The troll makes one attack with its bite and two with its claws, or it makes two javelin attacks.

If Ithrix dies during this fight, the trolls lose all desire for further combat, and either surrender to the characters or flee.

ITHRIX BLACKBILE

When the characters come into view, Ithrix Blackbile, a **young black dragon**, flies down from where he perches on the cliffs above the statue. He tries to line up as many characters as he can with his Acid Breath attack, then targets any characters who are flying or who have separated themselves from the party. As he does, his trolls move in to engage with any melee attackers, throwing javelins as they close the distance.

Ithrix specializes in hit-and-run attacks while he waits to recharge his breath weapon, landing on the statue at the end of his turn. The dragon hurls rocks at his enemies while on the statue, making the following changes to his stat block:

- Ithrix gains the following action option:
Rock. *Ranged Weapon Attack:* +7 to hit, range 60/240 ft., one target. *Hit:* 15 (2d10 + 4) bludgeoning damage.
- His Multiattack action is replaced by the following:
Multiattack. Ithrix makes one attack with his bite and two with his claws, or he makes two rock attacks.

CRUMBLING STATUE

The statue of the heroic knight stands nearly 60 feet tall and is crumbling badly with age. A dwarf, a character who has proficiency with mason's tools, or a character who succeeds on a DC 14 Wisdom (Perception) check can see that the cracks shot through the surface of the statue run deep, and understands that with careful planning, the statue will fall. The statue's base has AC 16, 30 hit points, and immunity to poison and psychic damage. If the base is reduced to 0 hit points, the statue goes off balance and topples. A character can also attempt to topple the statue by forcing open one of the cracks in its legs, requiring a successful DC 18 Strength (Athletics) check.

When the statue collapses, it shatters to send rubble flying out across the cavern. Each creature in the lower part of the cave and not in one of the alcove caverns must make a DC 14 Dexterity saving throw, taking 22 (4d10) bludgeoning damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one. The entire lower part of the cave also becomes difficult terrain.

If Ithrix is on the statue when it collapses, the dragon automatically fails this saving throw as he tries to

MIKE'S THOUGHTS: RUNNING DRAGONS

Dragons are the most iconic monster in fantasy RPGs, and they deserve special attention when they swoop into our games. A dragon's best defense is their ability to fly. Even without the benefit of the Flyby trait that many aerial predators have, a dragon's reach with at least some of their attacks lets them fly in, bite a character, and fly out without risking an opportunity attack. If able to, a young black dragon can even fly into the midst of characters with weak opportunity attacks, using their claws and bite before flying away again.

Use flying as a central part of a dragon's tactics when running them in your game. But don't just leave them in the air all the time to steal the characters' ability to finally pin the creature down and drive a sword through its skull. When it comes to the big finish, be a fan of the characters.

get airborne. He ends up prone on the ground in the center of the cavern, pinned underneath rubble. Ithrix must use an action to dig himself out before he can stand or fly away.

ELEVATED PATH

A path leads up from the floor of the cavern to a 20-foot-high overlook to the southeast. A creature on the overlook has partial cover from attackers on the cavern floor below.

ACID POOLS

Ithrix uses his acidic breath to strike fear into his troll followers. Over long years, the dragon has carved three shallow pools into the floor of the cavern, all of which remain filled with acid. Any creature that enters a pool for the first time on a turn or starts its turn there takes 14 (4d6) acid damage.

DRAGON HOARD

Ithrix's treasure hoard contains a wealth of valuables, detailed below.

TREASURE

Ithrix Blackbile's hoard includes 423 cp, 4,927 sp, 2,110 gp, 141 pp, ten gemstones worth 100 gp each, and a *brooch of shielding*.

The hoard also includes the Shield of the Lily, a rare magic item that requires attunement. The Shield of the Lily is a +1 *shield* imbued with the spirit of its previous wielder, a lawful good human knight named Andrena Donnovil. A creature attuned to the shield can use an action to cast the *charm person* spell. Once the shield's spell is cast, it can't be cast again until the next dawn.

The magic longsword carried by the knight in area X3 is called Blackpetal, and is a rare +1 *longsword* that

SCOTT'S THOUGHTS: IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Mike offers great advice in the previous sidebar for making the most of a dragon in a fight. But even as you're focusing on the combat abilities of those powerful bosses, don't forget the fun that can come from roleplaying a dragon to the hilt. These great creatures have an ancient history and a grand sense of their own place in the world, and they're not shy about making those things known to adventurers.

Many dragons have an advanced intellect, especially as adults and ancient dragons, fueling an innate sense of superiority. So use this mindset to go even more over-the-top with roleplaying a dragon than you do with most monsters and NPCs. Think about how a particular dragon comes off when talking to the characters. Dismissive? Megalomaniacal? Do they treat humanoids as irritating insects, or as children needing to be taught or punished? Even good dragons might look down on humanoids, growing impatient or acting perpetually irritated when having to explain their plans and their view of the world.

If you sometimes have trouble improvising memorable dialogue (especially in the middle of tracking combat), you can have a few pithy phrases or caustic insults written down for a dragon—or any other intelligent, haughty boss—beforehand. Some of these might be keyed to specific events—one for the first time a character disagrees with the boss, one for the first time the boss takes damage, one for the first time the boss kills a character, and so forth.

requires attunement. A creature attuned to Blackpetal can use a bonus action to cast the *branding smite* spell. Once the sword's spell is cast, it can't be cast again until the next dawn.

ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTY

You can adjust the difficulty of this lair in a number of different ways. For more difficult encounters, consider any of the following options:

- Replace Ithrix with an **adult black dragon** or an **ancient black dragon**.
- Replace the trolls with **hill giants** or corrupted **stone giants**.

To reduce the difficulty of the lair, consider any of the following options:

- Reduce the number of trolls, remove them completely, or halve their hit points from the scarring Ithrix has inflicted upon them.
- Replace the trolls with **orcs**, **bugbears**, or **lizardfolk**.

EXPANDING THIS LAIR

You can expand this lair by building on or modifying any number of the hooks found within it:

- You might decide that Ithrix flees if he is badly wounded, taking flight to fight another day. The dragon might begin to stalk the characters as they adventure in the wilds, set on revenge.
- Ithrix might instead flee the fight with his tail between his legs, making his way back to his mother, Aundarax the Blood of the Abyss. For having humiliated her son in his attempt to make his way in the world, this adult or ancient black dragon might seek bloody revenge.
- You can expand the sewers beneath the lair to lead to other ruins sunken beneath the ground. These ancient imperial sites might contain lost treasure, powerful undead knights, and the wrathful spirits of corrupted nobles who wish for their empire to rise again.
- Andrena Donnovil, the knight whose spirit is bound into the Shield of the Lily, might become a catalyst for further quests. This lair could be the starting point for a long campaign in which the characters seek out the greatest mysteries of a fallen empire.



THOSE WHO ARE ABOUT TO DIE

JACK KAISER

On a night of deadly fighting, the characters stand in the Arena of Blood to perform three acts of a deadly performance. The trappings of these battles span the planes, beginning in the chaotic Abyss, then traveling to the dark forests of the Shadowfell, and finally into the cleansing fires of the Nine Hells. Whatever brought our heroes to this deadly battleground, only their strength and their wits will allow them to walk free once again.

This lair is optimized for four to five 7th-level characters.

BACKGROUND

For over a thousand years, violence and entertainment have been brought together in the Arena of Blood, built and rebuilt over the centuries for the single purpose of entertaining the masses. Here, the city's most corrupt criminals and most destructive villains can become veritable kings through strength of arms or the might of magic. But it is not enough for combatants to smash each other into so much gruesome gristle. Rather, combat in the arena must be conducted with style and panache. It must bring a fever to the audience who

watch from the stands. For this is not simply violence for the sake of violence. This is a show.

INTEGRATING THIS LAIR

You can use the following hooks to integrate this lair into your campaign, whether as part of a longer adventure or as the focus of a single play session:

- After being defeated by powerful foes, the characters awaken in the cells in area D1, still equipped with their weapons and armor. This encounter makes a great response to a total-party-kill scenario in a previous adventure that you didn't expect.
- At some point during an urban campaign, the characters enter the arena while searching for an NPC or clues to a mystery. Little do they know that their presence was expected, and the city's gladiators are ready for the challenge.
- In the course of another adventure, the characters must prove themselves to local lords who prize combat prowess above all else. Only by defeating powerful foes in the arena will the characters be granted audience or favor by these lords.
- A devastating war unfolds outside the city gates, which can be ended by combat between the

characters and the champions of the opposing armies. By achieving victory in the Arena of Blood, the characters can end the conflict and save countless lives.

APPROACHING THE ARENA

The Arena of Blood can be set in many different locations. It could be a central auditorium in a sprawling and violent city, or a freestanding site in a relatively uninhabited location. It might be part of an underground settlement or on another plane. The size and scope of the area around the parts of the arena shown on the map, including the size of the stands and the type of audience that fills them, are left for you to define as you place the arena in your campaign.

The area descriptions below assume that the characters begin outside the cells in area D1, and that the arena's operators and overseers are prepared for the characters' participation in the games. If the characters are entering the arena clandestinely before the show, they might find workers preparing for the games to come, seeing statues moved into position, and caged owlbears and other beasts being readied for battle.

ARENA FEATURES

The areas of the arena have the following general features:

- The arena floor consists of six inches of packed sand and clay over reinforced wood. The tops of the elevators that rise up from the tunnels below the arena are flush with the top of the sandy floor.

GETTING AROUND

The most straightforward setup for the arena lair is to have the characters come here as combatants, willing or otherwise. But you can hack that scenario in any number of ways to give the characters free run of all areas of the arena. The drain in area D1 allows access to the tunnels of area D3, which in turn give potential access to the arena platforms from underneath. The characters might also get into the access tunnels from the arena floor when the guards raise or lower the statues or release the owlbears (see area D4 for information).

The weak floor on the east side of the arena is another potential way down into the access tunnels of area D3. And any characters who reach area D3 can pass through area D2 while the owlbears and wolves are caged up before the fight, then release them into the tunnels. If the players are having a great time subverting expectations, you might even have them face the Angels of Blood (see area D4) without ever reaching the arena floor. All the spaces below the arena—including any additional spaces you want to set up there—can provide numerous options for creating an exciting story.

- The main area of the arena is open to the sky. Magic lamps cover the battlefield with bright light during nighttime combat.
- The rooms below the arena have 15-foot-high ceilings, while the tunnels connecting them have 10-foot-high ceilings.
- The rooms and tunnels below the arena are brightly lit by torches in iron sconces.

THE ARENA OF BLOOD

The following encounter areas are keyed to the map of the arena lair.

D1. GRIM CELLS

If the characters arrive here when the arena is not already filled with people, adjust the text below as you read or paraphrase it to set the scene:

The stench of death and the roar of the crowd above fills this morbid chamber. Racks holding weapons and armor are set within locked iron cages on the north wall of the room, flanking the walled ramp leading up and out of the arena. A heavy iron portcullis at the end of the ramp seals it off from the rest of the room.

Iron cages stand along the east and west walls, and a large iron sewer grate is set into the floor to the southwest.

This staging area is set up to hold prisoners before their battles in the arena. Most are brought here against their will and kept in the iron cages. The ramp leads up and outside of the arena, and is usually barred by the portcullis. That barrier is raised by a winch in a guardroom beyond the top edge of the map.

GUARDS

Four human **guards** watch over the prisoners in this area from behind the safety of the portcullis. Each has a set of keys that unlocks the cells and the weapon racks. If the characters are here as combatants, the guards goad them to head into the arena when it's time.

The guards here also notify the characters of the rules of the Arena of Blood:

- Combatants cannot leave the arena. Doing so brings down the ire of four mages who watch over the proceedings (see "Referees" in area D4 below).
- Combatants are not allowed to levitate or fly during a battle.
- Teleportation is allowed, but only between points in the arena. Magical wards in place along the arena walls prevent anyone in the arena from teleporting outside of it.

If the characters balk or cause trouble, these sentries shout out to the north, calling out for “the red guard” to teach the prisoners some manners. The red guard consists of six **veterans** and two **mag**es who are stationed in a guard post beyond the edge of the map. They appear when called, ready to “persuade” the characters to enter the arena.

PRISONERS

Two prisoners reside in the cells in addition to (or instead of) the characters, awaiting their turn in the arena. Granduk Halfiron, a chaotic neutral half-orc **berserker**, is a recent arrival. Tivon Kace, a neutral evil human **spy**, is a longtime resident, too skinny to put on enough of a show—and thus awaiting his turn to be eaten by owlbears.

Tivon knows many secrets of the arena, and might impart them to the characters if properly convinced. However, because he expects anyone he meets to be dead in a few hours, he has little initial desire to share what he knows. Promising him freedom and succeeding on a DC 13 Charisma (Persuasion) check might loosen his tongue. If so, Tivon can tell the characters about the connection between the sewer drain in this chamber and the tunnels of area D3. He also knows about the weak spot in the arena floor, on the east side of area D4.

CAGES

The cages are built of sturdy iron bars and feature strong locking doors. A character can unlock a cage with a successful DC 14 Dexterity check using thieves’ tools, or can bend the bars with a successful DC 20 Strength (Athletics) check. Prisoners and troublesome combatants are kept in the cages until it is time for them to enter the arena. The guards all carry keys that can open the cages.

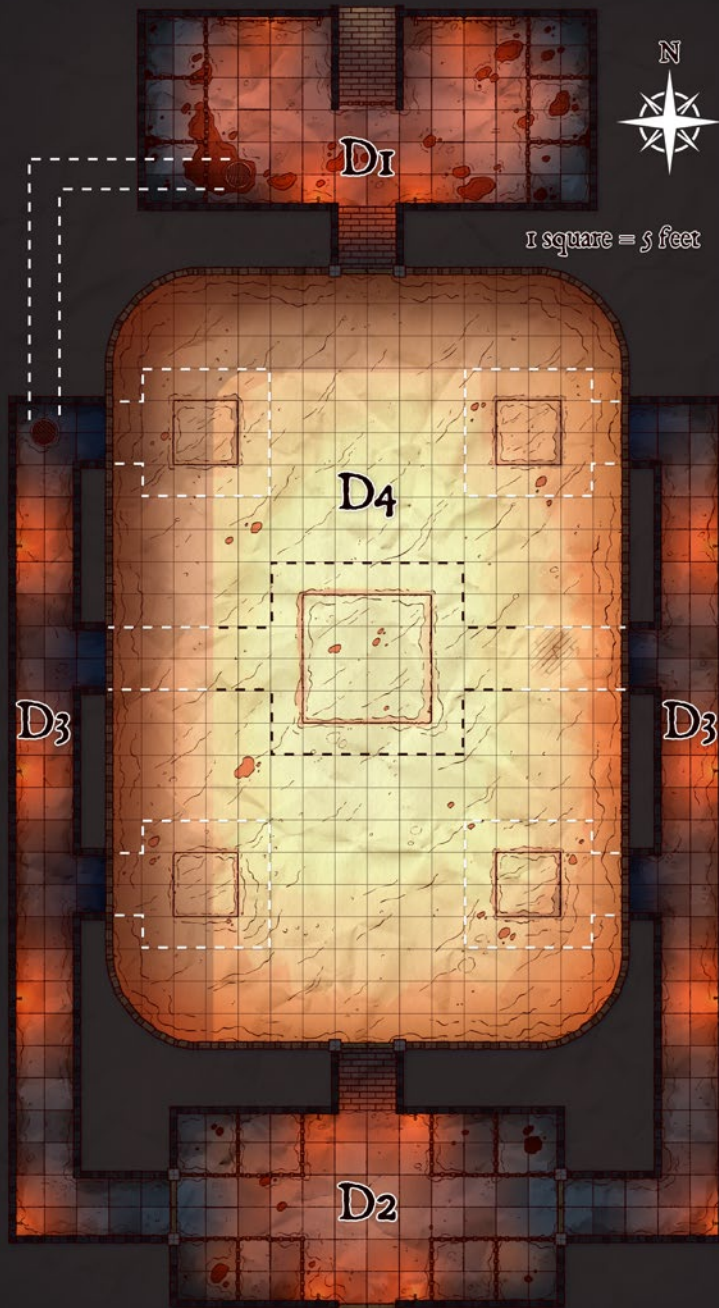
WEAPON AND ARMOR RACKS

The guards hold the keys to these locked racks, and open them for combatants when it is time for them to prepare for battle. For characters who don’t have their own gear, the racks contain a wide assortment of nonmagical melee weapons, ranged weapons, shields, and armor, excluding the most expensive options of breastplate, half plate, and plate armor.

If the characters have been captured and brought to the arena to fight, their equipment is kept safe in the weapon and armor racks for their use.

DRAIN

A 3-foot-wide iron grate sits atop a 10-foot-high drainpipe that leads down into the bloodstained sewers beneath the arena. Breaking the grate free of the mortar that holds it requires a successful DC 14 Strength (Athletics) check. If the guards see anyone



attempting to pull up the grate, they threaten to call the red guard—and do so if they are unheeded.

Characters who escape down the drainpipe end up in area D3. You might decide to have them first face some of the threats of the arena in those tunnels, including **veterans**, **owlbears**, **ogres**, and **gladiators**.

D2. DREAD MENAGERIE

The arena masters keep beasts and monsters intended to battle prisoners in this area. When it’s time for them to fight, the creatures here are sent up the ramp to the north of the room and into the arena, or driven through the tunnels of area D3 to the elevators and trap doors leading up through the arena floor. If the characters arrive here before the arena events begin, the large cages hold **owlbears** and **wolves**.

To the south, a barred door leads out and away from the arena. The monsters held in this area are brought in through this door, and the Angels of Blood enter this way before they begin the third wave of the arena battle (see area D4).

D3. ACCESS TUNNELS

A network of access tunnels runs under the arena. Fourteen armed humans (use the **bandit** stat block) use these tunnels to move monsters and set up obstacles and hazards in the arena. The tunnels are 10 feet wide and 10 feet high, and extend under the arena floor where indicated.

If the characters make their way into these tunnels, they might gain access to some of the traps, hazards, and monsters mentioned in area D4 before they enter the arena. While exploring these tunnels, a character can notice the weakened floor (see that section in area D4) with a successful DC 12 Wisdom (Perception) check.

The arena has five elevators, one in each corner and a larger elevator at the center of the floor. Each elevator rises 15 feet from the tunnel floor to the arena floor. Throughout the three waves of battles detailed below, arena workers use wheeled dollies to move statues, hazards, and other equipment into position on the elevators. They then slide open the trap doors and use winches to raise the elevators. The elevators are used the same way to release creatures driven onto them into the arena.

If any arena workers are attacked by combatants in the arena, they flee into the tunnels, releasing any convenient monsters as they do so, and calling for the red guard (see area D1).

D4. ARENA OF BLOOD

When the characters arrive in the arena proper, read or paraphrase the following, making adjustments as necessary if a crowd is not yet present:

The roar of the crowd fills the arena—a huge open space whose sand-covered floor features occasional patches of soaked blood. The magically enhanced voice of an announcer echoes across the stands as it calls out:

“Down in the depths of the Abyss, demons tear across a broken land of blood and steel seeking mortal flesh! Behold the rage of demons!”

At the four corners of the arena, platforms rise bearing four statues of blade-wielding demons. As the gate closes behind you, another gate at the opposite end of the arena opens up. Four ogres dressed in demonic armor and bearing horrid weapons step forth, roar, and charge toward you.

When the characters enter the arena, the battles begin. As written, this arena battle takes place in three phases, each of which has its own theme, creatures, and hazards. See “Customizing the Arena” at the end of the lair for guidance on modifying and personalizing these encounter scenarios.

WAVE 1: RAGE OF DEMONS

During the first wave, one ogre per character enters from the south door. The ogres spread out to avoid area attacks as they move up, throwing javelins as they close the distance to the characters.

Each **ogre** wears gladiatorial armor that is the equivalent of ring mail (AC 14), and which features a helm shaped like a demonic dog, bull, frog, or ram. The ogres wield a wide range of strange gladiatorial weapons, including balls on spiked chains, large spiked clubs, bladed gauntlets, and iron mauls. Use the greatclub attack from the ogre stat block for all these weapons, but change the damage type as appropriate.

If the opportunity presents itself, the ogres shove or grapple characters, pushing them into the range of the bladed statues (described below). If an ogre can successfully grapple an opponent, they hold that character within the area of the blades to be cut to pieces. An ogre can attack with their other hand even if they have a character grappled.

Bladed Demon Statues. The statues on the corner platforms depict marilith demons, each of which wields six sharp blades. When the battle begins, the statues begin to magically spin. A creature that moves within 5 feet of a statue or starts its turn there must make a DC 14 Dexterity saving throw, taking 13 (3d8) slashing damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one. A statue can be disabled with a successful DC 16 Dexterity check using thieves’ tools, broken with a successful DC 18 Strength (Athletics) check, or attacked. Each statue has AC 15, 40 hit points, and immunity to poison and psychic damage.

At the start of each round, the blades of one random statue fly out on chains, so that they deal damage to each creature within 10 feet of the statue. The blades retract the following round, and another statue’s blades extend.

WAVE 2: DREAD FOREST

When the characters have defeated all but one of the ogres, the next wave begins.

The announcer calls out once more: “Far from the depths of the Abyss, a dark forest blooms in a realm of shadow. Twisted creatures of nightmare walk the land, and howling wolves follow the scent of mortal blood!”

The trap door in the center of the arena slides open, and a large tree rises on the elevator platform. A wooden statue of a satyr sits in the tree, with a magical wind blowing through a flute it holds to its lips. In response to the sound of the flute, the tree and the ground within 15 feet of it becomes affected by a *spike growth* spell.

The four bladed demon statues then recede into the arena floor. The following round, one angry **owlbear** per two characters leaps up from the shafts where the statues descended, racing in to attack as the trap doors are closed again. At the same time, the south doors open and two **wolves** per character rush forth. The wolves spread out to avoid area attacks as they charge the characters, then come together to take advantage of their Pack Tactics trait.

If the wolves and the owlbears have no suitable targets outside the *spike growth* area at the central tree, they attempt to make running long jumps across the spikes and thorns to reach their prey. To do so, each creature must succeed on a DC 10 Strength (Athletics) check or land short and be forced to move through the *spike growth* area.

A character can climb the tree and reach the flute with a successful DC 13 Strength (Athletics) or Dexterity (Acrobatics) check. The satyr statue must be attacked to be destroyed, and has AC 16, 45 hit points, and immunity to poison and psychic damage. If the statue is destroyed, the whistling of the flute stops. In addition to the *spike growth* effect ending, the owlbears and wolves grow suddenly calm, losing interest in fighting the characters unless they are attacked.

WAVE 3: ANGELS OF BLOOD

When the owlbears have been defeated or when the characters have stopped the flute and the action dies down, wave 3 begins as the announcer calls out again.

“Corruption flows through the depths of the Nine Hells like poison! Only the blades of the angels of heaven can purify the sins of mortals! Behold Sava and Karsa, the Angels of Blood!”

MIKE’S THOUGHTS: RUNNING LOTS OF MONSTERS

Sometimes you’ll find yourself in the position of running a lot of monsters. A couple of wolves per character doesn’t seem like a huge number, but it’s enough that rolling a bunch of attacks (with advantage for Pack Tactics) and tracking all their hit points can be a pain. So here are a couple of tricks that can save you time when running packs of monsters—even a hundred or more.

First, tally the damage done to the whole group of monsters instead of each one of them. Let’s say you have twelve wolves. Instead of tracking the damage done to each wolf individually, add up the damage done to any wolf as an ongoing tally. When that tally gets higher than the hit points of one wolf, the most recent wolf to take damage dies. Then drop the tally back down to 0 and carry over any extra damage. This way, big melee attacks can take out whole swathes of wolves.

Second, instead of rolling a lot of attack rolls or saving throws for a large number of the same creature, assume that one quarter of such rolls succeed (or one half if all the creatures have advantage.) If your twelve wolves take damage from an area effect such as a *fireball* spell, this means three will succeed on their saving throws while nine fail. Just like before, you can tally up the total damage done, then remove a number of wolves whose hit points total up to that number. Even easier, just assume they all fail their saves and remove them all from the battle.

You can adjust these guidelines up or down depending on circumstances, making the monsters in a mob easier or tougher. But either way, these quick and dirty tricks will save you time when a monster mob enters the fray.

Four statues shaped like bat-winged devils rise from the four trap doors at the corner of the arena, then begin to rotate as they breathe out goutts of flame. Each creature that moves within 15 feet of a statue or starts its turn there must make a DC 14 Dexterity saving throw, taking 21 (6d6) fire damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

Sava and Karsa, two tiefling warriors known as the Angels of Blood, step out of the south door dressed in black and red armor, sporting decorative black-feathered wings, and wearing flaming haloes above their heads. The two gladiators play to the crowd, holding their spears and shields to the sky before they attack.

Sava and Karsa use the **gladiator** stat block with the following changes:

- Both are neutral.
- Tiefling racial traits: They have darkvision out to 60 feet and resistance to fire damage. They can cast the spells *hellish rebuke* (save DC 13, 3d10 fire damage)

and *darkness*. Once cast, each spell can't be cast again until Sava or Karsa finishes a long rest.

- Twice per day, each gladiator can reroll a failed saving throw. They must use the new roll.

If circumstances allow, Sava and Karsa each use one of their attacks to push characters into the flames erupting from the statues. They might also grab a character and drag them into the flames, hoping that their resistance and their ability to reroll a saving throw lets them avoid the worst of the damage.

REFEREES

Four **mag**es watch the battle from front-row seats, one at each corner of the arena. Each has *dispel magic* memorized instead of *ice storm*, and all are here to ensure that no one cheats. In particular, if a character attempts to fly or levitate out of the arena, a mage casts either *counterspell* or *dispel magic*. The mages do not engage in direct combat, preferring to focus on keeping the energy of the show as high as possible.

WEAKENED FLOOR

A section of the floor in the middle of the east side of the arena has become weak over time. A character

SCOTT'S THOUGHTS: MORAL IMPERATIVE

Fantasy RPG adventures are often framed as a clash of good versus evil, drawing on the tropes of epic fantasy to create a clear vision of heroism opposing villainy. But even in a staunchly epic fantasy campaign, don't be afraid to mix things up by focusing on power rather than morality for key villains.

Having a typically good creature corrupted to evil is a classic fantasy trope. And having a normally evil creature come over to the light side can make a nice twist in an adventure narrative. But players and characters alike might be even more surprised to face off against a nominally good boss with an agenda that puts them at odds with the party. The desires of celestials and good dragons to drive evil from the world can make them surprisingly indifferent to the fates of adventurers who get in their way. And characters who stir up trouble, intentionally or otherwise, might easily run afoul of enemies less powerful but no less virtuous.

In this lair, the Arena of Blood might be controlled by a staunchly good faction of leaders, who understand that sending criminals and beasts to a violent and public end is a small price to pay to keep the city's working classes happy. Or the arena might end up a place the characters are sent to after an even more-powerful good sovereign decides that money-grubbing adventurers running around digging up ancient evil are a risk to the public weal. Always remember that even the most lawful good creatures and NPCs can be driven to anger—and there's no anger quite like a righteous anger.

within 30 feet of the weakened floor can notice it with a successful DC 12 Wisdom (Perception) check. Breaking through the floor requires a successful DC 13 Strength (Athletics) check, and drops all creatures in the area 15 feet down into the east tunnel of area D3. If an owlbear or an ogre steps into the area, the floor collapses automatically.

THE ANNOUNCER

In addition to what's spoken in the read-aloud text, the booming voice of the announcer echoes throughout the arena during the fight, describing the battle and working up the crowd. The announcer celebrates gore and entertainment above careful tactics, hoping to bait the characters into rash and bold attacks.

PLAYING TO THE CROWD

Any character can choose to play to the crowd of the arena by making a show of their actions and succeeding on a DC 14 Charisma (Performance) check. A character who attempts this check after having dispatched an opponent or performing some other significant feat of battle has advantage on the check. On a success, someone in the crowd throws a potion toward the character, rolled for or chosen from the following table.

d6 Potion

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------|
| 1 | Potion of frost giant strength |
| 2 | Potion of greater healing |
| 3 | Potion of growth |
| 4 | Potion of invisibility |
| 5 | Potion of poison |
| 6 | Potion of speed |

Only one such potion appears per round, and the crowd expects it to be used. They begin to boo if it is stored or held back.

Sava and Karsa can also make these checks in the third wave, with the crowd throwing potions their way as well.

ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTY

Nearly any type of creature can work well in this arena setting, and you can easily modify the effects or damage of the statues used in these encounters. Spell effects of an appropriate level also work well when centered on the platforms during the fight.

You can adjust the difficulty of this lair in a number of different ways. For more difficult encounters, consider any of the following options:

- In wave 1, let the ogres use the **gladiator** stat block.
- In wave 2, have the characters face **wyverns** and **dire wolves**.
- In wave 3, use the **fire giant** stat block for Sava and Karsa.

To reduce the difficulty of the lair, consider any of the following options:

- In wave 1, let the ogres use the **orc** stat block.
- In wave 2, replace the owlbears with **death dogs**.
- In wave 3, use the **berserker** or **veteran** stat block for Sava and Karsa.

EXPANDING THIS LAIR

You can expand this lair by building on or modifying any number of the hooks found within it:

- Characters who defeat their foes in the Arena of Blood become immediate celebrities in the city. You can decide whether this makes them heroes to the common folk, or targets for retribution from the shadowy figures who use their control of the arena to shore up their own power in the city.
- Characters who prove themselves in the arena might be called upon by victims of injustice or powerful nobles, all of them seeking high-profile heroes to take up some dangerous challenge.
- Those who run the Arena of Blood might try to take advantage of the characters' victory by hiring them to perform in the arena for vast sums of money, or to take on some of the responsibility for running it. Working for the Arena of Blood might see the characters undertaking quests in search of rare monstrosities or magic to be used in arena battles, or even shifting the focus away from blood sport to more humane challenges.

CUSTOMIZING THE ARENA

The setup of this lair can be customized in many different ways, offering great flexibility for how you run it. These customizable options include the following:

- The goal of the battle
- Environmental effects
- Options for the four small platforms
- Options for the larger central platform
- Wave 1 opponents
- Wave 2 opponents
- Wave 3 opponents

GOALS

At different points in the fight, the characters and the monsters might have goals other than simply defeating their opponents. These goals might include the following:

1. Defending the central platform
2. Defeating a single powerful opponent
3. Destroying four statues on the four small platforms
4. Surviving an onslaught of magic
5. Protecting a delicate object
6. Destroying a huge single object

CREATURES

Opponents for the three waves can be just about any monster or NPC. Ideally, it's best to pace the fights with increasingly smaller numbers of higher-challenge creatures, culminating with a big climactic monster at the end.

ENVIRONMENTS

The entire environment of the arena can be customized in different ways. Alternative arena environments might include the following:

1. Flooded, with battles taking place on boats
2. Shrouded in fog
3. Weakened gravity
4. Filled with a bloody magical mist that induces rage in all combatants
5. Set up with areas that provide arcane enhancements to combatants or result in wild magic
6. Containing shifting holy and unholy auras

SMALL PLATFORM OPTIONS

During the battle, you might add additional magical or mechanical effects to the four platforms at the corners of the arena. These effects might include any of the following:

1. Arcane crossbows
2. Swinging axes
3. Statues that compel combatants to perform certain actions
4. Turrets firing the *magic missile* spell
5. Iron coils that erupt with the *lightning bolt* spell
6. Random castings of the *thunderwave* spell to force creatures back from the platforms

CENTRAL PLATFORM OPTIONS

The central platform is a place for a single large object, effect, or monster, including any of the following options:

1. A large statue that blasts combatants with psychic damage
2. A spiked ziggurat that must be climbed
3. A **mage** or **archmage** warded by magical protections but able to attack combatants
4. A spiral staircase that is dangerous to climb but allows combatants to gain advantageous position
5. A monument imbued with unholy power
6. A dragon statue that spits out the *fireball* spell



XAVIER BEAUDLET

ZENGRAN'S GAME

From a lair in an extradimensional emporium of games, puzzles, and other wondrous entertainments, a rakshasa seeks out a group of adventurers destined for greatness. But whether the fiend's interest lies in helping the characters fulfill their destiny, or in destroying them before they have a chance to end the rakshasa's plans for domination, remains to be seen.

This lair is optimized for four to five 7th-level characters.

BACKGROUND

For more than three thousand years, the rakshasa Zengran has been the proprietor of Zengran's Emporium, a small game and curio shop that conceals an extradimensional lair. With the help of Merlyn, an unusually intelligent owlbear, the rakshasa scries an endless succession of heroes in countless worlds, seeking those who attract their interest—and either aiding, using, or destroying them.

SOME GOOD, SOME BAD

You have the choice of playing this lair in a number of different ways, depending on Zengran's moral bent and

goals. Played as a traditional rakshasa, Zengran is evil through and through, with long-term plans involving all manner of oppression and depravity. If not trying to kill the characters, the fiend might try to manipulate them, perhaps granting them something they want in exchange for favors.

Alternatively, Zengran might be a rare neutral or good rakshasa, having drifted away from their evil origin over thousands of years in the mortal realm. As

CR WHAT NOW?!

The rakshasa is a CR 13 creature, nominally making an encounter with this fiend a likely lethal affair for 7th-level characters. But much of the rakshasa's potency in combat derives from their powerful immunity to magic and their ability to use *plane shift* to escape a fight—then to catch characters unawares as they set up combat on their own terms. Thanks to some special setup in the final encounter, this lair makes a nice but not overwhelming challenge for any party within the upper levels of tier 2, and shows the kind of fun that can be had with higher-challenge creatures when the point of the encounter is more about story than about the fight to the finish.

a collector of curios from dozens of worlds, any version of Zengran could be seeking a relic the characters carry, or looking for agents to take on a challenging heist. And as a good rakshasa, Zengran could be intent on undoing the evil done by others of their kind, or simply aiding adventurers who have dedicated their lives to good.

INTEGRATING THIS LAIR

A nondescript establishment hidden away from prying eyes, Zengran's Emporium can be placed in any city or smaller settlement. Because of its extraplanar nature, you could also have the emporium appear in a middle-of-nowhere location for maximum mystery.

You can use the following hooks to integrate this lair into your campaign, whether as part of a longer adventure or as the focus of a single play session:

- A mysterious benefactor has been helping the characters with resources that have proved instrumental in their adventuring success. A long investigation has linked the benefactor to the emporium, and the characters are set on meeting this mysterious figure. (Depending on their bent, Zengran might be helping the characters to advance the cause of good, or to quietly eliminate the rakshasa's own evil enemies.)
- The powerful planar magic that imbues the emporium has been bleeding out into the local area, summoning strange creatures and manifesting unusual effects. Called in to deal with these effects, the characters determine that the emporium is the source of the magic.
- While searching for a magic item or unique ritual components, the characters are incorrectly told that Zengran's Emporium secretly sells what they need, and the rakshasa assumes they have come to make trouble.

APPROACHING THE EMPORIUM

Whatever reason brings the characters to the emporium, they are drawn in by an unusual feature of its distinctive facade. Read or paraphrase the following to set the scene:

A small one-story shop catches your eye—quite literally. At first glance, the place seemed entirely innocuous, and you might well have passed it by. But as you focus on it, the remarkable quality of its engraved woodwork and delicate stenciling are suddenly apparent, becoming clear to your eye in a way that suggests they were obscured before.

The clean, finely painted establishment features two windows whose shelves are filled with colorful toys, puzzles, puppets, and figurines, and which obscure the view of the shop beyond. A brightly painted sign curving above the bright-red door reads: "Zengran's Emporium—Games, Puzzles, Conundrums, Diversions, and Other Probable Entertainments."

The building features no other doors or windows, and radiates faint illusion and abjuration magic to a *detect magic* spell. The illusion obscures the facade of the shop for characters outside it, redirecting the gaze of anyone not consciously or subconsciously looking for it. The abjuration seals the building against teleportation and divination magic, and any attempt to teleport, see, or hear inside by magical means automatically fails. (Other magic protects the shop from the inside, as noted below.)

With a successful DC 15 Intelligence (Arcana) check, the character casting *detect magic* senses that the building's magic is much more potent than the faint baseline detected by the spell, and is being obscured by equally powerful means.

With a successful DC 12 Intelligence (Arcana or Religion) check, a character who can read Infernal confirms that the delicate stenciling that covers the building is a derivation of that script, though it has no specific meaning.

EMPORIUM FEATURES

The areas of the rakshasa's lair have the following general features:

- The front door and windows cannot be broken or opened unless Zengran wills it so.
- The shop is brightly lit by magic lanterns. All other areas, including the extradimensional corridors, are dimly lit by magic candles.
- Ceilings are 10 feet high unless otherwise indicated.
- The *antimagic field* spell fails if cast within the emporium. Magic that allows a character to teleport

PLAYING THE GAME

Whatever hooks you use to integrate this lair into your campaign, think about using games to connect to Zengran's plots. Whether the rakshasa is wicked or benevolent, the game emporium is a metaphor for Zengran's relationship with the world, and exemplifies their view of mortal lives as game pieces to be played with.

functions if used to teleport within an area, but fails if a character attempts to teleport beyond an area. A character can assess these magical wards from inside the emporium with a successful DC 15 Intelligence (Arcana) check.

- Each area in the lair is its own demiplane, and can be noted as such with a successful DC 14 Intelligence (Arcana) check. Only Zengran can successfully cast the *plane shift* spell to move between areas of the emporium.

ZENGRAN'S EMPORIUM

The following encounter areas are keyed to the map of the rakshasa's lair.

Z1. SHOPFRONT

A bell above the red door tinkles as the characters step inside the shop.

The interior of the emporium is as bright as the exterior, and features the same finely engraved woodwork and stenciling. Shelves and tables line the walls and fill the floor space, covered with every imaginable manner of game, toy, curio, and figurine.

When the characters enter, Zengran is using *disguise self* to take on the appearance of an elegant elf, and speaks to the characters even before looking at them.

“And what entertainments do you come in search of today, friends? Games of chance or skill? Challenges for the body or mind? The beauty of sculpture or clockwork? Dioramas of creation or destruction? Tales of the past that's gone, or of worlds not yet seen? Tell Zengran, and what you seek will be found.”

Zengran knows that their low-level illusion can be easily seen through, and they have no qualms about being recognized for what they are. A character who keeps an eye on Zengran in elf disguise and succeeds on a DC 13 Wisdom (Perception) check notes something odd about the shopkeeper's hands—a glitch where the illusion tries to cover for the rakshasa's hands being attached backward, as is normal for their fiendish kind.

(The characters do not get to fight Zengran in this area, so see area Z4 for the rakshasa's statistics.)

JUST BROWSING

Characters who look around the shop while other characters are talking to Zengran notice that the front door has locked behind them. Characters who inspect the contents of the shelves discover an astonishing selection of board games, war games, variations of

chess, card games, books of story games, puzzles, articulated figures, hand puppets and marionettes, clockwork toys, and much more. Zengran encourages everyone to inspect and test the emporium's games and toys. All the wares here are immaculately made and bear a tiny maker's signature: “Merlyn.” Nothing except Zengran's *disguise self* illusion radiates magic.

FIENDISH DETENTE

The initial conversation with Zengran can take any form consistent with the hook that brought the characters here. If Zengran is evil or otherwise has no interest in working with the party, they quickly tire of any questioning or subterfuge on the characters' part. If Zengran is good or otherwise wishes to bind or bend the characters to service, they eventually decide that the time has come to test the characters.

“Look at you all. So sure of yourselves. So keen to play the game.” So saying, the elf's illusory body dissolves, revealing the tiger form of a fiendish rakshasa holding an ornate twenty-sided die in their hand. “But this game is one you don't know. And the board is mine.”

Zengran immediately uses *plane shift* to slip to the meditation chamber (area Z4) as the walls of the shop begin to unfold (see area Z2 below). You can assume that the rakshasa has been using the Delay action each round to be ready to act before the characters can attack them. Alternatively, allow the characters to roll for initiative, but the surge of planar magic as the emporium unfolds imposes disadvantage on the characters' roll and grants Zengran advantage on theirs.

Z2. GAME NEXUS

As the shop unfolds, the floor shakes as shelves ripple and collapse outward. Magic keeps the wares of the emporium from spilling as openings appear in the walls, revealing the nexus of corridors and doors seen on the map. The walls, ceilings, and floors of the

WHAT ARE WE PLAYING TONIGHT?

For an even more immersive experience, think about setting up actual games for the players, in lieu of their characters rolling dice to determine the outcome of the emporium's challenges. For players who enjoy mixing things up, a game of time-limited checkers or chess, a tournament on a kid-sized billiards set, or a session of Nerf volleyball over the gaming table can add a fun component to this part of the adventure.

GAMES GALORE

d6 Game

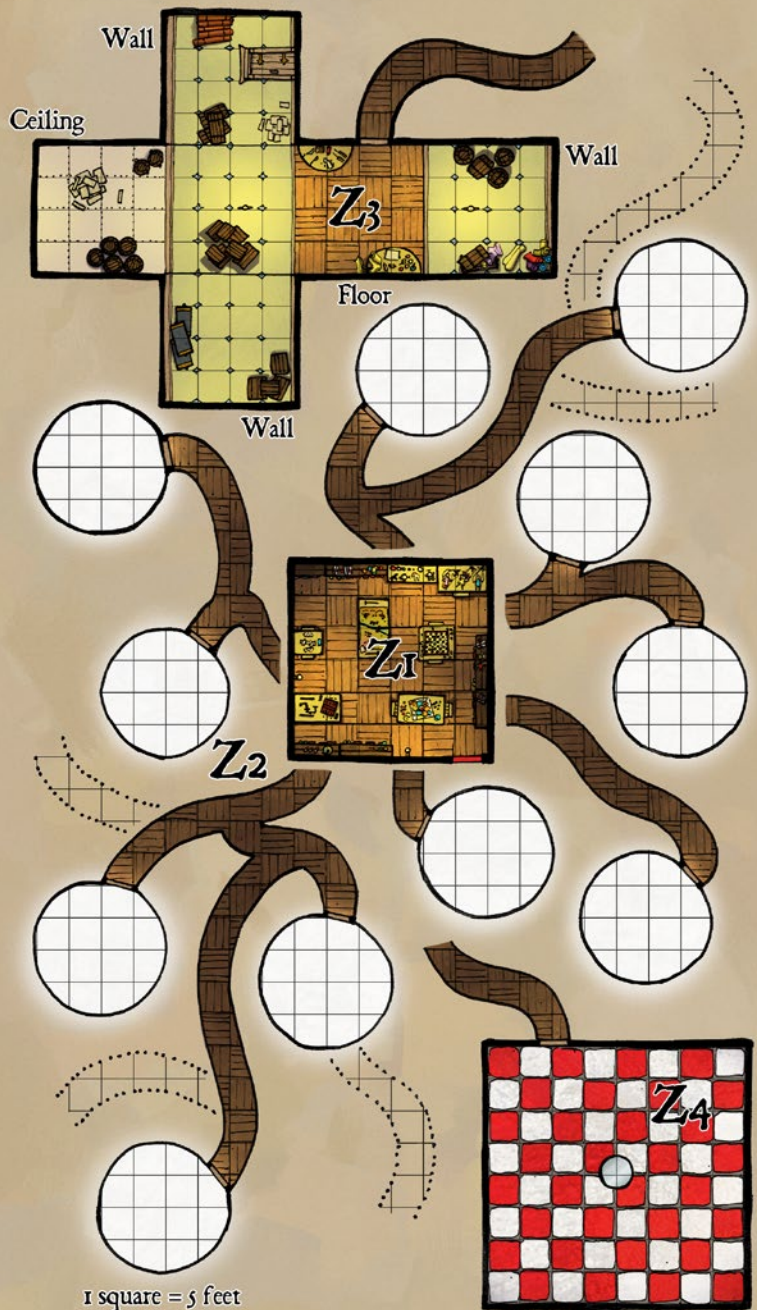
- Beach Volleyball.** Characters compete with contests of Strength (Athletics) or Dexterity (Acrobatics). Each winning player regains 3d4 hit points, or each losing player takes 7 (3d4) psychic damage.
- Full-Contact Chess.** Characters compete with contests of Intelligence (Arcana) to telekinetically hurl human-sized chess pieces at each other. Each winning player has advantage on their next initiative roll, or each losing player has disadvantage on their next initiative roll.
- Capture the Flag.** Characters compete with contests of Intelligence (Investigation) or Wisdom (Perception). A winning character gains a fine silk flag that can be used as a scroll of protection (roll randomly for type), or a losing player has a silk flag tied around their wrist that imposes disadvantage on weapon attack rolls and can be removed only with a *remove curse* spell.
- Blind Folks' Bluff.** Each character who starts their turn in this area is blinded. Characters must attack each other with unarmed strikes or bludgeoning weapons until one character has taken 10 damage, whereupon the blinded condition ends for all characters. The most damaged character regains full hit points, or all the other characters gain one level of exhaustion.
- Axe Throwing.** Characters hurl an assortment of fine throwing axes in a contest of attack rolls (if they have proficiency with the handaxe) or Dexterity (Acrobatics) checks. A winning character gains a +3 *handaxe* that loses its magic after the first hit made with it, or a losing character has one of their magic weapons lose its magic until targeted by a *remove curse* spell.
- Big Billiards.** A flat green expanse is covered with 10-foot-high smooth, colored stone spheres that erupt into random motion for 5 rounds. Each character must succeed on a DC 14 Dexterity saving throw each round or be run over by a giant billiard ball that deals 3 (1d6) bludgeoning damage and knocks the character prone. A character knocked prone on their previous turn makes their next save with disadvantage.

A character who attacks their ball with a melee weapon and hits AC 15, or who casts any spell at their ball that deals force or thunder damage, can partially deflect that ball to gain advantage on their save. A character who deals 10 or more damage to their ball with this attack or spell knocks it into a pocket that suddenly appears on the ground, and does not need to make the saving throw.

When the game ends, each character who took damage gains one level of exhaustion, or the character who took the least damage is gifted a normal-sized billiard ball that can be used to cast the *restoration* spell. The ball's magic fades once the spell is cast.

corridors appear to be made of wood paneling, and are set with built-in shelves identical to those seen in the shop, all covered with more games and toys.

The wooden doors of the nexus open easily. Each chamber that's part of the nexus offers either a game-based challenge for the characters, or is a portal to another plane, as you determine. Characters who open any door see a round white chamber with a



domed ceiling—which suddenly expands and fades away to reveal a game play environment of a size you determine, or an otherworldly planar landscape of your choice.

The number of extradimensional chambers in the lair is up to you, and you can extend the map along the dotted lines as you like. However, unless you want to take the characters through an entire mini-campaign while within the emporium, the planar portals are presently locked down to the area of the round room, allowing the characters to see where they lead but not to travel there.

PLAYING THE GAME

Unless you want to run this lair as a short encounter (or you suspect the players won't enjoy themselves),

have the characters try out two or three of the game chambers, rolling on the Games Galore table or using the table to inspire game challenges of your own. Knowledge of a specific game and its rules is imparted to characters when entering a game area. For games requiring ability checks, you decide how many checks determine a winner. You likewise determine how many winners there are, whether or not characters can leave a chamber before a game is won, and the positive or negative effects of a game, depending on whether Zengran wants to kill or test the characters. (If you decide that characters who enter a game area can't leave until the game is played and won, characters who enter the area disappear to the sight of those in the corridor behind them. Characters in the room likewise see the door disappear until the area's game is completed.)

Z3. WORKSHOP

The emporium's workshop is found behind one of the doors of the nexus, whenever you determine that it's time for the characters to arrive here.

This room is a high-ceilinged cube, and some sort of workshop. A pair of semicircular tables along the walls are covered with tools, knives, materials, paint pots, spools of thread, rolls of fabric, and a dozen other kinds of craft materials. The walls and ceiling are piled up with crates, barrels, boxes, rolls of cloth, and wooden blocks, with no sign of what holds them there.

The crafter working here is, inexplicably, an owlbear named Merlyn, who stands on her hind legs at one table, looming above an elaborate three-tiered board game under construction. The owlbear wears a set of strange gauntlets on her massive front paws, with each of the gloves' eight fingers extending to become its own small clockwork hand. Those mechanical hands hold chisels, knives, paintbrushes, and other tools, the owlbear shifting her paws in subtle patterns as she works—at least until she notices the characters.

The owlbear's black eyes go wide as she swivels toward you. Deftly, the creature flicks the gauntlets off, stepping back from the table, then dropping down to all fours. In a forceful voice, she demands: "Who?!"

Merlyn (see below for her statistics) can't speak, and is simply making an owlbear call. She can understand Common, and listens to anything the characters say.

SCOTT'S THOUGHTS: KEEPING BUSY

One of the challenges of running a regular monster as a solo boss is that the actions available to a group of characters quickly outstrip even a creature with a healthy Multiattack action. Especially in a scenario in which most of the characters act before the boss in the first round, the fight can end up almost over before it begins.

Adding legendary actions to a creature can help offset this imbalance, but legendary actions won't feel right for every boss. So instead, think about adding minions to distract the characters and eat up some of their action economy. The animated armor in this encounter and the flying swords in area Z4 work perfectly well as threats in their own right. But their main purpose in these encounters is to prevent the entire party from focusing on Merlyn and Zengran, so those foes aren't too quickly overwhelmed.

She doesn't have a lot of patience, however, and quickly rolls her eyes at the characters' prattling.

A wire basket on one table holds a number of black, blue, and yellow clockwork spheres. Glaring at the characters, Merlyn upends the basket to swallow a dozen spheres (see "Clockwork Loogie" below). She then gives an outraged "Hooooo!!!" and attacks.

TOY MONSTERS

As the fight begins, the characters see clockwork toys begin to fly off the tables and out of crates and boxes along the walls and ceiling. Each round on initiative count 0 (losing initiative ties), these toys magically assemble themselves into clockwork constructs resembling fantastic beasts, each of which has the statistics of **animated armor**. Two constructs assemble themselves each round, to a maximum of four. If Merlyn is of good or neutral alignment (see below), have one or more constructs use their attacks to attempt to shove characters toward the door.

OMNIDIRECTIONAL GRAVITY

The walls and ceiling of this area are its storage space, taking advantage of how gravity magically pulls into each surface. Whatever surface a creature or object has most recently touched determines gravitational precedence, so that a character who touches a wall is suddenly wrenched off the floor and slammed into that wall. Any creature except Merlyn moving from surface to surface (intentionally or otherwise) must succeed on a DC 13 Dexterity (Acrobatics) check or fall prone.

The clutter of the six navigable surfaces of the room is difficult terrain.

MERLYN

Zengran found Merlyn as a cub centuries ago, and took a liking to the owlbear. The rakshasa has given her infusions of specially treated fiendish ichor to extend

her life span, and she uses the **owlbear** stat block with the following changes:

- She has 95 (11d10 + 33) hit points.
- She has an Armor Class of 15.
- Her Dexterity is 18 (+4) and her Intelligence is 12 (+1).
- She understands Common and Infernal but can't speak.
- She has advantage on saving throws against spells and other magical effects.
- She has the Clockwork Loogie attack (see below).
- Her Multiattack action allows her to make three attacks with any combination of her beak, claws, or Clockwork Loogie, including three Clockwork Loogie attacks.
- She has a Challenge Rating of 6 (2,300 XP).

Merlyn is the same alignment as Zengran. If you've set the rakshasa up as good or neutral, the owlbear simply wants the characters out of her workshop, and continually shoos them toward the door while she fights. If she's evil, Merlyn wants to drink the characters' blood while the last life fades from their terrified eyes. She uses Clockwork Loogie to tie down characters attacking her at range, and takes to the walls and the ceiling to prevent characters from surrounding her.

If Merlyn is reduced to 20 hit points or fewer, she bolts out the door in search of Zengran. Characters can follow her to area Z4.

CLOCKWORK LOOGIE

For centuries, Merlyn has honed her skills as a master toymaker, providing her with a unique ranged attack. Like owls, owlbeards cannot chew their food, and automatically regurgitate bones, hair, and other indigestible parts of their prey. Merlyn uses this ability to first consume, then hawk up small spheres of magic clockwork, granting her the following action option.

Clockwork Loogie. Merlyn hawks up a clockwork sphere that targets one creature within 30 feet of her that she can see. The sphere delivers one of the following effects, chosen by Merlyn. When its magic is delivered, a sphere collapses into a heap of metal filings and worthless clockwork components.

Binding Sphere. This black sphere explodes into strands of fine wire that wrap around the target, which must succeed on a DC 14 Strength saving throw or be restrained until the end of its next turn. The target can also be freed if it or another creature succeeds on a DC 14 Strength (Athletics) check as an action to burst the binding wires.

Dozing Sphere. This blue sphere releases a burst of sweet-smelling gas around the target, which must succeed on a DC 14 Constitution saving throw or fall asleep until the end of its next turn. The target also wakes if it takes damage or another creature takes an action to wake it. The sphere has no effect on constructs and undead.

Shocking Sphere. This yellow sphere erupts in a shower of sparks surrounding the target, which must make a DC 14

Dexterity saving throw. The target takes 16 (3d10) lightning damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

LOOTING THE ROOM

The materials here are all of fine quality, and many of the crates and boxes show signs of having originated in far-off lands—and other worlds. You can use the value of these goods as treasure if the characters loot the emporium before it is destroyed (see the end of the lair for more information).

The characters can also claim one of each type of clockwork loogie from the basket, but Merlyn's magic gauntlets function only for her.

Z4. MEDITATION CHAMBER

This broad, square chamber features a twenty-foot-high cathedral ceiling whose arches are carved with the same engraved and stenciled woodwork seen outside and within the shop. Niches set into the walls are occupied by hundreds of art objects, including a number of finely made weapons. The tile floor is set in a pattern of red and white squares, and is spread with blankets and scattered cushions. A circular mirror is embedded in the center of the floor, before which Zengran the rakshasa sits on a cushion, eyes closed as if in meditation.

If Merlyn escaped from the characters, the wounded owlbear is here as well, restored to half her hit points, sitting against the far wall, and using her claws to flip carefully through a large book taken from a wall niche. The owlbear glances from Zengran to the characters, giving them very dark looks, then goes back to her reading, content to wait for the rakshasa to notice the intrusion.

Either assuming that the challenges of the emporium would keep the characters busy for a longer time, or awaiting their arrival as part of a test, Zengran is in a deep trance, meditating on visions seen in the mirror. The characters have a chance to enter the room, discover the nasty magical side effect of the floor, and investigate the items along the walls (including some that are potentially valuable in the fight; see "Zengran's Collection" below) without worrying about being attacked. But Zengran's eyes flick open and the rakshasa comes fully awake in response to anyone preparing to attack the rakshasa or Merlyn. Characters trying to get the jump on these foes might gain initiative over them, but Zengran cannot be surprised here.

ZENGRAN'S COLLECTION

The items set into the wall niches are mementos Zengran has collected from dozens of worlds. Most are simply fine art objects, but the collection includes the following magic items:

- *Mace of smiting*
- *Horn of blasting*
- *Bracers of archery*

The magic in this room causes these items to glow when any creature passes within 10 feet of them, and grants any character touching an item the knowledge of what it is and what it does, as if the character had focused on the item during a short rest. (This includes learning the command word for the *horn of blasting*.) These items conveniently allow one or more spellcasting characters a chance to get fully into the fight against Zengran, since the rakshasa's Limited Magic Immunity trait nullifies a 7th-level character's combat spells. (If enough other characters don't possess magic weapons to make any headway against the rakshasa's damage immunity, feel free to add a +1 *weapon* or two to Zengran's collection.)

If the characters wake Zengran before noticing and assessing the items, allow characters Wisdom (Perception) checks to notice potentially useful items along the wall during the fight.

GAME ON!

Zengran monologues during the battle, challenging or goading the characters as appropriate to the setup of the encounter. They use the **rakshasa** stat block, and have the following additional trait while within the emporium:

- When Zengran is reduced to 0 hit points but not killed outright, they drop to 1 hit point instead. Zengran can't use this feature again until they finish a long rest.

On initiative count 0 each round (losing initiative ties), one weapon per character comes flying off the shelves of the room to independently attack. Each weapon uses the **flying sword** stat block but can deal bludgeoning, piercing, or slashing damage as you determine. The weapons focus their attacks on any character wielding a weapon that deals piercing damage, as Zengran has no intention of succumbing to that vulnerability shared by all rakshasas.

Even if Zengran is testing the characters, the rakshasa cuts loose during the fight, using *dominate person* to bring a warrior under control. They then send that character against ranged attackers while carving through other characters with claws attacks.

If Merlyn is here and is badly wounded, she falls back into a corner behind a phalanx of flying weapons and uses the Dodge action each round.

YOUR MOVE

The colored pattern of the floor tiles lets you trot out the time-honored tradition of the chess-board dungeon! Except the players will probably expect that, so you'll make it checkers instead to trip them up.

The color of the first square a creature steps on at the doors determines which squares they can safely step on thereafter, constraining them to diagonal movement or jumping square to square. (If a player has their character jump onto both door squares at once, decide randomly which square the character's first foot hits. Their second foot touching down in the opposite square then triggers the effect.)

A creature that steps into one or more opposite-color squares while moving must succeed on a DC 15 Charisma saving throw at the end of its turn or be racked with pain that deals 13 (3d8) psychic damage and knocks them prone. A character forced into a wrong-colored square suffers no effect immediately, but must make the saving throw with disadvantage if they then move into a wrong square intentionally.

Zengran and Merlyn are immune to the floor's effect.

If you are not playing combat on a grid, a character who moves no more than half their speed while in this area avoids the saving throw as they pick their way carefully from square to square. A character who moves more than half their speed must make the saving throw at the end of their turn.

I'M FINE!

If the characters are being tested by Zengran, anyone who fails a third death saving throw here is automatically stabilized but remains at 0 hit points. (If none of the other characters investigate to see that the character is still breathing, you can decide whether to announce this or just alert the character's player in secret.)

IMAGES OF OTHER WORLDS

The mirror set into the floor is used by Zengran when they scry creatures across other planes and worlds. Characters who look into it see wisps of shadow obscuring a slow-shifting view of strange landscapes, but the mirror can be used only by Zengran.

EVIL END

If Zengran is an evil fiend, they might use *plane shift* to escape a fight they can't win, swearing vengeance on the characters and setting up a rematch for the future. If the characters can prevent Zengran from fleeing, they can finish this lair by destroying the rakshasa and sending their spirit on the harrowing journey back to the Nine Hells. Either way, when Zengran departs,

the emporium's planar magic collapses in on itself, dumping the characters prone on the floor of the shop, returned to its original appearance.

The shop is shaking, games and toys tumbling from the shelves. The characters have 1 round to get out the now-open door before the emporium implodes, dealing 27 (5d10) force damage to each creature still inside and shunting them out. The emporium then vanishes and is never seen again—but a beautifully carved, six-inch-tall, articulated figure of Zengran sits in meditation pose at the center of the vacant lot where the building once stood.

The figure is a rare magic item that radiates an aura of transmutation to a *detect magic* spell. A creature with the figure in its possession can choose to have advantage on its initiative roll at the beginning of a combat, but then must reroll one attack roll or saving throw of the GM's choice made within the next minute of game time. The figure has no ongoing connection to Zengran unless you wish it otherwise.

GOOD GAME

If Zengran is merely testing the characters, the rakshasa stops the fight when reduced to 10 hit points or fewer, when the last character has been dropped to 0 hit points, or if challenged with evidence that the fight is not real. (Noting a character failing a third death save and automatically stabilizing is likely to do this.) Zengran takes a *potion of superior healing* and offers one to each of the characters, then invites them to chat.

TREASURE

If the emporium is destroyed, you can have valuable crafting materials, relics, books, games, and clockwork devices left behind for the characters to claim, totaling 2,700 gp. If the characters loot the workshop before facing Zengran, their swag plus any loot left behind totals 3,000 gp. You can also have any magic items the characters didn't grab in the meditation chamber tossed out during the emporium's destruction.

If the characters end up working for Zengran, the rakshasa bequeaths the party 3,000 gp in coins and gems, plus the magic items in the meditation chamber, as a retainer.

ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTY

You can adjust the difficulty of this lair in a number of different ways. For more difficult encounters, consider any of the following options:

- Increase the number of constructs that fight alongside Merlyn or Zengran.
- Give Merlyn a twin brother named Berlyn, who acts as Zengran's bodyguard and takes part in the fight with Zengran even if Merlyn is slain.
- Give Merlyn, Zengran, or both the Regeneration trait, allowing each to regain 10 hit points at the start of their turn unless they've taken radiant damage.

To reduce the difficulty of the lair, consider any of the following options:

- Make Zengran a **mage** using illusion magic to pretend to be a rakshasa.
- Decrease the number of constructs that fight alongside Merlyn or Zengran.

EXPANDING THIS LAIR

You can expand this lair by building on or modifying any number of the hooks found within it:

- If a good Zengran has been aiding the characters or recruits them as troubleshooters, the missions the rakshasa sets for the party from the emporium can fuel a long campaign arc across the planes.
- The planar portals in the emporium nexus might summon numerous unusual creatures when the emporium is destroyed, which the characters must now hunt down.
- The emporium's magic is failing, and Zengran recruits the characters to track down the means to repair the magical site—whether the rakshasa shares the characters' morality or not.
- An evil Zengran fixates on revenge against those who destroyed their material form to send them back to the Nine Hells. The characters might endure attacks by the rakshasa's allies or servants while Zengran regains material form over months or years—or they might decide to journey to the Nine Hells to end the rakshasa's threat permanently.



JACK KAISER

THE BLOOD PALACE

The spirit naga Lacris lairs in a ziggurat hidden deep within a swamp. Among other thralls and deadly traps, the naga hides their greatest guardian and executioner: a ravenous hydra ready to consume all those who try to infiltrate the Blood Palace.

This lair is optimized for four to five 8th-level characters.

BACKGROUND

For long years, the spirit naga Lacris has obsessed over one goal: killing humanoids with the audacity to adventure. When Lacris first formed, adventurers slew the naga over and over again to get at the treasures they were sworn to protect. So after their original masters died, Lacris took charge.

The naga traveled to the Blood Palace, a ziggurat inhabited by a community of demon-worshipping gnolls. Harnessing the abyssal magic within the temple, Lacris enthralled those evil humanoids, who are now known as the Bite of Lacris. The gnolls serve as the naga's hunters, drawing adventurers into the Blood Palace, which Lacris has outfitted with magic traps and a hidden hydra guardian. Inside this lair,

the naga spends their days counting treasure, reading spellbooks, experimenting with magic—and looting the corpses of the adventurers they despise.

INTEGRATING THIS LAIR

Though this lair is written to take place in a swamp ziggurat, you can place its chambers in an underground temple, a mountain ruin, or any other enclosed space of your choosing. The areas detailed here could be the entirety of the naga's lair, or just one part of a much larger building.

You can use the following hooks to integrate this lair into your campaign, whether as part of a longer adventure or as the focus of a single play session:

- The gnolls known as the Bite of Lacris attack the characters repeatedly, perhaps stealing one or more magic items from them, or eventually becoming enough of a nuisance that the characters decide to bring the fight to the Blood Palace.
- NPC adventurers who are friends, family, or mentors to the characters go missing. A trail of evidence leads to the Blood Palace.
- Rumors of the treasure-filled Blood Palace keep coming up in conversations with NPCs. Unknown to

the characters, these rumors have been spread by the Bite of Lacris to tempt others into the naga's deadly lair.

APPROACHING THE BLOOD PALACE

A swamp filled with twisted trees, stagnant water, and deep muck surrounds the Blood Palace. As the characters approach the structure, read or paraphrase the following to set the scene:

Huge red stones form a massive three-tiered ziggurat atop a mound of earth thrust up above the swamp. Buzzing insects swarm across the building's wall carvings, all depicting demons devouring humanoid sacrifices. A high, straight stair leads up the south side of the ziggurat to a set of closed stone doors.

THE BITE OF LACRIS

The gnolls in the ziggurat are fully under Lacris's magical sway. They attack intruders with blank expressions and mechanical efficiency, fighting to the death. It is obvious that something controls the emotionless creatures. Lacris's gnolls labor hard for the naga, giving them an improved musculature. Whenever you see a bold reference to a **Bite of Lacris gnoll**, use the **gnoll** stat block with the following changes:

- The gnoll has a Strength of 18 (+4).
- They have proficiency in the Athletics skill, giving them a +6 bonus to Strength (Athletics) checks.
- They have a +6 bonus to attack rolls and +4 bonus to damage rolls with their bite and spear attacks.

If Lacris dies, the gnolls become free of the naga's control. They flee the ziggurat, hoping to get as far from the place as possible before Lacris reforms (as all nagas do).

BLOOD PALACE FEATURES

The interior areas of the Blood Palace have the following general features:

- Ceilings are 20 feet high.
- The *continual flame* spell is cast onto torches in wall sconces, filling all areas with bright light.
- The entire place reeks like a charnel house, with the scent of blood, rot, and decay permeating the building.

THE BLOOD PALACE

The following encounter areas are keyed to the map of Lacris's lair.

B1. ENTRANCE HALL

Carvings on the walls, floor, and ceiling depict gnolls bowing down before giant hideous balor demons holding up severed humanoid heads.

COMPRESSING ROOM TRAP

A character who succeeds on a DC 20 Wisdom (Perception) check made to scan the entrance hall notices a 10-foot-square pressure plate built into the floor at the center of the hall. With a successful DC 20 Intelligence (Investigation) check, a character notices a thin copper wire made to look like part of the west wall's carvings that connects the pressure plate to the door to area B2.

When more than 20 pounds of weight is placed on the pressure plate or when a creature opens the door to area B2, the hall begins to rumble. Each round on initiative count 10 (losing initiative ties), the east and west wall of this area move 2 feet toward each other. After the walls move once, the hall is 6 feet wide, and Large or larger creatures must squeeze to move through it. After the walls move twice, the hall is 2 feet wide, and Medium or larger creatures must squeeze to move through it. If the walls move a third time, they grind into each other, and each creature in the entrance hall takes 55 (10d10) bludgeoning damage. The walls then retract and the trap is ready to be triggered again.

If the trap is triggered, a creature that can reach both walls can brace its body between the walls as an action and make a DC 20 Strength (Athletics) check. On a success, the walls are held in place and do not move that round.

Characters can jump over the pressure plate to avoid triggering the trap (as do the gnolls). Wedging an iron spike or similar object under the pressure plate allows a creature to walk over it without triggering the trap. With a successful DC 18 Dexterity check using thieves' tools, a character can safely cut the copper wire, allowing the door to be opened without triggering the trap. A failed check triggers the trap.

GLYPH OF WARDING

A *glyph of warding* (save DC 14) is inscribed on the ceiling above the pressure plate. If any creature other than a gnoll or Lacris moves along the floor through

KEEP IT MOVING

If the characters move quickly after triggering the compressing room trap, they don't need to worry about getting crushed, even if affected by the *slow* spell. The point of the trap is to force them into facing the gnolls in area B2, and to prevent them from standing in the entrance hall and fighting from around the corner to gain cover from the doorway.

the 10-foot-wide area under the glyph, it casts the *slow* spell (save DC 14) in an area centered on the glyph.

A creature that succeeds on a DC 15 Strength (Athletics) check can climb the walls to avoid triggering the glyph, and might be able to chisel a section of the ceiling free to disable the glyph, as you determine. If the check fails by 5 or more, the creature falls, triggers the glyph, and lands on the pressure plate to trigger the compressing room trap.

B2. GNOLL QUARTERS

Gnawed humanoid bones and blood-soaked rags formed into foul beds are spread across the floor of this gnoll den. The entirety of the ceiling is taken up by a massive glyph carved into the stonework. Next to a closed door on the west side of the room, a statue of a massive coiled serpent rises from the floor, its mouth hanging open.

The smell of rot in this chamber is far worse than in the other areas of the lair. When a creature other than the gnolls, the hydra in area B4, or Lacris enters this area, it must succeed on a DC 13 Constitution saving throw or be poisoned for as long as it remains in the area. A creature can repeat the saving throw at the end of each of its turns, ending the effect on itself on a success.

ABYSSAL GLYPH

A creature that understands Abyssal knows that the glyph on the ceiling is related to the word for “blood” in that demonic tongue. A *detect magic* spell reveals that the glyph radiates auras of conjuration and enchantment magic.

The first time a creature takes damage in this area, the glyph begins to glow red, then rains blood into the chamber for 10 minutes. Any creature that ends its turn in the area during this time becomes soaked in the blood, which imposes disadvantage on saving throws against Lacris’s spells and against the poison from the naga’s bite attack. A creature soaked by the blood can remove it and end this effect by bathing in a clean water source for 10 minutes.

The glyph can be nullified only by attacking it, and becomes permanently inactive if destroyed. It has AC 17, 36 hit points, and immunity to poison and psychic damage. A creature that succeeds on a DC 15 Strength (Athletics) check can climb the walls and reach the glyph.

SOUTH DOOR

The door to area B3 is locked, but can be opened by interacting with the serpent statue (see that section below). The lock can also be picked with a successful DC 15 Dexterity check using thieves’ tools. The

TWO FRONTS

The idea of this encounter is that the trapdoor can force the characters to battle the naga and the hydra at the same time, effectively splitting the party. If the characters are smart or lucky (or both), they might take on the naga and the hydra as separate encounters. If this is the case, use the advice in the “Encounter Difficulty” section to increase the difficulty of both battles.

door can be forced with a successful DC 21 Strength (Athletics) check, or it can be attacked and destroyed. The door has AC 17, 27 hit points, and immunity to poison and psychic damage.

GNOLLS

The **Bite of Lacris gnolls** guarding the chamber consist of two gnolls plus one gnoll per character. In addition, an enormous two-headed gnoll who Lacris calls Gervin watches over this area. Gervin is the result of Lacris’s magical experiments, and uses the **ettin** stat block with the following changes:

- Gervin can speak and understand Gnome instead of Common and Orc.
- Gervin has the Rampage trait from the gnoll stat block, which he can use to make any of his melee attacks.

If the characters stand in the doorway to area B1, the gnolls assault them with ranged attacks rather than charging into melee. They might also move into the northeast corner of the room to try to force the characters to enter.

SERPENT STATUE

The statue of the coiled serpent against the west wall stands 10 feet high and radiates an aura of transmutation magic to a *detect magic* spell. A dwarf character or a character proficient with mason’s tools can tell that the statue was built much more recently than the ziggurat.

When any creature gets within 5 feet of the door to area B3, the statue animates. Its eyes glow red and its massive mouth moves as it asks in a sinister, hissing voice (actually Lacris’s voice): “What baubles have you brought me?” If a creature presents something of value to the statue—either coins or objects worth at least 50 gp, or a magic item—the animated statue gobbles up the offering and the lock on the door deactivates for 10 minutes.

If a creature makes no offering and moves closer to the door, the statue attacks that creature: +8 to hit, 10 (1d10 + 5) piercing damage, and the target is grappled by the statue (escape DC 13). While grappled this way, a creature is restrained. The statue makes one attack per round on initiative count 20 (losing initiative

ties). If the statue is grappling a creature on its turn, it repeats the attack against the grappled target. On a hit against a Medium or smaller grappled creature, the statue unhinges its jaws and swallows the creature, sending it down its hollow gullet. The creature falls 30 feet to the hydra den (area B4), landing prone and taking 3d6 bludgeoning damage.

A *dispel magic* spell or similar effect renders the statue inert for 1 hour. The statue has AC 17, 75 hit points, and immunity to poison and psychic damage. If the statue is destroyed, its hollow interior is revealed, as well as a hole in the floor that leads to area B4.

B3. LACRIS'S CHAMBER

The bright sound of chisels on stone fills this chamber, as gnolls with blank expressions work on a half-completed relief carving of a giant serpent that extends across all the walls. Near the back wall, a long, black-scaled serpent with great bat wings is spread out over a cushioned dais, while a slack-jawed gnoll holds up a book for the serpent to read.

One **Bite of Lacris gnoll** per character is hard at work here. When the gnolls notice the characters, they put down their chisels and draw weapons, stepping up to the dais between the characters and Lacris as they await the naga's orders. If combat breaks out and the trapdoor is opened (see that section below), the gnolls use their actions to try to push the characters into the open pit leading to area B4, making use of their +6 bonus to Strength (Athletics) checks.

LACRIS

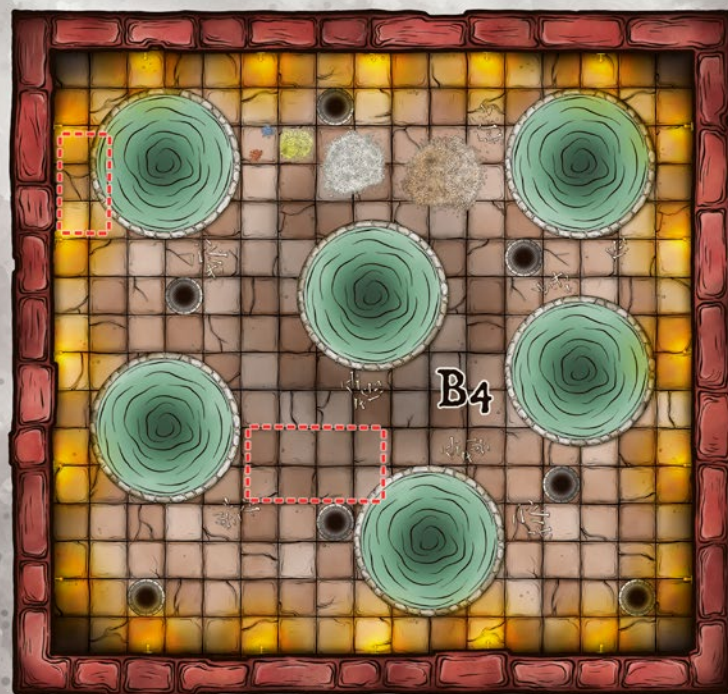
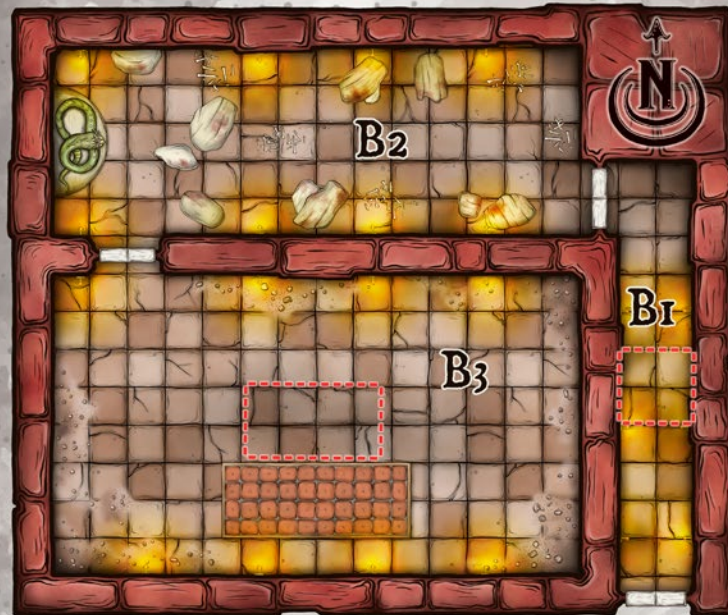
The spirit naga Lacris is poring over a spellbook taken from a recent victim of the gnolls when the characters enter. Lacris feigns treating the characters kindly at first, stopping the gnolls from attacking and asking innocently why they have come to the ziggurat. The naga hopes to catch the characters off guard with the trapdoor, sending them to face the hydra below.

Lacris uses the **spirit naga** stat block with the following changes:

- They have 121 hit points.
- They wear *wings of flying*, giving them a flying speed of 60 feet.
- They have the *thunderwave* spell prepared instead of *detect magic*.

TACTICS

When combat breaks out, Lacris takes to the air and keeps their distance from the characters. They cast *dominate person* on a character who hasn't fallen through the open trapdoor, forcing them to act as a bodyguard. Lacris then casts *blight* and *lightning bolt* to



1 Square = 5 feet

make quick work of the characters, or casts *hold person* and *thunderwave* to help the gnolls push characters into area B4.

If more than half the gnolls are taken out of the fight, or if Lacris is reduced to 70 hit points or fewer, the naga flies down into the hydra's den for extra protection. If reduced to 20 hit points or fewer, the naga casts *dimension door* to flee the ziggurat, vowing revenge against the characters.

TRAPDOOR

A spring-loaded, 10-foot-wide, 20-foot-long trapdoor is concealed in the floor just in front of the dais.

A character who succeeds on a DC 17 Wisdom (Perception) check made to carefully check the floor notices the faint outline of the door against the stones.

A hidden button beneath a cushion on the dais controls the trapdoor, and can be found with a successful DC 15 Intelligence (Investigation) check. When the button is pushed, the trapdoor swings open and each creature standing on it must make a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw. On a success, a creature is able to leap off the falling trapdoor into an unoccupied space next to the door. On a failure, a creature falls 30 feet down to area B4, landing prone and taking 3d6 bludgeoning damage.

If the button is pushed again, the trapdoor swings closed. While closed, the door can be forced open with a successful DC 22 Strength check or attacked to break through it. It has AC 17, 50 hit points, and immunity to poison and psychic damage.

B4. HYDRA'S DEN

The skulls and bones of gnolls and other humanoids litter the ground of a filthy chamber set with staggered stone columns. Dancing torchlight reflects off neatly organized piles of gold, silver, copper, and other treasures, set alongside six murky brown pools of stinking swamp water that cover the floor.

The red outline to the northwest of the map marks the location of the ceiling hole beneath the serpent statue in area B2. The red outline to the south marks the location of the trapdoor in area B3.

COLUMNS

Each of the room's stone columns extends from floor to ceiling, and can be climbed with a successful DC 15 Strength (Athletics) check. A creature that climbs the column next to the area of the trapdoor can return to area B3 when the trapdoor is open.

POOLS

Beneath the floor, the murky pools are all connected as one 30-foot-deep body of water. A 5-foot-wide, 200-foot-long tunnel at the very bottom of the pool leads to the swamp outside the ziggurat, but is too small for the hydra to swim through. A creature in the pool can find the tunnel exit with a successful DC 14 Intelligence (Investigation) check made as an action.

HYDRA

The hungry **hydra** that Lacris has placed as a guardian in this area hides in the interconnected murky pools. A character with a passive Wisdom (Perception) score of 14 or higher notices one of the hydra's heads occasionally popping its eyes above the water before slipping back down.

The hydra waits until a creature gets within 10 feet of a pool, then pops up to attack. It then submerges and swims to a new pool to set up its next attack, possibly making the characters believe they face multiple hydras. If the hydra can't reach the creatures attacking it (for instance, if characters in this area are all flying), it submerges and waits. If reduced to 45 hit points or fewer, the hydra emerges from the pools and fights to the death.

Because the hydra was captured and trained by Lacris, it does not harm the naga. However, it does attack any gnolls who enter its den.

TREASURE

The following items found in the encounter might all be claimed as treasure by the characters:

- Lacris wears *wings of flying*. However, if you do not wish to make these useful to the characters, the wings are sized for a Large serpent and cannot be altered.
- Lacris is reading a spellbook when the characters arrive, and could have others in the treasure hoard in area B4. The following spells are contained in these tomes: *alarm*, *blight*, *burning hands*, *charm person*, *counterspell*, *detect magic*, *detect thoughts*, *dimension door*, *dominate person*, *expeditious retreat*, *false life*, *feather fall*, *hold person*, *identify*, *knock*, *lightning bolt*, *mage armor*, *mage hand*, *minor illusion*, *mislead*, *protection from energy*, *ray of frost*, *rope trick*, *sleep*, *thunderwave*, and *water breathing*.
- The piles of treasure in the hydra den (area B4) contain a *potion of hill giant strength*, a *potion of water breathing*, five obsidians (worth 10 gp each), two zircons (50 gp each), four spinels (100 gp each), one black pearl (500 gp), 95 pp, 2,214 gp, 7,432 sp, and 11,857 cp.

ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTY

You can adjust the difficulty of this lair in a number of different ways. For more difficult encounters, consider any of the following options:

WHACK-A-HYDRA

The hydra's hit-and-run tactics might make play frustrating for some groups, especially if the characters have already defeated all the other monsters in the ziggurat. If those tactics are dragging on your fun, have the creature emerge from a pool immediately to stand toe-to-toe with the characters. And if you think the characters need a more difficult challenge to offset the lack of whack-a-mole tactics, throw a second hydra at them that was lurking in the water the whole time!

JAMES'S THOUGHTS: TRACKING A SPLIT PARTY

There's a good chance that this lair splits the characters up, and many GMs find that tracking two groups of characters can be a daunting task. In addition to presenting a difficult tactical challenge for players and characters alike, splitting the party causes stress if one group of characters gets more time and attention than the other, or if the GM keeps the information known by one group separate from the other.

If you're worried about making sure everyone gets an equal amount of time playing, roll initiative as soon as the group is split, even if no one is engaged in combat. When a character who is not engaged in combat takes their turn, set a timer for 1 or 2 minutes. This is how long the player has to describe what the character is doing. Let the players know you're doing this to keep the game moving, and make sure everyone gets equal time in the spotlight. It's up to you how strict you are with the timer, so if everyone is engaged and having fun listening to the player whose turn it is when time runs out, just encourage the player to wrap it up rather than cutting them off before moving on.

When a party is split, the different groups of characters experience separate events. They learn different things! But even though it can feel less realistic, you don't need to keep the information one group of characters knows restricted to only those characters' players. It saves a lot of time if you aren't running back and forth between different rooms (real or virtual) and sending separate notes to each group, then saves even more time when the players come together again and you don't need to recap information to bring everyone up to speed.

Save moving players into separate spaces and passing notes for information that should be truly secret. When a party splits up, keep the players together. Let them know that the barbarian and rogue face a hydra alone while the rest take on a naga and a group of gnomish thralls! Sometimes the game is less about realism and more about everyone having fun by telling and listening to the story.

- Replace the Bite of Lacris gnolls with **bugbears** or humanoid **berserkers**.
- Use the **troll** stat block for Gervin.
- Make Lacris a chaotic evil **guardian naga**.
- Replace the hydra with a **behir**.
- Have the hydra start with more than five heads, or give it the Poison Breath action of a **young green dragon**.

To reduce the difficulty of the lair, consider any of the following options:

- Replace the gnolls with **goblins** or any humanoid **bandits**.
- Use the **ogre** stat block for Gervin.
- Make it so Lacris has already expended their 4th- and 5th-level spell slots.
- Replace the hydra with a **gorgon** that has the hydra's swimming speed and Hold Breath trait.

EXPANDING THIS LAIR

You can expand this lair by building on or modifying any number of the hooks found within it:

- If Lacris gets away, the naga tries to find a new, more powerful group of humanoid servants (such as bugbears) and monstrous guardians (such as rocs and purple worms) to destroy the characters. The naga wants to make them suffer, and so might begin by attacking people and places the characters love.
- If Lacris is slain, the characters might learn (if they don't know already) that nagas eventually come back to life unless their spirit is somehow stopped from entering a new body. You might build a new adventure around the search for a ritual that can stop Lacris from rising again, even as cultists dedicated to the naga try to stop the characters.
- The characters might want to return some or all of the items Lacris stole to the next of kin of the naga's victims. Finding those relatives and delivering the news of their loved ones' demise would be an emotional adventure indeed!



CURSE OF BLACK ICE

VICTOR LEZA MORENO

Driven from his clan, a frost giant warrior drank from an ancient pool that twisted him into a creature of fangs and claws. But after hunting in the icy wastes for decades, the frost giant werewolf has begun to expand his killing ground into civilized lands. Now the adventurers hunt the monstrous frost giant to his lair of frozen ice, and face his bloodthirsty followers.

This lair is optimized for four to five 8th-level characters.

BACKGROUND

The frost giant Eldrek Graytusk was second-in-line to become the jarl of the Graytusk clan, but a failure to defeat his older brother, Rokkuna, in combat resulted in his exile. All his folk expected him to perish in the frozen wastes, but die he did not. Instead, called by primordial dreams and visions, Eldrek found a cave deep in the mountains, formed within the skull of a gargantuan mammoth—an ancient creature once touched by fiendish power. Within the depths of the cave, Eldrek found a pool of blood surrounded by the bones of malformed beasts. Desperately hungry, he

drank deep. His body twisted and convulsed. His bones broke and reformed. And he became something else.

Fueled by the bestial power in the blood, Eldrek returned to his clan and faced his brother once again. Transforming into a towering white-furred wolf, he ripped his brother in half in front of his father and the rest of the clan. Then he did the same to them. Turning his back on the past with every one of his former folk slaughtered, Eldrek returned to the mammoth cave and took on a new name—Eldrek the Black Tusk.

Decades later, four dozen members of the Green Sky clan of ice hunters found the cave and entered it. Eldrek the Black Tusk devoured many of them, then forced a horrid transformation upon the survivors. Feeding on the blood from the pool, they too grew into bestial lupine humanoids. Now, Eldrek and the Black Tusks have come out from their cave and begun to prey upon the hunters and settlers of the icy tundra, slowly making their way toward ever-larger settlements.

INTEGRATING THIS LAIR

You can use the following hooks to integrate this lair into your campaign, whether as part of a longer adventure or as the focus of a single play session:

- As the characters spend time in the frozen north, they hear reports of beasts and humanoids hunting down settlers and travelers, led by a brutal giant. The characters can learn more of Black Tusk's origin through whispered rumors of a huge frost giant who transforms into a winter wolf. After tracking the giant and facing the werewolves serving him, the characters come to the mammoth cave and face Eldrek himself.
- A larger quest could bring the characters to the mammoth cave in search of the ancient blood the Black Tusk drank to become a creature of nightmares. Eldrek protects the blood at all costs, cutting down any who dare to drink it except by his command. However, additional healing properties of the blood (as you determine; see area I3) might be the only thing the characters can use to save a friendly NPC, or even one of their own, from a vile curse.
- Warring factions of frost giants have suddenly united under a single legendary leader, said to be filled with the blood of both giant and beast. Directed by this powerful new jarl, the frost giants have begun attacking frontier settlements, and are amassing forces for an attack against larger towns and cities. Before the giants start an all-out war, the characters have one chance to slip into this jarl's lair and take him out, shattering the alliance and ending the threat.

APPROACHING THE MAMMOTH CAVE

The mammoth cave is cut into ancient glacial ice as deep blue as the sea, and extends into the rock the glacier buries. It is an old and secluded place, seen by very few creatures in the inhospitable frozen wastelands.

MAMMOTH CAVE FEATURES

The areas of the mammoth cave have the following general features:

- The caves are dimly lit by permanently glowing blue stones embedded in the ice. These strange stones continue to glow if dug out.
- Caves and tunnels are 25 feet high.
- The walls of the cave are a mixture of rock and ice, and frequently show the frozen corpses of humanoids and beasts buried within them.

SIDE PASSAGES

The map of the mammoth cave shows side passages that lead off into the ice. You can add your own caverns to the ends of these passages, block them off with fallen rocks, or have them lead out to other exits from the lair.

MAMMOTH CAVE

The following encounter areas are keyed to the map of Eldrek's lair.

11. TITANIC MAMMOTH SKULL

Freezing, snow-filled wind continually swirls around the entrance to the lair, limiting visibility to 50 feet. When the characters get within that distance, they can just make out the sinister silhouette of the entrance. Read or paraphrase the following to set the scene:

A pair of titanic tusks are thrust up from the snow before a blue glacial cliff rising hundreds of feet into the air. The gargantuan skull of some sort of mammoth is set with a ridge of bone, and with spikes jutting out at odd angles. The lower jaw of the skull is buried in the ice, so that the upper jaw creates a dark passage leading into the cliff. A pair of skull-topped totems stand to either side of the entrance.

A character who succeeds on a DC 12 Wisdom (Medicine) check can tell that the gargantuan skull belongs to some kind of fiendish giant mammoth of unknown origin. When the characters get within 30 feet of the entrance, the character with the highest passive Wisdom (Perception) score notices that a number of figures have come out of the blizzard to surround the party.

WEREWOLVES

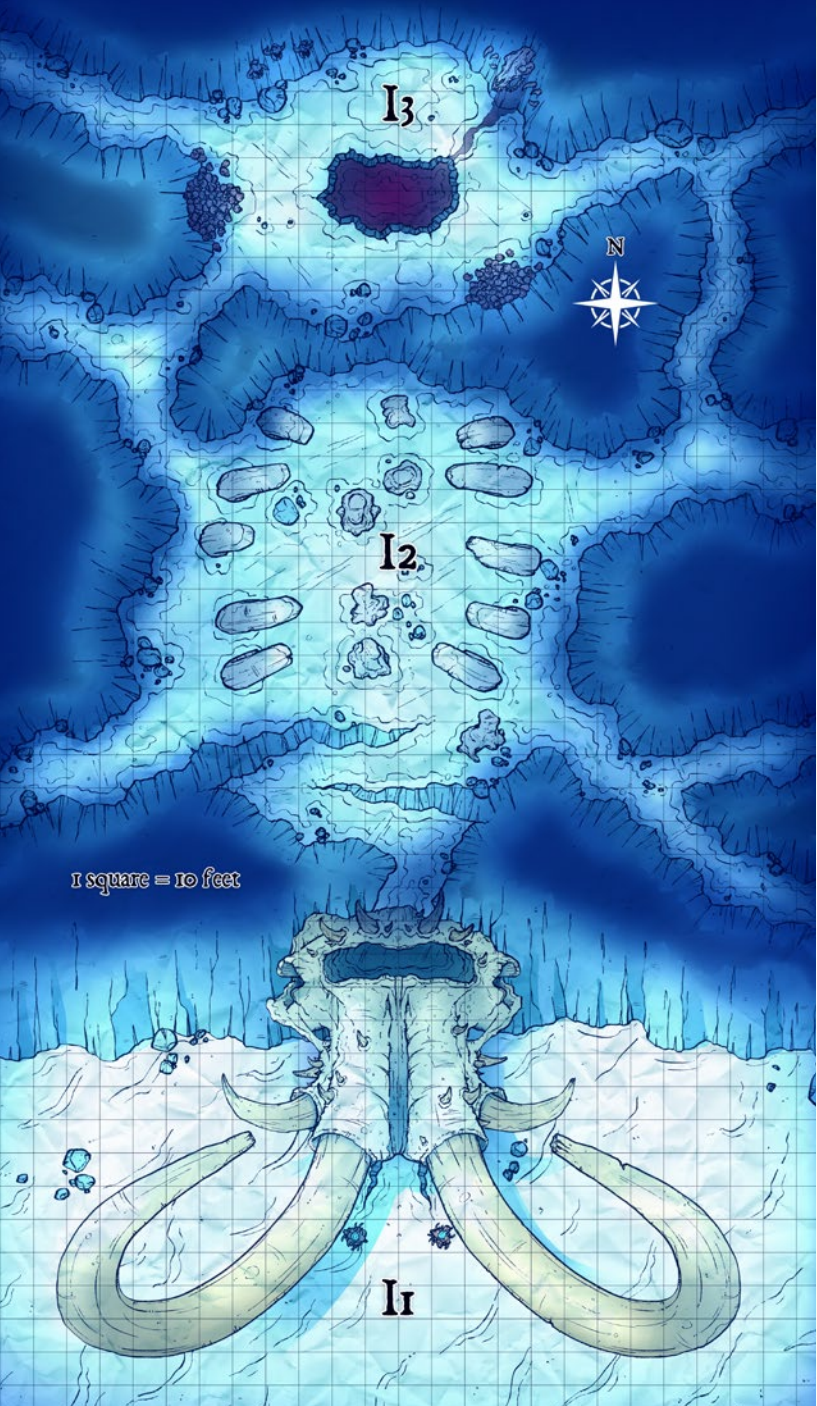
One **werewolf** per character moves in from the surrounding blizzard, having caught the characters' scent as they approached the cave. The werewolves are little more than black silhouettes in the storm, their eyes glowing blue-white as they attack.

The werewolves start 30 feet from the characters, and are in a mixture of humanoid, hybrid, and wolf forms. In wolf form, each has white fur with a gray stripe down the middle of their back.

TOTEMS

The two totems in front of the skull fill the werewolves with a terrible bloodlust. Any werewolf within 60 feet of a totem has advantage on attack rolls and deals an extra 7 (2d6) necrotic damage with each hit.

The eyes in the skulls on the totems glow with the same blue-white light seen in the eyes of the



ALEX VANDERAA

werewolves. A character who succeeds on a DC 12 Wisdom (Insight) check recognizes that the lycanthropes' ferocity and the totems are connected, and that destroying the totems can disrupt the connection. Each totem has AC 12, 15 hit points, and immunity to necrotic, poison, and psychic damage.

I2. PILLARS OF THE DEAD

A switchback path leads down to the center of this massive cavern, which is dominated by the ribcage of the gargantuan mammoth, lying half-buried in the ice. The vertebrae of the great beast rise in the middle of the cavern as large lumps of bone. Six tunnels lead out of this cavern.

Whenever two or more characters move more than 20 feet beyond the end of the switchback path, echoing roars rise from the east and west tunnels as the followers of Eldrek attack.

MAMMOTH RIDERS

Two **mammoths**, each ridden by a Black Tusk **werewolf**, race into the cavern. If the party contains six or more characters, add one additional mammoth and rider. The mammoths initially attempt a Trampling Charge against intruders, then gore or stomp anyone they can reach. Once the mammoths have charged, the werewolves jump from the backs of their mounts and attack.

RIBS AND VERTEBRAE

Each of the great ribs rising up from the ice of the floor has AC 12, 20 hit points, and immunity to psychic, poison, and necrotic damage. As an action, a rib can be broken and knocked over with a successful DC 16 Strength (Athletics) check. When knocked over, a rib shatters into multiple pieces, and each creature in a 15-foot cone facing away from the creature knocking over the rib must make a DC 14 Dexterity saving throw. On a failure, the target takes 22 (4d10) bludgeoning damage and is knocked prone. On a successful save, the creature takes half as much damage and is not knocked prone.

Each vertebra and standing rib offers partial cover to creatures behind it.

I3. BLACK POOL

A pool of black liquid bubbles in the center of this cavern, fed from a rivulet flowing from the skeletal remains of a huge lupine monstrosity frozen into the wall. Piles of bones, both bestial and humanoid, lie along the walls. Three frost giants are barely visible where they are frozen into the north wall, their helmets jutting out from the ice above them like tombstones.

By day, this cavern is brightly lit by sunlight filtering through the ice ceiling above. As the characters enter, Eldrek the Black Tusk enters through a tunnel opposite their position. In his hybrid werewolf form, Eldrek has a huge gray-white wolf's head atop the torso of a frost giant.

ELDREK'S PACK

Eldrek is accompanied by two **dire wolves** when facing up to five characters, or four dire wolves when facing six or more characters. The dire wolves stay close to each other, making optimal use of their Pack Tactics

trait. If blocked from attacking the characters directly, Eldrek and his dire wolves use the side tunnels to get around behind the characters.

Eldrek the Black Tusk uses the **frost giant** stat block with the following changes:

- He has immunity to bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing damage from nonmagical attacks not made with silvered weapons.
- Three times per day, if Eldrek fails a saving throw in his true form or in hybrid form, he can choose to succeed instead.
- He has the following trait:

Shapechanger. Eldrek can use his action to polymorph into a wolf-frost giant hybrid or into a special wolf form, or back into his true form. His statistics are the same in his true form and his hybrid form. Any equipment he is wearing or carrying isn't transformed. Eldrek reverts to his true form if he dies.

- Eldrek has the following additional attack:

Bite (Hybrid Form Only). *Melee Weapon Attack:* +8 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 19 (3d8 + 6) piercing damage. If the target is a humanoid or a giant, it must succeed on a DC 16 Constitution saving throw or be cursed with werewolf lycanthropy.

- Eldrek has legendary actions:

Eldrek can take 3 legendary actions, choosing from the options below. Only one legendary action option can be used

at a time and only at the end of another creature's turn. Eldrek regains spent legendary actions at the start of his turn.

Bite (Hybrid Form Only). Eldrek makes one bite attack.

Move. Eldrek moves up to his speed.

Greataxe (Costs 2 Actions). Eldrek makes one greataxe attack.

- He has a challenge rating of 12 (8,400 XP).

When Eldrek is reduced to 0 hit points but not killed outright, he does not fall unconscious, but instead transforms into a **winter wolf** with the following changes:

- His size is Huge.
- He has 150 (17d12 + 34) hit points.
- He has immunity to bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing damage from nonmagical attacks not made with silvered weapons.
- His only language is Giant.
- Three times per day, if Eldrek fails a saving throw in wolf form, he can choose to succeed instead.
- The wolf's Strength is 23 (+6), adjusting his bite attack as follows:

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +8 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 19 (3d8 + 6) piercing damage. If the target is a creature, it must succeed on a DC 16 Strength saving throw or be knocked prone. If the target is a humanoid or a giant, it must succeed on a DC 16 Constitution saving throw or be cursed with werewolf lycanthropy.

- He has the following action option:

Multiattack. Eldrek makes two bite attacks.

- His Cold Breath attack deals 36 (8d8) cold damage.
- In wolf form, Eldrek has legendary actions:

Eldrek can take 3 legendary actions in wolf form, choosing from the options below. Only one legendary action option can be used at a time and only at the end of another creature's turn. Eldrek regains spent legendary actions at the start of his turn.

Bite. Eldrek can make a bite attack.

Move. Eldrek moves up to his speed.

Cold Breath (Costs 2 Actions). Eldrek can use his Cold Breath action.

- Eldrek's wolf form has a challenge rating of 12 (8,400 XP).

This winter wolf is the special wolf form Eldrek can change into with his Shapechanger trait.

BLACK POOL

The pool in the center of this cavern is filled with a necrotic liquid flowing from the entombed remains of the lupine creature in the ice. A character who spends an action to study the pool and succeeds on a DC 14 Wisdom (Medicine) check recognizes that the blood carries dangerous yet potent healing power. A creature that ingests the blood must make a DC 16 Constitution saving throw. On a success, the creature regains 4d8

MIKE'S THOUGHTS: ON MULTISTAGE MONSTERS

As of the writing of this book, multistage monsters aren't exactly a standard concept in fifth edition fantasy roleplaying games. But we found this idea to be a great design for some of the bosses in *Fantastic Lairs*, particularly higher-level combat encounters where monsters are typically killed far too easily.

The design of a multistage boss monster is pretty straightforward. The first time it crosses some hit point threshold (typically half its hit points or 0 hit points), it refreshes itself into something new. If dropped to 0 hit points, it comes back fighting, either with temporary hit points or with its regular hit points restored. In this second stage of the fight, a boss does something different. It might gain new abilities, have its existing abilities powered up in some way, or even take on a whole new form. Just remember that as always, the story should drive these mechanical changes as much as possible.

The concept of a multistage boss isn't part of the regular fifth edition rules, so it's possible that you'll discover some weird edge cases when running them. What happens when a character casts *power word kill* on a monster in its first form? I would usually rule that such a move drops the boss to 0 hit points and triggers its final form. But if the battle is going long and the players have given it their all, maybe it just works!

hit points but is cursed with werewolf lycanthropy. On a failure, the creature takes 18 (4d8) necrotic damage and is poisoned for 24 hours.

TREASURE

Mixed in with the bones of the creatures Eldrek has slain over long years in area I3 is the treasure of numerous dead adventurers. This totals 512 cp, 6,127 sp, 1,622 gp, 90 pp, and ten gemstones of mixed types (each worth 100 gp). A set of *gauntlets of ogre power* and a *potion of resistance (necrotic)* can also be found with a search of the cavern.

ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTY

You can adjust the difficulty of this lair in a number of different ways. For more difficult encounters, consider any of the following options:

- Replace the werewolves with lesser frost giant werewolves, using the **frost giant** stat block with the immunities of the **werewolf** stat block. These frost giants can use the Shapechanger trait of the werewolf to transform into **winter wolves** with the same immunities as the werewolf.
- Replace the dire wolves in area I3 with **winter wolves**.
- Increase Eldrek's hit points and give him additional **frost giant** companions.
- For the winter wolf that Eldrek transforms into, start with the stat block of a **young white dragon** or an **adult white dragon**.

To reduce the difficulty of the lair, consider any of the following options:

- Remove Eldrek's ability to take on his winter wolf form automatically.
- Have him take on his winter wolf form when he is reduced to half his hit points or fewer.
- Reduce or remove Eldrek's legendary actions.

EXPANDING THIS LAIR

You can expand this lair by building on or modifying any number of the hooks found within it:

- The skeletal lupine creature in the innermost cavern might be just one of a number of ancient and unholy beasts, the rest of which are still alive. The characters must hunt down and destroy these creatures before their evil spreads.
- The blood flowing from the creature's remains might have some connection not just to lycanthropic power, but to a legendary vampire.
- Eldrek's preparations for war might be a sign of the rise of the Ice Queen, a fey monarch who yearns to blot out the sun and freeze the entire world. Eldrek is only the first champion of the Ice Queen, and it's up to the characters to find and defeat the others.
- The creature whose remains fueled Eldrek's transformation might be one of many such creatures that once ruled the desolate northern wastes. Elaborate labyrinths and forgotten cities created by these beings might still exist deep within the earth. The curse of lycanthropy might have been the end of this mighty civilization, whose treasures are waiting to be discovered by enterprising adventurers.



KORRINGTON ACADEMY

THOMAS PERRINS

Having assumed the identity of the kindly dean of an academy for sorcerers, a malevolent oni has been murdering the academy's most powerful faculty members, and absorbing their power as he attempts to rebuild his guild of assassins.

This lair is optimized for four to five 9th-level characters.

BACKGROUND

Professor Liben Korrington is a kindly, middle-aged halfling sorcerer of celestial heritage—or so most of the students of Korrington Sorcerer Academy think. But in actual fact, Liben is dead, and has been replaced by the infamous Nash Bonegnaw, an oni who once led a crew of murderers for hire known as the Bonegnaw Assassins Guild. After losing all his lackeys to do-gooder adventurers, Nash went into hiding at the academy, killing and taking the place of the school's founder and dean.

Korrington Sorcerer Academy is a secluded compound where young sorcerers learn to control their often-wild magic. The dean's cozy house is now the headquarters for Nash Bonegnaw's revived criminal

guild. Posing as Professor Korrington using his Change Shape action, Nash is actively recruiting older evil students to become the new Bonegnaw assassins. At the same time, he captures the academy's most disliked professors and murders them, as part of a dark ritual that grants the oni enhanced magical power.

INTEGRATING THIS LAIR

Nash's cottage stands on the grounds of the Korrington Sorcerer Academy, which could be sequestered within high walls in a city, hidden deep in a forest, nestled in a secluded valley among high mountains, or in any other location that suits your needs. You can expand the adventure around this lair and its encounters by building out the rest of the campus with classrooms, laboratories, and places where students can safely practice magic and engage in mock duels.

You can use the following hooks to integrate this lair into your campaign, whether as part of a longer adventure or as the focus of a single play session:

- The characters foil an assassination attempt by a Bonegnaw guild member. After capturing the culprit, they learn the location of a guild stronghold, which leads them to another stronghold, and so on. The

characters clear out each stronghold until the only one left is Nash's secret lair in Korrington's cottage. (In this setup, the characters are the adventurers who drove Nash into hiding.)

- The friend of a professor at the academy asks the characters to check in with the academic, who has suddenly stopped sending letters. At the academy, Nash as Professor Korrington tells the characters that the professor went missing some time ago, but clues found during the characters' investigation indicate that the faculty member got mixed up with the Bloodhand Assassins, a rival guild and enemy of the Bonegnaws. In the stronghold of the Bloodhand Assassins, the characters find no sign of the missing professor, but learn that the Bonegnaws operate out of the academy. The characters find enough evidence to piece together that Nash misled them to harm his enemy, and that the missing teacher died at the oni's hands.
- The characters come to the academy hoping to visit an NPC teacher friend. But the teacher is missing, and the characters learn that their friend was supposed to meet with Professor Korrington at the cottage shortly after the last time they were seen.

APPROACHING THE COTTAGE

As the characters approach Korrington's cottage, read or paraphrase the following to set the scene:

The cottage residence of Korrington Sorcerer Academy's founder, Professor Liben Korrington, is a circular building with a domed top. Two towers poke out of the top of the dome, with the south spire standing one story taller than the north spire.

The characters can enter the cottage through its front door, by breaking its windows, or by climbing 20 feet up the side of the building and entering area K6 through the canvas-covered hole in the ceiling. See "Cottage Features" below for information on all those approaches.

COTTAGE FEATURES

The areas of the cottage have the following general features:

- Rooms in the cottage are 10 feet high, with 8-foot-high doorways connecting them. Though a halfling lived here, Liben Korrington often entertained larger visitors.
- Unless otherwise noted, all areas are brightly lit by magically glowing glass angel ornaments that hang from the ceiling on wires.

- The exterior walls of the cottage are smooth marble, and cannot be climbed without the aid of equipment or magic.
- The wooden doors of the cottage have AC 15, 18 hit points, and immunity to poison and psychic damage. A locked door can be picked with a successful DC 15 Dexterity check using thieves' tools, or forced open with a successful DC 20 Strength (Athletics) check.
- The windows of the cottage do not open, and are made of opaque frosted glass. Each window has AC 11, 3 hit points, and immunity to poison and psychic damage. Breaking a window draws the attention of any creatures on the same floor of the cottage, and could draw the attention of any number of **guards** from the academy grounds.

BONEGNAW SORCERERS

The students in the cottage when the characters arrive are all young adults with darkness in their souls, who Nash has recruited to rebuild his assassins' guild. In addition to their spellcasting talents, these students have been trained by the oni in the arts of stealth and deception. Whenever you see a bold reference to a **Bonegnaw sorcerer**, use the **spy** stat block with the following changes:

- The Bonegnaw sorcerer's alignment is neutral evil, and they can speak, write, and understand Common.
- They gain the following trait:

Spellcasting. The Bonegnaw sorcerer is a 5th-level spellcaster. Their spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 13, +5 to hit with spell attacks). They have the following sorcerer spells prepared:

At will: *mage hand, minor illusion, ray of frost, shocking grasp*
1st level (4 slots): *disguise self, expeditious retreat, mage armor*
2nd level (3 slots): *invisibility, suggestion*
3rd level (2 slots): *lightning bolt*

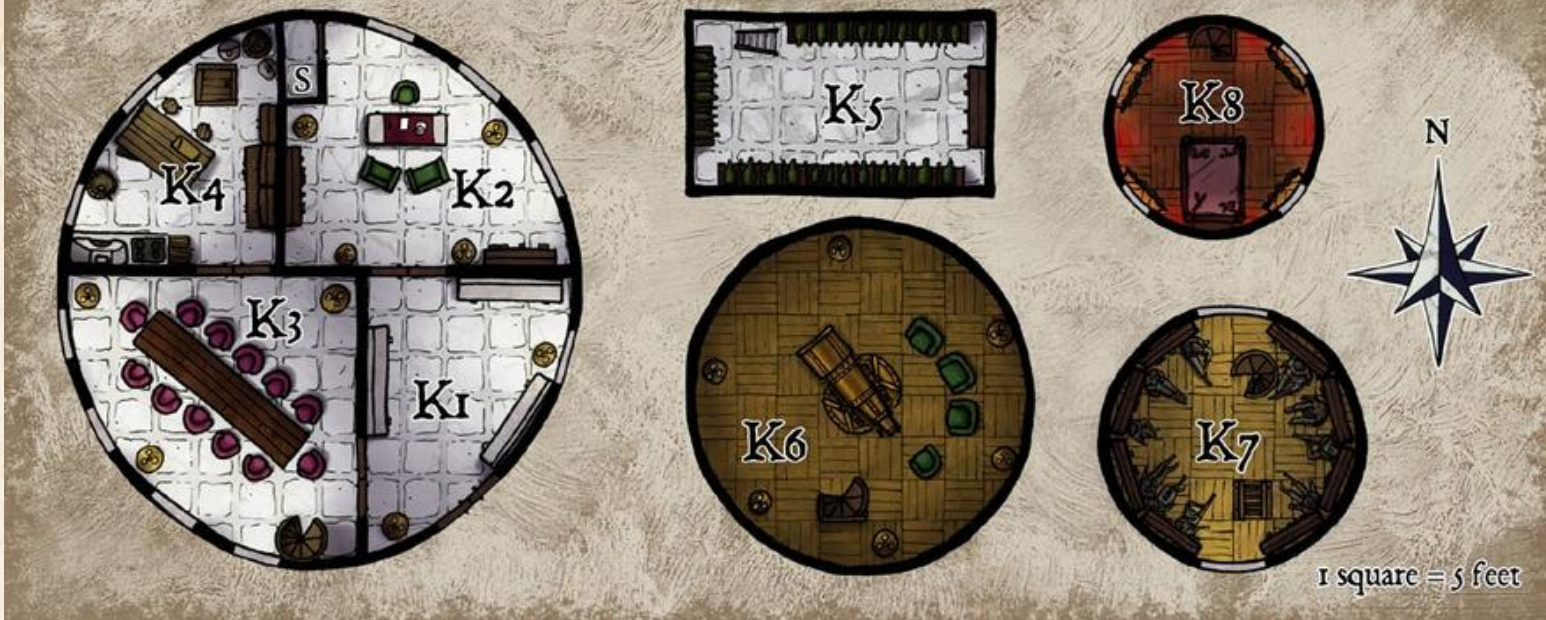
- A Bonegnaw sorcerer has a challenge rating of 2 (450 XP).

As long as Nash maintains his cover and the characters remain in areas K1 or K3, the Bonegnaw sorcerer students working for the oni treat the characters with respect, answering questions about the school and its staff with polite disinterest. With a successful DC 15 Wisdom (Insight) check, a character can tell that the students are hiding something.

A successful DC 17 Charisma (Deception or

NASH'S COVER

The setup of the initial encounters assumes that the characters do not already know that Nash masquerades as Liben. If the characters already know the oni's true identity and come in spoiling for a fight, Nash's allies immediately attack.



Intimidation) check can force a student to reveal the true identity of the oni, the truth behind the missing professors, and information about the cottage's layout.

If the students realize the characters mean to do Nash harm, or if they catch the characters in the cottage outside of areas K1 or K3, they attack. Each Bonegnaw sorcerer fights until reduced to 10 hit points or fewer, then flees. While they fight, the Bonegnaw sorcerers cast *suggestion* to turn characters against their friends, and stay close in melee to take advantage of their Sneak Attack trait. A successful DC 19 Charisma (Intimidation or Persuasion) check made as an action convinces one student to stand down for 1 round. A second successful check made as an action convinces the student to flee.

KORRINGTON'S COTTAGE

The following encounter areas are keyed to the map of Nash Bonegnaw's lair.

K1. ENTRANCE FOYER

Stone benches sitting beneath iron cloak hooks line the walls of this chamber. A portrait depicting Professor Korrington in a cap and gown hangs on the west wall, beneath which sit Elith and Terwa, two human **Bonegnaw sorcerers** posing as the professor's assistants.

The pair greet the characters and tell them that Professor Korrington is busy at the moment. The students then invite the characters to wait in the foyer. If they wait, have each character make a DC 22 Wisdom (Perception) check every 10 minutes. On a success, a character hears muffled screaming coming from above (see area K7). If the characters wait for an hour, Nash Bonegnaw enters the room disguised as Professor Korrington. Having just absorbed Marcus Vergenbliss's life essence, Nash is empowered (see area K8 and the "Nash Bonegnaw" section below). He

invites the characters into his office (area K2) and acts as described in the "Nash Bonegnaw" section.

If combat breaks out in this area, the invisible stalker and the Bonegnaw sorcerers in areas K2 and K3 come to investigate.

K2. KORRINGTON'S OFFICE

The door to Korrington's office is locked (see "Cottage Features" above). Characters who enter see a stone desk with multiple drawers at the center of the room, set with an overstuffed chair sized for a halfling, and with two green couches facing it. A marble bust depicting an angelic face sits on the desk, and a closet door stands closed in the northwest corner of the room.

In addition to what can be seen, an **invisible stalker** keeps watch in the office. If any creature except Nash Bonegnaw or any of the Bonegnaw sorcerers touches the bust or the desk, this guardian immediately attacks. The invisible stalker fights until destroyed.

If a fight breaks out in this room, the Bonegnaw sorcerers in areas K1 and K3 come to investigate.

ANGEL BUST

A *detect magic* spell reveals that the angel bust radiates an aura of divination magic. Any creature that touches the bust must make a DC 15 Wisdom saving throw,

JAMES'S THOUGHTS: INVISIBLE FRUSTRATION

A lot of groups enjoy encounters with creatures such as invisible stalkers, and with spellcasters who make use of the *greater invisibility* spell. But if characters lack the ability to counter the invisible condition, a battle against always-invisible foes can quickly slog to the point of tedium. If your group isn't enjoying a battle with an invisible enemy, have the next hit kill the creature or cause a spellcaster to lose concentration to speed things up.

taking 22 (4d10) psychic damage on a failed save. On a success, the creature establishes a telepathic connection to a deva named Elissias, who lives on one of the celestial planes. A creature that can speak and understand Celestial automatically succeeds on the saving throw. (Nash knows what the bust does but has never touched it, as celestials disgust him.)

Elissias is surprised when contacted through the bust, saying that she has not heard from her friend Professor Korrington in months. The angel gave the professor the bust years before, as a reward for freeing her from imprisonment at the hands of a devil named Zeezilbub. She tells the characters that Korrington used to check in every day, and she is worried about him. He mostly asked her questions about the Outer Planes, but would also talk about how proud of his students and staff he was.

CLOSET

The 10-foot-high closet to the northwest is empty, but a successful DC 13 Intelligence (Investigation) check made to inspect the interior notes a secret trapdoor that swings down from the ceiling. A successful DC 17 Intelligence (Investigation) check made to inspect the trapdoor can tell that a heavy object is set on its top side.

That object is a lead bucket filled with acid. A creature that opens the secret door without being aware of the bucket must make a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw, taking 33 (6d10) acid damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one. A 10-foot-long folding ladder built into the top of the secret trapdoor lowers when it is opened, leading up into area K7.

K3. DINING ROOM

A rectangular table made of dark wood stands at the center of the room, surrounded by twelve plush chairs. Group portraits of various Korrington Sorcerer Academy staff throughout the years hang on the walls, and a spiral staircase to the south leads up.

One **Bonegnaw sorcerer** per character sits at the table, all talking in hushed tones as they pretend to study magic theory. In truth, they are whispering about the latest victim captured by Nash Bonegnaw (see area K8), which can be overheard by any character who succeeds on a DC 17 Wisdom (Perception) check.

If combat breaks out in this room, the Bonegnaw sorcerers and the invisible stalker in areas K1 and K2 come to investigate.

The spiral staircase leads up to a closed door and area K6.

PROTECTIVE WARDS ON STUDENTS

Although the Bonegnaw sorcerers are all adults, they are on the younger side, and some players might feel uncomfortable engaging in lethal combat against them. At your discretion, while on the school grounds, all students of Korrington Academy have a protective ward placed on them, preventing them from dying in case their spells get out of control and they harm themselves or other students.

Whenever a Bonegnaw sorcerer is reduced to 0 hit points, they are knocked unconscious and automatically stabilized. Under the scrutiny of the *detect magic* spell, each warded student radiates an aura of abjuration magic. The magical resources needed to maintain this protective ward mean that faculty and visitors are not under its protection. School budgets are tough!

K4. KITCHEN

The cottage's immaculate kitchen features a large island counter, an oven, a stove, and cabinets lining the walls. One of the cabinets radiates an aura of transmutation magic to a *detect magic* spell, and has an interior kept magically cold to preserve food. Opening the cupboard reveals the heads of the three human cooks who once worked in the kitchen, staring out. (Nash killed and butchered the unfortunate cooks, then stored their remains here to snack on.)

A trapdoor in the north part of the room opens to reveal a ladder leading down to area K5.

K5. WINE CELLAR

Characters coming through the trapdoor in area K4 descend a ladder into this cellar. Wine racks filled with bottles line the walls of this room. Tellar Flegon, a drunk **Bonegnaw sorcerer** is asleep on the dirt floor when the characters arrive here, hugging an empty bottle.

If woken from his slumber by a gentle shake or a loud noise, Tellar doesn't react like other students. His first response is to yell for help, but the students in area K3 know that he's been drinking and ignore his initial cries. If he continues shouting for 2 or more rounds, the students come running. A successful DC 17 Charisma (Deception or Persuasion) check gets Tellar to stop shouting for help and causes him to break down crying.

The drunk student (treat him as poisoned) regrets taking part in capturing faculty members for Nash, and a follow-up successful DC 17 Charisma (Deception or Persuasion) check convinces him to spill what he knows. Tellar is aware of who Nash is, what the oni's plans are, and the layout of the cottage. He is too scared to stand against the oni, though, and begs the

characters to let him hide out in the cellar if they talk about moving against Nash.

K6. OBSERVATORY

This tower room features a domed ceiling with a 10-foot-radius opening covered by a canvas attached to iron hooks. A door set into what appears to be a freestanding closet opens to a spiral staircase that leads down to area K3.

A 15-foot-long brass telescope on a gimbal stands tilted at the center of the room, set next to four plush chairs (one sized for a halfling). Professor Korrington once used the telescope to observe the heavens by night, employing the *mage hand* spell to pull the canvas back. Nash has since turned the telescope into an instrument of destruction.

DANGEROUS MAGES

Venica Tellwith and Mortia Gonish, two human teaching assistants working for Nash, are sitting in the chairs when the characters arrive, debating which faculty member to abduct for the oni next. If they notice the characters, they activate the telescope (see “Telescope Trap” below) and flee to the first floor of the cottage, casting the *arcane lock* spell on the door behind them. They then attempt to rally any allies they can to area K2, where they prepare to make a final stand against the characters.

Venica and Mortia use the **mage** stat block with the following changes:

- Their alignment is chaotic evil, and they can speak, write, and understand Common.
- Each has the *arcane lock* spell prepared instead of the *suggestion* spell.
- Each has an Intelligence score of 12 (+1).
- Each has a Charisma score of 17 (+3), and Charisma is their spellcasting modifier.

TELESCOPE TRAP

A *detect magic* spell reveals that the telescope radiates an aura of transmutation magic. When any creature touches the telescope, it spins in a wild blur in its gimbal for 1 round and turns red hot. The following round on initiative count 20 (losing initiative ties), the telescope flies off the gimbal and bounces around the chamber. Each creature in the room must succeed on a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw or take 16 (3d10) bludgeoning damage and 16 (3d10) fire damage. The telescope repeats this action for a total of 3 rounds.

On its initiative in the fourth round after it was activated, the telescope explodes in a burst of fiery brass shards. Each creature in the chamber must make a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw, taking 22 (4d10) piercing damage and 22 (4d10) fire damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

K7. READING ROOM

A trapdoor in the closet ceiling of area K2 leads to what was once Professor Korrington’s reading room. The place is now a grim repository for the bodies of Nash Bonegnaw’s victims.

A stench of rot permeates this library. Ten humanoid corpses, all missing their eyes and showing gray, shriveled skin, are propped up against the book-laden shelves that line the walls. Muffled moans come from a well-dressed middle-aged human lying at the bottom of the room’s spiral staircase, gagged and bound.

The corpses are the professorial victims of Nash Bonegnaw’s power-absorbing ritual. A character who examines the bodies and succeeds on a DC 15 Intelligence (Arcana) or Wisdom (Medicine) check determines that the corpses have been magically drained of their life essence.

The spiral staircase in this room leads up to area K8.

THE PROFESSOR’S STORY

The captive on the floor is Professor Horace Vergenbliss, a lawful good human who uses the **mage** stat block with the following changes:

- He has 5 hit points remaining.
- He has an Intelligence score of 12 (+1).
- He has a Charisma score of 17 (+3), and Charisma is his spellcasting modifier.
- He has no spell slots remaining.

Horace is restrained by two pairs of manacles, each of which can be unlocked with a key Nash carries or a successful DC 20 Dexterity check using thieves’ tools. However, if any character approaches Horace, he shakes his head frantically and thrusts his bound hands forward. The professor knows Nash cast the *glyph of warding* spell on the cloth gag in his mouth. If a creature other than Nash or Horace touches the gag, the glyph triggers an explosive runes effect that deals thunder damage (save DC 15). The sound of the explosion draws the attention of Nash if he is in area K8, inspiring the oni to turn invisible but remain in that area.

If Horace’s hands are freed, he removes the gag safely himself, thanks the characters, and shakily tells what he knows:

- Professor Korrington is actually an oni in disguise, who has been kidnapping and draining the power from sorcerer professors through a dark ritual.
- Horace learned this after the oni and several of the academy’s students broke into the professor’s campus cottage and captured him and his husband, Marcus.

After dragging both to this area, the oni took great delight in telling Marcus and Horace how he had already drained several other members of the faculty, while showing off their corpses.

- If the characters waited for Professor Korrington and have already met Nash (see area K1), Horace tearfully tells them that Marcus is dead. If the characters did not wait, Horace tells them that the oni took Marcus upstairs to perform the ritual, and begs the characters to rescue his husband.

If Horace regains at least 20 hit points and is given a dagger, a quarterstaff, a light crossbow, or a magic item he can use, he joins the characters to try to get Marcus back (or to take revenge).

K8. BEDROOM

The spiral staircase in area K7 leads up to this room. Nash Bonegnaw has converted Professor Liben Korrington's sunny bedchamber into a dark place of grisly sacrifice.

A red glow pulses from six arcane symbols drawn on the walls in blood, lighting this grim bedchamber. The air smells of iron, and heavy black curtains are pulled across the room's windows to blot out the sky beyond. Across from the staircase, a bed fixed with chains stands in shadow.

Unless the characters waited to talk to Professor Korrington (see area K1), Nash Bonegnaw is here. If the characters waited for the oni or took a short or long rest while exploring the cottage and before coming to this room, the corpse of Marcus Vergenbliss is chained to the bed, and Nash has drained Marcus' life essence (see "Nash Empowered" below). If they did not, then Marcus is alive. He is a neutral good human who uses the **mage** stat block with the following changes:

- He has an Intelligence score of 12 (+1).
- He has a Charisma score of 17 (+3), and Charisma is his spellcasting modifier.
- He has no spell slots remaining.

Marcus is restrained by the manacles chained to the bed. The manacles can be unlocked with a key Nash carries or a successful DC 20 Dexterity check using thieves' tools. If freed, Marcus stands against the oni with the characters, making use of any weapons or magic items that can be offered to him (see the note for Horace in area K7).

NASH'S RITUAL

If Nash is in the bedroom and Marcus is alive when the characters enter, the oni's ritual to consume the

professor's life essence has already begun. Each round on initiative count 0 (losing initiative ties), the runes drawn in blood on the walls flare with light, and each humanoid in the chamber must make a DC 15 Constitution saving throw, taking 5 (1d10) necrotic damage per active symbol on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one. If a creature dies as a result of taking this damage, Nash regains hit points up to his hit point maximum and becomes empowered (see below).

Each symbol radiates an aura of necromancy magic under the scrutiny of a *detect magic* spell. A creature that assesses the symbols with a successful DC 15 Intelligence (Arcana) check knows that a symbol can be destroyed with a *dispel magic* spell or by dealing 15 radiant damage to it.

If Marcus dies, the ritual continues as Nash tries to draw the life essence from one of the characters.

NASH BONEGNAW

Nash Bonegnaw uses the **oni** stat block with the following changes:

- He has 169 (19d10 + 57) hit points.
- His Charisma score is 18 (+4), giving him a +7 bonus to Charisma saving throws, a +10 bonus to Charisma (Deception) checks, and making his spell save DC 15 for his Innate Spellcasting trait.
- Three times per day, when Nash fails a saving throw, he can choose to succeed instead.
- He deals an extra 7 (2d6) necrotic damage when he hits with a melee weapon attack.
- He has a challenge rating of 8 (3,900 XP).

How Nash reacts to the characters depends on how they meet him. If they wait for him in area K1, he enters in the guise of the cheerful Professor Korrington. He invites them into his office and talks with them for a few minutes while his followers in areas K1, K3, and K6 gather outside the door. They then storm inside, battling the characters en masse alongside the oni.

If Nash encounters the characters in area K8, he is in his oni form. Read the following when the characters first see him:

A creature with thin, greasy white hair, unnatural blue skin, sickly yellow eyes, and stubby horns grins at you. This monster is the size of an ogre and reeks of rot, muscles rippling as it flexes clawed hands.

FIGHTING NASH

While battling the characters, Nash laughs, telling them that their power will be his—"Just like Korrington and

the rest.” The oni fights until reduced to 30 hit points or fewer, then attempts to flee.

Nash holds a special magic item—a sparkling blue *celestial gem* stolen from Professor Korrington. Any character who holds the gem can use a bonus action to break it, causing a **deva** named Ariscrissem to appear. The deva serves the creature that broke the gem faithfully for 1 hour or until that creature dies. Ariscrissem gave the gem to Professor Korrington as thanks for his aid on a quest, and Nash uses it as soon as a battle starts.

Ariscrissem does as the oni orders, but any character who succeeds on a DC 13 Wisdom (Insight) check can tell that the deva abhors following Nash’s commands. If the characters kill Nash before defeating Ariscrissem, the deva helps them rout any other servants of Nash from the cottage, then rewards them with treasure (see below).

NASH EMPOWERED

If Nash successfully absorbed Marcus Vergenbliss’s life essence because the characters waited before facing him (see area K1), or if any character is reduced to 0 hit points by Nash’s ritual (see area K8), Nash undergoes the following changes:

- His Regeneration trait allows him to regain 20 hit points at the start of each of his turns if he has at least 1 hit point.
- The extra damage he deals with his melee weapon attacks increases to 14 (4d6) necrotic damage.
- He has a challenge rating of 9 (5,000 XP).

TREASURE

Nash keeps a purse on his belt holding 5,000 gp. If Ariscrissem is not destroyed by the characters, the deva gives them a *ring of shooting stars* and a tiny unicorn statuette carved of diamond (worth 1,250 gp) for destroying Nash.

ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTY

You can adjust the difficulty of this lair in a number of different ways. For more difficult encounters, consider any of the following options:

- Give Nash’s Bonegnaw sorcerers the **mage** stat block, letting them focus on magic rather than melee.

- Give Nash’s teaching assistants 72 hit points, or let them use the **archmage** stat block.
- Make Nash a powerful dragon or a fiend of your choice, with the oni’s Change Shape action.
- Use the **planetary** or **solar** stat block for Ariscrissem.
To reduce the difficulty of the lair, consider any of the following options:
 - Give Nash’s Bonegnaw sorcerers the **acolyte** stat block, or set up that they have already expended their 3rd-level spell slots.
 - Use the **druid** or **priest** stat block for Nash’s teaching assistants.
 - Give Nash 110 hit points, or use the **doppelganger** or **night hag** stat block for him.
 - Make Ariscrissem a **couatl** or a **unicorn**.

EXPANDING THIS LAIR

You can expand this lair by building on or modifying any number of the hooks found within it:

- Nash didn’t kill Professor Liben Korrington, instead trading the sorcerer to devils in exchange for a pile of gold. The professor is now trapped on another plane, but the characters can follow a contract Nash left behind to find Korrington’s fiendish jailers.
- Impressed by the characters’ defeat of Nash, Elissias or Ariscrissem ask them to serve as agents of the celestials in the Material Plane. Either deva can give the characters quests hunting fiends, rescuing celestials, and protecting the innocent.
- With Professor Korrington and many other educators gone from the academy, the remaining staff members ask the characters to travel to distant lands and recruit other sorcerers to come work at the school. Alternatively, the characters might be tasked with recovering diamonds of suitable value to be used as spell components for the *resurrection* spell, allowing the murdered staff members to be brought back to life.



THE REMEMBERED GOD

Calathorr, a mighty aboleth once worshiped as a god, has begun to rebuild their humanoid cult thanks to clever planning and a stroke of luck. If all goes well, the aboleth will enslave an army of followers even grander than their previous cult—by drawing on the energy of a captive kraken.

This lair is optimized for four to five 10th-level characters.

BACKGROUND

Millennia ago, humanoids bowed to the aboleth Calathorr, believing the alien aberration to be their god and creator. Then the true gods revealed themselves and drove the aboleth into the depths. Calathorr wandered the seas, ruling small islands and enslaving sailors on passing ships. But always, these new subjects would eventually bore the aberration, who wanted to wield the full power of a god once more.

Recently, luck delivered Calathorr exactly what they needed to build a new thrall legion. When the gods revealed themselves, the aboleth wasn't the only being chased into the deep. The great kraken Xarsilthaal refused to be cowed, so the gods imprisoned the titan in an enormous amber gem hidden at the bottom of a

sea cave. All was a tireless limbo for the kraken until Calathorr found Xarsilthaal's prison.

The amber encasing Xarsilthaal draws off the kraken's energy, keeping the titan weak—but serving as a source of power that Calathorr has learned to tap into. The aboleth uses the stored energy to broadcast psychic messages to nearby humanoids, drawing victims to the sea cave with empty promises of treasure and power. When the humanoids arrive, the aboleth enslaves them, then sends them out to capture more thralls.

INTEGRATING THIS LAIR

The sea cave that serves as Calathorr's lair and Xarsilthaal's prison can be in any ocean environment you choose. It might be just off the coast or hundreds of miles out to sea, hidden in the depths. The water's surface above the cave entrance could be home to dozens or even hundreds of ships—both those abandoned by the humanoids drawn to the aboleth's service, and those used by the aberration's now-loyal forces to make their raids.

You can use the following hooks to integrate this lair into your campaign, whether as part of a longer adventure or as the focus of a single play session:

- The aboleth's humanoid servants raid seaside settlements, hauling off victims to join their ranks. The characters get caught up in stopping these raids, and eventually track down Calathorr to the sea cave.
- Calathorr's use of Xarsilthaa's energy to widely transmit telepathic messages allows the kraken to slip a secret message to the characters, taking the form of prophetic dreams that tell when and where the aboleth's thralls will attack. If the characters fight the aboleth's forces, Xarsilthaa reaches out again to give them clues about the aboleth's location.
- Mik Turmley (see area G2) could be set up as a friend to the characters, or his family or friends could beseech the characters to help search for him. The characters learn that Mik talked about hearing voices telling him to sail to the sea cave, before taking his keelboat, the *Lollygagger*, and going missing. The characters find the *Lollygagger* anchored near the site of the cave.

BREATHING AND MOVING

The design of this lair assumes that the characters have ways to breathe and move freely underwater. If they don't, the players should be made aware that surviving the lair will be far more difficult.

If you're using this lair as part of a longer adventure, make sure the characters understand that the lair is beneath the waves, and that they have a chance to prepare the proper spells and equipment before diving into danger. If you're using this lair as a surprise development or for a single session of play, consider giving the characters a *spell scroll of water breathing* or a few *potions of water breathing*.

A swimming speed isn't necessary to navigate the lair, but it makes doing so easier. Any characters without a swimming speed move more slowly and have disadvantage on most weapon attacks, as per the game's core rules. Magic items such as the *cloak of the manta ray* or the *ring of swimming* can counteract these penalties, and might be obtained from NPC allies who are willing to trade or lend what they have, or as advance rewards from NPCs who have an interest in the characters undertaking this dangerous quest.

APPROACHING THE CAVE

No matter where you place the sea cave, the characters should have undertaken some amount of swimming, diving, or traversing undersea tunnels to get there. As the characters approach the cave, read or paraphrase the following:

Dim green light leaks out around a black boulder in the stone floor, as if the heavy stone covers a hole that leads to an illuminated chamber below.

GREATEST DESIRES

The aboleth's Probing Telepathy trait allows the aberration to learn a creature's greatest desires. Before running this lair, have each player write down their character's greatest desire on a piece of paper or in a text message, and send it to you in secret. You will use these desires when the characters face Calathorr in area G3.

The heavy boulder blocks the entrance to area G1. A character who examines the boulder and succeeds on a DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check notices that its stony surface is actually gray, and that its black color comes from a fungus that grows over it. A character who succeeds on a DC 15 Intelligence (Nature) check knows that the fungus is called sea bile, that it is poisonous to the touch, and that lightning instantly kills it.

Any creature that touches the fungus with bare skin (including creatures that touch the boulder before the fungus is cleared from it) must succeed on a DC 15 Constitution saving throw or be poisoned for 1 hour. While poisoned this way, the creature is also blinded.

Fungus covers the boulder on all sides except its bottom, which is how Calathorr and their forces move the boulder while within the lair. If the boulder takes any lightning damage, all of the fungus instantly dies.

CALATHORR'S FORCES

Calathorr's servants are all under the effect of the aboleth's Enslave action (which the aberration can use at will in the lair). As such, none of those servants can take reactions. Each also suffers from a disease that allows them to breathe underwater, thanks to the aboleth's tentacle attack (see the **aboleth** stat block for more details). Since Calathorr is empowered by a kraken's energy, they are also able to give each enslaved creature in the lair a swimming speed equal to its walking speed if they do not already have a swimming speed. Unless otherwise noted, the aboleth's servants never show any emotion and rarely speak.

Thanks to Calathorr's enhanced power, the aboleth's forces do not get to make a saving throw against the charmed condition of the aberration's Enslave action when they take the damage. The charmed condition can be removed only by magic such as the *lesser restoration* spell, or by killing the aboleth or breaking Xarsilthaa's prison. If the characters end the charmed condition on a servant, that servant tells the characters what they know of the lair, then flees. Humanoid creatures can be convinced to stay and battle the aboleth with a successful DC 17 Charisma (Persuasion) check.

A creature diseased by Calathorr's tentacle attack doesn't gain slimy, translucent skin, thanks to the aberration's connection to the kraken. (This has allowed the aboleth's forces to go largely unnoticed as they travel far and wide in search of new recruits.)

Calathorr directs their forces telepathically to attack intruders, and all their servants battle to the death. Thanks to the energy drawn from the kraken, the aboleth can telepathically communicate with more than one creature at a time. Under the aboleth's direction, their servants make smart tactical choices, and are willing to sacrifice themselves to do as much damage to the characters as possible.

SEA CAVE FEATURES

The areas of the sea cave have the following general features:

- Cavern ceilings are 20 feet high.
- Phosphorescent algae on the walls lights all areas with a green glow.
- The cave is wholly underwater.

SEA CAVE

The following encounter areas are keyed to the map of Calathorr's lair.

G1. ENTRANCE CAVE

When the characters have moved the boulder and can see into this area, read or paraphrase the following to set the scene:

This cavern would appear to be a natural sea cave, its walls lined with plant life and glowing algae. Except that its rough stone floor is dominated by an enormous turbine embedded into it, set with huge, slowly spinning blades.

SHARK RIDERS

When the characters first enter this area, the cavern is home to a number of glassy-eyed humans in leather armor, who spar with each other while riding saddled sharks. There is one **gladiator** riding a **hunter shark** for every two characters in the party (rounded up). Because all these creatures are controlled by the aboleth, the sharks don't follow the normal rules for mounts, and each can take any action on its turn.

When combat begins in this area, one of the gladiators pushes the turbine lever up (see below) before joining the fray.

TURBINE

A lever on the east wall is automatically noticed by any character who enters the cavern. It moves up and down, and is placed in the middle position when the

characters first enter this area. The lever controls the turbine, which was built by the aboleth's thralls. As part of its movement, a creature can move the lever up, down, or back into the middle position.

When the lever is up, the turbine blades spin in a rapid blur, drawing water through them. Any creature that starts its turn in the cavern and has a swimming speed of 30 feet or less, or that is not mounted on such a creature, must make a DC 13 Strength saving throw. On a failure, the creature is pulled into the turbine's blades, takes 22 (4d10) slashing damage, and is restrained until the start of its next turn.

If the turbine lever is in the middle position, the blades don't spin fast enough to pull creatures toward them, but any creature that comes into contact with the blades for the first time on a turn, or that starts its turn in contact with them, takes 11 (2d10) slashing damage.

If the lever is down, the turbine's blades stop spinning and can be disengaged and lifted up, allowing creatures to safely pass into area G2.

G2. TENTACLE DEN

This cavern features a number of 6-inch-diameter holes drilled scattershot across the floor. (These are cut through the stone to connect to area G3.)

The center of the cavern floor is set with a 10-foot-wide circular brass door, currently closed.

This area is guarded by several humans in splint mail—one **veteran** per character—who stand near an enormous gray **giant shark** covered in battle scars. Once the characters are in this area, they can also spot a tall, thin human standing against the east wall of the room (see "Prisoner" below).

TACTICS

The aboleth's servants attack intruders at once. As they do, a **mage** hidden in the giant shark's throat casts spells against any characters it can see whenever the shark opens its maw to attack. (The characters cannot see the mage initially and might think the shark is casting spells!) Each time a spell is cast, a character can make a DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check, noticing the mage on a success. If the shark dies, the mage crawls from its throat and continues fighting. If the mage dies, the shark swallows her.

When this encounter begins, roll initiative for Calathorr in area G3. If any characters move within 5 feet of the floor of this chamber, the aboleth reaches up through the holes with tentacle attacks.

BRASS DOOR

The door in the floor is locked by a wheel underneath it, accessible from area G3. A creature can force the door open with a successful DC 20 Strength (Athletics) check made as an action. The door has AC 19, 50 hit points, and immunity to poison and psychic damage.

While a character tries to open the door, Calathorr attacks from below.

PRISONER

Mik Turmley, a human **assassin**, is bound to the cavern wall by magically hardened coral chains. Calathorr's thralls bound him there with his equipment at hand after capture, and the aboleth has already used their Enslave action to make Mik charmed. Under the aboleth's direction, Mik plays the part of a prisoner, begging the characters to free him, and offering to help them battle Calathorr.

A mundane lock on the chains can be picked with a successful DC 15 Dexterity check using thieves' tools, or the chains can be broken with a successful DC 17 Strength (Athletics) check. A chain has AC 15, 27 hit points, and immunity to poison and psychic damage. The key to the lock is found in Calathorr's hoard in area G3.

Mik feigns loyalty to the party during combat, but intentionally misses his attacks against other thralls. A character who succeeds on a DC 18 Wisdom (Insight) check made while watching Mik in combat knows that the prisoner is actually under the aboleth's control. If not dealt with before the characters finally face the aboleth in area G3, Mik turns against them at the start of that fight.

G3. ABOLETH'S CAVERN

Jagged, broken coral lines the walls of this cavern, whose floor is covered with scattered piles of coins. An enormous yellow crystal juts up from the stone near the center of the cavern, the shadowy figure of a horrid behemoth trapped within it.

ABOLETHIC DEFENDERS

The aboleth Calathorr dwells and plots in this chamber, defended by one **knight** in shining plate armor for every two characters (rounded up). Calathorr uses the **aboleth** stat block with the following changes:

- They have 216 (28d10 + 56) hit points.
- A creature diseased by Calathorr's tentacle attack doesn't gain slimy, translucent skin, thanks to the aberration's connection to the kraken.
- Calathorr can use their Enslave action at will. The charmed condition imposed by Calathorr can be removed only by magic such as a *lesser restoration* spell, or by killing the aboleth or breaking Xarsilthaa's prison. Calathorr can also willingly end the charmed condition the aboleth has imposed on any creature.
- Calathorr can speak telepathically to more than one creature at a time.



At first, Calathorr speaks with the characters, using the Probing Telepathy feature to learn each character's greatest desire. The aberration entreats the characters to help them conquer the land and sea, promising each character their greatest desire in return. If a desire is something the aboleth is able to offer right away, such as the gold from their hoard (see "Treasure" below), they do so. Calathorr immediately uses the Enslave action on characters who accept their offer (allow characters to intentionally fail the saving throw if they so choose). Characters who refuse the offer are attacked.

TACTICS

If a fight breaks out, the knights try to keep the characters at bay while the aboleth uses Enslave to

get as many characters to fight for them as possible, starting with characters focused on weapon attacks. If all the knights are killed and Calathorr is reduced to 50 hit points or fewer, or if Xarsilthaal is freed (see “Xarsilthaal’s Prison” below), the aboleth flees, heading for the open ocean.

At your discretion, Xarsilthaal can reach out telepathically to one of the characters during this fight, promising a magic item of legendary power if the character breaks the gem.

PSYCHIC CORAL

The coral on the walls in this area is psychically connected to Calathorr’s mind. Any creature that touches the cavern wall for the first time on a turn, or that starts its turn in contact with the wall, takes 33 (6d10) psychic damage.

Each round on initiative count 0 during combat (losing initiative ties), Calathorr picks one creature that isn’t charmed by the aboleth, and has the psychic coral create a momentary illusion of the creature’s greatest desire. The creature must succeed on a DC 15 Wisdom saving throw or immediately move its speed into the coral closest to it.

XARSILTHAAL’S PRISON

The amber gem holds Xarsilthaal, recognizable as a **kraken** with a successful DC 20 Intelligence (Nature) check. A creature that touches the gem can communicate telepathically with Xarsilthaal, and hears the titan demand their freedom.

The gem has AC 19, 100 hit points, and immunity to poison and psychic damage. It radiates an aura of abjuration magic to a *detect magic* spell. If the gem is destroyed, it explodes outward, and all creatures in this area except for Xarsilthaal must make a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw, taking 33 (6d10) piercing damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one. If the kraken is freed, the monstrosity attacks Calathorr, fighting until the aboleth is killed. The kraken chases the aboleth through the cave, breaking apart walls and doors with ease where necessary.

After Calathorr dies, Xarsilthaal thanks the characters. The kraken then vomits forth a magical rod they swallowed long ago (see “Treasure”) as a reward before departing for the depths.

CALATHORR’S HOARD

The coins scattered across this area can be claimed as treasure (see below). While scooping them up, a character automatically finds the key to the lock in area G2.

TREASURE

Calathorr’s hoard contains 3,000 gp. The fragments of amber once used to contain Xarsilthaal are worth a total of 4,000 gp. The rod the kraken gives the characters as a reward is a *rod of lordly might*.

ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTY

You can adjust the difficulty of this lair in a number of different ways. For more difficult encounters, consider any of the following options:

- Replace any of the human thralls with humanoids or NPCs of a greater challenge rating.
- Replace the hunter sharks with **killer whales** or **chuuls**.
- Replace the giant shark with a **hydra**.
- Replace the aboleth with a psychic **storm giant**, a **dragon turtle**, or a **kraken**, giving any of those creatures the aboleth’s Enslave action and the ability to disease creatures with a melee attack.

To reduce the difficulty of the lair, consider any of the following options:

- Replace any of the human thralls with humanoids or NPCs of a lower challenge rating.
- Replace the hunter sharks with **reef sharks** and the giant shark with a **hunter shark**. (In the latter event, make the mage in the shark’s mouth a halfling or gnome under the reduce effect of the *enlarge/reduce* spell.)
- Replace the aboleth with a **sea hag** or a psychic **young green dragon**, giving either creature the aboleth’s Enslave action and ability to disease creatures with a melee attack.

EXPANDING THIS LAIR

You can expand this lair by building on or modifying any number of the hooks found within it:

- If the characters freed Xarsilthaal, the kraken begins gathering aberration and giant allies, plotting to take over the land and sea. As the attacks of the kraken’s servants increase, people learn that the characters are responsible for the titan’s release, and call on them to fix their error.
- Calathorr had thralls raiding seaside towns throughout the world. Though they are likely no longer dominated by the aboleth, these diseased humanoids need help if they ever want to live outside the water. The characters can take to the seas to find and heal them.
- If Calathorr escapes, the aboleth searches for other aboleths exiled by the gods. Instead of gathering an army of humanoids, the aboleths raise a massive army of chuuls that raid the land for magic items to take back to their masters.



DRAGON MUMMY'S RAGE

For thousands of years, Ashtox the Howling Rage has screamed in his sealed tomb at the former subjects who betrayed and imprisoned him. But the gold dragonborn mummy lord is finally free, and has begun to build an undead army that will win back his lost lands and power—unless the characters can stop him.

This lair is optimized for four to five 12th-level characters.

BACKGROUND

The despotic gold dragonborn warlord known as Ashtox the Howling Rage yearned for a grand monument honoring him to be constructed during his lifetime, forcing his subjects to build a massive obsidian tomb that would eventually house his remains. The dragonborn cared little for the safety of the laborers, pushing them to build ever faster, and the construction of the grand wonder cost the lives of hundreds. When the tomb was completed, the laborers rioted, killing Ashtox and his army. But for those who overthrew him, death was not enough punishment for the warlord.

The laborers wrapped Ashtox in magic cloth that gave him an eternal undead existence as a mummy, then sealed the tyrant within his tomb. For thousands of years, the obsidian vault stood undisturbed, but dragonborn local to the area would claim that if one put an ear to the wall, they would hear Ashtox screaming in anger and pounding his fists against the stones of the tomb. In time, Ashtox broke through those walls, and the undead tyrant's servants now abduct dragonborn in the night, turning them into lesser mummies as punishment for their sin of not freeing him. With plans afoot to build an undead army, Ashtox is ready to resume conquering the world.

INTEGRATING THIS LAIR

You can place Ashtox's tomb near any settlement of dragonborn in your campaign world, and can decide whether the mummy lord breached the tomb with his own power, or as the result of natural disaster or outside intervention. By the time the characters travel to the tomb to face the mummy lord, they might find nearby settlements destroyed, and crawling with dragonborn mummies and other undead that serve Ashtox.

You can use the following hooks to integrate this lair into your campaign, whether as part of a longer adventure or as the focus of a single play session:

- Ashtox has already built a significant army, and his mummy-led forces have conquered numerous settlements. The characters have fought against those undead, routing them out of every location and driving them back to the tomb, where the warlord prepares to make his final stand.
- The characters are friends with the members of an elite unit of dragonborn soldiers. When a number of those soldiers begin to go missing one by one, the survivors ask the characters for protection. After a series of encounters defending the troops from dragonborn mummies, the characters track the undead back to the tomb.
- A dragonborn NPC the characters know asks them to investigate the disappearance of several friends from a settlement close to the tomb. Clues lead the characters to the site, and the revelation that the tomb has been opened.
- Venotriss, a young green dragon, has been attacking elven settlements in a forest near the tomb. After fighting the servants of the green dragon, the characters track Venotriss but discover only an empty lair. However, clues point toward the tomb as the place where the dragon might be found.

APPROACHING THE TOMB

As the characters approach the tomb, read or paraphrase the following to set the scene:

A weathered, twenty-foot-tall obsidian statue of a screaming dragonborn swinging a massive sword stands atop a beveled building shaped of the same shining black stone. The only doorway into the structure is sealed by a slab carved with faded Draconic runes. However, a chill wind howls across a hole punched through the wall on the east side of the tomb, which is large enough for a human to comfortably stride through.

A *glyph of warding* spell is placed on the wall of the tomb just north of the hole leading to area M1, and can be noticed with a successful DC 17 Intelligence (Investigation) check. The first non-undead creature that moves past the glyph triggers it, casting the *harm* spell (save DC 17) on that creature.

The stone block that seals the entrance to area M2 has AC 17, 300 hit points, a damage threshold of 30, and immunity to necrotic, poison, and psychic damage. It can be pulled or pushed from the entrance with a successful DC 30 Strength (Athletics) check.

The Draconic carving on the stone block reads: “Here screams the restless form of Ashtox the Howling Rage, a cruel tyrant who deserves a fate worse than death.” If the characters haven’t already learned the history of Ashtox from another source, a successful DC 15 Intelligence (History) check allows a character to recall the lore.

TOMB MUMMIES

Ashtox is served by dragonborn mummies within the tomb, which inherit some of the traits of their living forms. Whenever you see a bold reference to a **dragonborn mummy**, use the **mummy** stat block with the following change: A dragonborn mummy does not have vulnerability to fire damage, but instead has resistance to fire damage.

TOMB FEATURES

The areas of the tomb have the following general features:

- Ceilings in the tomb are 15 feet high, with 8-foot-high doorways connecting areas.
- The interior doors are well-hinged stone slabs that open easily.
- The interior is dark.
- A horrible stench of death and decay fills the tomb. Each time a creature enters a new area of the tomb, it must succeed on a DC 15 Constitution saving throw or be poisoned for 1 minute. A creature that succeeds on this saving throw does not need to make it again for another 24 hours.

ASHTOX’S TOMB

The following encounter areas are keyed to the map of the mummy lord’s lair.

M1. FALSE CRYPT

This chamber was originally built to deter grave robbers, and is Ashtox’s first line of defense against intruders.

Twelve heavy stone sarcophagi, each carved with the visage of a gold dragonborn knight, stand upright along the walls of this chamber. An octagonal dais at center holds up a gold coffin with a lid carved to look like a resting, regal dragonborn with ruby gemstones for eyes.

MUMMY GUARDIANS

When any character enters this area, the sarcophagi along the walls open magically, and two **dragonborn mummies** for every member of the party emerge to attack. When enough mummies have been destroyed

that the characters outnumber the mummies, the mummy closest to the gold coffin tries to open it.

GOLD COFFIN

A character proficient with jeweler's tools or who succeeds on a DC 15 Intelligence (Investigation) check recognizes that the coffin is not actually gold but pyrite, a mineral that looks like gold but is worth far less. The *detect magic* spell reveals that the ruby eyes in the lid radiate auras of evocation magic, and that the base of the coffin radiates an aura of conjuration magic. When a non-undead creature touches one of the rubies, it explodes to create the effect of a *fireball* spell (save DC 17) centered on itself.

A creature that can reach the coffin can lift its lightweight lid as an action. When the coffin opens, the magic in its base creates the effect of an *insect plague* spell (save DC 17), conjuring a locust swarm that erupts from inside the coffin. This swarm centers on the nearest non-undead creature.

M2. ENTRANCE HALL

Covered in faded gold paint, the enormous stone head of a gold dragon is built into the north wall of this hall. A *detect magic* spell reveals that the head radiates an aura of illusion magic.

When any non-undead creature enters this area, the head magically animates to speak in Draconic, calling out, "You dare enter the tomb of Ashtox the Howling Rage? Violators! Robbers! Unworthy! May your senses betray you, just as you have forsaken the demigod Ashtox."

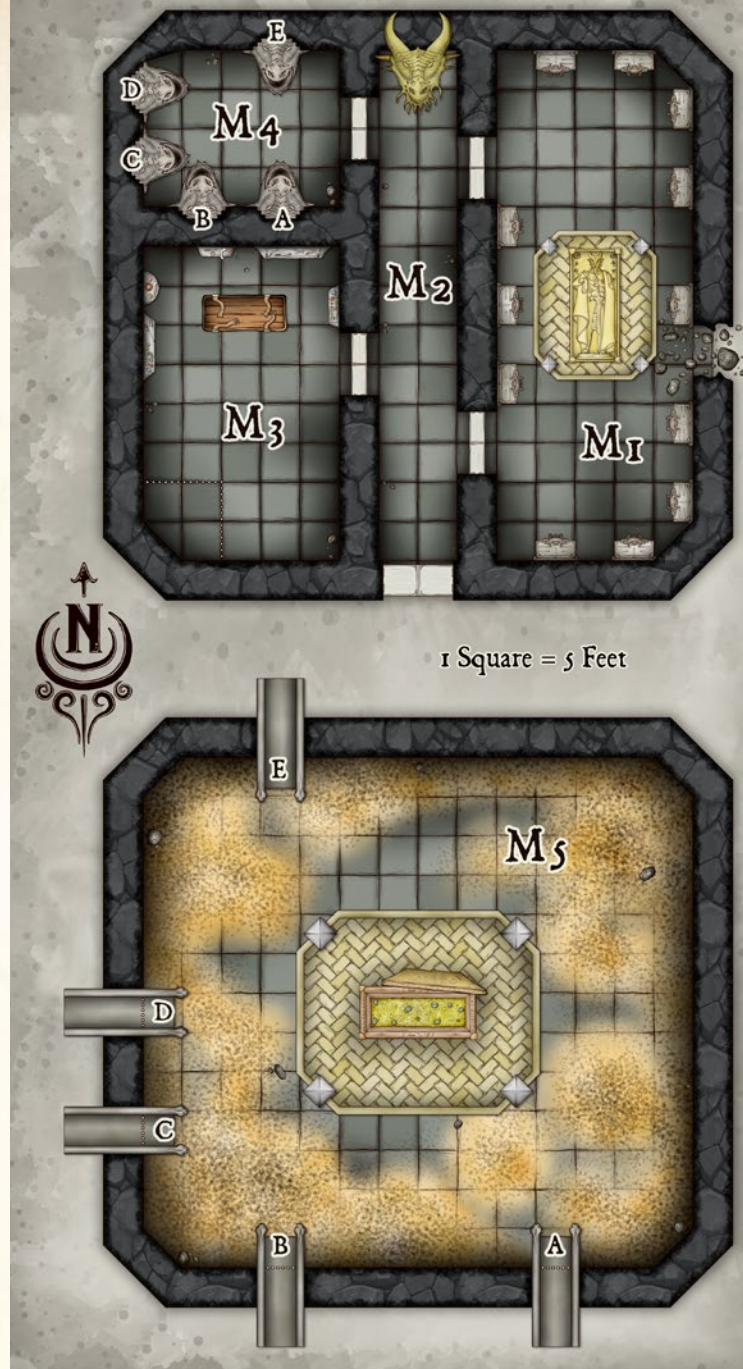
Each non-undead creature in the chamber when the dragon speaks must succeed on a DC 13 Wisdom saving throw or be cursed. While cursed in this way, the creature's eyes constantly weep blood. Whenever a cursed creature targets an enemy with an attack and that enemy is within 5 feet of one or more of the cursed creature's allies, roll any die. If the number rolled is odd, the cursed creature targets one of its allies with the attack instead, as chosen by the GM.

The curse can be removed with the *remove curse* spell or similar magic.

M3. MUMMY WORKSHOP

Ashtox turned this area into a prison and a mummy-making workshop. Shelves and racks along the walls hold equipment and surgical tools. A table set with leather binding straps stands to the north, and a 10-foot-square iron cage stands in the southwest corner.

When the characters first enter this area, an incorporeal dragonborn spirit made of black shadow floats about the chamber, giving orders to several chanting mummies that hold scalpels, hooks, and other



surgical tools. The cage holds four bruised and gagged gold dragonborn, while a screaming gold dragonborn is strapped to the table, their body scoured by green, crackling energy.

UNDEAD SERVANTS

When Ashtox was finally freed from his tomb, he raised the spirit of one of his advisors, Malish Kanda, from the dead. Now a **wraith**, she oversees undead servants consisting of two **dragonborn mummies** plus one more dragonborn mummy per character.

MALISH'S RITUAL

Malish and the mummies are performing a ritual to turn Furigon, the gold dragonborn **commoner** on the table, into a mummy. If the ritual is not interrupted, Furigon rises from the table as a **dragonborn mummy**

at the start of the third round of combat. A character who uses an action to unstrap Furigon from the table takes 21 (6d6) necrotic damage and interrupts the ritual. Destroying Malish also interrupts the ritual.

IRON CAGE

The iron cage's locked door can be picked with a successful DC 15 Dexterity check using thieves' tools, or forced open with a successful DC 20 Strength check. The cage has AC 19, 27 hit points, and immunity to poison and psychic damage. A character who succeeds on a DC 14 Wisdom (Perception) check while searching the room notices the key to the cage hanging on a hook on the underside of the table to the north.

PRISONERS

The prisoners, named Olvis, Tubin, Usco, and Zonks, are all neutral gold dragonborn **commoners** who were captured by Ashtox's forces. Several other dragonborn who were captured alongside them have already been turned into mummies. The dragonborn are terrified and wish to leave the tomb immediately.

M4. SIDE CHAMBER

Five stone dragon heads jut out from the walls of this chamber. Each head's mouth is open as if in a horrifying roar, revealing a tunnel in the wall that leads down into darkness.

The stone dragon heads are carved of the same obsidian as the rest of the tomb, and open up to tunnels 3 feet wide. A *detect magic* spell reveals that each head except for E radiates auras of abjuration and necromancy magic.

When the first character enters this area, roll for initiative. Each round on initiative count 0 (losing initiative ties), all the dragon heads except for E emit a pulse of necrotic energy. Each creature in the area must make a DC 17 Constitution saving throw, taking 44 (8d10) necrotic damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one. A creature with a passive Wisdom (Perception) score of 15 or higher notices that head E emits no pulse of energy.

TUNNEL SLIDES

The 3-foot-wide tunnel in each dragon mouth opens into a long, twisting tunnel that descends into darkness and leads to area M5 below this chamber. A creature examining the slides who succeeds on a DC 17 Intelligence (Investigation) check can tell that the north slide (E) is more worn than the others, as if many creatures have been sliding down or climbing up it.

When any creature enters slide A, B, C, or D, the slide targets them with a *dispel magic* spell as if cast with a 5th-level spell slot, a precaution meant to strip magical defenses from intruders. Casting *dispel magic* on one of the slides suppresses its own *dispel magic* effect for 1 hour. Each slide ends in area M5, with the ends of slides A through D blocked off by bars that turn the slides into cages set within the walls. See that area for more details.

From below, a creature can climb up a slide with a successful DC 15 Strength (Athletics) check.

M5. MUMMY LORD'S CRYPT

A raised dais at the center of this area holds a golden sarcophagus whose lid has been removed and lies to one side. The floor of the chamber is covered by uncountable numbers of beetles, crawling over one another to form an undulating carpet of chitin, their horrid chittering filling the rot-pungent air.

ASHTOX AND VENOTRISS

Ashtox the Howling Rage lairs in this chamber, plotting his next moves under the protection of Venotriess, a green dragon Ashtox recently killed and mummified. The gold dragonborn mummy wears shining plate armor, his bandages falling asunder in places to reveal shriveled, gold-scaled skin.

Ashtox uses the **mummy lord** stat block with the following changes:

- He has 143 (19d8 + 57) hit points.
- He speaks Common and Draconic.
- Ashtox does not have vulnerability to fire damage, but instead has resistance to fire damage.
- He wears a suit of +3 *plate armor*, giving him AC 21.

Venotriess uses the **young green dragon** stat block with the following changes:

- She is undead.
- She has 208 hit points.
- She is immune to necrotic and poison damage, and to bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing damage from nonmagical attacks.
- She is immune to the charmed, frightened, paralyzed, and poisoned conditions, and immune to exhaustion.

TACTICS

Venotriess puts herself between Ashtox and the characters, defending her master against all threats. She uses her Poison Breath as often as possible, knowing that even if Ashtox is in the line of fire, he is immune to its effect.

Ashtox starts combat casting his highest-level spells that deal damage at a distance, including *harm*, *contagion*, and *insect plague*. If any characters are trapped at the bottom of the slides, he focuses his efforts on them as Venotriss deals with attackers. If a character enters melee with Ashtox, the mummy lord uses Multiattack to attack with his Rotting Fist and Dreadful Glare. If Ashtox cannot escape melee, he climbs on Venotriss's back, riding the dragon like a mount to try to keep himself out of characters' melee reach. Both mummies fight until destroyed.

BARRED SLIDES

If the characters come down to this area from area M4 by way of slides A through D, a hinged grate of bars at the end of each of those slides leaves them caged. Creatures on one side of the bars have half cover from attacks made from the opposite side.

Each set of bars has AC 19, 50 hit points, and immunity to necrotic, poison, and psychic damage. The bars are locked but can be opened with a successful DC 17 Dexterity check using thieves' tools, or forced open with a successful DC 22 Strength check.

BEETLE SWARM

Whenever a non-undead creature starts its turn touching the floor in this area (but not while standing on the dais that holds the sarcophagus), it must succeed on a DC 14 Dexterity (Acrobatics) check or take 22 (4d10) piercing damage from the beetles covering the floor, which crawl up and into clothes and armor to bite characters.

The massive beetle swarm has AC 12 and 150 hit points. If the swarm is reduced to 75 hit points or fewer, the piercing damage taken by a creature that fails its Dexterity (Acrobatics) check is reduced to 11 (2d10). When Ashtox dies, the beetles disperse.

TREASURE

Ashtox wears a suit of +3 *plate armor*. His sarcophagus contains six diamonds (worth 1,000 gp each) and 16,000 gp.

ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTY

You can adjust the difficulty of this lair in a number of different ways. For more difficult encounters, consider any of the following options:

- For the dragonborn mummies, use the **vampire spawn** or **wraith** stat block.
- Make Malish Kanda a **vampire**.
- Have Venotriss use any adult or ancient dragon stat block.
- Use the **lich** stat block for Ashtox the Howling Rage.
To reduce the difficulty of the lair, consider any of the following options:
 - Use the **ghoul** or **zombie** stat block for the dragonborn mummies.
 - Make Malish Kanda a **ghast** or **specter**.
 - Have Venotriss use the stat block of a **young black dragon**, a **young white dragon**, or any dragon wyrmling.
 - Use the **mummy**, **vampire**, **wight**, or **wraith** stat block for Ashtox.

EXPANDING THIS LAIR

You can expand this lair by building on or modifying any number of the hooks found within it:

- Ashtox wasn't working alone, having courted the favor of a dragonborn lich named Korixas. With Ashtox's destruction, Korixas absorbs the rest of Ashtox's army into her own and plans to continue the mummy lord's work.
- A group of people who celebrated the return of Ashtox and a renewed call to conquer take up the mummy's cause after he dies. This band begins building an army to take over the land, and plots to make an example of the characters for the sin of destroying Ashtox.
- Tollicas, an adult green dragon and the father of Venotriss, seeks vengeance for his daughter's death. With Ashtox dead, Tollicas takes his anger out on the settlements nearest the tomb, and it is up to the characters to stop the dragon.



VALENTYNE'S LEGACY

NIKKI DAVIES

When the clouds darken and blood rains down from the sky, villagers and townsfolk flee, for they know that Delekan the Bloodbathed is coming.

Yet they are already too late. An army of undead has circled them, driving them under Delekan's floating black citadel, Bloodstorm. From above, the tolling of a terrible bell rings out as folk are exsanguinated, their blood drawn up into the citadel for its terrible lord. Then the dead rise, joining Delekan's army as they march to the next town.

This lair is optimized for four to five 14th-level characters.

BACKGROUND

Delekan the Bloodbathed was once a cloud giant warrior of the Highwinds, a formidable cloud giant clan. The Highwinds battled against Valentyne Nightwind, an elf vampire and emperor of an undead army that controlled a vast territory. Seeing Delekan's strength during the battles in which the giant's clan was destroyed, Valentyne spent months converting the cloud giant into their vampire thrall—and eventually, their staunchest ally.

For hundreds of years, Delekan and Valentyne scoured the land, feeding off entire kingdoms. Delekan loved his patron, serving them unquestioningly. Thus, his despair was endless when a group of adventurers stole into Valentyne's citadel and murdered the vampire, scattering their undead armies and bathing the land in sunlight once again.

Freed from his bond to Valentyne and yet ravaged by heartbreak, Delekan surrendered himself to his own sarcophagus, hiding himself away in the mountains for nearly a millennium. Then recently, a group of tomb robbers broke into Delekan's vault and opened his sarcophagus. A single drop of blood was enough to awaken the husk of the giant vampire, whose rage was swift and merciless as he devoured the tomb robbers to let their blood course through him.

Filled again with an unending hunger, Delekan called in favors from three liches indebted to his master, known as the Twilight Council. With their spellcraft, the liches cut the giant's citadel, known as Bloodstorm, free of the mountainside. And so Bloodstorm began its dark journey soaring across the land, a blood-red haze falling constantly beneath it. But when the citadel passes over a settlement, the flow of that rain reverses

as the tolling of its dread bell cracks bodies like eggs. With their blood drawn up and into the citadel, the desiccated dead rise as hungry zombie husks. Some claim to have seen a huge bloody bird flying around Bloodstorm, screeching as the citadel's death rain rises. Then Bloodstorm and its ever-growing zombie army move onward, pushing toward the next settlement as the cycle continues.

INTEGRATING THIS LAIR

You can use the following hooks to integrate this lair into your campaign, whether as part of a longer adventure or as the focus of a single play session:

- Delekan's rise might be a recent historical development as the characters reach higher levels in your campaign. The characters might learn that whole towns and villages are suddenly emptying, their residents vanished and never seen again. Rumors speak of a storm flowing over the countryside, devouring settlements in its wake. Prophecies speak of a newly risen horror—a blood-soaked cloud giant awakened from eternal slumber.
- Delekan's citadel might be on another plane, a shadowy image of the mortal world into which the characters step. These high-level adventurers could learn that Delekan's assault is taking place in this other world, but they are obliged to stop it if they are to receive the item or information they require for a larger quest. It is also possible that Delekan plans to bring his citadel between dimensions, ready to devour the people of the world once he has finished with the souls of those in the shadow realm.
- As part of a larger campaign, Delekan the Bloodbathed might be a main villain the characters hope to defeat. The characters could start their adventures fighting off small groups of the undead formed by Delekan's bloody citadel. Bloodstorm's passage could be slow, moving across the countryside to destroy a town every few months as its shambling zombie army grows. After fighting powerful undead captains and cultists of Delekan who inspire folk to give themselves willingly to death, the characters can travel to Delekan's citadel and face off against the cloud giant vampire in his lair.

APPROACHING THE CITADEL

The three locations set up in this lair are purposefully separated. You can join all three together as the main areas of a small dungeon by simply adding a T-shaped hallway between them. Or you might split them out in any number of ways. Each area might be part of a much larger Bloodstorm citadel that you fill out with numerous other chambers. Or they might be separate locations scattered across the world or the planes. Such

a setup creates a potentially expansive campaign, as the characters must seek out and find each of these locations if they hope to truly stop Delekan.

If you do place the different areas of the lair in far-flung or extraplanar locations, you'll need to set up—and make the players aware—that the characters will need to make use of magic to quickly travel to Delekan's tomb after destroying the vampire's physical form, or risk his return.

CITADEL FEATURES

Bloodstorm Citadel is an ancient castle set atop a rock mote floating high above the ground. The rock is saturated with the blood of those exsanguinated by the citadel's magic, with that blood constantly raining down again where the citadel flies. Each creature that is not undead or a construct that starts its turn underneath the citadel and makes contact with the blood rain must make a DC 14 Constitution saving throw, taking 14 (4d6) necrotic damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one. A creature killed by this damage rises as a **zombie** after 1d4 rounds.

Regardless of their location, the three areas of the lair share the following general features:

- Halls and chambers are ornately carved from black granite.
- All areas are dimly lit by ruby gemstones set into the walls, shedding red light.
- The halls are 20 feet wide and 25 feet tall to accommodate Delekan's size.

The citadel proper is always surrounded by black storm clouds, and is under the effect of a permanent *forbiddance* spell targeting celestial creatures (another gift of the liches of the Twilight Council). This prevents another *forbiddance* spell from being cast in the lair.

FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS

When the citadel is over a village, Delekan rings the dark bell in area V2 to forcefully exsanguinate all living creatures underneath and around the citadel. When the bell is rung, each creature that is not a construct, elemental, or undead within 360 feet of the floating castle must make a DC 16 Constitution saving throw. On a failure, a creature takes 28 (8d6) necrotic damage and its hit point maximum is reduced by an amount equal to the damage taken. On a success, the creature takes half as much damage and its hit point maximum is not reduced. A creature killed by this damage rises as an undead after 1d4 rounds—either a **zombie** (if the creature's hit point maximum was 20 or lower) or a **wight**.

BLOODSTORM CITADEL

The following encounter areas are keyed to the map of Delekan's lair.

V1. OSSUARY OF VALENTYNE NIGHTWIND

This chamber is the private ossuary of Valentyne Nightwind, the vampire lord who created Delekan. When the characters enter this area, read or paraphrase the following to set the scene:

Ten iron-walled tombs, each decorated with the images of armored humanoids, line this chamber's circular wall. A moat of flowing red blood surrounds a large stepped platform in the middle of the area. On a podium at the center of the platform sits a fanged humanoid skull.

Valentyne's spirit still lingers in the fanged skull on the podium, and the vampire's greatest knights remain ready to defend him even in death.

IRON TOMBS

The doors to all the iron tombs are closed. A door can be opened only by forcing it with a successful DC 20 Strength check, revealing a vampire knight or vampire mage within the tomb—and opening the other tombs (see below).

VAMPIRE KNIGHTS AND VAMPIRE MAGES

If any tomb is forced open, if any creature crosses the blood moat (including by flying or teleporting), or if the skull is touched or moved, multiple tomb doors magically open up. From the tombs closest to the entrance, one vampire knight per character emerges to attack. Each vampire knight uses the **vampire spawn** stat block with the following changes:

- They wear plate armor and have AC 18.
- Each wields a blood-covered greatsword and gains the following attack, which can be made as part of the vampire knight's Multiattack action.
Greatsword. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +6 to hit, reach 5 ft., one creature. *Hit:* 10 (2d6 + 3) slashing damage and 7 (2d6) necrotic damage.
- They can cast the *misty step* and *hold person* spells at will (save DC 12).
- A vampire knight has a challenge rating of 7 (2,900 XP).

At the same time the knights appear near the entrance, the tombs farthest from the entrance open up and two vampire mages emerge, attacking from range. (Use only one vampire mage if there are three or fewer characters in the party.) The mages use their Spider Climb trait to ascend the wall of the ossuary and stay

away from melee attackers. A vampire mage uses the **vampire spawn** stat block with the following changes:

- They have an Intelligence score of 18 (+4).
- They have the Spellcasting trait:
The vampire mage is a 9th-level spellcaster. Their spellcasting ability is Intelligence (spell save DC 15, +7 to hit with spell attacks). The mage has the following wizard spells prepared:
Cantrips (at will): *fire bolt, chill touch, mage hand, prestidigitation*
1st level (4 slots): *charm person, magic missile, shield*
2nd level (3 slots): *misty step, scorching ray*
3rd level (3 slots): *counterspell, fireball, fly, lightning bolt*
4th level (3 slots): *greater invisibility, ice storm*
5th level (1 slot): *cone of cold*
- They have the vampire's Misty Escape trait.
- A vampire mage has a challenge rating of 8 (3,900 XP).

Any vampire knight or vampire mage reduced to 0 hit points transforms into a bloody mist and flows back into their empty tomb, whose door magically closes behind them. They then take their material form and begin to regenerate unless destroyed.

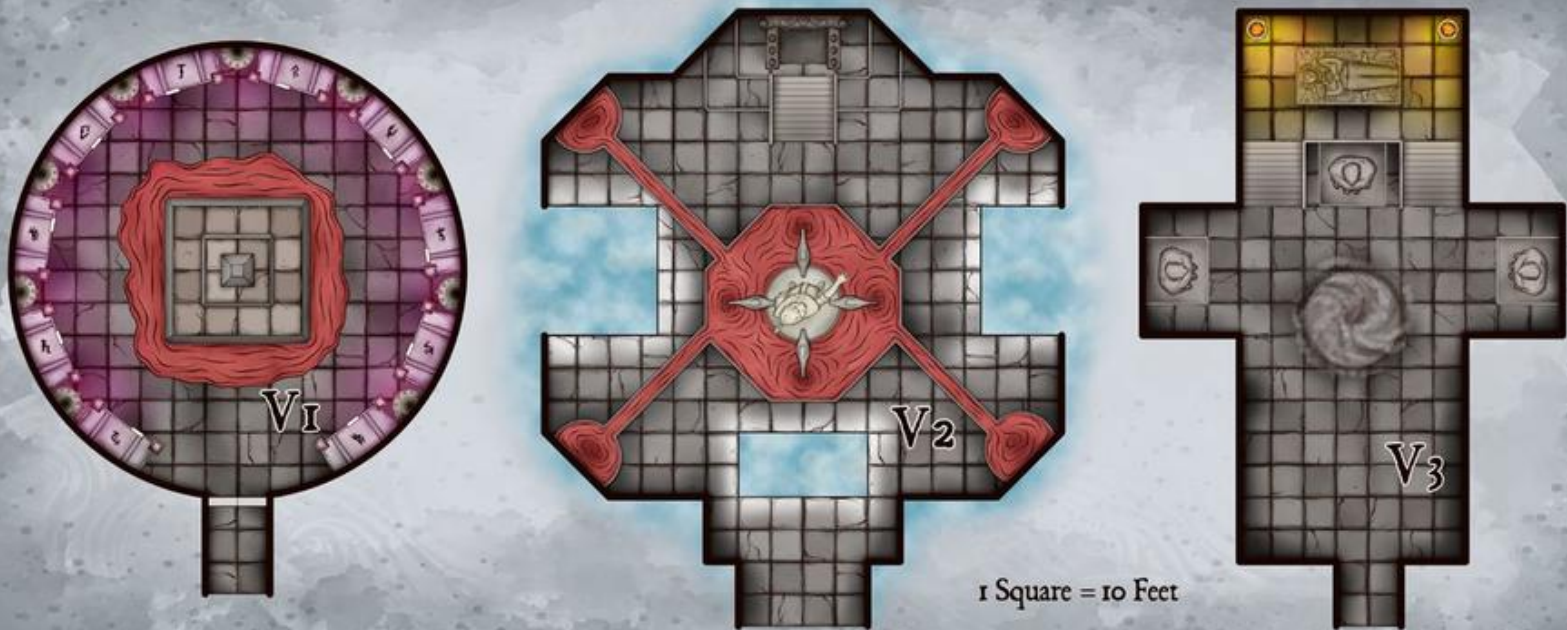
MOAT OF BLOOD

The moat surrounding the central platform is filled with necrotic blood. Any non-undead creature that enters the blood moat for the first time on a turn or starts its turn there must make a DC 18 Constitution saving throw, taking 21 (6d6) necrotic damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one. A vampire knight or vampire mage that starts their turn in the blood moat regains 20 hit points with its Regeneration trait, and that trait functions even if the creature took radiant damage or damage from holy water on their previous turn.

SKULL OF VALENTYNE NIGHTWIND

During the battle with the vampire spawn, any character with a passive Wisdom (Perception) score of 16 or higher notices a ghostly elven form standing atop the stepped platform near the skull, wearing white robes, and with pale skin, black eyes, and short black hair. The spirit observes the battle but does not react and cannot be interacted with. If a character approaches the skull while the vampire knights and vampire mages still fight, those creatures rush to defend the skull, screaming at the characters' sacrilegious actions.

Valentyne Nightwind is the neutral spirit of the former elf vampire, and is immune to all damage and effects. Though Valentyne once scoured the land killing thousands of people, centuries of isolation within this vault have forced the vampire to reckon the weight of their past actions. Valentyne's spirit has tried sharing their insights with Delekan when the cloud giant visits his former master's crypt, imploring him to give up his



evil ways. However, Delekan has assumed each time that Valentyne's spirit is his own doubt and weakness speaking to him, and he pushes the idea away.

Valentyne's spirit understands that Delekan must be stopped, as Valentyne was stopped, and the spirit lets the characters know of the locations of Delekan's throne room (area V2), where the vampire giant can be found, and his sarcophagus (area V3), where he can be destroyed permanently and given peace. Valentyne can also tell the characters about the black iron bell in area V2.

Valentyne's spirit permanently haunts their skull on the center platform, which reforms if it is destroyed. Eternity trapped within the skull is Valentyne's cursed fate for their foul deeds.

V2. BLOODFOUNTAIN THRONE

Even if the three parts of the lair are in different locations, this part of the lair is in Delekan's floating sky castle.

Black storm clouds rage in the open sky above this chamber. Three areas of the floor end in a sheer drop down to the ground, hundreds of feet below the castle. A huge throne shaped of black stone sits atop a stepped platform on the far side of the area.

A central fountain is filled with blood, and channels that foul liquid to pools at the four corners of the chamber. At the center of the pool stands the statue of a giant, blood flowing from her eyes and a black-iron bell held in her hand.

DELEKAN THE BLOODBATHED

The cloud giant vampire directs the movement of Bloodstorm and commands his undead armies from this chamber, and is sitting on his throne when the

characters arrive. Delekan uses the **vampire** stat block with the following changes:

- Delekan is Huge.
- He has 144 (13d12 + 52) hit points.
- He has a flying speed of 60 feet.
- He has a Strength of 27 (+8).
- He can read, speak, and write Giant.
- He has the following attacks, replacing the vampire attacks of the same name:

Unarmed Strike. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +13 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. *Hit:* 21 (3d8 + 8) bludgeoning damage and 10 (3d6) necrotic damage. Instead of dealing the bludgeoning damage, Delekan can grapple the target (escape DC 21). A grappled target is also restrained until this grapple ends.

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +13 to hit, reach 5 ft., one willing creature, or a creature that is grappled by Delekan, incapacitated, or restrained. *Hit:* 18 (3d6 + 8) piercing damage and 14 (4d6) necrotic damage. The target's hit point maximum is reduced by an amount equal to the necrotic damage taken, and Delekan regains hit points equal to that amount. The reduction lasts until the target finishes a long rest. The target dies if this effect reduces its hit point maximum to 0. A humanoid slain in this way and then buried in the ground rises the following night as a vampire spawn under Delekan's control.

- Delekan has the Innate Spellcasting trait:
 - Innate Spellcasting.** Delekan's spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 17, +9 to spell attacks). He can innately cast the following spells, requiring no material components:
 - At will: *detect magic, fog cloud, light, misty step*
 - 3/day each: *lightning bolt, telekinesis*
 - 1/day each: *chain lightning, control weather*
- Delekan does not have the vampire's Children of the Night action or Shapechanger trait, but has a modified Shapechanger trait detailed below.
- He has a challenge rating of 18 (20,000 XP).

DELEKAN'S END

As an action or when he drops to 0 hit points, Delekan uses a modified vampire Shapechanger trait to

transform into a blood-dripping roc. In this form, he uses the **roc** stat block with the following changes:

- He is undead.
- He has resistance to necrotic damage, and to bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing damage from nonmagical attacks.
- Three times per day, if Delekan in roc form fails a saving throw, he can choose to succeed instead.
- In his roc form, Delekan has legendary actions:
Delekan can take 3 legendary actions, choosing from the options below. Only one legendary action option can be used at a time and only at the end of another creature's turn. Delekan regains spent legendary actions at the start of his turn.

Talons. Delekan in roc form makes one talons attack.

Fly. Delekan flies up to his speed.

Beak (Costs 2 Actions). Delekan makes one beak attack.

- Delekan in roc form has a challenge rating of 14 (11,500 XP).

When Delekan is reduced to 0 hit points in his roc form, he turns into a bloody mist and is magically teleported to his sarcophagus in area V3. The characters must get to his sarcophagus and kill him before he can regenerate.

BLOOD ELEMENTALS

While in his throne room, Delekan is protected by one blood elemental for every two characters. A blood elemental uses the **air elemental** stat block, but its slam and Whirlwind attacks deal necrotic damage instead of bludgeoning damage.

FLOOR OPENINGS

The three openings around this area have no railings or other protections, and any creature that goes over the edge and can't fly drops hundreds of feet to the ground below. If the castle is 500 feet or more in the air, you can give a character 1 round to attempt to save themselves by activating any magic or ability that might help. Otherwise, anyone falling from the castle takes 20d6 bludgeoning damage when they hit the ground below.

BLOOD FOUNTAIN

Blood from Delekan's exsanguinated victims flows up through the rock beneath the castle to pool in this fountain. Delekan drinks deeply here, for the vampire's great size gives him an equally great appetite. Any creature that enters the fountain, the blood channels, or the pools in the four corners of this area for the first time on a turn, or which starts its turn there, must make a DC 16 Constitution saving throw, taking 21 (6d6) necrotic damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

BELL OF THE BLACK STORM

The statue at the center of this area depicts Delekan's cloud giant wife before his transformation into a vampire. The bell held by the statue is a magic relic that fuels the citadel's power to draw blood out of creatures on the ground below.

The *bell of the black storm* is a legendary magic item that requires attunement by an evil creature. When an attuned creature is in the throne room and the bell is rung as an action, each creature that is not a construct, elemental, or undead within 360 feet of the bell has the blood drawn from its body as it flows up toward the citadel. Each such creature is affected as noted in "For Whom the Bell Tolls" above. This feature of the bell cannot be used again until the next dawn.

During the fight, Delekan rings the bell if the characters appear to be getting the upper hand, either manually or with his *telekinesis* spell. A character can remove the bell from the statue without ringing it by succeeding on a DC 18 Dexterity (Sleight of Hand) check. A failure results in the bell ringing. If the bell is successfully removed from the statue, the blood elementals are destroyed.

Unless you wish it otherwise, the bell's magic becomes inert when it is removed from the statue or taken from the citadel.

V3. DELEKAN'S TOMB

This chamber contains Delekan's sarcophagus, and is the place where the cloud giant vampire rests when not in his throne room.

A column of blue-black smoke twists and turns in the center of this huge chamber. Stone statues stand in alcoves ahead of you, and twin stairwells lead up to a platform on the far side of the room. Atop the platform sits a huge stone sarcophagus.

It is most likely that the characters arrive here shortly after having defeated Delekan in area V2. If all three areas of Delekan's lair are in one location, this chamber might be directly adjacent to the throne room or some distance away within a larger castle complex. If set up as a hidden vault far from the citadel, remember that the characters will need some way to reach this location soon after Delekan is destroyed in area V2.

DELEKAN'S DEFENDERS

When the characters enter this area, a number of the statues animate as **stone golems**—one for every two characters. One **wraith** per character also flows out from the column of smoke, and all these creatures attack together.

TUNING HIT POINTS FOR PACING

At higher levels, it becomes increasingly difficult to properly tune monsters to fit the pace of the game running at your table. As such, feel free to change up Delekan's hit points to suit the feel of the encounter. If things are turning into a slog, lower hit points lets you speed up the cloud giant vampire's transformation into the blood roc. On the other hand, if Delekan is being too-easily destroyed by a paladin with multiple smites, feel free to increase his hit points to keep him around longer. That said, change things up in this way only when it better suits the feel of the game, not just to prevent a particular character from using abilities you find frustrating.

DELEKAN'S SARCOPHAGUS

Delekan's massive sarcophagus sits on the platform on the far side of the chamber. Pushing off the lid requires a successful DC 20 Strength (Athletics) check. If defeated in area V2, Delekan is recuperating in the coffin, tight ropes of muscle rebuilding themselves across his huge skeleton. Unless enough time has passed that he has recovered completely, he is in no shape to fight, and a stake through his heart ends the cloud giant vampire's threat. If he manages to recover completely, Delekan has the same statistics he had in area V2, but cannot transform into a roc.

TREASURE

Delekan keeps his treasure in his sarcophagus vault, all of which represents some sort of connection to his past. The hoard includes the following:

- 12,962 gp and 2,072 pp
- A fine cloth tabard trimmed with sable (worth 250 gp), a dragon-scale talisman inlaid with platinum (250 gp), an ornate silver mirror set with moss agates (250 gp), a tooled leather pouch set with quartz (250 gp), a set of gem-encrusted leather bracers (250 gp), and a pair of platinum bracers (250 gp)
- A +2 *wand of the war mage*
- A *shortsword of sharpness* known as *Serpent's Caress*, once carried by Delekan's favored vampire assassin, Olivia Serpentfang.

ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTY

You can adjust the difficulty of this lair in a number of different ways. For more difficult encounters, consider any of the following options:

- Give the vampire knights the *Pack Tactics* trait of the wolf stat block and advantage on saving throws against effects that turn undead.

- Increase the necrotic damage of Delekan's unarmed strike and bite attacks to 21 (6d6) and 28 (8d6) respectively.
- Increase the amount of necrotic damage the vampire knights deal with their greatsword attacks to 21 (6d6).
- Adjust the vampire knights' *Multiattack* action to give them three attacks with their greatswords.
- When Delekan transforms into a roc, use the **adult red dragon** stat block instead of the roc stat block, replacing any fire damage dealt by the dragon with necrotic damage.

To reduce the difficulty of the lair, consider any of the following options:

- Reduce the number of vampire knights who appear in area V1.
- For the vampire knights, use the standard **vampire spawn** stat block with no changes.
- Remove Delekan's ability to transform into a roc.
- Reduce the damage dealt to creatures in the throne room by ringing the black-iron bell, or assume that Delekan has used it recently and cannot use it again during the fight.
- Reduce the number of blood elementals, or remove them.
- Remove the wraiths in area V3.
- Reduce the number of stone golems in area V3.

EXPANDING THIS LAIR

You can expand this lair by building on or modifying any number of the hooks found within it:

- Splitting up Delekan's tomb from the floating citadel means that the characters must find the cloud giant vampire's sarcophagus and defeat him quickly after defeating him the first time in his throne room. By forcing the characters to search for the vampire's tomb, you can expand the campaign to include multiple encounters with Delekan instead of just the one in his throne room.
- Valentyne Nightwind asks the characters to help undo the horrors the vampire inflicted in years past. Souls trapped by the ancient vampire must be recovered and put right, inspiring the characters to explore old tombs and hunt for ancient artifacts across the world, or perhaps across the planes.
- With Delekan destroyed, the power of the flying citadel of Bloodstorm must be undone before another evil creature can claim it. Learning how to control the citadel so it can be smashed into the ground, or seeking out ancient lore detailing how to unmake its magic, might take the characters on any number of new quests.



THE WORLD EATER

JACK KAISER

Gemna the World Eater, a gnome lich obsessed with uncovering the secrets of the multiverse, has pierced the world with huge life-draining spikes that draw energy into her astral sanctum. Set within a floating mote of rock and iron, the unearthly citadel known as the Dread Nexus is the site of Gemna's dark experiments, where the lich works within the protection of an arachnoid iron golem. To stop Gemna from draining the life energy of even more worlds, the characters must work their way to the heart of the lich's lair—where a magical mote is the hiding place for her soul, and the receptacle into which the power she steals is poured.

This lair is optimized for four to five 14th-level characters.

BACKGROUND

The gnome wizard Gemna sought knowledge her whole life. She became addicted to it. But studying the ways of arcane magic wasn't enough for her. Achieving the rank of archmage wasn't enough for her. Gemna wanted it all, and no one life would be long enough to learn it. So after 160 years, the gnome archmage completed the ritual that transformed her into a lich,

turning the thing she loved most in the world into the vessel of her undead being—a single particle of matter whose depths she hoped to fully explore. Within that particle, the lich discovered an unearthly power—and understood that when fed the energy of harvested souls, the particle and its power would grow.

Using her extensive knowledge of engineering, Gemna built massive spikes of black iron which she called dreadtowers, and which she implanted into mortal worlds. Bursts of necrotic energy pulsing out from each tower would harvest the life around it and channel the energy of that life to Gemna's soul vessel, withering vegetation and seeking the souls of the living. Those mortals who dared get too close to any of Gemna's dreadtowers became the lich's undead servants—a slowly building army dedicated to feeding still more mortals to the dreadtowers' endless hunger.

In the deepest reaches of the Astral Plane, Gemna's lair of rock and iron is masterfully hidden away from the eyes of mortals and gods alike. Known as the Dread Nexus, the lair is connected by dozens of portals to the different worlds where the lich harvests the life energy that fuels her dark experiments. The dreadtowers that

plague those worlds are the only signs of her existence, and of her limitless hunger for life and knowledge.

THE DREADTOWERS

Gemna's dreadtowers are giant spires of organically shaped black iron. Each tower stands hundreds of feet tall, and is inscribed with the visages of skulls, demons, and spiders below Gemna's own stern, skull-like visage at the top. The dreadtowers are hurled across the multiverse from the lich's lair in the Astral Plane, targeting the countless worlds of the Material Plane. On each such world, towers tear through the sky and slam into the ground, drilling in to a depth of some one hundred feet. Beams of wavering green energy arc out from each tower, connected to planar portals within the dreadtower that channel the life energy it steals to Gemna's lair on the other side.

A tower ceases its operations when it has drained all life energy within ten miles of it, or when it is forcefully disconnected from its planar links.

INTEGRATING THIS LAIR

You can use the following hooks to integrate this lair into your campaign, whether as part of a longer adventure or as the focus of a single play session:

- The characters might learn of Gemna early on in the campaign, discovering dead dreadtowers and hearing of the destructive blight they inflict on the lands around them.
- The characters could be sought out by terrified local leaders who have seen a dreadtower slam down near a town or city, and who have no idea how to shut down its destructive power.
- The characters might witness a dreadtower slamming into the ground and sending out its pulse of necrotic energy, forcing them to deal with twisted, corrupted foliage, the many beasts and humanoids killed and reanimated by the dreadtower, and the dreadtower wights who hope to draw even more mortals into the death zone.

DREADTOWER WIGHTS

Gemna has an army of wights who emerge from and are empowered by each dreadtower. These wights are raised from the dead of peoples from across the multiverse, many of which have likely never been seen on the world they invade. Whenever you see a bold reference to a **dreadtower wight**, use the **wight** stat block with the following changes:

- A dreadtower wight wears scale mail and carries a shield, giving them AC 18.
- They have a Strength of 18 (+4).
- Their Life Drain attack is +6 to hit.
- Their longsword attack improves as follows:

Longsword. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +6 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 8 (1d8 + 4) slashing damage, or 9 (1d10 + 4) slashing damage if used with two hands.

- Necrotic energy drawn from a dreadtower flows from a wight's blades and arrows. Their successful longsword and longbow attacks each deal an extra 10 (3d6) necrotic damage.
- They have a challenge rating of 6 (2,300 XP).

APPROACHING THE DREAD NEXUS

The Dread Nexus is hidden away in the outer reaches of the Astral Plane, connected to the Material Plane only through the portals by which the dreadtowers conduct their energy. The characters might travel to the Dread Nexus on a ship traversing extradimensional space, or they might enter a dreadtower of your own design as part of your campaign, shutting off the tower's deadly necrotic energy and leaping through the portal before it closes. Alternatively, they might learn of the location of the Dread Nexus, perhaps through a relic left behind by Gemna's agents, and travel there using a *plane shift* spell.

DREAD NEXUS FEATURES

The inner chambers of the Dread Nexus are otherworldly but strangely utilitarian. Gemna's lair is built from a natural mote of stone and black iron carved out with *disintegrate* spells. The interior areas of the Dread Nexus have the following general features:

- Chambers and corridors have 20-foot ceilings unless otherwise noted.
- Areas are dimly lit by the phosphorescent light of strange chemicals flowing through glass tubes along the walls. Breaking any of these tubes results in acidic fluid spraying out in a 15-foot cone. Each creature in the area must make a DC 18 Dexterity saving throw, taking 21 (6d6) acid damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.
- All of the Dread Nexus is protected by a permanent *forbiddance* spell targeting celestial creatures.

DREAD NEXUS

The following encounter areas are keyed to the map of Gemna's lair.

E1. BLACK CONDUIT

Unlike areas E2 and E3, the map of this area shows a side view, rather than a top-down view, of the 100-foot vertical circular shaft leading up to the dreadsphere chamber of area E3. Characters can either use magic to traverse the shaft, or can climb it with successful DC 13 Strength (Athletics) checks made to move through each section. On a failed check a character falls to the floor of the current section, taking 2d6 falling damage.

The shaft is broken up into three sections: the entry area at the bottom, the midpoint, and the dreadsphere entryway at the top. These areas are connected by holes in the floor, but each also features sets of four 10-foot-high doorways spaced around the circular shaft along the floors and ceilings (except in the top section). The vertical presentation of the map shows just one portal from each set.

ENTRY AREA

This area is 30 feet high, and has a circular hole in the floor in addition to the holes in the ceiling leading upward. The doorways in this area are inert portals to other worlds. The circular hole in the floor of this chamber leads into the void of the Astral Plane. If the characters traveled here by way of the planar connections within any of Gemna's dreatowers, this is their arrival point.

Four brass arms jut out halfway up the wall (not shown on the map) to anchor a purple-pink crystal at the center of the area. This crystal was once one of the conduits for the necrotic energy flowing through this shaft, but has become inert.

MIDPOINT

The middle section of the vertical shaft contains another crystal anchored by brass arms at the center of the area. The doorways in this area are swirling planar gates that each depict an alien world connected to the nexus by Gemna's dreatowers. Unless you wish the characters to make use of them, these gates are locked down.

Wraith Attack. When the characters arrive in the midpoint section, two **wraiths** per character flow out from the gates and attack. Their proximity to the necrotic energy of the dreadsphere gives each wraith advantage on saving throws against effects that turn undead. After they defeat the wraiths, power pulsing from the portals suggests to the characters that more wraiths will come through soon. Every 10 minutes after the first wave is defeated, two more **wraiths** per character emerge from the gates, attacking creatures in any part of area E1. The wraiths do not enter area E2 or E3.

Unstable Necrotic Crystal. The necrotic crystal in this area is unstable, and triggers in response to the presence of any creatures here. On initiative count 10 (losing initiative ties), the crystal fires a bolt of necrotic energy toward one random non-undead creature within 30 feet of it. A creature struck by this bolt must make a DC 16 Dexterity saving throw, taking 35 (10d6) necrotic damage on a failed save or half as much damage on a successful one.

After the crystal's first pulse of energy, a character with proficiency in the Religion skill recognizes that

MIKE'S THOUGHTS: PUNISHING DOOR HUGGERS

Experienced GMs all have stories of characters who hug the doorway to a big room full of baddies. It's the safe move. If you can stay at the door and away from heavy hitters on the other side of it, you're certainly better off. This tactic generally doesn't feel like high-action heroic fantasy, though, so as a GM, you sometimes need to give the characters a shove.

The unstable necrotic crystals in area E1 of this lair are designed to do just that. If characters choose to hug the "doorway" (the circular hole in the ceiling) instead of leaping in to face Gemna in area E3, they can do so—but they'll have to eat blasts of necrotic damage and might have to battle more wraiths coming out of the portals. You can look for similar approaches in any encounters with a bottleneck to movement that can also serve as cover, creating hazards to complicate the threat ahead with a threat from behind. Smart characters will move into the next room under such duress, taking on the role of heroic adventurers one way or another.

they can attempt to redirect that energy into a radiant blast—though at potential risk. With an action and a successful DC 16 Intelligence (Religion) check, a character sends a blast of radiant energy from the crystal toward an undead creature within 50 feet of the crystal. The target creature must make a DC 16 Dexterity saving throw, taking 35 (10d6) radiant damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one. If the character attempting to channel the energy fails the check, they take 35 (10d6) necrotic damage as a blast of energy arcs from the crystal back to them.

Destroying the crystal ends its chaotic bursts of energy. It has AC 18, 50 hit points, and immunity to poison and psychic damage.

Cracked Wall. The bolts of necrotic energy coursing through the conduit shaft have previously cracked the wall at the midpoint of this area. A character who succeeds on a DC 16 Wisdom (Perception) check or who has a passive Wisdom (Perception) score of 16 or higher feels air flowing through the cracks, which reveal a chamber on the other side to any character looking through them. A character can break through the weakened wall with a successful DC 16 Strength (Athletics) check, opening a passage to area E2.

DREADSPHERE ENTRY

Another damaged necrotic crystal is held in place by brass arms in the uppermost section of this area, and erupts with power as soon as the characters arrive here. On initiative count 10 (losing initiative ties), bolts of necrotic energy arc out from the crystal to two random

non-undead creatures within 50 feet of it. A creature struck by this energy must make a DC 16 Dexterity saving throw, taking 35 (10d6) necrotic damage on a failed save or half as much damage on a successful one. Unlike the crystal in the middle section of the area, this crystal cannot be destroyed. Any attempt to damage it results in the attacker being hit by a bolt.

The doorways in this area can lead to other areas of the Dread Nexus, or can show more views through the planar portals connecting Gemna's lair to the many worlds whose life she is draining, as you determine. A circular hole in the ceiling of this area leads into the chamber of the dreadsphere.

E2. DEAD MONUMENTS

This chamber is filled with a number of shattered relics Gemna has claimed from the worlds she has assaulted, then cast away when their power and knowledge was hers. This includes a massive broken stone face, shattered temple columns and huge crystals, and the shattered remains of an ancient stone planar gateway. A deceptively deep pool of necrotic liquid covers the floor of this area, dripping from a pipe running beneath the ceiling.

ANCIENT GATEWAY

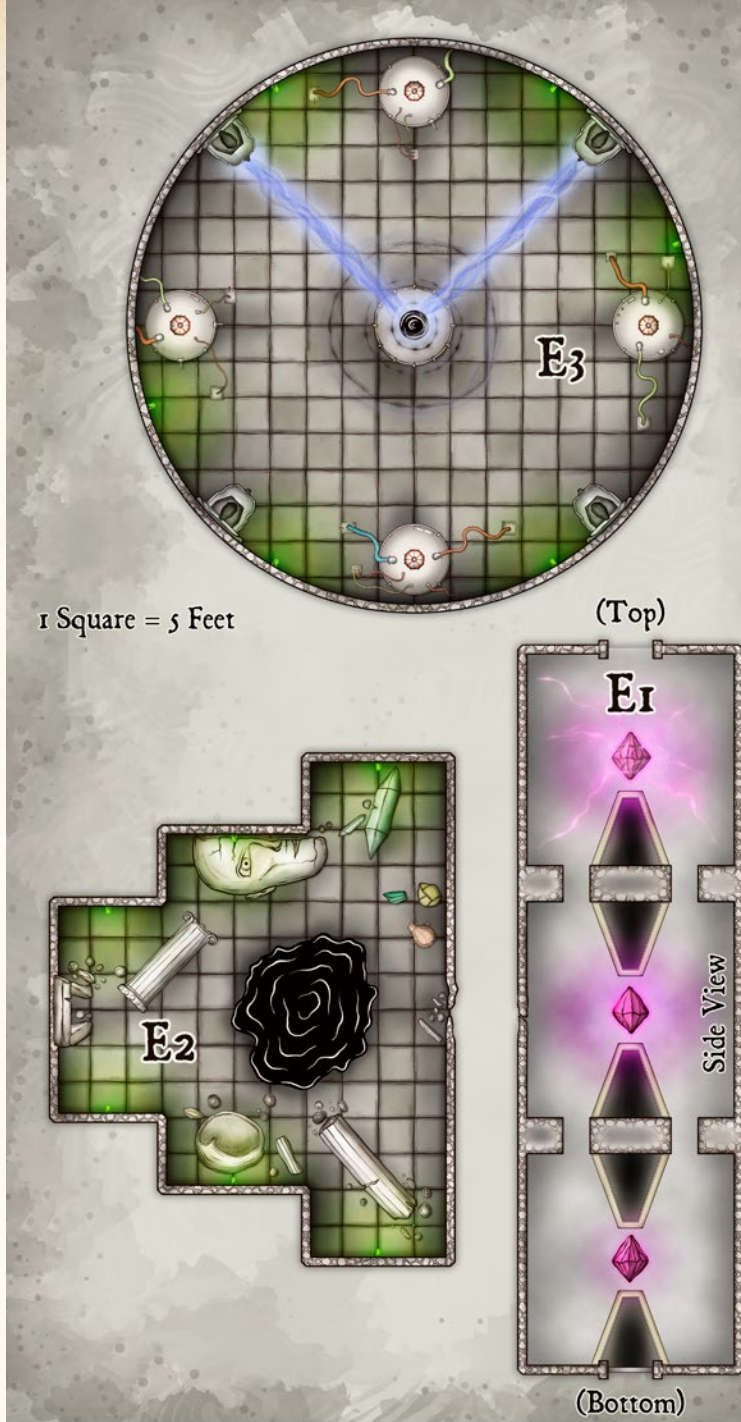
This gateway is all that remains of a haunted castle known as Moonless, once the lair of the necromancer Aion Damion. Gemna faced and defeated Aion centuries ago, and has since then incorporated the necromancer's magic and the artifacts of their castle into the Dread Nexus. Moved to the Dread Nexus so Gemna could study the borders between the worlds of the living and the dead, the gateway's secrets were soon uncovered, after which the lich stored its remains in this chamber of dead monuments.

AION DAMION

The spirit of Aion Damion remains stuck in a state between life and death, manifesting from the gateway as a chaotic evil elf **ghost**. During their battle in the deepest reaches under Moonless, Gemna tore Aion's soul from their body and hurled it into the gateway, trapping them between worlds. During her research, Gemna used the gate to speak to Aion, drawing forth the necromancer's secrets before disposing of them.

Aion appears as a long-haired elf, with tattoos and sigils sourced from many different languages covering their skin. Their soul has been trapped for so long that Aion's hold on reality has cracked. But though their thoughts often meander, Aion can share their knowledge of Gemna's origins, her plots, and the fact that the dreadsphere in area E3 holds her soul.

If the characters convince Aion that they are planning to destroy Gemna and one character succeeds on a DC 18 Charisma (Intimidation or Persuasion)



check, Aion gifts them a magic necklace (see “Treasure”).

NECROTIC RUNOFF

Where the dreadsphere in area E3 produces corrupted runoff from the necromantic energy it absorbs, that runoff is magically shunted into reservoirs connected by a network of pipes running throughout the lair. One of those pipes passes through this area, and drips endlessly to fill a 20-foot-deep pool formed where the floor has collapsed. Any creature that enters the pool for the first time on a turn or starts its turn there must make a Constitution saving throw, taking 22 (4d10) necrotic damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

If you want to expand the lair, you can establish that the spaces through which this network of pipes runs are navigable, allowing the characters to follow the pipes to an access point of your determination in area E3.

E3. DREADSPHERE CHAMBER

When the characters enter the chamber of the dreadsphere, read or paraphrase the following:

A webwork of black iron makes up the ceiling of this domed chamber, rising over a twenty-foot-high pillar and a sphere of pure blackness that floats above it. Beams of black-and-violet energy arc in from two complex pylons set along the walls. Two similar pylons are dark.

Huge glass vats fed by a complicated array of brass and iron pipes stand around the room. The hulking figures of armored knights float in two vats on opposite sides of the area, both of which are filled with amber liquid. A third vat swirls with a mist arcing thin bolts of lightning, and a fourth is made up of three large vertical cylinders holding red, blue, and green liquid.

The characters arrive through a hole in the wall beneath the pylon on the lower-left side of area E3 on the map. Gravity shifts when they enter this area, so that moving up through the hole in the ceiling in area E1 brings them into this area from the side, and they must drop to the floor.

Gemna is too busy in this area to notice any battles taking place in area E1, but she senses any characters entering the dreadsphere chamber. When the characters arrive, Gemna is crawling around on the gridwork ceiling inside her iron golem spider, twisting various knobs and manipulating levers as she modifies the two beams of necrotic energy pouring into the dreadsphere.

GEMNA'S DEFENDERS

Gemna the World Eater is a chaotic evil gnome **lich**. Within the Dread Nexus, she rides inside an iron golem spider that uses the **iron golem** stat block and has a climbing speed of 30 feet. The iron golem acts on Gemna's initiative. Two **dreadtower wights** per character stand along the wall of this area. When she notices the characters, Gemna commands the wights to attack.

Gemna enters and exits the golem through a hatch in its back that cannot be opened unless she wills it. While within the iron golem, Gemna cannot be

MIKE'S THOUGHTS: TAKE INSPIRATION FROM EVERYWHERE

Good ideas can come from any source, and the best RPG stories can borrow and take inspiration from any number of places. Villains and NPCs, guilds and monarchs, magic items, curses, and monsters—all of these adventure elements and more might be inspired by the stories we love.

The concept of the dreadtowers in "The World Eater" was inspired by the movie *The Chronicles of Riddick*. It's not the best science fiction movie in the world, but it's one I love, and the imagery in it is great. The Necromongers always grabbed me with their scope and scale, traveling from world to world, enslaving entire civilizations into their half-undead state, and leaving massive death-dealing monuments in their wake. So now the inspiration that film gave me will hopefully inspire you to build an even more amazing story of your own.

targeted with spells or attacks. She cannot be forced out of the iron golem until it is reduced to 0 hit points. She can use her Legendary Resistance trait on saving throws made either by herself or the golem. The lich is untouched if the golem is disintegrated.

While within the golem, Gemna is able to use her action and her legendary actions to fire her *ray of frost* cantrip through the golem's eyes, or to attack with *shocking grasp* through its forelegs. If the iron golem is badly damaged, Gemna casts *greater invisibility* on herself before escaping from it. If the golem has no options for getting into melee with the characters, it can give up its action to allow Gemna to pop out through the hatch in its back, cast a spell, then go back inside.

When the iron golem is defeated, Gemna flies out of the hatch and continues her attack. She uses the **lich** stat block with the following changes:

- She has a flying speed of 30 feet.
- She has replaced the following spells in her list of prepared spells:
 - *Prestidigitation* with *shocking grasp*
 - *Animate dead* with *lightning bolt*
 - *Globe of invulnerability* with *greater invisibility*
 - *Plane shift* with *circle of death*
 - *Dominate monster* with *feeblemind*
 - *Scrying* with *cone of cold*

Gemna is able to use the lich's lair actions from anywhere in the nexus, either in or out of the iron golem.

GEMNA'S EXPERIMENTS

Gemna has a number of experiments surrounding the inner wall of this chamber, three of which could cause complications during the battle—two knights held in

amber liquid, and a vat filled with mist. Each vat has AC 16, 15 hit points, and immunity to poison, psychic, and necrotic damage. A vat can also be shattered with a successful DC 16 Strength (Athletics) check. Gemna attempts to shatter a vat with a *ray of frost* cantrip if a character is standing near it.

Each vat has a control panel set into its side. A creature that uses an action to inspect a control panel, and that succeeds on a DC 16 Intelligence (Arcana) check, recognizes that the four vats are experiments in an incomplete state.

Pudding Knight. Where the hulking figure of an armored knight floats in a vat of amber liquid, a character with a passive Wisdom (Perception) score of 16 or higher, or who succeeds on a DC 16 Wisdom (Perception) check, sees that the body appears to ripple. If the vat is shattered, the knight melts down into a **black pudding** that attacks the nearest creature.

Death Beetles. The second vat holding a floating knight appears identical to the first, but a character with a passive Wisdom (Perception) score of 16 or higher, or who succeeds on a DC 16 Wisdom (Perception) check, notices the armored figure twitching strangely. If the vat is broken, four **swarms of insects (beetles)** pour forth from the armor as it collapses. Arcs of necrotic energy flow around these beetles, so that each creature that starts its turn within 5 feet of a swarm takes 7 (2d6) necrotic damage. The beetles ignore the golem and Gemna as they attack.

Raging Storm. This vat filled with mist holds a raging **air elemental**. If the vat is broken, the elemental randomly attacks the closest creatures to it.

Strange Brews. The fourth vat is segmented into three vertical cylinders, each set with a spigot and holding magical liquid with effects similar to a particular potion. The red cylinder contains liquid that produces the effect of a *potion of greater healing*. The blue cylinder contains liquid that produces the effect of a *potion of growth*. The green cylinder contains liquid equivalent to a *potion of poison*. A character who succeeds on a DC 16 Intelligence (Arcana) check made to assess the three liquids can determine what each does.

Drinking from any of the cylinders requires an action. Even if a cylinder is broken, liquid remains in the bottom of it that can be scooped up. A character can make use of the effect of each liquid only once. The magic of each liquid fades if it is removed from this area.

DREADSPHERE

Above the 20-foot-high pillar at the center of this chamber floats the dreadsphere—the mote of matter

originally used to store Gemna's soul, and which has since become a black hole of negative energy fed by the lich's dreadtowers. By feeding the dreadsphere life energy syphoned from new worlds, Gemna hopes to grow it into an unlimited source of eldritch power.

Climbing the pillar requires a successful DC 14 Strength (Athletics) or Dexterity (Acrobatics) check. Any creature that makes contact with the dreadsphere for the first time on a turn, or which starts its turn in contact with it, must make a DC 20 Constitution saving throw, taking 110 (20d10) force damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one. If a creature is reduced to 0 hit points by this damage, the creature and everything it is wearing and carrying, except magic items, are reduced to a pile of fine gray dust. The creature can be restored to life only by means of a *true resurrection* or a *wish* spell.

A character who uses an action to study the dreadsphere and who succeeds on a DC 18 Intelligence (Arcana) check intuits that there are three ways to

MIKE'S THOUGHTS: LICH TACTICS

Liches are difficult monsters to run. They have a huge range of things they can do, but not a lot of actions with which to do them. Though they have a great arsenal of spells, they are probably able to cast only four of them in a fight. The lich's legendary actions and lair actions can help to keep the players on their toes. But there are also a few other tricks to consider.

Improved invisibility is very powerful. It gives a lich advantage on attack rolls, imposes disadvantage on attacks against them, and effectively negates any spell or ability that requires seeing a target. This stops one of the true banes of the lich—*counterspell*.

Don't discount the use of cantrips with legendary actions. A lich's cantrips deal roughly 18 damage per hit, and can do so three times per round. Mix this in with lair actions, and the lich can deal a lot of damage even before taking their own turn.

Choosing which spell to cast as an action on the lich's turn is critical. The lich isn't likely to get a lot of those spells off, so it's easy to choose big powerhouse magic such as *power word kill*, *disintegrate*, and *finger of death*. But instead of those single-target spells, a multiple-target spell such as *circle of death* might have a bigger impact on the overall fight, especially if cast with a higher-level spell slot.

As a final trick, remember that a lich can prepare any wizard spells, and likely has access to any spell it wants to use. So ignore what spells the stat block says are prepared and let the lich cast what makes sense for the moment. Though they still have limited spell slots, you can trust that the lich is smarter than you, and that they'll have *maze* memorized if that's the most effective way to deal with a pesky adventurer.

destroy the sphere—and to thus permanently destroy Gemna the World Eater:

- A creature can hurl a legendary magic item or an artifact into the dreadsphere, overloading its magic and causing it to collapse. The item thrown into the sphere is likewise destroyed.
- The sphere can be sent to another plane by targeting it with a *gate* spell or similar magic, causing both the gate and the sphere to collapse. There is a 50 percent chance that, instead of being destroyed, the dreadsphere is teleported to a random spot on a random plane.
- A creature can throw a *rod of absorption* or a *portable hole* into the dreadsphere, destroying both the magic item and the sphere. Each creature within 50 feet of the sphere must make a DC 18 Dexterity saving throw, taking 70 (20d6) force damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

If the characters destroy Gemna but then don't destroy the dreadsphere (for example, if they need to leave the Dread Nexus to obtain one of the magic items that can destroy the sphere), you can decide how long it takes the lich to be remade by her Rejuvenation trait.

TREASURE

The necklace the characters might receive from Aion in area E2 is a very rare magic item. As an action, the wearer of the necklace can envelop themselves with spectral energy, giving them resistance to bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing damage from nonmagical attacks, and resistance to necrotic damage, all for 1 hour. Once used, the necklace fades away into nothingness.

In a single-session game, consider also having a *portable hole* found as treasure in area E1 or area E2, to help the characters destroy the dreadsphere.

ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTY

You can adjust the difficulty of this lair in a number of different ways. For more difficult encounters, consider any of the following options:

- Increase the hit points of the iron golem, Gemna, or both.

- Increase the number of dreadtower wights to four per character.
- Give Gemna the ability to cast *lightning bolt* at will as a legendary action. She can do so through the eyes of the golem while riding inside it.
- Let Gemna maximize the damage of some or all of her spells. Boom.

To reduce the difficulty of the lair, consider any of the following options:

- Remove Gemna's iron golem spider or replace it with a **shield guardian**. In this case, Gemna is not riding inside the shield guardian, and holds the shield guardian's amulet.
- Turn the dreadtower wights into normal **wights**.
- Have all the creatures spawned from the experimental vats drawn to attack Gemna or her wights.

EXPANDING THIS LAIR

You can expand this lair by building on or modifying any number of the hooks found within it:

- Even after Gemna is destroyed, the lich's dreadtowers remain scattered across multiple worlds. The characters can hunt down and destroy these towers before some other evil villain learns how to channel their magic.
- Instead of being destroyed, the dreadsphere might teleport to another plane. Gemna eventually reforms there with her Rejuvenation trait, and starts to build an eldritch machine designed to take revenge against the characters.
- Gemna might be just one of a cabal of powerful liches, all of whom are dedicated to harvesting all life from the multiverse.



THE FORGE OF SIZZLE DEATH



VICTOR LEZA MORENO

A murderous blue dragon has taken over the cavern-based forge of a group of artisan fire giants. By forcing the captive giants to forge magic items for him, the dragon plans to build up a magnificent hoard in his hidden desert lair. But the need for gems to fuel the production of his magical swag brings the dragon to the attention of the characters, who must end his plots.

This lair is optimized for four to five 16th-level characters.

BACKGROUND

The adult blue dragon Sizzlexitrox, known to all in the Karam Desert as “Sizzle Death,” covets gem-encrusted magic items over all other forms of wealth. For centuries, Sizzle Death attempted to craft items of his own, but the work was slow and often resulted in failure. Deciding he needed expert artisans to serve him, the dragon invaded the caves of the Burning Plateau, enslaved the fire giant smiths and artisans within, and now forces them to craft his treasures.

However, even with master artisans working for him, Sizzle Death requires raw materials for his treasures. The dragon has thus begun stealing the wealth of a

number of gem and ore mines in the desert, then laying waste to them. Each time Sizzle Death’s fire giants run out of materials, he heads out on another murderous expedition—and when the treasures of the desert run dry, the cities beyond will become his next target.

INTEGRATING THIS LAIR

The Burning Plateau and the Karam Desert can be placed anywhere that is convenient for your story. You can replace this desert locale with any hot, arid environment, and the caves within the Burning Plateau could be part of a larger underground complex at your discretion.

You can use the following hooks to integrate this lair into your campaign, whether as part of a longer adventure or as the focus of a single play session:

- The characters head deep into an adamantite mine to take care of a purple worm that has eaten several miners. While they battle the worm, they hear roaring and the crack of thunder from above. As they exit the mine, the characters see that many of the tunnels have collapsed, and the remains of slaughtered miners are everywhere. Survivors tell the

characters that a blue dragon attacked, then carried away carts full of ore in the direction of the Burning Plateau.

- Fire giants who have escaped from servitude in the Burning Plateau begin raiding nearby settlements, looking to acquire food and materials to build a new home. The characters are tasked with dealing with the giants, who tell the tale of Sizzle Death and his plans. The giants are too scared to face the dragon, but promise to return all that they've stolen if the characters can rout the dragon from their home.
- Sizzle Death attacks the characters several times throughout their adventuring careers, attempting to steal magic items or gems from them before flying away. When word comes to the characters that the dragon has become more active recently, destroying gem and precious metal mines, they are able to finally trace him back to his lair, ready to end Sizzle Death's threat once and for all.

APPROACHING THE BURNING PLATEAU

As the characters approach the Burning Plateau, read or paraphrase the following to set the scene:

A wavy haze of heat rises from a tall plateau of brown stone in the distance. As you draw ever closer to the landmark, the muted sound of steel ringing out on steel becomes clearer to your ears, even as the incredible heat of the desert increases. Clearly, the Burning Plateau is true to its name.

The characters are free to survey the plateau, which has no guards or other creatures around it. Doing so reveals only one obvious entrance—a yawning cave carved into the foot of the plateau's north side. However, this entrance is presently filled by a mound of sand.

A character with a passive Wisdom (Perception) score of 20 or higher notices wisps of steam mixed in with the heat haze coming off the top of the plateau. The plateau is 600 feet high, and its rough craggy exterior can be easily climbed. However, each creature doing so must succeed on a DC 15 Strength (Athletics) check or gain one level of exhaustion.

ATOP THE PLATEAU

Characters on the top of the plateau can see ten 5-foot-diameter holes bored down into its stone surface, each venting steam and hot air. These holes lead straight down 550 feet, opening up to area F2. Climbing down one of these shafts requires a successful DC 15 Strength (Athletics) check, and brings a character to the ceiling of area F2, 50 feet above the floor. A character who fails

this check by 5 or more falls down the shaft, taking 20d6 bludgeoning damage and landing prone in area F2. There is a 20 percent chance that any creature that falls lands in the lava flow.

CAVERN ENTRANCE

The 20-foot-high cave opening on the north side of the plateau is filled with sand that Sizzle Death easily piles up, then packs in with his tremendous girth. This entrance leads to area F1. One character shifting sand for 1 hour can open up a gap wide enough to push through the entrance. Multiple characters working together reduce the time proportionately. Each character who participates in this grueling work must succeed on a DC 15 Constitution saving throw or gain one level of exhaustion. Clearing the sand also draws the attention of the hell hounds in area F1, which lie in wait and ready their Fire Breath to use on the first creature that passes through the entrance.

BURNING PLATEAU FEATURES

The chambers within the Burning Plateau were carved out by the fire giants, and have the following general features:

- Ceilings are 50 feet high, with 20-foot-high doorways connecting each chamber.
- Doors within the plateau are 20 feet tall, made of iron, and have handles 9 feet above the floor. Any creature can attempt to open a door, provided that it or some other creature can reach the handle and unlatch it. An unlatched door can be pushed or pulled open with an action and a successful DC 15 Strength (Athletics) check.
- The west wall of each chamber is inscribed with a 10-foot-diameter Giant rune that translates to "light," and which fills the area around it with bright light. A *detect magic* spell reveals that the runes radiate evocation magic. A *dispel magic* spell disables a rune's light for 24 hours.
- Chambers in the Burning Plateau are connected by 2-foot-diameter airflow tunnels, created by the giants on Sizzle Death's orders to help disperse heat and make the lair more comfortable for the dragon. Large and larger creatures cannot fit through these tunnels. Medium and Small creatures must squeeze to move through them. If intruders squeeze into these areas and the giants notice them, they jab their greatswords within to attack. At every opportunity, Sizzle Death breathes lightning at any intruders it is aware of in the tunnels.

BURNING PLATEAU

The following encounter areas are keyed to the map of Sizzle Death's lair.

F1. ENTRANCE CAVERN

This cavern has rough-hewn walls and is occupied by hell hounds that consider the area their lair. They attack any intruders they notice, fighting to the death. They don't pursue creatures outside the cavern.

The cavern is home to one **hell hound** plus one more hell hound per character in the party. These hounds are led by an alpha hell hound, which uses the **young red dragon** stat block with the following changes:

- The hound is a fiend, and its alignment is lawful evil.
- Its walking speed is 60 feet, and it doesn't have a climbing or flying speed.
- The hound understands Giant and Infernal but can't speak.

If combat breaks out in this area, Sizzle Death takes note and watches through the airflow tunnels connecting to area F4. If he has the opportunity to use his Lightning Breath against any characters, he does so even if it means potentially harming one of the hounds.

F2. FORGE

An intense heat and the ringing of hammers striking iron fill this room, which is filled with giant-sized anvils and other metalworking gear set along a slow-flowing river of lava. A copper conduit extending out of the west wall leads to a 15-foot-diameter copper ball that hangs from the center of the ceiling (not shown on the map). A 40-foot-square mirror in a gold frame dominates the south wall.

FIRE GIANT THRALLS

Red-haired giants wearing black plate armor are hard at work in this area—and are clearly chained to their equipment to prevent escape. One **fire giant** works here for every two characters in the party (rounded up). Their chains have enough slack that they can move anywhere in this chamber, but they cannot leave it.

The giants know that Sizzle Death watches them through the mirror (see below). Fearing the dragon's wrath, they attack if they notice intruders. A character with a passive Wisdom (Insight) score of 15 or higher notices that the giants are only reluctantly attacking the characters, and that they keep looking fearfully at the mirror during the battle.

If the characters destroy the mirror, the giants cease attacking and plead for mercy. If the characters agree to help them, the giants provide the following information:

- Sizzle Death conquered the giants' home and now forces them to craft gem-encrusted magic items.
- The giants in this room hate the dragon, but the giants currently in area F3 have sworn fealty to Sizzle Death, and are working hard to craft magic items for him.



1 square = 10 feet

- The giants are forced to work long hours for Sizzle Death, leading to the creation of a number of fragile and unstable magic items now part of the dragon's hoard.

If the characters free the giants in this area, a successful DC 17 Charisma (Intimidation or Persuasion) check convinces them to stand against the traitors in area F3. Given how much they fear Sizzle Death, the giants cannot be convinced to fight the dragon.

If combat breaks out in this area and the characters then decide to rest here before proceeding, the giants in area F3 come to investigate before the rest can be completed.

JAMES'S THOUGHTS: DESCRIBING ENVIRONMENTS

As the GM, it's your job to set the scene each time the characters enter a new area. When an area doesn't provide read-aloud text, remember to always think about not just what the characters see, but also what they can hear, smell, taste, and feel when you create description.

Describing small details like the bone-rattling ringing of a giant's hammer striking an anvil, the sweat-inducing heat of a river of lava, and the smell of molten iron on the air can help immerse the players in the world. Don't feel like you need to hit every sense with your descriptions, but picking two beyond sight goes a long way in helping transport your players into any environment or lair. In the same way, when an area does provide text for you to read aloud, make it your own. Cut lines you don't like, rephrase things in your own voice, and add your own words to focus on the sensory details you think are significant.

Just as important as what you say when describing an area is how you say it. Even if an area description is short, it can cause players to tune out if it is not delivered in an exciting and dramatic way. If you're able to, stand up or speak with big arm movements as you deliver important description, both to grab your players' attention and to keep from sounding like a teacher giving a lecture. Better to be overly dramatic and corny than boring. If your players are laughing, they're paying attention—and having fun.

CHAINS

Each of the chains binding the fire giants features a built-in lock and radiates an aura of abjuration magic to a *detect magic* spell. Each chain has AC 20, 50 hit points, and immunity to fire, lightning, poison, psychic, bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing damage. A successful DC 25 Dexterity check using thieves' tools picks a chain's lock. A key that unlocks all the chains is held within Sizzle Death's hoard in area F4.

COPPER BALL

The conduit connecting to the copper ball runs through the walls of the cavern, connecting to a copper plate in area F4. As Sizzle Death watches the forge through the mirror (see below), if he sees the characters trying to free the giants or if the giants appear to obviously be losing the battle, he uses his Lightning Breath on the copper plate. The lightning instantly travels along the conduit to reach the copper ball, and is then dispersed throughout this room. Each creature in area F2 must make a DC 19 Dexterity saving throw, taking 49 (9d10) lightning damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

The copper ball has AC 18, 100 hit points, a damage threshold of 10, and immunity to fire, lightning,

poison, and psychic damage. The conduit has the same AC and immunities, but it has no damage threshold and only 30 hit points. Destroying either the ball or the conduit prevents Sizzle Death from sending lightning into this area.

LAVA FLOW

Any creature that enters the lava for the first time on a turn or starts its turn there takes 22 (4d10) fire damage.

MIRROR

The large mirror on the south wall has the phrase, "I am always watching," written on its frame in three different languages: Common, Draconic, and Giant. Under scrutiny of a *detect magic* spell, the mirror radiates an aura of divination magic.

The mirror is magically connected to a similar mirror on the wall in area F4. When Sizzle Death speaks a special Draconic command word, the mirror in area F4 shows what the mirror in area F2 currently reflects. A character who studies the mirror and succeeds on a DC 20 Intelligence (Arcana) check understands how it works, and intuits that it must have a connected twin mirror nearby. If this check succeeds by 5 or more, the character can use an action to reverse the magic of the mirrors, allowing any creature in this area to view what the mirror in area F4 reflects.

The mirror has AC 15, 20 hit points, and immunity to lightning, poison, and psychic damage.

F3. MAGE'S WORKSHOP

Several beds sized for giants are set up in the southwest corner of this room, while a number of 9-foot-tall wooden worktables stand to the north. An unadorned, 15-foot-tall straw-stuffed dummy in the shape of a dragon dominates the center of the room.

Unless they have been encountered already, a number of fire giants work at the tables here when the characters arrive, cutting gems and carving runes into them—one **fire giant** for every two characters in the party (rounded up). In addition, Novas Flamebound, a hulking fire giant with Giant runes tattooed on her face, leads the work being done here. Novas uses the **fire giant** stat block with the following changes:

- She has an Intelligence score of 20 (+5)
- She has the Spellcasting trait from the **archmage** stat block.
- Her challenge rating is 12 (8,400 XP).

TACTICS

Novas casts the *mind blank* and *stoneskin* spells on herself before combat, casting *time stop* first to do so if caught off guard. If combat occurred in area F2, the giants in this area have used the Ready action, with

Novas casting *cone of cold* and the other giants making rock attacks as soon as the characters enter.

These fire giants are loyal to Sizzle Death, and fight to the death against any intruders—including the fire giants from area F2. Sizzle Death hears any fight that takes place here, and watches the battle from area F4 through the airflow tunnels. If he has the opportunity to use his Lightning Breath through an airflow tunnel, he does so, even if it means potentially harming one of his giant servants.

STRAW DRAGON

The straw dragon at the center of the room is easily recognized as a sturdy armorer's dummy. It was used to create the armor Sizzle Death now wears.

GEMS

Any character with proficiency in the Arcana skill recognizes that the gems on the worktables are being prepared to be used in magic item creation. The gems can form part of the treasure for this lair (see below).

F4. SIZZLE DEATH'S HOARD

When he first took over the Burning Plateau, Sizzle Death tore up the floor of this chamber to take full advantage of his ability to burrow. If he knows the characters are about to enter, he digs down below the ground to hide beneath the dirt and his scattered treasure, hoping to surprise them.

When the characters first enter this area, read:

Piles of coins, gems, wands, arrows, and other glittering items cover the dirt floor of this chamber, whose air is filled with an earthy smell. A large copper plate is mounted on the north wall here, while an enormous mirror hangs to the west.

The function of the mirror and the copper plate in this area are described in area F2.

MIKE'S THOUGHTS: TIMING HIGH-LEVEL LAIRS

High-level encounters are just plain harder to run. Characters have a lot of capabilities. They can do more in a turn than lower-level characters. They have many more class options to choose from, and most of those choices are more complex. As a result, running high-level encounters will push even the most advanced Gamemasters—and most if not all high-level combat encounters will take a lot of time. When you're planning to run any of these lairs of 12th level or higher, be aware of how long their boss encounters might run. Plan accordingly, including making preparations for a break point in case you start a combat late in a game session and need to split it over the next session as well.

Sizzle Death waits here for the first character to fully enter the room before breaking his *elemental gems* (see below). He then erupts from the ground and attacks. When the characters first see Sizzle Death, read:

An acrid smell ignites the air as a dragon covered in massive iron plates studded with glowing gems lets loose a bone-shaking roar. Its exposed claws and wings show dull blue scales, while its yellow eyes blaze with rage within the monster's gem-studded helm.

SIZZLE DEATH

Sizzle Death uses the **adult blue dragon** stat block with the following changes:

- He has 324 (25d12 + 150) hit points.
- His magic armor gives him AC 21.
- The armor functions as a *helm of brilliance*, and has two special corundum gems embedded into it. These gems function as *elemental gems* that conjure fire elementals.

The blue dragon battles the characters head-on, using his Lightning Breath action as often as possible. Each time he does so, unstable magic items in his hoard explode in bursts of brilliant light, and each creature that fails its saving throw against Lightning Breath is also blinded until the end of Sizzle Death's next turn.

Sizzle Death fights until reduced to 80 hit points or fewer, then flees. If the dragon dies, the gems on his armor begin to glow red-hot unless the armor is targeted by a *dispel magic* spell, rendering this effect inert. Otherwise, after glowing for 1 minute, the armor explodes. Each creature within 100 feet of the exploding armor must make a DC 18 Dexterity saving throw, taking 55 (10d10) fire damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

MAGIC ITEMS

As an action, a creature can root around in Sizzle Death's treasure hoard and pull out a magic item. Roll on the Sizzle Death Magic Items table to determine what they find.

Each magic item on the table functions normally but has the following additional features:

- The item doesn't require attunement to be used.
- Whenever the item is activated or used to make an attack or cast a spell, the GM rolls a d10. On a result of 1–3, the item explodes, dealing 16 (3d10) fire damage to the wielder. On a 4–6, the item vaporizes in a burst of light, blinding the wielder until the end of their next turn. On a 7–9, the item crumbles to dust. On a 10, the item remains intact.

SIZZLE DEATH MAGIC ITEMS

d100	Item
01–09	Flame tongue greatsword
10–19	Hammer of thunderbolts
20–29	Horn of blasting
30–39	Pipes of the sewers
40–49	Wand of lightning bolts
50–59	Wand of magic missiles
60–69	Wand of polymorph
70–79	Wand of web
80–89	Wand of wonder
90–99	Vorpal longsword
100	A permanent magic item from the “Treasure” section below.

Twenty of these magic items can be found in Sizzle Death’s hoard, in addition to the magic items noted under “Treasure” below. Characters who search for and find any magic items also find the key that unlocks the chains in area F2.

TREASURE

If you’re planning to build up to this lair as part of a longer campaign, consider having the characters find fewer magic item rewards until they battle Sizzle Death. Then you can reward them with the items below, and even add a few of your own to the hoard. The characters can find the following rewards in areas F3 and F4:

- Coins and gems worth a total of 34,000 gp.
- A *staff of fire*, a suit of *adamantine plate armor*, a *+3 shield*, and a *luck blade*.
- If Sizzle Death’s armor is recovered, a master smith (including a grateful fire giant from area F2) can reforge the pieces into a *helm of brilliance* sized for a Medium or Small character with 2d10 days of work.

ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTY

You can adjust the difficulty of this lair in a number of different ways. For more difficult encounters, consider any of the following options:

- For the hell hounds, use the **red dragon wyrmling** stat block with the same adjustments as the hell hound alpha. For the alpha, use the **adult red dragon** stat block.
- Use the **cloud giant** or **storm giant** stat block for the fire giants, giving them immunity to fire damage.

- Use the **ancient blue dragon** stat block for Sizzle Death.

To reduce the difficulty of the lair, consider any of the following options:

- Give the hell hounds the **dire wolf** stat block with immunity to fire damage.
- Remove the alpha hell hound, or use the **red dragon wyrmling** stat block for it.
- Use the **hill giant**, **stone giant**, or **frost giant** stat block for the fire giants, giving them immunity to fire damage.
- Use the **behir** or **young blue dragon** stat block for Sizzle Death. Alternatively, you could use the **young black dragon** or **young white dragon** stat block for Sizzle Death, but his breath attack deals lightning damage instead of acid or cold damage, and he is immune to lightning damage instead of acid or cold damage.

EXPANDING THIS LAIR

You can expand this lair by building on or modifying any number of the hooks found within it:

- Sizzle Death was collecting magic items to prepare for an approaching war of dragons. The world’s most powerful ancient wyrms are gearing up to duke it out to the death, with the victor gaining the others’ hoards and the scorched world where the battles took place. If the characters don’t stop the other dragons before the war begins, thousands of humanoids will perish.
- Many of the gems in Sizzle Death’s hoard were stolen from powerful metallic dragons, who are now tearing up the countryside looking for them. The characters must return the gems to their rightful owners before the good dragons do something bad.
- If Sizzle Death escapes, he goes crying to his mother, Explirasana the Blue Horror. If he dies, Explirasana learns of it and seeks revenge. In either case, the dragon is also a powerful necromancer who sends armies of undead to destroy everything the characters ever loved until they return her son’s hoard.



BLADE QUEEN'S THRONE

XAVIER BEAUDLET

On a layer of the Abyss known as the Ocean of Blood, a mountain of iron juts out of a boiling red maelstrom like an infected splinter. Carved into this island is the Keep of the Virulent Blade, where the marilith Blade Queen Karethe guards a Word of ancient power for her demon prince master—a Word that can either save the world or destroy it.

This lair is optimized for four to five 17th-level characters.

BACKGROUND

A power exists in the multiverse that allows life to bloom across countless worlds. But that power can just as easily snuff life out. For millions of years, an ancient sect of celestials protected the Word, as this power was known, hiding it even from the gods, who could not be trusted with it.

Hearing faint whispers of this Word and the power behind it, the demon prince Garvesch Bloodletter spent hundreds of years hunting it down. His armies of demons and cultists scoured the multiverse for every shred of evidence of the Word's existence and location. In an obsidian tower in the Ocean of Blood, Garvesch's

layer of the Abyss, hundreds of sages, priests, and wizards used dark and terrible magic to hunt for the Word—until after thousands of years, they found its location, and Garvesch waged a war to claim it.

The celestials known as the Keepers of the Word were few in number, but powerful. Their silvery blades cut through hundreds of Garvesch's demonic invaders, but those forces eventually cut down the sacred beings, broke into the Keepers' inner vaults, and took possession of the Word.

However, when Garvesch's claws first caressed the amber crystal containing the golden plate upon which the Word was written, the demon prince felt only fear. What was this thing he possessed? What power did it truly hold? What might be done with it—and could its power be unleashed accidentally? For having claimed the Word, Garvesch realized that he did not want it.

Feeling himself cursed to possess such power, Garvesch buried the Word in the remotest part of his realm, then put his most trusted lieutenant in charge of protecting it. Since then, the Word has been kept safe by the marilith Blade Queen Karethe, who waits for her master to choose that power's fate.

INTEGRATING THIS LAIR

Though this lair is intended as an extraplanar setting, you can easily choose to set the Keep of the Virulent Blade in a fantastic location in the Material Plane, perhaps deep in the depths of an ancient mountain or at the center of a hidden citadel. You can also decide that the Word represents a more specific source of supernatural power in your campaign.

You can use the following hooks to integrate this lair into your campaign, whether as part of a longer adventure or as the focus of a single play session:

- The Word is the only force capable of stopping a huge planetary object from smashing into the world and destroying it. This object might be a comet or some other natural phenomenon. Or it could be a planet-sized elder evil whose malevolence is beyond understanding, but whose threat grows ever clearer in the night sky.
- A group of villains plans to acquire the Word, having struck a deal with the Blade Queen. It's up to the characters to defeat her and claim the Word before she can pass it off.
- One of the characters or an NPC they care for has fallen under an ancient demonic curse that no known magic can remove—but which the Word holds the power to undo. However, wishing to have his own cure for the curse on hand, Garvesch has sequestered the Word away in a hidden vault and has bound the Blade Queen to protect it.
- Garvesch has learned that the characters hunt for the Word, and has decided that the time to use it is now. With the power of the Word, the demon prince plans to shatter the multiverse, leaving his Ocean of Blood as the only realm of existence—unless the characters can stop him.
- In a low-magic campaign, you could establish that the Word is the origin of the *wish* spell, which is as yet unknown in the world. By capturing the Word and scribing it into spell form, the characters can help set the magical destiny of the world. Alternatively, the Word could be an even more powerful version of the *wish* spell, whose parameters you determine.

APPROACHING KARETHE'S CITADEL

The Blade Queen's throne stands within a citadel shaped from the black iron of a claw-like island jutting out of the Ocean of Blood, the layer of the Abyss controlled by Garvesch. This ocean extends throughout Garvesch's realm, marked by other black iron islands carved into towers and fortresses by his followers.

You can create a more expansive version of Karethe's lair by having the inner chambers detailed here protected by a larger keep. That larger fortress is filled

by a contingent of the Blade Queen's retinue, including **vrock**, **hezrou**, and **glabrezu** followers.

However you set up the surroundings of the Blade Queen's lair, the doors to the north of area Q1 should appear to be the proper entrance into the Keep of the Virulent Blade. You might have the doors set into a wall of stone with no sense of what lies beyond, or part of an angled structure suggesting that the doors conceal a flight of stairs leading down.

CITADEL FEATURES

The areas of the Blade Queen's lair have the following general features:

- The whole lair has been magically shaped from black iron.
- Interior areas are brightly lit by red and orange glowing gemstones.
- Ceilings range from 25 to 50 feet high.
- The Blade Queen's citadel is under the effect of a *forbiddance* spell that targets celestial creatures, and which prevents any creature from teleporting into the lair. This effect ends when Karethe is killed.

KEEP OF THE VIRULENT BLADE

The following encounter areas are keyed to the map of the Blade Queen's lair.

Q1. FOUNTAIN OF WAR

A cracked stone bridge stands twenty feet above a roiling river of blood flowing to the ocean that surrounds the island. More blood drips down from underneath the bridge, with the river sending up writhing tendrils to reach for each drop like grasping hands.

Across the bridge, a grim sculpture depicts four figures impaled by fiendish weapons. A huge iron door sits against the natural rock wall west of the fountain.

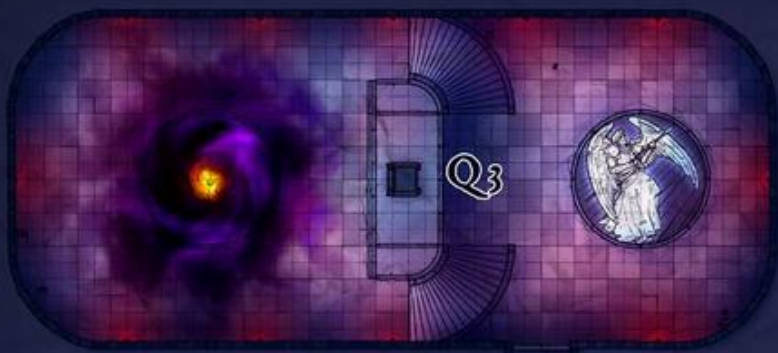
A creature that succeeds on a DC 14 Wisdom (Perception) check before stepping onto the bridge spots the large bulbous pods of blood (see below) that are moving back and forth underneath it.

RED-BLACK PUDDINGS

If any character comes into contact with the river or attempts to cross the bridge, one red-hued **black pudding** per character flows up from underneath the bridge or climbs up the cliffs from the river below.

RIVER OF BLOOD

Any creature that enters the river of blood or starts its turn there must make a DC 16 Constitution saving



1 square = 5 feet



ALEX VANDERAA

throw, taking 28 (8d6) necrotic damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

FOUNTAIN OF WAR

The sculpture on the far side of the bridge is a fountain of stone and iron depicting four different creatures impaled by fiendish-looking weapons. The sculpture radiates necromancy and conjuration magic to a *detect magic* spell.

The fountain teleports creatures into Karethe's lair if properly activated—or into peril if activated incorrectly. A character who examines the fountain can see that the weapons stabbing into the statues are real, and that the statues are slotted to allow the weapons to pass through them. The weapons cannot be pulled free, but each one can be easily pushed inward to stab deeper into its statue.

Abyssal words have been carved into the base of the sculpture underneath each of the statues (described in parentheses below). When a blade is pushed into its statue, a magical effect activates as described below. Only one blade can be pushed in at a time. If the characters attempt to push two or more blades in simultaneously, choose one effect randomly.

MIKE'S THOUGHTS: RUNNING EASY ENCOUNTERS AT HIGH LEVELS

GMs often face a temptation to make every battle a challenge for the characters, particularly at high levels. But players often enjoy watching their high-level characters defeat challenges that would have once proved difficult. In this lair, a battle against black puddings provides one such challenge, giving 17th-level characters a chance to defeat easy foes and have some fun doing it. The best stories often come from easy encounters, so never worry about pitting the characters against easily defeated foes.

The fountain's magic resets 1 minute after being used. Any portal created by the fountain vanishes, the blade used to activate the fountain slides out, and the fountain can be activated again.

Havar the Solar (“The Defeated”). This statue of a kneeling winged solar has an ornate longsword piercing its chest. A character who succeeds on a DC 18 Intelligence (History or Religion) check recognizes the statue as that of Havar, one of the Keepers of the Word defeated by the Blade Queen. If the blade is pressed in, an opaque portal resembling shimmering quicksilver forms next to the right-hand door beyond the fountain. Stepping through this portal takes the characters to the quicksilver mosaic in Karethe's throne room (area Q3).

Shrouded Devil (“The Prisoner”). A long spear impales the statue of an erinyes devil with its face covered by a shroud. If the spear is pressed down, an opaque portal resembling a shimmering cloth shroud appears next to the left-hand door beyond the fountain. Stepping through this portal takes the characters to the grim cells of area Q2.

Bloody Skeleton (“The Screaming Dead”). A skeleton covered in flowing blood is impaled by a bone-hilted greatsword. A creature that presses the sword farther into the statue is teleported into the blood river below the bridge.

Iron Knight (“The Guardian”). A huge, heavy-bladed sword is thrust through the body of a kneeling armored knight. The statue and the blade are cold to the touch. A creature that presses the sword farther into the statue is teleported into the false entrance in this area (see below).

FALSE ENTRANCE

The double doors beyond the fountain are a false entrance to Karethe's lair. Each is a smooth slab of

stone set with no obvious lock. The doors can be forced open with a successful DC 18 Strength (Athletics) check. Each door has AC 18, 40 hit points, and immunity to poison, necrotic, and psychic damage.

Beyond the false doors stands an ice-touched iron golem that attacks if the doors are opened or if a creature is teleported into this chamber. A blue crystal on the golem's chest envelops it in frost. The ice-touched iron golem uses the **iron golem** stat block with the following changes:

- It is immune to cold damage, in addition to its other immunities.
- Its slam and sword attacks deal an extra 14 (4d6) cold damage on a hit.
- Whenever a creature within 10 feet of the golem hits it with a melee attack, the frost covering the construct erupts as a freezing blast that deals 18 (4d8) cold damage to the attacker.
- The golem's Poison Breath deals cold damage instead of poison damage. Whenever the golem uses its Poison Breath, it can make one slam or sword attack as a bonus action.
- It has a challenge rating of 20 (25,000 XP).

Q2. GRIM CELLS

This chamber holds the Blade Queen's favorite prisoners in eternal torment. Each lies upon a stone slab, and is covered from head to toe with a magic shroud that restrains a creature and fills its mind with its own worst nightmares. Some of these prisoners have been here for years. Others have been held by the Blade Queen for centuries.

If a shroud is removed from any of the victims, that victim's nightmares cease. A shroud loses its magical properties if removed from the chamber.

PRISONERS

Each of the four prisoners currently on the slabs has four levels of exhaustion, 10 hit points, and no will to face Karethe. Use these prisoners to relay information regarding the lair and its backstory as needed.

Yrric. This withered **vrock** displeased Karethe when they let one of the Blade Queen's prisoners escape from this citadel two centuries past. The vrock's nightmares are of endless pain and violence, and they attack the first person they see if freed.

Zephyrus Flamecloak. A lawful evil human **archmage** (with no prepared spells), Zephyrus was marked for retribution when he summoned and bound Karethe centuries ago. The Blade Queen imprisoned the archmage here, breaking his mind with the eternal death screams of his younger brother. If freed, Zephyrus's torment ends, but he does not respond to those around him. A successful DC 16 Wisdom

(Medicine) check reveals that the archmage's mind has been broken from his torment.

Varre. This **erinyes** was captured by Karethe in a battle during the Blood War. Varre's nightmares have her continually reliving her life as a lemure, crawling through the primordial soup of the first layer of the Nine Hells. Varre has knowledge of the Blade Queen and the defenses in the throne room (area Q3), and shares this knowledge with the characters if they promise to kill her. Doing so sets her free from this prison and returns her to the Nine Hells as a lemure (but only once this time).

Orum. A **deva** gifted to Karethe by Garvesch, Orum was a witness to the demon prince's attack on the citadel of the Keepers of the Word. Little is left of their mind after centuries under Karethe's shroud, but they remember the slaying of their master, the solar Havar, and how his soul was trapped within the mosaic in front of Karethe's throne (see area Q3). After offering this information to characters who free them from the shroud, Orum sighs as their body flows into quicksilver and they return to their home plane.

TUNNEL TO THE THRONE ROOM

A 20-foot-diameter round tunnel leads out of this area, then angles toward a circular set of black-iron doors. The doors are unlocked and open into the Blade Queen's throne room (area Q3).

Q3. THRONE OF THE BLADE QUEEN

The graven images of demons tearing angels apart adorn the walls of this chamber, with the weapons of the fiends seemingly plated in real steel. The room is divided into a lower section whose floor is inscribed with the silver image of an angel, and an upper section set with a large throne made of iron and obsidian. A pair of curved ramps connect the two sides of the chamber.

An armored marilith sits upon the throne, her serpentine lower body curled at its base. With each of her arms, she draws six blades from the fan of swords that make up the throne's back. Behind her, a large yellow crystal floats within a swirling black mist, with a shining plate of gold held within the crystal's heart.

To lend power to his greatest general and guardian, Garvesch has granted Karethe items and magic that make her far more powerful than a normal marilith. She uses the **marilith** stat block with the following changes:

- Karethe wears a *belt of fire giant strength*, giving her a Strength of 25 (+7). This gives her +12 to hit for her

TURNING THE DIALS

Running high-level encounters that maintain the balance between making a fight challenging but not overwhelming is notoriously difficult. For this reason, always be thinking about the dials you can adjust to affect the difficulty of the encounter on the fly. For this lair, the dials you can turn to increase or decrease the threat level include:

- The number of swords Karethe can summon each round.
- The extra radiant damage dealt by Karethe's longsword attack and by her flying swords, granted by the mosaic.
- The damage dealt by Karethe's sword aura after she gains her temporary hit points.
- Whether Karethe calls in her clay golem guardians.

All these options add a bit of potential complexity to the main encounter in this lair, but their ultimate goal is to make the fight easier to run. Feel free to turn any of these dials up or down during the battle to keep the challenge high but not make the fight impossible.

longsword and tail attacks, and increases her damage for those attacks by 3.

- Three times per day, when Karethe fails a saving throw, she can choose to succeed instead.
- While the mosaic in Karethe's throne room is active, the marilith's longsword attacks and the attacks of her flying swords (see "Quicksilver Mosaic" below) each deal an extra 10 (3d6) radiant damage.
- Karethe can use a bonus action to teleport to the location of any one of her flying swords (see "Flying Swords").
- When Karethe takes damage that would reduce her to 0 hit points, she instead gains temporary hit points equal to her normal hit point maximum and removes any ongoing conditions or effects on her. While she has these temporary hit points, she is surrounded by an aura of swirling swords that extend 20 feet from her. A creature hostile to Karethe that enters the area of the swords for the first time on a turn or starts its turn there must succeed on a DC 20 Dexterity saving throw, taking 27 (6d8) slashing damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one. Karethe can't use this ability again until she completes a long rest.

FLYING SWORDS

Each round on initiative count 20 (losing initiative ties), Karethe can summon one flying sword per character in an unoccupied space she can see within 60 feet of her, with the swords appearing to fly out of the hands of the demons engraved on the walls. Each flying sword uses the **flying sword** stat block, but uses the attack and damage statistics of Karethe's longsword attack (including the extra radiant damage of the quicksilver mosaic; see below). These swords act on

initiative count 10 (losing initiative ties), potentially giving the characters time to neutralize them before they attack. Karethe can summon new swords each round to replace swords neutralized by the characters, but only to a maximum of one flying sword per character at any time.

If Karethe has temporary hit points from having been reduced to 0 hit points and the mosaic in the floor is disabled, she can summon two flying swords per character each round, to a total of two per character.

When she initially summons her flying swords, Karethe can choose to have one or more of the swords immediately hurl themselves toward a creature within 50 feet of the sword. A sword hurled this way makes one melee attack against its target and is destroyed.

When Karethe is killed, any remaining flying swords clatter to the ground.

CLAY GOLEMS

Guardian **clay golems** stand along the side walls of the elevated half of the chamber—two golems for four characters, three golems for five characters, or four golems for six characters. Karethe activates the golems as a bonus action under the following circumstances:

- The battle is going particularly poorly for her.
- The characters try to bypass her and go straight for the crystal containing the Word.
- The characters have found a way to consistently neutralize her summoned swords.
- The quicksilver mosaic is deactivated soon after the start of the fight.

QUICKSILVER MOSAIC

A huge mosaic, its tiled lines filled with angelic quicksilver blood, covers the floor below Karethe's throne. The image continually shifts and moves, showing the serrated blade of the demon prince Garvesch piercing the heart of the solar Havar, who led the Keepers of the Word. The mosaic has trapped Havar's soul at the moment of his murder, and will continually recreate that moment throughout eternity.

While active, the mosaic infuses Karethe's blades with radiant energy, so that her longsword attacks and the attacks of her flying swords each deal an extra 10 (3d6) radiant damage. A character with a passive Wisdom (Perception) score of 16 or higher, or who succeeds on a DC 16 Wisdom (Perception) check, sees that the swirling radiant energy in the mosaic resembles the radiant energy of Karethe's swords.

A character who uses an action to study the mosaic can attempt a DC 16 Intelligence (Arcana or Religion) check. On a success, the character recognizes that the mosaic contains the trapped soul of the solar Havar, and that the mosaic can be deactivated by drawing Havar's soul out of it. Doing so requires two successful

DC 18 Intelligence (Arcana or Religion) checks made as an action, two castings of *greater restoration*, or two castings of *dispel magic* (DC 18). If drawn out of the mosaic, Havar's freed soul returns to his home plane.

THE WORD

The Word is written upon a plate of gold surrounded by a rough-faceted amber crystal, floating in what appears to be a black mist. A character who succeeds on a DC 16 Intelligence (Arcana) check recognizes that the mist is, in fact, a pocket of pure destructive planar energy used as a protective barrier around the crystal. Any creature that touches the swirling planar energy for the first time on a turn, or that starts its turn in contact with it, must make a DC 22 Constitution saving throw, taking 90 (20d8) force damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one. If this damage reduces a creature to 0 hit points, it is destroyed. The creature and everything it is wearing and carrying, except magic items, are vaporized and drawn into the mist. The creature can be restored to life only by means of a *true resurrection* or a *wish* spell. Constructs and undead are immune to this damage. The crystal cannot be touched by anything other than a creature.

Work with the players as they determine how to acquire the crystal. If they come up with a creative solution, give characters advantage on their saving throws as they interact with the planar energy. If they come up with an approach that appears as though it should work without difficulty, let them succeed automatically.

Some possible approaches to claiming the crystal include:

- Using the dismembered hand of one of the golems to acquire the crystal.
- Summoning a monster with enough hit points to survive entering the area of planar energy and pulling the crystal out.
- Creating or summoning an undead creature to acquire it.

Once the characters have the Word in hand, it's up to you to determine its effects—or whether they can use it at all. Unless you choose to customize its effect, the characters can determine that the Word is a powerful *wish* spell with no restrictions. Alternatively, you can limit this by establishing that mere mortals such as the characters can't invoke the Word's full power, but can use it as a normal *wish* spell.

TREASURE

Along with her *belt of fire giant strength*, Karethe wears a jeweled crown of gold and platinum depicting interlocked swords (worth 50,000 gp) and two bracelets of interlocked serpents (25,000 gp each).

ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTY

You can adjust the difficulty of this lair in a number of different ways. For more difficult encounters, consider any of the following options:

- Increase the number of flying swords to two per character instead of one.
- Let the swords act immediately when summoned instead of on initiative count 10.
- Add more clay golems to Karethe's lair, and let her activate these golems earlier.
- Increase the amount of extra damage granted by the quicksilver mosaic to 21 (6d6) or 28 (8d6).
- Increase the damage dealt by Karethe's sword aura to 45 (10d8) slashing damage.

To reduce the difficulty of the lair, consider any of the following options:

- Decrease or remove the extra damage granted by the quicksilver mosaic.
- Remove the clay golems or replace them with **flesh golems**.
- Remove Karethe's ability to gain temporary hit points when she is reduced to 0 hit points.
- Run Karethe using the default **marilith** stat block.

EXPANDING THIS LAIR

You can expand this lair by building on or modifying any number of the hooks found within it:

- If the demon prince Garvesch becomes aware that the characters have recovered the Word, he stops at nothing to get it back. Demons loyal to Garvesch and mercenaries of all kinds hunt the characters down, attempting to recover the Word. The only way to stop the assault might be for the characters to face the demon prince in his floating citadel above the Ocean of Blood.
- A number of solars once allied with the Keepers of the Word eventually learn that the Word has been claimed, and hunt down those who recovered it. They do not look kindly on any mortals who dare to meddle in the Keepers' work. They might demand the cleansing of any humanoid who dared to touch the Word, becoming foes just as dangerous as the Word's former demonic guardians.
- Using or protecting the Word might become its own adventure. Supposing that the Word is a powerful *wish* spell with no limitations, figuring out the correct incantation to properly use that power for a specific goal might take time, effort, and consultation with the right sages across the multiverse. Alternatively, like Garvesch, the characters might find that recovering the Word causes all kinds of problems, inspiring them to find another secure hiding place for it.



HELLS' HEART

JACK KAISER

An ancient gold dragon has long suffered under a curse imposed by a powerful fiend. Now, the once-noble creature has become convinced that the only possible end to its millennia-long torment is the destruction of the entire multiverse. The characters must face the tormented dragon at the heart of the Vault of Creation to prevent the end of all.

This lair is optimized for four to five 20th-level characters.

BACKGROUND

Veragon the Shining Star knows only pain. For his first two thousand years of life, the gold dragon spent his days in pursuit of knowledge and discovery. Traveling across the mortal realm, he passed lifetimes in humanoid forms, struggling to better understand the existence of the peoples of the world. He then spent further centuries traveling across the planes, seeking to understand the magic that permeates every aspect of existence.

Then one day, a band of evil dragon hunters broke into one of Veragon's many lairs, hoping to loot one of his vast magical stores. Pitying them, the dragon made

their deaths as quick as possible. But their leader, an unholy paladin named Muriel Northbound, stabbed Veragon in the chest with a fiend-possessed spear called Gloomtooth before she fell. The stone-shard tip of the spear broke off in the dragon's chest before Veragon summarily bit the paladin in half.

Though his armored skin healed over the wound, the shard of the spear tip stayed in the dragon's chest, sending tendrils of its evil sentience throughout Veragon's body, infecting his heart and mind. The dragon's days began to fill with unimaginable pain and torment brought by the corrupted shard's fiendish power—even as that power brought Veragon an immortality he did not want.

Working against the pain, Veragon desperately sought ways to cure himself of his curse, but in vain. Not even the mightiest *wish* spells could rid him of the plague that racked his body and mind. And so the shard's influence inevitably pushed him toward a single conclusion: if Veragon could not die, his pain would end only when the multiverse no longer existed. Driven to this dramatic end, Veragon has sought the location of the legendary Pillar of Creation, secured within the celestial fortress known as the Vault of

Creation. For the chaotic sentience of the cursed shard wishes an end to all things, and has turned Veragon into the instrument that might complete its goal.

INTEGRATING THIS LAIR

Depending on how you set up the lead-in adventures to this lair, Veragon's corruption and descent into madness might be known to the characters before they face the dragon. Alternatively, they might discover the dragon's true nature only when they face him, learning in the heat of battle that this powerful being is seeking the end of the multiverse. If your campaign involves a long-term hunt for Veragon, make sure the characters discover that the dragon has taken on a fiendish essence, to prevent them seeking weapons or magic specifically effective against dragons.

You can use the following hooks to integrate this lair into your campaign, whether as part of a longer adventure or as the focus of a single play session:

- The fiendish influence cursing Veragon could come from a powerful archdevil or demon prince who the characters have faced throughout their high-level adventures. This fiend might be able to influence Veragon through the shard lodged in the dragon's chest, causing him to seek out the Vault of Creation as a distraction. While the characters chase down Veragon, the true villain might then bring their own plots to fulfillment.
- The characters might have heard of Veragon's plight and followed the dragon's trail of destruction as he hunts for the Vault of Creation. Throughout their adventures, they run into apocalyptic cultists and fiends who wish to see Veragon succeed. Veragon's corruption might also have spread to a number of celestials, who hunt down the characters to stop them from interrupting the dragon's plans.
- This lair might be part of a series of quests that a god or celestial entity gives to high-level characters. Veragon's destructive wrath might have surprised the gods, forcing them to call upon the mightiest mortal heroes to stop the dragon from destroying all of creation.

APPROACHING THE VAULT OF CREATION

The Vault of Creation is a domed marble structure sitting atop impossibly high mountains in a beautiful celestial domain. It sits outside the view of gods and mortals alike, protecting a magical pillar whose power holds the multiverse together.

However the characters seek out and travel to the vault, they arrive just in the aftermath of an unexpected attack. Read or paraphrase the following to set the scene:

A great domed structure shaped of marble sits atop impossibly high celestial mountains. Clouds obscure the landscape below as it reaches out into infinity. But this serene landscape is marred by the smoke pouring out of the doorway of the celestial vault. The broken forms of dead angels lie around the entrance, their bodies scorched and twisted.

When Veragon appeared at the Vault of Creation, the fiendish curse consuming the dragon drew forth the vault's celestial defenders. Unfortunately, the evil of that curse also attracted fiends from across the planes, who took on the celestials in a bloody fight. With those two sides having destroyed each other, Veragon has been left alone to seek the Pillar of Creation and shatter it.

VAULT OF CREATION FEATURES

The areas of the Vault of Creation have the following general features:

- Halls and chambers are formed of white-and-gold marble, and carved with ornate reliefs of celestials protecting mortals from demons and devils.
- All areas are well lit by blue-and-white glowing gemstones embedded in the walls.
- Hallways have 40-foot-high ceilings.
- Chambers have 80-foot-high ceilings.

VAULT OF CREATION

The following encounter areas are keyed to the map of Veragon's lair.

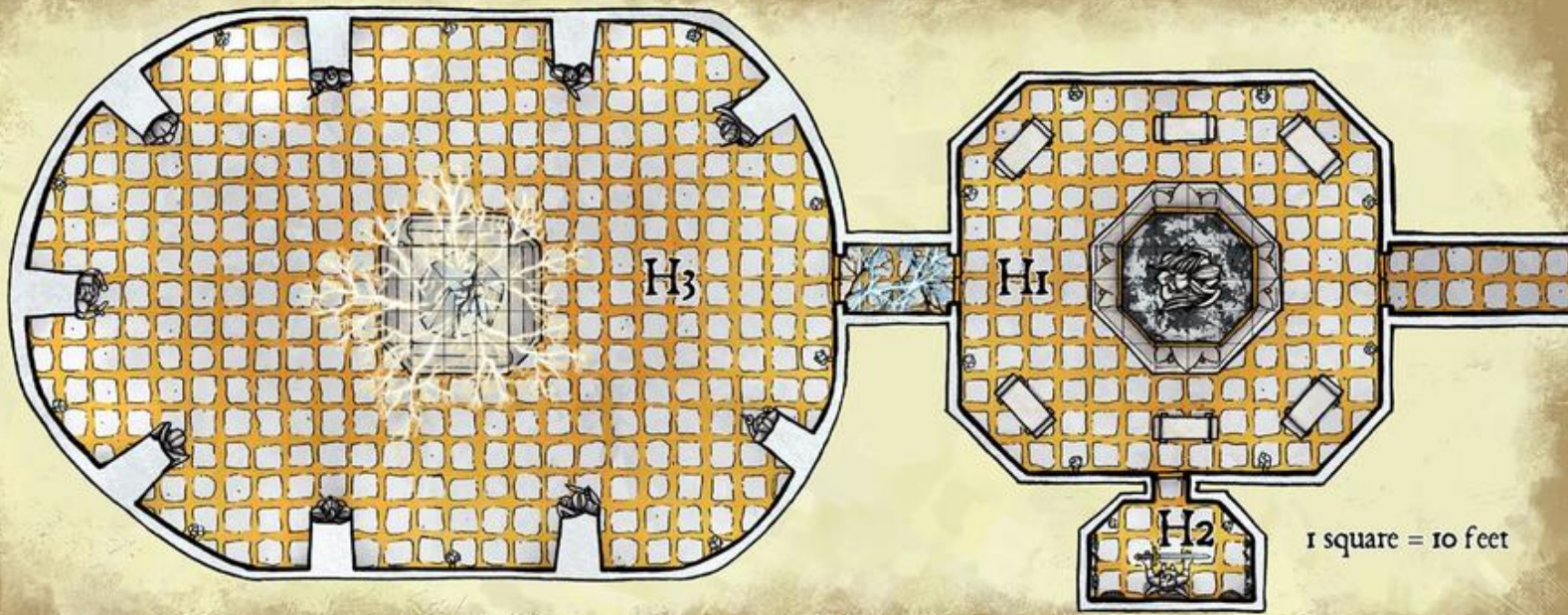
H1. FOUNTAIN OF LIFE

Once a place of pure celestial beauty, this area has been corrupted by Veragon's arrival and the battle that has followed the dragon here.

A statue of a weeping angel kneels in the middle of a large marble fountain. The body of a deva and a glabrezu demon both sprawl within the fountain, their ichor swirling black and silver within the deep blue of its water. Two shattered doors across the chamber lead into a hallway filled with jagged bolts of blue-and-black lightning, while a marble door stands closed upon the nearer wall. The corpses of numerous fiends litter the floor in front of this door, which is carved to depict a blindfolded humanoid, her arms held out as if in welcome.

FIENDISH FORCES

As the characters enter the chamber, dimensional gates suddenly open up around them, disgorging two **balors**



DIANA MUNOZ

into the room. Add a third balor if the party has five or more characters. The balors speak of the joy of being able to witness the end of creation as they attack the characters.

TAINTED FOUNTAIN

The mixture of demonic and celestial blood in the fountain has caused it to become hideously corrupted. A character with a passive Wisdom (Perception) score of 14 or higher, or who succeeds on a DC 14 Wisdom (Perception) check, notices a foul odor of death coming from the pool.

A creature that enters the fountain for the first time on a turn or starts its turn there must make a DC 20 Constitution saving throw, taking 35 (10d6) radiant damage and 35 (10d6) necrotic damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

HALLWAY

Cracks in the Pillar of Creation in area H3 have caused unstable energy to tear through the hallway leading to that area. Any creature that starts its turn in the hall must succeed on a DC 20 Dexterity saving throw or take 75 (10d6 + 40) force damage. If this damage leaves the creature with 0 hit points, it and everything it's wearing and carrying, except magic items, are reduced to a pile of fine gray dust. The creature can be restored to life only by means of a *true resurrection* or a *wish* spell. The characters can avoid this danger by moving through the hallway and fully into area H3 without stopping.

ARMORY DOORWAY

This doorway into area H2 is imbued with dangerous radiant energy, which can be felt by a character who studies the door and succeeds on a DC 16 Intelligence (Arcana, Investigation, or Religion) check. A character who senses the energy understands that the door can be opened only by a celestial creature, or by a creature

that fills itself with the door's radiant energy with a successful DC 20 Intelligence (Religion) check. On a failed check to draw on the door's energy, or if an unsuitable creature attempts to open the door, beams of radiant energy erupt from the blindfolded carving on the door. The creature triggering the beams must succeed on a DC 22 Dexterity saving throw or take 70 (20d6) radiant damage and be stunned for 1 minute.

H2. ARMORY OF LIGHT

This small chamber holds the armory of the celestial warriors charged with protecting the Vault of Creation. Veragon's attack on the vault came so quickly that none of the guardians had time to come here before the battle.

A ten-foot-high statue of an armored angel stands against the far wall, her face covered by a full helm and her hands extended, palms up. A glowing white-and-silver sword lies across the statue's upturned hands.

A character who succeeds on a DC 20 Intelligence (Arcana or Religion) check senses the tremendous arcane energy coming off the blade, as well as a powerful intelligence within it. The sword is a *luck blade* with one charge remaining. Choose the sword's type based on what will be of most use to the characters.

A *wish* spell cast by the blade channels celestial power designed to preserve the sanctity of the Vault of Creation. As such, it can be used to undo Veragon's curse and destroy the shard in the dragon. But although a character can attune to the *luck blade* here, the blade will not let the possessor cast *wish* until after

MIKE'S THOUGHTS: RUNNING 20TH-LEVEL ENCOUNTERS

Running encounters at high levels is fraught with complications at the best of times. Challenging experienced players with well-tuned high-level threats can be... well, challenging, for any number of reasons:

- Challenge rating math assumes that the characters have fewer magic items than they actually do.
- Character synergy is particularly good at higher levels.
- High-level characters have many ways to mitigate or eliminate damage, and often have substantial hit point pools.
- Certain classes have excellent ways to reduce the effectiveness of monsters, while others can deal tremendous amounts of damage. This combination can finish off even the toughest foes quickly.

This lair shows off some of the ways you can bring a strong challenge to 20th-level characters, by allowing Veragon to avoid many of the typical ways 20th-level characters can pin down high-challenge monsters. Still, no encounter can account for every strange combination of features and magic the characters can bring to the table at such a high level. Because you know the capabilities of your campaign's characters better than anyone else, always feel free to fine-tune your encounters and your boss monsters' abilities even further to bring the greatest excitement to your group.

Veragon has been defeated (see "Killing Veragon" below).

RESTING UP

This secure chamber is a good place for the characters to take a short rest and allow one of them to attune to the sword. If they tarry any longer, however, Veragon will succeed in shattering the Pillar of Creation and destroying the multiverse. Characters who use magic or stealth to get a look into area H3 see the dragon pacing restlessly in that area, and can intuit that a short rest will not hinder their quest.

H3. PILLAR OF CREATION

This chamber houses the Pillar of Creation, a huge white crystal floating within the domed well of the chamber's ceiling. When the characters can see into this area, read or paraphrase the following to set the scene:

A jagged white crystal floats beneath the domed center of this chamber, watched over by thirty-foot-high statues of angels standing against the great pillars that line the walls. Bolts of blue-white lightning periodically erupt from the crystal to arc out across the room.

Veragon has already begun to smash at the crystal, tearing at it with his claws and casting destructive spells upon it. The dragon becomes aware of the characters as soon as they enter this area, telling them that destroying the crystal is the only way he can be free of his torment.

The characters can easily see that a great wound cuts across the dragon's chest, set with motes of blue-white light. If the characters speak to Veragon and one of them succeeds on a DC 18 Charisma (Persuasion) check, the dragon is suddenly racked with pain, and takes 8d6 psychic damage from the shard embedded into his chest. A different voice with a fiendish tone then speaks through the dragon, telling the characters that they have failed and will die here—whereupon Veragon attacks.

A character who succeeds on a DC 18 Wisdom (Insight) check during any conversation with the dragon recognizes that Veragon's wound is the source of the curse driving his actions. A character with a passive Wisdom (Perception) score of 18 or higher, or who succeeds on a DC 18 Wisdom (Perception) check, can see that one of the motes of light in the dragon's wound is actually the end of a stone shard lodged deep within Veragon's chest. The character can tell that the shard cannot be removed without subduing or killing the dragon.

VERAGON'S WRATH

Veragon uses the **ancient gold dragon** stat block with the following changes:

- Veragon is a fiend.
- He is immune to fire, necrotic, and poison damage; and to bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing damage from nonmagical attacks.
- He is immune to the blinded, charmed, deafened, frightened, poisoned, and stunned conditions.
- Veragon has advantage on saving throws against spells and other magical effects.
- Veragon regains 30 hit points at the start of his turn. If the fiendish shard in his chest is targeted with a spell or attack that deals radiant damage, this regeneration doesn't function at the start of Veragon's next turn. The shard has Veragon's AC and saving throws but takes no damage directly. Veragon dies only if he starts his turn with 0 hit points and doesn't regenerate.
- Veragon has an Intelligence of 28 (+9).
- He has the Innate Spellcasting trait:

Innate Spellcasting. Veragon's innate spellcasting ability is Intelligence (spell save DC 26; +18 to hit with spell attacks). He can innately cast the following spells, requiring no material components:

At will: counterspell, dispel magic, fireball, lightning bolt, misty step, shatter, shield

1/day each: *circle of death*, *disintegrate*, *maze*, *meteor swarm*, *prismatic spray*

- Veragon has the following additional legendary actions:
Cast Spell. Veragon casts an at-will spell.
Fire Breath (Costs 3 Actions). Veragon uses his Fire Breath.
- His Multiattack action is replaced by the following:
Multiattack. Veragon can use his Frightful Presence. He then makes one bite attack and two claw attacks; or he makes one bite attack, one claw attack, and casts any innate spell that can normally be cast as an action.
- Veragon's Frightful Presence has a save DC of 26.
- His fire breath has a save DC of 26 and deals 55 (10d10) fire damage and 55 (10d10) necrotic damage.
- His Weakening Breath has a save DC of 26.
- He has a challenge rating of 30 (155,000 XP).

VERAGON'S END

If Veragon drops to fewer than half his full hit points, the shard in his chest flares brightly. His breath weapon recharges, and he is enveloped in black and red fire as

SCOTT'S THOUGHTS: AVOIDING LOST VICTORIES

Mike talks in the "Curse of Black Ice" lair about the use of multistage monsters in this book, and this design does a great job of putting a unique spin on some already powerful creatures. Experienced players might well have faced off against an ancient dragon before, but having that dragon refresh halfway through the fight with a 30-foot aura of necrotic fire and a multitarget *finger of death* legendary action will keep them on their toes. However, there's one area where players of all levels of experience can have a consistently bad time in a game, and that's feeling as though a victory has no value because it's been arbitrarily snatched away.

When playing a multistage monster, try to read the table to get a sense of how the players might react to putting down the boss through valiant effort, only to have the boss laugh maniacally as they power up again. You want this to be a moment of peak "What? Wow!", rather than one of "What? Ugh." If you feel like your players are up for the reveal as much as their characters are up for the challenge, let the multistage boss surprise them. But if you're worried about accidentally undercutting their sense of victory, don't be afraid to tease a boss's multistage setup ahead of time.

Whispered rumors can speak of how the corrupted gold dragon is unkillable, or about another group of heroes who thought they'd vanquished the frost giant werewolf only to be torn limb from limb by the wolf that rose from the giant's corpse. In a pinch, you can even set up what's coming with the ever-popular, "If you strike me down..." monologue. After all, a multistage boss who's on the ropes in their first form has plenty of reasons to be confident that they've still got the upper hand in the fight.

he is overcome by the fiendish presence in the shard. While Veragon is below half his full hit points, his statistics have the following additional changes:

- He is surrounded by an aura of black fire. Any creature that moves within 30 feet of Veragon for the first time on a turn or starts its turn there must make a DC 26 Constitution saving throw, taking 18 (4d8) fire damage and 18 (4d8) necrotic damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.
- He loses his Innate Spellcasting trait.
- He loses his previous additional legendary actions and gains the following legendary action:
Finger of Death (Costs 3 Actions). Veragon casts the *finger of death* spell (save DC 26), but can target two creatures instead of just one.

FIENDISH FORCES

When facing more than five characters, Veragon is accompanied by one **planetar** for each character above five. These celestials have been twisted by Veragon's own corruption, their alignment shifting to lawful evil. They now serve the dragon and fight to the death against his foes.

TACTICS

Veragon holds nothing back when fighting the characters. He begins by using three legendary actions to use Fire Breath, then takes flight and casts *meteor swarm* on his turn. When he does so, the meteors shatter the domed ceiling and smash down into the chamber. The characters can use this rubble for half cover.

The dragon typically uses his legendary actions to cast *fireball*, *lightning bolt*, or *shatter*. He uses *misty step* if pinned down, *counterspell* and *dispel magic* if he faces troublesome spellcasters, and *shield* if facing powerful melee or ranged attackers. He saves *disintegrate* in case *wall of force* is used to pen him in.

Veragon uses his mobility to his advantage, staying in flight and staying out of range of *counterspell* when casting his spells.

PILLAR OF CREATION

A crack in the Pillar of Creation caused by Veragon's earlier attacks causes pure energy to arc around the chamber. Once per round on initiative count 0 (losing initiative ties), a bolt of this energy strikes a random creature in the room, which must succeed on a DC 22 Dexterity saving throw or take 75 (10d6 + 40) force damage. If this damage leaves the creature with 0 hit points, it and everything it's wearing and carrying, except magic items, are reduced to a pile of fine gray dust. The creature can be restored to life only by means of a *true resurrection* or a *wish* spell.

To add more urgency to the battle, Veragon can use his Tail Attack legendary action to continue smashing

the pillar, sending more cracks through it. This has no effect on the timeline of the pillar's destruction, but you can use it to heighten the tension.

KILLING VERAGON

When Veragon drops to 0 hit points, the dragon falls down, defeated. But unless the shard is removed from his chest, he immediately begins to regenerate from the vast amount of damage he has taken. Even if Veragon is disintegrated, the shard lies intact among his ashen remains—and begins to rebuild the dragon piece by piece.

When he first regains consciousness, Veragon remains outside the shard's influence. With his mind freed, the dragon understands something that the shard's curse has previously prevented him from knowing, and he explains to the characters that the shard can be destroyed by using a *wish* spell, the cleric's Divine Intervention feature, or similarly powerful magic to make it vulnerable, and then to sunder it with a powerful weapon. Veragon also shares that destroying the shard will destroy him as well.

As Veragon foretold, using *wish* or Divine Intervention allows a character to use a rare or legendary weapon (including the *luck blade* found in area H2), to destroy the shard. Doing so likewise destroys Veragon, whose essence has been thoroughly taken over by the shard. The dragon thanks the characters before he dies.

If the characters do not have access to the necessary magic or weapon, Veragon can tell them that he senses one nearby, directing them to area H2. (The shard's curse previously prevented him from seeking the weapon himself.)

TREASURE

In addition to the *luck blade* claimed in area H2, the vault contains numerous other treasures. These include a mixture of celestial-forged idols and artifacts worth a total of 100,000 gp, and a suit of golden +3 *plate armor* forged for a mortal hero of the gods.

ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTY

You can adjust the difficulty of this lair in a number of different ways. For more difficult encounters, consider any of the following options:

- Add one or more **planetars** to the fight, all corrupted by Veragon's curse and serving the dragon.
- Have Veragon's breath weapon deal 71 (13d10) fire damage and 71 (13d10) necrotic damage.

- Add *cone of cold* to Veragon's list of at-will spells.
- In the second part of the fight, let Veragon target three or more creatures with *finger of death* as a legendary action.

To reduce the difficulty of the lair, consider any of the following options:

- Have Veragon's breath weapon deal 35 (10d6) fire damage and 35 (10d6) necrotic damage.
- Avoid using Veragon's more powerful spells.
- Run Veragon as a standard **adult gold dragon** or **ancient gold dragon** with no changes to his stat block.
- Have Veragon not overcome by the shard when he drops to below half his full hit points, finishing the fight using his original statistics.

EXPANDING THIS LAIR

You can expand this lair by building on or modifying any number of the hooks found within it:

- If a fiendish villain orchestrated the dragon's attack on the Vault of Creation, that villain's true agenda still stands. After defeating Veragon, the characters must travel quickly to the realm of the fiendish lord to try to stop a plot that might already be well underway.
- If this quest was one of many the gods or their celestial agents have given to the characters, other quests might remain to be performed. Perhaps a rift to a planet populated by tarrasques has formed within a populated city, whose folk need the characters' aid.
- After defeating Veragon, the characters might decide to take on the quest to cure the poor dragon before he is taken over again by the curse. Not even a *wish* spell can destroy the shard on its own, but you can have the characters search for and destroy the source of the shard's dark influence to end its power.
- Even if the characters are successful in destroying the shard, the guardians of the Pillar of Creation might not take kindly to mortals stepping into the vault even with the best of intentions. The lawful attitudes of the celestials who guard the Vault of Creation might drive them to hunt down and destroy the characters, so that word of the vault's location never reaches the mortal world.



PUT THE MONSTER BACK

JACK KAISER

A group of mages known as the Magus Conclave have succeeded in neutralizing the most powerful monster in existence, creating a prison island specially built to hold the tarrasque. And when a devious necromancer attempts to break that legendary creature out of the secure facility so as to raise it as an undead, only the characters can stop her.

This lair is optimized for four to five 20th-level characters.

BACKGROUND

Adamantine Island Prison was built for one purpose: to contain the legendary creature known as the tarrasque. For years before that titan monstrosity's capture, a group of wizards known as the Magus Conclave worked on transmuting the island and its surrounding waters, creating a magically fortified, seamless adamantine structure that floats in a sea of acid. The conclave then hired a crew of renowned adventurers to capture the tarrasque and bring it to the island.

If all had gone according to plan, the prison would have held the monstrosity indefinitely. Using a construct version of the titan, the mages of the

conclave have been able to safely interact with the tarrasque as they observed and unraveled its secrets. But they didn't count on a powerful necromancer, Lacarek the Oblivion, infiltrating their group. When Lacarek was ready to make her move, she seized control of the construct tarrasque to slaughter the mages of the conclave, then freed the tarrasque from its cell—only to have Adamantine Island's automated defenses kick in and lock the facility down.

With the mages on guard at the prison all eaten by the tarrasque, Lacarek has been busy preparing to enact her ultimate plan: kill the tarrasque, then bring the titan's body back as an undead thrall under her control.

INTEGRATING THIS LAIR

Adamantine Island Prison can be placed in any sea or other large body of water, as you desire. The prison might be a remote island set on its own, or part of a larger group of islands all built to contain legendary monsters.

You can use the following hooks to integrate this lair into your campaign, whether as part of a longer adventure or as the focus of a single play session:

- The characters were the adventurers who helped the Magus Conclave imprison the tarrasque, after having been approached and trained by members of the conclave early in their careers. Earlier adventures might include the characters being sent out hunting monsters for practice, seeking ancient books for research, and helping gather the materials necessary to build the prison. Then, just a few months after finally capturing the monster, the characters receive a dying message by way of a *sending* spell from a member of the Magus Conclave they know, which says, “The tarrasque is freed, but contained on the island. We cannot say for how long. A traitor works against us. Please come help immediately!”
- Lacarek’s unique undead creations have been a thorn in the characters’ sides for a long time. The necromancer has unleashed zombie owlbears, night hag vampires, behir skeletons, dragon mummies, and more onto the world, whose threats the characters have stopped every time. Ready to end things once and for all, the characters plan to take the fight to Lacarek, and learn by interrogating her apprentices that she has infiltrated the Magus Conclave and is staying at Adamantine Island Prison.
- The characters use Adamantine Island as a base of operations, in exchange for performing the occasional quest in search of rare books and items for the Magus Conclave. The tarrasque has been safely imprisoned there since the characters moved in. But when they return one day from a quest for the conclave, they find the prison in lockdown and the tarrasque on the loose.

APPROACHING THE PRISON

The best ways to reach Adamantine Island Prison are to teleport onto its shores or to fly to it. Boat access is possible, but the sea within one mile of the island is a caustic current that deals 66 (12d10) acid damage to each creature or object that starts its turn in the area. Any vessel approaching the island must be magically treated or otherwise immune to such damage.

When the characters first see the prison, read or paraphrase the following to set the scene:

An imposing black fortress rises up from an equally dark island floating in a green sea that sizzles and pops. The building and the island appear to be a continuous, smooth adamantine structure, as if the citadel was grown from the metal ground rather than being assembled piece by piece atop it. A rage-filled, bestial howl comes from within, seeming to shake the entire island with its power.

UNEXPECTED GUESTS

When the characters arrive at the island, a group of Lacarek’s disciples are already there, pacing around the prison and trying to figure out how to enter without triggering more of its defenses. The following creatures make up this force:

- Mavis Sol, Lacarek’s best apprentice and a chaotic evil human **archmage**
- Two **clay golems**
- One **mage** loyal to Lacarek for every two characters in the party (rounded down)

If the characters are noticed, Mavis approaches them, acting concerned for the people within the prison. She asks for the party’s help in entering and aiding her friends trapped inside. She knows much about the Magus Conclave thanks to reports from Lacarek, and casts the *detect thoughts* spell to try to obtain any information from the characters that might convince them she is on their side. She focuses only on a character’s surface thoughts, so as to not give away her probing. A character who succeeds on a DC 18 Wisdom (Insight) check can tell that Mavis is lying, and that the archmage wants to use the characters to get inside the prison before she disposes of them.

If the characters refuse to help, Mavis and her forces attack, fighting to the death. If any of the mages are captured, a successful DC 18 Charisma (Intimidation) check inspires them to relay the information found in the “Background” section.

JAMES’S THOUGHTS: LET THEM FEEL EPIC

It is hard to write encounters that work for every high-level party. A group of 20th-level characters that includes a barbarian, a bard, a druid, and a ranger handles problems with vastly different resources than a group composed of a cleric, a fighter, a monk, and a warlock. And either way, high-level characters have a lot of resources that can make a battle a cakewalk. One good *meteor swarm* spell can end a fight before it really starts.

With this in mind, we’ve made sure to put smaller combat encounters in the lead-up to the boss battles in higher-level lairs. If the characters don’t appear fully challenged by these encounters because of their combination of incredible class features, magic items, and spells, that’s okay! These battles are not meant to push the characters to their limits, but rather to drain some of their many resources. A few rounds spent trouncing a golem and a group of mages lets epic characters feel epic. It also gives them the courage to stare down a tarrasque and its construct twin—even while making that climactic encounter a little more difficult.

GETTING INSIDE

The only way into the prison is through a massive set of 30-foot-high double doors on the structure's north side. Magic woven into the doors and walls of the prison radiates abjuration to a *detect magic* spell. These wards block magic that would allow a creature to teleport into or out of the structure, including magic that transports a creature to another plane (*banishment*, *plane shift*, and the like). They also block creatures outside the prison from using magic such as the *scrying* spell to sense within it.

In addition to their abjuration aura, the doors radiate an aura of evocation magic to a *detect magic* spell. The doors automatically locked and had a magic trap activated on them when the tarrasque was freed from its cell (see below). The lock can be picked with a successful DC 30 Dexterity check using thieves' tools, or the door can be forced open with a successful DC 31 Strength (Athletics) check.

Each of the prison's doors and 5-foot-cubic sections of wall has AC 23, 300 hit points, a damage threshold of 100, and immunity to acid, fire, lightning, poison, psychic, and thunder damage. Left unchecked, the tarrasque can use its Siege Monster trait to deal enough damage to eventually break out through the prison walls.

TRAPPED DOORS

If any creature damages the doors, forces them open, or fails in an attempt to pick their lock, a magic trap activates to unleash a 60-foot cube of thunderous energy that extends out from the doors. Each creature in the area must make a DC 20 Constitution saving throw. On a failed save, the creature takes 44 (8d10) thunder damage and is pushed 60 feet way from the doors (likely ending up in the acid sea). On a successful save, it takes half as much damage and is not pushed. A successful casting of *dispel magic* (DC 19) renders the trap inert for 5 minutes.

PRISON FEATURES

The areas of the prison have the following general features:

- The ceilings are 60 feet high, with 30-foot-high doorways connecting rooms.
- The prison is in lockdown when the characters enter because the tarrasque is out of its cell. This activates several defenses in the prison, which are specifically called out in each area's description. See area P2 for information on how the characters can end the lockdown.
- The prison is brightly lit by magic globes embedded into the ceiling. While the prison is in lockdown, the globes shed red light.



ADAMANTINE ISLAND PRISON

The following encounter areas are keyed to the map of the tarrasque's prison.

P1. ENTRANCE DORM

This living area for the mages of the Magus Conclave contains ten sets of bunk beds along the walls and two long tables set with benches standing at the center of the room. Between the two tables, a 10-foot-tall statue of an angel holding out a sword and spreading its wings levitates 15 feet above the floor.

A character who succeeds on a DC 22 Wisdom (Perception) check notices that the eyes of the angel statue appear to follow all the characters around the room as they move. The statue is actually a guardian creature normally held in stasis, and which wakes

when the prison goes into lockdown. The statue uses the **solar** stat block with the following changes:

- The statue is an unaligned construct.
- Its Intelligence score is 3 (–4) and its Charisma score is 1 (–5).
- It does not have proficiency with Intelligence or Charisma saving throws.
- The statue understands Common but can't speak, and it doesn't have the Divine Awareness or Innate Spellcasting traits, or the Healing Touch action.

When the statue notices any creature move within 10 feet of the door to area P2, or if it takes any damage while the prison is in lockdown, it erupts into motion. This causes a magic wall of blades 20 feet wide, 10 feet thick, and 30 feet high to appear in front of the door that leads outside. At the same time, the ceiling begins to drop (see below).

Any creature that touches the blade wall for the first time on a turn or starts its turn there takes 33 (6d10) slashing damage. Once in motion, the statue attacks all creatures in the room, fighting until destroyed or until the prison is no longer in lockdown. However, it does not follow characters who flee into area P2.

DROPPING CEILING

The 60-foot-high ceiling drops down 10 feet each round on initiative count 0 (losing initiative ties). The ceiling is a solid slab of magically elongating stone that eventually fills the entire room. A creature that can reach the ceiling can make a DC 25 Strength (Athletics) check as an action, holding it in place with a successful check and preventing it from dropping that same round. This check must be repeated each round to keep the ceiling in place.

When the ceiling drops all the way to the floor, each creature in the room is immediately reduced to 0 hit points and crushed to death—including the tarrasque if the characters manage to lure it inside this room. The room remains filled by the expanding ceiling until the prison is no longer in lockdown.

P2. PRISON CENTER

The 30-foot-high double doors that lead to this chamber from area P1 are locked. The lock can be picked with a successful DC 30 Dexterity check using thieves' tools, or the door can be forced with a successful DC 31 Strength (Athletics) check. The doors have AC 23, 300 hit points, a damage threshold of 100, and immunity to acid, fire, lightning, poison, psychic, and thunder damage.

When the characters first enter this area, read or paraphrase the following:

A bone-rattling roar rises from across this devastated chamber. Few creatures in the multiverse could leave such deep gouges in the adamantine walls enclosing you, but this prison appears to be home to two of them! The towering terror known as the tarrasque paces around the room in rage, as a mechanical version of the titan, just as enormous and made of adamantine, moves beside it. Neither the real tarrasque nor the metal one attacks the other, with both appearing to be allies.

The floor the monsters stalk across is carved with arcane sigils that glow purple, and which are set around three giant metal grates through which the noxious mist of the acid sea rises. Above it all, two observation balconies run along the sides of the chamber, some forty feet off the floor.

As the characters have a chance to fully observe the room, they note a 3-foot-high red lever jutting out of the floor next to each floor grate. Toward the south end of the room, one of the balconies holds a small ballista that juts over its edge. A large crystal swirling with the colors of the rainbow is embedded low into the west wall, and three greatswords with sapphire blades are stabbed into the ceiling at the center of the room. A trio of sapphire pillars stand across from an area that was clearly the tarrasque's cell.

TARRASQUE!

As soon as the **tarrasque** notices the characters, it attacks, fighting to the death. The creature has the following additional action, which it can use in place of one or both claw attacks when it takes the Multiattack action:

Hurl Debris. *Ranged Weapon Attack:* +19 to hit, range 600/2,400 ft., one target. *Hit:* 24 (4d6 + 10) bludgeoning damage. If the target is a creature, it must succeed on a DC 20 Strength saving throw or be knocked prone.

The tarrasque prefers to use its mighty melee attacks to destroy its foes. It attacks whichever creature it perceives as the biggest threat—typically the creature that dealt the most damage to the titan in the previous round. Cunning characters can use these straightforward tactics to lure the tarrasque back into its cell in the southwest corner of the room. The tarrasque doesn't attack Lacarek as long she remains inside the metal tarrasque (see below), but that ends if she is forced out of the construct.

LACAREK'S REVENGE

Lacarek the Oblivion is inside the metal tarrasque, controlling the construct from within. The

JAMES'S THOUGHTS: DESCRIPTION AND MOVEMENT

Long combats can be a real drag, especially when every turn feels like one player adding up numbers on dice followed by another player subtracting that number from a creature's hit point total. To get your players invested, lead with enthusiasm and energy. Stand up if it helps you, and go beyond the dice. Describe the actions and reactions of your monsters with glee and drama, and invite your players to do the same with their characters by asking questions about what their actions feel, look, and sound like. Award inspiration for great descriptions, to encourage your players to stay engaged with the story beyond the mechanics.

Combat is boring when everyone stands in one place attacking each other. So to help keep combat exciting, have the monsters move around. Better positioning is often worth the risk of an opportunity attack, and many creatures—especially those of low Intelligence or with a sense of invulnerability—lack the capacity to think about the consequences of charging through a line of enemies to get to the wizard harassing them with long-range spells. Plus, giving the characters a few extra attacks can help end a long combat a little sooner!

necromancer uses the **archmage** stat block with the following changes:

- She is chaotic evil.
- She has 162 hit points.
- Her Spellcasting trait has been replaced with the Spellcasting trait from the **lich** stat block.

Lacarek initially focuses on harming the characters, softening them up because she knows she needs to kill them only after the undead tarrasque rises. The necromancer casts *power word kill* when the tarrasque drops below 100 hit points, targeting the monstrosity so she can control its undead form (see “Necromantic Sigils” below). If the metal tarrasque is destroyed or she is removed from it, Lacarek continues to fight, hoping to bring down the tarrasque as quickly as possible so she can compel it to defend her in its undead form.

Lacarek knows how all of the defenses in the prison work, and uses them to bring her plans to fruition.

METAL TARRASQUE

A *detect magic* spell reveals that the metal tarrasque radiates an aura of abjuration magic. A successful DC 23 Wisdom (Perception) check made as an action reveals the outline of a door on the machine's chest, which leads to a hidden compartment 5 feet on a side filled with switches and levers. This door locks from the inside when closed, and can be unlocked from outside with a successful DC 25 Dexterity check using thieves' tools, or forced open with a successful DC 25 Strength (Athletics) check.

A creature inside the compartment with the door closed has total cover against attacks and other effects originating outside the metal tarrasque. In addition, a creature in the compartment can see through the door when it is closed, can spend all its movement to move the machine 40 feet, and can spend an action to use one of the machine's action options.

The metal tarrasque has the following statistics:

- It has AC 25; 676 hit points; immunity to fire, poison, and psychic damage; and immunity to bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing damage from nonmagical attacks.
- It has immunity to the poisoned condition.
- It has the tarrasque's Reflective Carapace trait, and all the tarrasque's action options except for Frightful Presence, Swallow, and legendary actions.
- The metal tarrasque automatically succeeds on Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma saving throws. While being piloted, it has a +10 bonus to Strength and Constitution saving throws and a +0 bonus to Dexterity saving throws.
- Despite its Siege Monster trait, the real tarrasque does not deal double damage to the metal tarrasque, which is specially designed to stand toe-to-toe with the titan monstrosity.

BALCONY

The 40-foot-high balcony extending around the room has a 3-foot-high railing along its outside edge. The tarrasque or a creature piloting the metal tarrasque can tear down a 10-foot-square section of balcony in place of making a claw attack. Any creature standing on that section of balcony must succeed on a DC 20 Dexterity saving throw to jump to a safe section of balcony. On a failed save, or if there is no safe place within jumping distance, the creature falls 40 feet to the floor, landing prone and taking 4d6 bludgeoning damage.

GLUE BALLISTA

The ballista along the balcony is loaded with three glue bombs. As an action, a creature at the ballista can fire it at any point it can see in the room, causing glue to explode in a 10-foot-radius sphere centered on that point. Each creature in the area must succeed on a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw or become restrained. A restrained target can repeat this saving throw at the end of each of its turns, ending the restrained condition on itself on a success.

SEA GRATES

Each lever next to the grate is engraved with the words: “ACID RELEASE.” As an action, a creature can pull the red lever to cause the acidic water of the sea below to shoot up through the grate, creating a 30-foot-diameter caustic column that reaches the ceiling. Each creature

in the area must make a DC 20 Dexterity saving throw, taking 66 (12d10) acid damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

PRISMATIC CRYSTAL

A *detect magic* spell reveals that the rainbow-colored crystal embedded in the west wall radiates an aura of abjuration magic. The crystal is engraved with the phrase: “Speak the order of the rainbow’s colors to activate.” If a creature in the room uses an action to say, “Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet,” aloud in any language, the crystal activates (or deactivates if it is already active). Speaking the words in reverse order is also acceptable. If none of the players knows the colors of the rainbow and the order in which they appear, a successful DC 10 Intelligence check allows a character to remember that information.

When the crystal activates, it produces a 60-foot-high, 10-foot wide, 90-foot-long rainbow wall that stretches between the west and east walls of the prison and extends from floor to ceiling. This wall functions like the one created by the *prismatic wall* spell (save DC 19), with the following changes:

- The wall can form in a space occupied by a creature, immediately affecting that creature.
- Creatures within 20 feet of the wall do not need to make Constitution saving throws to avoid becoming blinded by it.
- All creatures are affected by the wall, including the creature that activates the crystal.

The crystal has AC 19, 50 hit points, and immunity to poison and psychic damage.

NECROMANTIC SIGILS

A *detect magic* spell reveals that each of the glowing purple sigils scribed into the floor radiates an aura of necromancy magic. A character proficient with mason’s tools notes that the sigils are freshly carved, and do not appear to be part of the prison’s defenses. Lacarek has just completed carving the sigils into the floor using the metal tarrasque.

A character who succeeds on a DC 18 Intelligence (Arcana) check made to study the sigils knows that they are part of a necromancy ritual meant to bring the tarrasque back from the dead. Each sigil has AC 20, 18 hit points, and immunity to poison and psychic damage. Destroying a sigil or casting the *dispel magic* spell on it drains its magic.

Whenever a creature that isn’t Lacarek or the tarrasque ends its turn touching one of the sigils, it must succeed on a DC 15 Constitution saving throw or gain one level of exhaustion.

If the tarrasque dies in this room and any of the sigils are active, it rises as an undead creature under Lacarek’s control at the start of Lacarek’s next turn. As an undead creature, the tarrasque has the following changes to its stat block:

- It is an undead with 676 hit points, minus 45 hit points for each sigil that was destroyed or dispelled before the tarrasque died.
- All uses of the tarrasque’s Legendary Resistance refresh.
- A creature swallowed by the undead tarrasque takes necrotic damage instead of acid damage.
- The tarrasque is immune to any effect that turns undead.
- Any creature killed by the tarrasque rises as a **wraith** controlled by Lacarek at the start of the creature’s next turn.
- The undead tarrasque can take the Hurl Debris action as described above.

When the undead tarrasque rises, Lacarek orders it to kill the characters, and fights to the death alongside her creation. If the necromancer dies, the tarrasque destroys the characters if it can, then goes berserk and destroys everything in sight.

SAPPHIRE SWORDS AND PEDESTALS

A character who observes the sapphire swords in the ceiling and the sapphire pedestals knows they are connected and intuitively their purpose with a successful DC 15 Intelligence (Arcana) check. A *detect magic* spell reveals that the swords and pedestals radiate auras of abjuration magic. The swords and the pedestals are indestructible and immune to all damage.

A character who examines the pedestals sees that each has a slot in its top side large enough to accommodate the blade of a greatsword. The sapphire swords were flung into the ceiling by Lacarek using the metal tarrasque. Removing a sword from the ceiling requires an action and a successful DC 18 Strength (Athletics) check. Sliding a sword into or removing it from a pedestal requires an action. When each pedestal has had a sapphire sword placed into it, a cube of magical force 40 feet wide, 30 feet long, and 60 feet high appears, surrounding the tarrasque’s cell in the southwest corner of the room. The walls of this field are paper thin and immune to all damage. The field cannot be dispelled, and nothing except air can pass through it. If a sword is removed from any pedestal, the force field disappears.

If the tarrasque is inside its cell when the force field is activated, the prison goes out of lockdown. If the characters kill the tarrasque, members of the Magus Conclave arrive 1d10 days later and can magically override the lockdown of the prison from outside it.

TARRASQUE'S CELL

A 30-foot-square steel plate sits on the floor of the tarrasque's cell. A *detect magic* spell reveals that this plate radiates an aura of evocation magic. A creature that touches the plate for the first time on a turn must succeed on a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw or have an enormous spectral hand erupt from the plate, grab the creature, and pull it to an unoccupied space as close to the plate's center as possible. The creature is then restrained by the hand until the start of its next turn.

TREASURE

If the characters slice the belly of the tarrasque open, they discover that it swallowed an *Orb of Dragonkind*. Lacarek carries ten flawless diamonds (worth 10,000 gp each) and a *wand of ultimate power*. This very rare magic item requires attunement by a spellcaster, and grants its wielder a +3 bonus to spell attack rolls and to the saving throw DCs of the wielder's spells.

METAL TARRASQUE AS TREASURE

Clever characters might decide to claim the metal tarrasque for themselves, including finding a way to move it off an island surrounded by acid. If you don't want the characters to have the device, the Magus Conclave asks for it back after recovering from the disaster, or the characters determine that keeping it operational requires special magic known only to the members of the conclave.

If you want the characters to keep the metal tarrasque, remember that the enormous device can hold only one character within it, and that it lacks subtlety. Moreover, creatures that collect unique magic items, including dragons, will quickly come to covet the device, and might plot to steal it.

ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTY

You can adjust the difficulty of this lair in a number of different ways. For more difficult encounters, consider any of the following options:

- All of Lacarek's followers outside the prison are **archmages**, and work with **iron golems** instead of clay golems.
- Lacarek is a **lich** instead of an archmage.
- The tarrasque has 990 hit points and regains 30 hit points at the start of its turn as long as it has at least 1 hit point.

To reduce the difficulty of the lair, consider any of the following options:

- Mavis Sol is a mage instead of an archmage, and her retinue travels with **flesh golems** instead of clay golems.
- The angel statue uses the **deva** or **planetary** stat block instead of the solar stat block.
- Lacarek uses the unmodified **archmage** stat block.
- The tarrasque and the metal tarrasque each have AC 20 and 363 hit points.

EXPANDING THIS LAIR

You can expand this lair by building on or modifying any number of the hooks found within it:

- If the characters manage to put the tarrasque back into its cell, the grateful remaining members of the Magus Conclave ask the characters to find new archmages to join the ranks of those who were killed. They give the characters a list of mages around the world to approach in person. Each mage is willing to join, provided the characters can perform a favor or two.
- The tarrasque is actually just the last in a long line of dragons, krakens, giants, and other titanic creatures Lacarek has turned into undead servants. Now with the necromancer dead, these creatures run amok and rampage across the land. Only a group of powerful adventurers like the characters can stop them.
- If the characters killed the tarrasque, a cult that worships the titan monstrosity seeks vengeance. The cult's leaders open up a portal to another world full of tarrasque-like creatures, which come into the Material Plane with an appetite for destruction.

BUILDING A BOSS LAIR

This book provides a wide range of villainous lairs for your fifth edition fantasy games. But you can also use it as inspiration for building your own fantastic lairs and boss monster encounters. Having spent a fair bit of time creating the lairs and encounters for this book (as well as other books), we thought we'd share some of the tips and tricks we've learned for building great boss lairs.

WHO'S THE BOSS?

Every lair needs a good boss monster running the show. When creating a new boss lair, it's often best to start with this head villain, as doing so helps to shape the story and the features for the lair.

PICK A CREATURE

Your fifth edition game gives you hundreds of creatures to choose from, but not all of those make good boss monsters. To start with, **bandits**, **cultists**, **goblins**, **kobolds**, and other creatures with a challenge rating below 1 are usually better suited to accomplice or minion roles with their lower hit points and weaker attacks. This same idea continues to hold true for any creature whose challenge rating is equal to or lower than the party's level, unless that creature has a lot of interesting features. At challenge rating 3, a standard **owlbear** might be a great boss for a group of 2nd-level characters. But it quickly becomes less interesting at higher levels, as it has no mechanical traits that make

MODIFYING LAIRS

You can use the lairs in this book as is, or you can create your own boss lairs—but you also have a middle option. Take this book's lairs and encounters, and overhaul them to suit your needs. Want to have a sinister oni that runs a produce store? Just take the "Sticky Toffee" encounter and swap out your chosen baddie for the night hag. You can then reskin the taffy mound and golem to be produce-themed enemies, describe the vats of chocolate and toffee as salad dressing, and make all the candy into fresh fruits and vegetables. Suddenly, you've got a totally new lair with a unique boss monster! In most cases, swapping the villain and underlings and reflavoring features is all you need to do to make these lairs your own.

it a challenging combatant and lacks the intelligence to use dynamic tactics or traps during a battle.

Bosses are special. They should have memorable, deadly features to unleash upon the characters during a dramatic showdown. This could be as simple as a standard **night hag**'s combination of spellcasting, strength, and toughness, or it could involve modifying a creature's stat block to make it unique.

A quick way to modify a creature is to pull traits and action options from one stat block to add to another. Think about that poor owlbear boss being laughed at by a party of 5th-level characters. Then imagine if the monstrosity's Intelligence and Charisma scores increased to 18, it could speak and understand Common, and it gained the Spellcasting trait from the **mage** stat block. That is one surprising and competent boss monster! Just be aware that making adjustments like this can increase a creature's challenge rating, even as it increases the fun of your game.

Some creatures are obviously special and made to be bosses. Monsters with legendary actions or lair actions, monsters that cast lots of spells, and monsters of Huge or Gargantuan size typically need little or no modification to be good boss monsters. Other creatures might benefit from a little modification just to keep the characters and players on their toes, like the titular foe in "Caves of the Cockatrice."

MULTIPLE BOSSES

Some lairs might have more than one boss, allowing you to use creatures with lower challenge ratings to still create an effective battle. The gladiator duo in "Those Who Are About to Die" or the lamia and the young brass dragon in "The Lamia Job" are good examples of two boss creatures working together to challenge the characters. This also eliminates the risk of having a lone boss facing the characters—and getting stunned, incapacitated, or killed before finishing their evil opening monologue. You could have a lair run by a circle of **archmages** or several **bandit captains**, depending on the party's level. It's up to you whether the bosses have equal say in running the lair and work together as partners, or if one boss is in charge (sometimes called the big boss).

MAKE YOUR BOSS UNIQUE

Each boss should have a unique quality that makes the creature memorable. What makes one black dragon different from all the others? Is it a personality trait or flaw? A special hatred for a particular school of magic? An odd hobby such as collecting humanoid skulls? Is it the fact that the creature has a blue dragon ancestor that gives it resistance to lightning damage, and that it sometimes breathes lightning instead of acid? Decide what makes your boss really stand out even among creatures with the same base stat block.

PICK THE PLOTS

Every villain has at least one good plot that the characters can get wrapped up in. A creature with a low Intelligence score likely has a single straightforward plot, while smarter creatures use subterfuge and guile to conceal their complicated plans. A hill giant might lead raids from a cave complex where it stockpiles grain and livestock, but a cloud giant flies through the air in a castle made of cloudstuff, spying on nobles and using the information gleaned to blackmail the wealthy into handing over riches.

BOSS MOTIVATIONS

Once the boss monster's plots are established, ask what motivation they have to accomplish these plots? This could be simple. Devils, demons, and other fiends are simply pure evil. It's in their nature to corrupt, murder, and destroy. Other creatures have more complex motivations rooted in past events. One assassin might kill for excitement and wealth, enjoying holding the power of life and death, and coveting the finery their fees can purchase. But another assassin might have turned to a life of murder after being imprisoned for a crime she didn't commit, then deciding that the law doesn't deserve to be followed.

MAKE A LAIR

Once you have a boss monster selected, it's time to create a lair. A good boss lair should have the following qualities:

- It makes sense for the story and the plots of the boss.
- It has a unique history.
- It supports your villain's mechanical strengths.
- It has sidekicks, minions, traps, hazards, and treasure.
- It's a fantastic, memorable location.

FIT WITH THE STORY

Your lair should fit with the story of the boss you created. Consider where such creatures typically lair. Then ask how your villain's plots might change this location. For instance, red dragons typically live in

WHY DO BOSSES STAY IN THEIR LAIRS?

Before the players can ask why the boss monster doesn't come out of their lair to kill their pesky characters when they first appear, it's important that you answer the question, because all bosses should have a reason.

The most common answer is simple security. A boss monster picks their lair because it provides a defensible position. Even an owlbear knows that living in a cave is better than sleeping outside in a field. A boss most likely also puts himself and their most prized possessions in an area of their lair that is most difficult to reach. The characters might first encounter a boss somewhere other than this remote chamber, but the boss is smart enough to retreat to their best defensive position, putting as many underlings and traps between themselves and the adventurers as possible. This strategy gives a boss time to prepare and plan for the oncoming fight, like any good foe.

Beyond security, a boss might keep to a single chamber in their lair for practical reasons. They might be performing a magic ritual that requires their undivided attention, interrogating a prisoner with time-sensitive information, or meeting with an important visitor. Just give your boss a good reason to stay inside their awesome lair, and your players will have an equally good reason to explore it.

volcanoes, and if this specific monster has a vendetta against the denizens of a port city for stealing some of its hoard, you might decide that the dragon lairs on a nearby island formed by a volcano.

MAKE IT FANTASTIC

Much like the bosses that live in them, lairs should be unique. There's nothing wrong with finding yourself drawn to create an underground ruin. So just ask yourself what you can do to make it a fantastic, memorable location for the characters and players alike.

You can tweak any or all of a lair's elements to make them fantastic. A goblin boss in a cave is an encounter that most players have experienced more than once. But if the cave is carved out within the body of a dead titan, with arteries for tunnels and a calcified-heart throne room, you've got a location that's unique.

LOCATION HISTORY

Did the villain build their lair? How long have they lived there, and what effect has their presence had on the place? If the boss monster was not the lair's original inhabitant, who was? And what have they left behind? By thinking about the above questions, you'll start to get an idea of the history of the lair, which should be as dynamic as the history of any important NPC. Having a solid backstory for a location then helps you fill it with details such as hazards, treasure, and terrain.

VILLAIN STRENGTHS

Bosses lair in defensible locations that suit their tastes and needs. For instance, many amphibious creatures lair underwater because they can breathe in such environments but their enemies can't. Take a look at the boss's damage immunities, traits, and action options to get a sense of how their lair might work to those strengths. A creature immune to fire damage has no problem hanging out in a shallow pool of lava, while a white dragon's Ice Walk trait grants it an edge over intruders in a lair with floors, walls, and ceilings covered in slippery ice.

SIDEKICKS AND MINIONS

No boss lair is complete without a few lieutenants, lackeys, bodyguards, and servants. NPCs and lesser monsters that possess similar mechanics to the boss are always a good choice, as they get the same advantages from the lair as the boss does. You can also pick sidekick creatures that shore up a boss's weaknesses. For instance, **veterans** make great bodyguards for a **mage**, since the spellcaster can attack at a distance while the warriors engage enemies in melee, preventing them from reaching their employer.

You can always reskin a monster, or simply add a damage immunity or a trait to a creature, to make its story and mechanics better suited to a specific lair. For instance, kobolds that can breathe underwater and that are immune to acid damage make great minions for a black dragon.

It's a good idea to have at least one or two secondary bosses among a boss's sidekicks. Those might be trained animals, warrior captains, spellcasters, or any other creatures that are stronger than the average servant in the lair. For instance, a hill giant might have an ettin leading its gnoll followers, while a bugbear warlord might keep a hobgoblin mage as an advisor.

TRAPS AND HAZARDS

Though most boss lairs have natural defensive features, even reasonably intelligent creatures can enhance those defenses with traps and hazards to delay and destroy intruders. Traps placed within a lair should make thematic sense. For example, a green dragon in a swamp might fill their lair with poisoned pools that it knocks intruders into. The poison thematically

FINDING LAIR MAPS

While you can certainly draw your own lair maps, you can also find thousands of exciting fantasy maps online, as well as several incredible map generators, by searching for your favorite cartographers' websites. Many cartographers and artists sell their work from their websites or offer hundreds of maps through services such as Patreon. Some might also offer selections of their maps for free, but if you can support their work with your money, we encourage you to do so. And if you're not sure where to look for great cartographers, start by checking out the credits of this book.

matches the dragon's plot to poison the wells of local humanoid settlements, and also does not risk harming the dragon, with its potent poison immunity.

The creatures inhabiting a lair usually know the locations of traps and hazards, and know how to avoid them. Environmental effects under a boss's control are often engineered to not be harmful to the boss and their servants, such as a lich and its undead minions taking advantage of their poison immunity to lair in a cave filled with toxic gas.

TREASURE

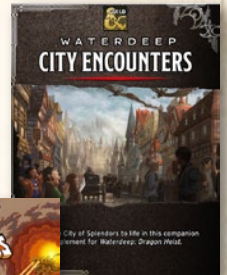
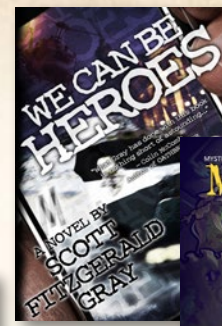
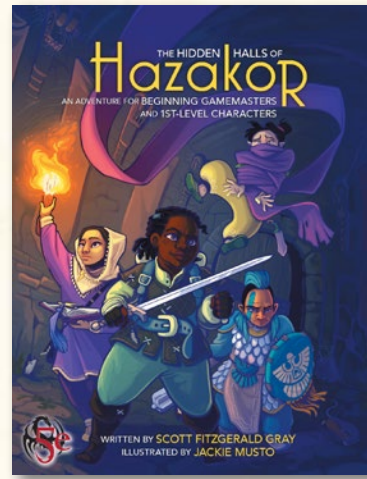
No lair is complete without a bit of treasure! Smart villains use magic items, like the spirit naga wearing *wings of flying* in "The Blood Palace" lair. Consider giving your villain a magic item to wield against the characters, especially if it takes advantage of the lair's features. A unique magic ring that allows a creature to take on the black pudding's Amorphous trait makes a great item for a boss lairing in a cave full of narrow tunnels. Just remember that most magic items you give to the boss should be things you won't mind the characters using later. Otherwise, think about giving the boss unique powers that are effects tied to the lair, or the product of special rituals that only the boss knows.

THE TEAM

SCOTT FITZGERALD GRAY

Scott Fitzgerald Gray (9th-level layabout, vindictive good) is a [writer of fantasy and speculative fiction](#), a fiction editor, a story editor, and an [editor and designer of roleplaying games](#)—all of which means he finally has the job he really wanted when he was sixteen. His work in gaming covers [three editions of the Dungeons & Dragons RPG](#), including working as an editor on all three core rulebooks for fifth edition D&D.

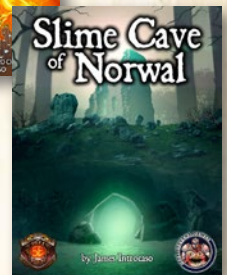
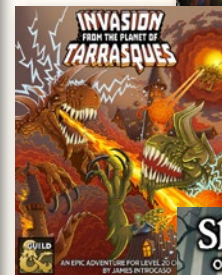
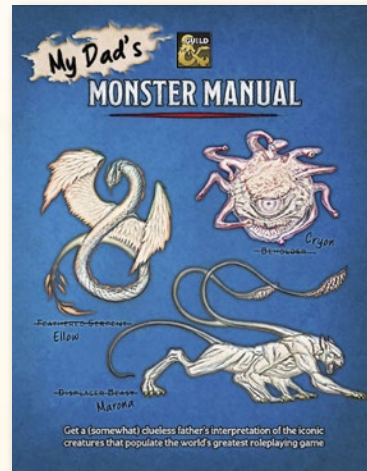
Scott shares his life in the Western Canadian hinterland with a schoolteacher named Colleen, two itinerant daughters, and a number of animal companions. More info on him and his work (some of it even occasionally truthful) can be found by reading between the lines at [insaneangel.com](#).



JAMES INTROCASO

James Introcaso is the lead designer of Roll20's [Burn Bryte RPG](#), writer of the Gold-ENnie-winning blog [World Builder Blog](#), author of multiple best-selling products for the [Dungeon Masters Guild](#) and [DriveThruRPG](#) (including [My Dad's Monster Manual](#) and [Invasion from the Planet of Tarrasques](#)), and coauthor of seven official Dungeons & Dragons books. He has worked with MCDM, Wizards of the Coast, Roll20, D&D Beyond, Kobold Press, and many other great game companies.

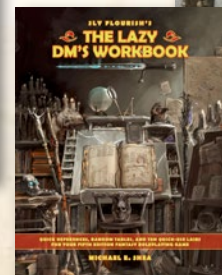
James lives in New Jersey with his wife, Bonnie, and their dog, Lilo.



MICHAEL E. SHEA

Mike Shea is the writer for the website [Sly Flourish](#) and the author of [Return of the Lazy Dungeon Master](#), the [Lazy DM's Workbook](#), [Fantastic Adventures](#), [Fantastic Adventures: Ruins of the Grendleroot](#), and a number of other books. Mike has freelanced for a bunch of RPG companies, including Wizards of the Coast, Kobold Press, Pelgrane Press, and Sasquatch Games. He's been playing RPGs since the mid '80s, and writing for and about RPGs since 2008.

Mike also happens to be the son of Robert J. Shea, author of the '70s cult science fiction novel *Illuminatus!* He lives with his wife Michelle in Northern Virginia, USA.



PLAYTESTERS

Huge thanks to the following players and GMs for helping us make *Fantastic Lairs* the best book it could be!

6lordapophis6, Willy Abeel, Justin Aion, Alianbow, Bryan Alexander, Fernando Alves, Amo, Ryan Amely, Millie Amy, Eddy Anderson, Thomas Anderson, Archer, Bill Arnold, Jeff B, BabyDM, John Baccaro, Bachy, Bre Baltaxe-Admony, Leon Barillaro, Rudy Basso, S John Bateman, Alex Baur, Amanda Baur, Arktorin, Erin Beall, Jeff Beltran, Lydia Bender, François Bertrand, Gregory Blair, BluDevil, BobbyCobb, Burt Bonebreaker, Tim Boothroyd, Gui Bordin, Ethan Boyle, Bread, Matt Briddell, Rhys Bridgeashwell, Stuart Brockbank, Anthony Brown, Amberle 'Doc' Browne, Daniel Bruchhausen, Sarah Bruchhausen, Brutkó, Lexie Bryan, John Bryant, Kathy Randall Bryant aka Xyra Skylark, Tony Byrne, Douglas "Should be Scotty Salami" Bubbletrousers, Lewis Butler, Butters, Ryleigh "Bedlam" Cameron, Brian Canty, Michael Capraro, Carlos Jr, Chris Cecchini, Lee-Anne Cecchini, Dave Charette, Tim Chawaga, Sharon Cheng, Matthew Christ, Andrew Cholewa, Zachary Clark (LAG), JC Clarke, Sarah Clarke, Declan Clifford, Jay Colburn, John Colgan, Shane "Honey" Combs, Connn, Damien Conoly, Simon Cooper, Shvaugn Craig, Cranky Old Mage, Casey Creech, Gabrielle Cummings, Cylvre, Daddi, Chris David, Melody David, Jesse Davidson, Phil Davidson, Anson Davis, Christina Davis, Trevor Davis, Rob Davoust, The Dawnguard, Colin Dawson, Dean, Julien del Rosario, Patrick Dennis, Christopher Diggins, Jeff Dillema, Sam "DMSamuel" Dillon, The DM, Calum Dobson, Ian Donaldson, Adam Donnelly, Michael Dorrill, Liam Doran, Loes Doup, Eric Draper, DraugShade, Chris Dudley, Sharon Dudley, Dvirankis, Aaron Dye, Sam Ellis, Eriyah, The Eternal Servants of the Great Lascal, Erica "The Great Pumpernickel" Etson, Latoyia Everett, Raymond Fallon, Chelsea Fankhauser, John Fischer, Eric Fisette, Marco "Hot Mustard" Flores, Whitluis Flynn, Geoffrey Fortier, Garret Forrester, Foxhound, Wexler Frak, Jobe Fredericksen, David Friant, Jeremy Fuhst, J.L. Frye, Dan G., Mickey Galbraith, Paul Ganter, Garmbreak1, Jesse Gehman, Luke Gilbert, Collier Gladin, Kelly Gladin, Daniel Godwin, Renato Goldael, Erin Goldin, Fabio Gomes, Goose, Dennis Gottschalk, Bridger Grantham, David Grantham, Phoenix Grantham, Sequoia Grantham, Isabella "Ellyria" Graves, Ron Graves, Jay Greck, Kyle Greck, Jon Green, Jeff, Jeff Greiner, Sir Greg, Alexander "DM - Hestir" Grinton, Pat Grogan, Ashen Grove, James Grummell, Lisajo Grummell, Carl H, Alex Hancock, Greg Hannah, Erin Harrelson, Jasper Harris, Amalia Hawkins, Ian Hawthorne, Kenny "Revelry" Hayter, Gavin Heckel, Luke Henley, Leigh "A Brave Potato" Hermon, The Hierophant, Chelsey "Mereille" Higgins, Chris "Bast" Higgins, Matt "Zosimos" Higgins, Hikaru, Rich Hirsch, Alan Hong, Mr. Hushbrown, Megan Isaac, Steaphon Isaac, Andrew Introcaso, Cristin Introcaso, Black Jack, Brent Jans, Clifford Jenkins, Jeratrend, James K, Kyra Johnson, Noah Johnson, Netanel K, Andrew Kane, Garrison Kane, Jeroen Kanters, Brian Kapustik,

Chani Kapustik, Dmitry (Dimdim) Katz, Dina Katz, Eugene Katz, Jason Katz, John Kealy, Christopher Kearney, Melody Keating, Sean Keating, Kex, Dan Keyser, Maria Keyser, Katie the Killer, Ian King, Michael Kinzler, Daniel Knena, Chaka Konig, Scott Konig, Kozzak, Kraig, Koen Kukken, Evan Kunze, Joe Kupsky, Jen Kwiatek, Vince Kwiatek, Stephanie Kwik, Rebecca L, Jeff Lai, Vegas Lancaster, Andrew Laufman, Laurel, Leslie Laws, Robert Laws, Legass, Joshua Leland, Chloe Lindgren, Michael "Miracle Whip" Lison, Chelsea Livingstone, Jason Logsdon, Kyra Logsdon, Jerry Lorengo, Phillip Lovas, John Lowe, Mairead Lyons, Kyle M, Rebecca M, Sarah M. and the Test Marchers, Tim M, Bonnie MacDonald, Margaret Mae, Maersh, Zaria "Anakis" Malindi, John Mallette, Katie Mallette, Jessica Marcum, Jay Marland, Jared Marks, Mark McConville, Kyle McCordic, Rebecca McCordic, Timothy McCown Reynolds, Kyleen "Cedric" McKinley, Michael McLawhorn, Rich McNeill, The Mean Janine Machine, Derek Mears, Mark Meer, Melestrua, Daniel Mensel, Justin Mercer, Matt Mercer, Laura Mickey, Midgardia.com, Midgardia RPG, Bernie Monsanto, Eric Moore, Daniel Morris, Dylan Morris, Joe Morris, Justin Morris, John Mustard, Mystarseed.com, Rachael N, Nalin, W. James Nash, Thomas Neal, Terese Nelson, Nemo, Nerds of the Roundtable, Martin Nicholls, Noah, Randi Ocena, Samantha Ocena, Dave O'Connor, Brian O'Farrell, The OG TPK, Hades Oineroi, Opal, Jorge Ortiz, David Otterson, Rebekah P, Ruber Ironshield Pallbearer, Tom Partington, Pat Paulson, Pebble, Pelky, Grayson Phelps, Alex "Atlas" Pipes, Joe Plemmons, Rachel Plemmons, Jono Price, Mark Price, Luc Princen, The Procrastinationers, El Quarantino, Kyle Rath, Rejuvn, Rinat, RIP Magogo, Anna Roguski, The Rollerblading Wizard, Evan Ross, The Rousseau-Keepin Crew, Kirstie Ruffatto, Joel Russ, Faith S, Juliet Sabol, Sacks, Brandon Paul Salinas, Drew Saltzgeber, Savinothesavino, James Scriven, Mike Schiller, Sande Scott, Chuck Sexton, Michelle Shea, TJ Sheff, Jake Shelton, Chris Shortt, Lauren Shows, Aras Sivad, Asim Skeete, Oisín Smith, OsterMax, Percyell Smith, Tre Smith, Ryan Solava, Song, Andrew Spencer-Lee, Erica Spencer-Lee, Vincent St. John, StabyStab, The Steelheart Guild, Steve, Petra Stickrod, Stragulus, Sublover, James Sullivan IV, Josh Sunday, Eric T, Lynn T, Chris Tallman, Sally Tamarkin, Ellen Tausch, Steve Tausch, Max Tavares, Team den store los, Team Sandwich, Kensie Terrill, Terry, ThatRadioGeek, Theo, Andrew Timmes, Lilianne Timmes, Titch, Michele Titolo, Brian Tobin, Trigogh, Paul Turner, Twenty Three One Dee, Holly Van Der Poel, Stephanie van Wissen, Eric Vaessen, Eugenio Vargas, Varis, Kirti Vekaria, Joe Veneracion, Jip Vogels, Dave W, Rupert Wainwright, Warblejay, Kateri Warnick, Jenny Wertemberger, Marc Wertemberger, Cindy Webb, Jake Webb, Patrick Webb, Joshua Wells, Ian Werth, Josh Whelen, Wicky, Wili, Allan Williams, Belle Williams, Donna Williams, Ian Winchester, Lyndsay Winchester, Josh Windsor, Bryan Wire, Witinho, xBabyHadesx, Xellarant (Rallante Hunt), Chris Y, Matt Young

OPEN GAME LICENSE

Notice of Open Game Content: This product contains no Open Game Content.

OPEN GAME LICENSE Version 1.0a

The following text is the property of Wizards of the Coast, Inc. and is Copyright 2000 Wizards of the Coast, Inc (“Wizards”). All Rights Reserved.

1. Definitions: (a) “Contributors” means the copyright and/or trademark owners who have contributed Open Game Content; (b) “Derivative Material” means copyrighted material including derivative works and translations (including into other computer languages), potation, modification, correction, addition, extension, upgrade, improvement, compilation, abridgment or other form in which an existing work may be recast, transformed or adapted; (c) “Distribute” means to reproduce, license, rent, lease, sell, broadcast, publicly display, transmit or otherwise distribute; (d) “Open Game Content” means the game mechanic and includes the methods, procedures, processes and routines to the extent such content does not embody the Product Identity and is an enhancement over the prior art and any additional content clearly identified as Open Game Content by the Contributor, and means any work covered by this License, including translations and derivative works under copyright law, but specifically excludes Product Identity. (e) “Product Identity” means product and product line names, logos and identifying marks including trade dress; artifacts; creatures characters; stories, storylines, plots, thematic elements, dialogue, incidents, language, artwork, symbols, designs, depictions, likenesses, formats, poses, concepts, themes and graphic, photographic and other visual or audio representations; names and descriptions of characters, spells, enchantments, personalities, teams, personas, likenesses and special abilities; places, locations, environments, creatures, equipment, magical or supernatural abilities or effects, logos, symbols, or graphic designs; and any other trademark or registered trademark clearly identified as Product identity by the owner of the Product Identity, and which specifically excludes the Open Game Content; (f) “Trademark” means the logos, names, mark, sign, motto, designs that are used by a Contributor to identify itself or its products or the associated products contributed to the Open Game License by the Contributor (g) “Use”, “Used” or “Using” means to use, Distribute, copy, edit, format, modify, translate and otherwise create Derivative Material of Open Game Content. (h) “You” or “Your” means the licensee in terms of this agreement.

2. The License: This License applies to any Open Game Content that contains a notice indicating that the Open Game Content may only be Used under and in terms of this License. You must affix such a notice to any Open Game Content that you Use. No terms may be added to or subtracted from this License except as described by the License itself. No other terms or conditions may be applied to any Open Game Content distributed using this License.

3. Offer and Acceptance: By Using the Open Game Content You indicate Your acceptance of the terms of this License.

4. Grant and Consideration: In consideration for agreeing to use this License, the Contributors grant You a perpetual, worldwide, royalty free, nonexclusive license with the exact terms of this License to Use, the Open Game Content.

5. Representation of Authority to Contribute: If You are contributing original material as Open Game Content, You represent that Your Contributions are Your original creation

and/or You have sufficient rights to grant the rights conveyed by this License.

6. Notice of License Copyright: You must update the COPYRIGHT NOTICE portion of this License to include the exact text of the COPYRIGHT NOTICE of any Open Game Content You are copying, modifying or distributing, and You must add the title, the copyright date, and the copyright holder’s name to the COPYRIGHT NOTICE of any original Open Game Content you Distribute.

7. Use of Product Identity: You agree not to Use any Product Identity, including as an indication as to compatibility, except as expressly licensed in another, independent Agreement with the owner of each element of that Product Identity. You agree not to indicate compatibility or co-adaptability with any Trademark or Registered Trademark in conjunction with a work containing Open Game Content except as expressly licensed in another, independent Agreement with the owner of such Trademark or Registered Trademark. The use of any Product Identity in Open Game Content does not constitute a challenge to the ownership of that Product Identity. The owner of any Product Identity used in Open Game Content shall retain all rights, title and interest in and to that Product Identity.

8. Identification: If you distribute Open Game Content You must clearly indicate which portions of the work that you are distributing are Open Game Content.

9. Updating the License: Wizards or its designated Agents may publish updated versions of this License. You may use any authorized version of this License to copy, modify and distribute any Open Game Content originally distributed under any version of this License.

10. Copy of this License: You MUST include a copy of this License with every copy of the Open Game Content You Distribute.

11. Use of Contributor Credits: You may not market or advertise the Open Game Content using the name of any Contributor unless You have written permission from the Contributor to do so.

12. Inability to Comply: If it is impossible for You to comply with any of the terms of this License with respect to some or all of the Open Game Content due to statute, judicial order, or governmental regulation then You may not Use any Open Game Material so affected.

13. Termination: This License will terminate automatically if You fail to comply with all terms herein and fail to cure such breach within 30 days of becoming aware of the breach. All sublicenses shall survive the termination of this License.

14. Reformation: If any provision of this License is held to be unenforceable, such provision shall be reformed only to the extent necessary to make it enforceable.

15. COPYRIGHT NOTICE

Open Game License v 1.0a Copyright 2000, Wizards of the Coast, LLC.

System Reference Document 5.1 Copyright 2016, Wizards of the Coast, Inc.; Authors Mike Mearls, Jeremy Crawford, Chris Perkins, Rodney Thompson, Peter Lee, James Wyatt, Robert J. Schwalb, Bruce R. Cordell, Chris Sims, and Steve Townshend, based on original material by E. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson.

Fantastic Lairs. Copyright 2020, Scott Fitzgerald Gray, James Introcaso, Michael E. Shea; Authors Scott Fitzgerald Gray, James Introcaso, Michael E. Shea.



EVERYTHING LEADS TO THIS...

Fantastic Lairs is a book of twenty-three capstone boss encounters for the fifth edition of the world's most popular fantasy roleplaying game. Featuring challenges for characters from 1st to 20th level, these lair encounters give you everything you need to fit them into your own campaign, including evocative artwork, beautiful full-color maps, memorable monsters, guidelines for world-building, inspiration for lead-in and follow-up adventures, and fully playtested boss encounters.

Whether you're looking for a unique boss monster and a climactic encounter to run as a fun, high-stakes one-shot adventure, or as a point of inspiration around which to build a longer adventure—or even an entire campaign—*Fantastic Lairs* is an indispensable resource for any GM.