

Quoth the Raven



Worst... Issue... Ever!

From Hell

It's Time to Face your Demons

Hello and welcome to the seventh issue of Quoth the Raven. It's funny that this issue should be a good, lucky number, when this issue's theme is fiends. No one who's ever crossed paths with a fiend tends to think of good luck, unless of course they get out of the encounter with all their appendages in place.

Fiends are the oldest monster; since humans first learned to speak we've told tales of evil, magical demons that mean to do us harm. It's no coincidence that so many of the religions we've created are defined by their stance against these monsters. Salvation anyone? But why demons? Could it be paranoia or even a little latent guilt? Since we learned to rub sticks and grunt, we humans have been top dog on this earth. We rule over the earth with impunity, for nothing comes close to our power. Or so we think.

Enter the demon.

In many ways, demons are reflections of mankind as seen by our prey. Smart, powerful and cruel, demons are the wolf to our deer. Yet demons are more than just predators, they are our worst nightmares made real. Demonic mythologies agree on some key points; demons are smarter than us, stronger than us, more powerful than us and by no means are they impressed with our silly little activities. These infernal creatures once ruled the land of the living, but for one reason or another they have been pushed aside to make room for us hairless primates. Needless to say, they're not happy about it.

Some fiends want to damn mankind, to corrupt our spirit and claim our souls. These ones tempt the weak with their heart's greatest desire, lead them into depravity, then yank the reward away. For the longest time demons were believed to be the source of all evil, and evil humans merely the weak vessels of demonic entities. These *devils* are out to enslave humans, just as we enslave animals. Just as we use the old carrot on a stick trick to get horses to pull, devils tempt us to perform their will.

Other fiends, though, just want to hear us scream. These are *demons*, nightmares made flesh. Hell, the abyss, or wherever fiends dwell is described as a thoroughly unpleasant place, filled with thoroughly unpleasant people. Like extra-planar convicts they have festered in their abyssal confinement, becoming more evil and more powerful with every century. Demons want out of their prison, and the moment they gain their freedom, they're coming for some payback.

Whatever their style, fiends agree on one thing; humans are the bugs and they're wearing the boots. Fiends are out to do harm and the only thing standing between them and us is your party of puny adventurers. Not a good place to be. Hopefully, this issue will tell you everything you need to know to send those fiends back to where they came from.

Just keep that holy water handy and keep your eye out for Linda Blair.

ScS.

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The Second Time Around

An original Story

By Conrad "Chaos Nomad" Clark

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*I shall pull you then, brother,
Into this pit of sin,
And there you shall have no name;
For where the mists rise,
We are but droplets of pain,
Carried forever in its wake*

Mademoiselle Ludente stood on the balcony, leaning gently against the decayed handrail that separated her from the pitted stone floor over forty feet beneath. He wanted her to buy this rundown place? She gazed at the distant surface with an expression that threatened to reduce the dust smothered tiles and detritus to a new level of insignificance. It was a worthless mess, of that she had little doubt, and it caused her great amusement just to think of what she was about to do. It was for him, though, and she would not fail; she dared not. A dark eyebrow arched up with well-versed ease and then returned, before rising again with its twin to the pursing of thin, red lips. Unsettled though her features were, there existed in them no sign of perturbation. Instead, the Mademoiselle's look was of satisfied dissatisfaction: her mouth curved in a half-smile while her nostrils flared repeatedly.

Slowly, and with considered care, she pulled at the lip of one of her white gloves; stretching it from her arm to such degree as to discolour the material. Then, after a moments pause, she released it. It snapped back into place, the sound echoing around the empty structure. The Mademoiselle closed her eyes, smiled briefly, and then turned her attention back to the floor, her nose twitching. Seemingly content, she skipped back a couple of steps and pirouetted, re-viewing her surrounds carefully.

She was a lithe and graceful thing, delicate of line and structure, yet lacking perhaps the curves that would have made her a well-considered lady of the city; and while this would have dispossessed lesser creatures of both attention and affection, Mademoiselle Ludente was not to be denied. It was certainly true that she was renowned for possessing a gentle elegance, a poise and manner of such measure and placidity as to undo the most abrasive character. Yet, were one to catch her eye unnoticed, to penetrate for a moment the periphery of her being, there one might discover but a molecule of the storm, a flicker of the vital spark that pushed her onward unrelenting. It was this thing, this dynamism, which produced in her an intangible air, a gravity of some moment, and a mystique irresistible to men of the opposite sex.

The Mademoiselle brushed a thin hand down a hem of her purple-laced dress. She had chosen it for its simple charms; it fanned enough for thought, but not comment; requested undergarments, yet did not require; spoke of revelry, but confessed to naught. It was perfect –and well she knew it.

When the main door creaked ajar, Mademoiselle Ludente was already standing atop the wide stairway, her hands placed gently beneath her breastbone. She saw a polished black boot emerge –its movements blind and awkward— then retract when it crunched on fragments of plaster and masonry. The attempt was re-made several times, before its owner, perhaps recognising the futility of the endeavour, placed it firmly down and moved in regardless. Ludente regarded the well-dressed man standing inside the doorway. He was middle-aged and plump, filling out his shabby red and black outfit comfortably. The pearly-grey buttons and dull gold chain added to the impression of a man who had secured his wealth in earlier life and now thought only of his next glass of port. He removed his hat, revealing a thinning scalp, and brushed it over the mess at his feet. Mademoiselle Ludente smiled, before extending her throat slightly to release the smallest of coughs. When the man failed to react, she repeated the action, ensuring that this time she obtained his attention.

“Hullo,” he called, dryly. His voice was uncertain, though foretold of a harsher edge perhaps reserved for subordinates. “Is that somebody on the stair? It’s a little dark in here!” The mademoiselle moved several steps down the flight and smiled.

“Perhaps a little light would remedy that, Monsieur,” she said, widening her eyes. “I felt it improper to touch one of the lamps...without your permission, I mean.”

The man stumbled over more wood and fallen plaster until he reached the bottom of the stair. “I should light one if you wish to see anything. I can hardly imagine how you arrived at your present position, yet alone opened that damn door.”

“I manage,” replied the Mademoiselle.

“I can see that,” said the man, reaching into a pocket and withdrawing a small object. Ludente watched him approach an empty lamp affixed to one of the walls, and then extend the thing toward it.

“That one’s empty, if I recall,” she said, pointing. “If you try the one over there you may have more success.” The man turned about several times, before stopping.

“Which one? Where?” he said.

Mademoiselle Ludente sighed despite herself. “Turn right...No, that’s too far...back again...a little more...that’s good...Now, forward...watch out for that...yes, you’ve got it...almost there. Well done, Monsieur.”

After an amount of hissing and spluttering a slow, dirty flame came to life, and huge shadows appeared on the opposing walls, shivering with the lamp’s uncertainty. Ludente shielded her face for a second, before revealing her most dazzling smile.

“There. Is that not better, Monsieur?” she said.

The man turned to her, extending a hand into the space between them, bowing slightly.

“Indeed, it is, Mademoiselle,” he said and then coughed. “My name is Garrick, John Garrick, and I am at your service.” There came then the briefest pause, during which their eyes touched and Monsieur Garrick shivered. Garrick quickly retreated into the safety of his well-rehearsed pitch.

“The place needs a little work, there’s no arguing there. But she’s solid, Mademoiselle. She’ll keep out all kinds of weather. And the district is pleasant, I’m sure you’ll agree.”

Mademoiselle Ludente’s thin lips curled into a smile as she casually made her way down the remaining stairs. If she was paying Garrick’s voice the slightest heed, there

was no outward indication; she just looked at him with a vague kind of amusement. Once within ten feet of the man, she stopped, looked at him askance, and then proceeded to swish her dress back and forth.

"I have decided to buy," she proclaimed at last. "Any objections?"

Oblivious to the remark, Garrick continued to motion with his hands, as one explaining the difficulties of life and the necessity of certain matters. It took his brain several seconds to catch up. "Alas," he began, "I cannot reduce the... Buy you say! Well, of course, Mademoiselle, splendid! A wise purchase, Mademoiselle..."

"How much, then?" she interrupted, still swishing the dress.

"One-thousand-Corona, Mademoiselle!" stuttered a surprised-looking Garrick. He looked about him, expecting perhaps to awaken at any moment; it was obvious from his face that the actuality of such an experience lay in the furthest reaches of his expectation, and that it yet remained for him just beyond belief.

"Here," said Mademoiselle Ludente as she produced a glittering object, "this jewel is worth twice your asking price." She tossed the crystal at him and pulled at a glove. "Now, it would be wise if you left as I have much to attend to. And you, Monsieur, I should imagine have things to occupy you. Good day, then, Monsieur!"

With that, Mademoiselle Ludente made her way from the room, disappearing through a darkened doorway into another part of the building. Garrick stood where he was, staring at the jewel under the weak lamp. After a minute he looked up—he had the strangest feeling that he was now entirely alone.

* * * *

Outside, dusk descended on great town of Pont-a-Museau, feeding the heavy fog that sat upon the waterways, and sending its wispy presence further into the streets and alleyways. The sound of anxious voices and hastening feet had grown steadily less as the light faded, their patter echoed perhaps at the edge of hearing far below. Slowly, one by one, small lights began to appear in windows, their soft oranges and yellows spilling out in angled lines through cracks and under the doors, marking a feeble resistance to the coming night. But to those souls yet without, the narrow golden bars held no welcome; for no door would open again until dawn. For sensible citizens, it was time to be home.

Some folks, however, never learned what was sensible. Somewhere on the periphery of the town, a small group gathered around a fire.

"Dwarves never enjoy anybody's cooking," said Quarn'mez.

The sound of the magician's voice stopped the elf dead—he had been meditating and not spoken in so long that the others had forgotten him. Meli dropped to a crouch and began stirring the mixture, sniffing. She pushed her long golden hair back, revealing a disturbed face.

"Unless it's their wife's or mother's," the magician continued. "It's of no consequence what you do with it; another race's food is always 'tripe' to a dwarf. I knew one many years ago. He was a fine, good-natured soul, honest, brave, and a distinct advantage in a back-alley brawl. He invited me over on several occasions to give me the pleasure of his wife's art. She was the most awful cook imaginable, at least in Darkon, and then probably farther a field. Ha, he would not have it, bless him. To that dwarf, she was the best cook in the world, and mightily proud of her he doubtless remains.

Fortunately for him, dwarves have goat stomachs, and I am not entirely estranged from the healing arts.”

Meli looked across at Quarn and smiled. “Did you tell him?” she said.

“Goodness no,” laughed the magician. “Could you imagine me facing down a dwarf at his own dinner table? I had somebody else do it, on the sly so to speak.” Jorn, the party’s paladin, looked across at Quarn, before returning to his parchment. Meli was still smiling.

“You and your tales, Quarn,” she said. “No tales tonight though.”

Quarn stared at the flames for a second, and then sighed deeply. Jorn put his parchment down and turned to the pair, “The task at hand still awaits us, and we are close now. I can feel it somehow, in a way I cannot explain. Perhaps we ought to find Nigal and get this meal over with.” Quarn nodded thoughtfully. “I agree! Perhaps it would be wise to rest a while first, though. That confounded dwarf could be anywhere.”

Meli looked along the edge of the old canal for any sign of the dwarf. There was none. Even to her eyes, the effort was now a strain; she thought the place held the darkness to it, as though it were deliberately trying to impede her vision. Stooping back down to the pot, the elf spooned some of the broth into a small wooden cup.

“Jorn,” she whispered, “would you like some of my broth? Her eyes faltered as he met them, shifting to the ground. “I’ll understand if you don’t,” she added quickly. “Nigal’s probably right...”

The paladin smiled softly, “I should love some of your broth, Meli, thank you. In truth, it has been a great distraction to my reading, and thusly a great boon in my fight against temptation. Beside, I think we all need something warm in us this evening. What say you, friend Quarn?”

The mage knelt down by the fire, and extending his hands toward it looked over at the paladin.

“Yes,” he said, softly, “tonight I believe will be cold for all of us. And, as for me, this night shall be especially so.”

“How so?” said Meli. The elf spooned out another mug of broth.

“Tonight I must attempt to contact our master, and discover what we must now do.” Quarn stared first into the flames, and then at the elf. “I know that you wanted me to explain the symbols, I am sorry. But...”

Meli moved, almost too quickly, and broth lapped over the edge of the mug she was holding. “You promised Quarn,” she said, waving her one free hand, her cheeks reddening. “You said I was ready. Do you not think me ready now? Have I...”

“But I shall enquire after another for you. And this,” snapped Quarn, raising his voice, before relaxing into a pacifying tone, “this is far more important. There will be plenty of time afterwards for learning.”

The elf looked askance at Jorn for assistance. When none came, she raised her voice again.

“We are always too busy. There is always this or that pressing. You told me that tonight you would teach me its meaning. How am I supposed to use it when I do not know what it does? And how many times must there always be another threat? How many times are we drawing toward the end of our goal?”

Quarn stood, before raising his hands, palms upward as if in supplication.

“I am sorry, Meli, I was only told that you would know when to use it. What would

you have me do? Even I do not fully understand the power it possesses, only that this power is imbued to a specific end.”

Jorn placed his mug down and approached the elf, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. She withdrew from his touch, twisting her head away from both men. She then walked toward the canal, stopping only yards from it to stare into the darkness.

“Dear Meli, my friend” said the paladin, “let not this personal setback disturb you. What you have lost in training, we have won in battles against the legions of night. We must all make sacrifices. I harbour no love for the arcane, or most of its practitioners, and I should be the last to call any such one our master. But with his guidance, we have succeeded in thwarting many of the enemy’s plans. Never have I had such success. And we have saved many lives too. Would you change that, Meli? Would you have it another way, just for the sake of a symbol?”

The elf spun nimbly around and strode back into the fire’s glow. Before Jorn could react, Meli was standing before him, staring directly into his eyes. The paladin looked away.

“It always sacrifice with you isn’t it, Jorn, my *friend*? You’re never allowed to have what you want, are you. Well, that’s your choice, not mine, I never stopped you.”

Jorn’s face was radiant, and he moved closer to the fire. It was then that a stout, full figure broke into the light. The dwarf looked about him, at each of them in turn, before settling his gaze on the elf.

“Nay warrier lives b’ words or symbols,” he said with gravely menace, and then, holding his thick hands afore him, added, “A true warrier lives b’ these, an’ his ‘cart.” Nigal sat down gracelessly onto the earth and poured himself some broth. “Ye changing, lass,” he said. “Ney afore have a seen an elf s’ keen t’ learn. Noneo’ya see it, bu’ it’s true. Magic changes a person, turns em bad. An I ‘ate to see it wit’ you.”

Quarn looked scornfully from the dwarf to the mug of broth he now held.

“You! You are a fine one to criticise. For what you supply in principles and sound judgement, you forgo in memory. Magic, divine and arcane, has come to your assistance more times than I can recall. And as for your belly, that seems more two-faced than anything. Do you not understand how much you upset Meli earlier? Those who did not know you better might call you ungrateful.”

Nigal turned his face up to the wizard and gave him a careful look. Quarn stared back, wide-eyed, palms out with his mouth agape. Nigal dropped his gaze to the floor and placed the mug beside him. Then he stood and looked out across the water.

“Aye, ye right, Quarn, I am ungrateful. For truth b’ told, I’ve never much liked magic, even tha’ from your nimble fingers. But it saved me, curse it, and now I’ve t’ sit and pay the price.” The dwarf kicked at a loose stone and sent it toward the canal’s edge. “Acht. I’ve no’ felt this edgy in an age. And now am takin’ it all ou’ on m’ friends. Sorry Meli, I’m just a swine-skulled dwarf with an axe tha’s t’ sharp.”

The old wizard’s mouth curved up slightly as he looked into the flames. “An’ nuthin’ t’ blunt it on,” he mouthed, allowing Nigal own voice to fill the void. Dwarves were a strange bunch, he had to admit, they were quick to anger while being reserved, stubborn as pack mules, and afraid of far less than most races. In all the time Quarn had known this one, never had he once graced the spell-weaver with a compliment. Until now that was, and it had taken an insult to get it. Had he of uttered it at their first meeting, one of them would have ended up dead.

The wizard was ushered out of his reverie by the sound of Jorn's soft but resolute voice. "I too grow weary of these arguments," he said. "We have achieved so much, and yet we bicker amongst ourselves like children. The cult is almost smashed. We have purged the land of many of its most powerful members, and now we must move to destroy it completely." The paladin stopped and looked at each of them in turn, and when no one moved to speak, he continued. "And yet there is something I cannot understand. Why here? I mean, why have we travelled for weeks just to come to this place, when previously we fought the cult so far away? Never has there been any mention of Richemulot, not once."

The small group, all huddled now around the fire, looked from one to the other. Eventually all eyes rested on the wizard. Quarn raised his shoulders in an exaggerated pose, and then let them slump again.

"Our master has not told me everything, and this is why I must visit him again tonight, to receive what advantage we can. He just asked us to come to this place and then speak with him again. Perhaps he discerned something from our last success that we did not understand. He is of an intelligence beyond my comprehension."

Meli sipped from her mug of broth. "Surely he cannot be more intelligent than you. You have taught me things, things specifically for me, things you would never have bothered learning were it not for me, and all without any seeming effort."

Quarn smiled weakly at the elf. "It was he that taught them first to me...though I sensed the endeavour tested his patience. But then he was patient, and must remain so, for he is always in great danger. He tells me that there are those across the land who would see him dead, and that he is forever destined to act through others. I can tell you that tomorrow will bring a most trying time for each of us, and I do not know if all shall make it. With such a force on our side, perhaps a safer world is no longer just a dream. "

"That is well," said Jorn, "but I do remain concerned that we never meet him. Or, should I say, that only you ever meet him. Also, it disturbs me that we know so little about him. And, though I care not that gifts are bandied to my friends while I remain ignored, I am curious as to why."

"The fire is getting low," said Quarn, before adding, "I too have wondered at his, Jorn, and I shall ask him this very night. Though mayhap it is out of respect he says nothing specifically for you; for you would not accept it, would you?" When Jorn failed to respond, the wizard continued, "To be honest, I am not being entirely truthful, for he did tell me at our last meeting that the Cathedrale de Destine would prove interesting to you, and that what you find there might well help bring about a successful conclusion."

Nigal grunted then reached out for another log, moving to place it on the small fire. There was a faint sound from the canal's edge: a scuffing followed by the plop of something breaking the water. Nigal spun about like a startled boar and hurled the piece of wood with tremendous force. There was a shriek, a splash, and then silence.

Meli was up and across to the waterside before the others could draw weapons. The elf leaned, fully outstretched with her palms to the ground, and thrust her head directly into the black water. When she pulled it out, she pushed her sodden hair to the side. "There were three rings, two small the other large, and there was movement under the water, although I could not see well enough to make anything out. What ever they were, they were fast indeed."

"Should I send a globe under the water," said the wizard. "Would that help?"

“Perhaps,” said Meli, before adding, “but I believe they have gone now.”

Quarn grunted something about bolting the water, but one look from the elf dissuaded him from that course of action. The paladin strode slowly over to the edge of the canal and stared into the murky depths. The dark water lapped at his feet. “I have heard stories of this place,” he whispered. “Some call this a human city...but then they do not live here.”

Nigal cast a quick glance at his companion. “Whataya sayin?” he said, hoisting his axe across his broad shoulders.

Jorn continued. “I am saying that there are more things here than men, and that we should remain extremely vigilant. Beside, there are enough desperate refugees pouring into this area already without even considering other sources of danger. We could have been attacked were it not for their mistake and your swift work.”

“Watches then,” said the Dwarf. “I’ll take the darkest hours.”

* * * *

The work was progressing exceptionally well, especially considering its nature; for it was very hard, even for someone of Ludente’s persuasive talents, to find those prepared to deal with, well, such a dangerous thing. Of course, threats, along with their more terrible cousin: promises, were always effective and had once again come to her assistance. Workers had already cleared away all of the loose masonry, and had now begun the delicate task of excavation. By sundown tomorrow, it would be finished, and the others would arrive; and the mademoiselle was patiently interested in meeting them.

Before her, two silhouettes struggled upending a board –it creaked in protest, before finally breaking free of its fixings. Ludente’s nose twitched.

“Well,” she said, turning gracefully about, “you are late! What have you to tell me?” Three men, all young and slender stood before the Mademoiselle, doubled over and breathing heavily. All of them dripped continually.

“They are here,” whispered one, “just as you said. Four of them in all; one old, one short, one thin...and one other.”

The Mademoiselle cast a glance then toward the ceiling, and all of the men followed it. A second later, one of the men lay crumpled in a heap against the wall. Several workers moved across and pulled the writhing form aside. Ludente wiped her hand on one of her two remaining scouts.

“I do not employ idiots, in case you had forgotten. Now tell me, how did he obtain the bruise to the side of his head? Quickly!”

One of the men began to stutter, but the other broke in just as Ludente’s eyes flashed with anger. “He slipped on the way back, and caught his head on the end of a post. We had to revive him before returning.”

“I see,” replied Ludente, scowling through them, “and I am supposed to believe that.” There was a moment of extreme noise as workers wrenched another board from its moorings. The Mademoiselle turned back to the excavation and looked down at a complex pattern of red symbols, which arched away from her vision beneath the remaining flooring. A wicked grin spread across her face as she turned. “Well, it seems things are progressing smoothly here, and you have performed well enough. I want you to go and find Po. Tell him that I sent you, he’ll know what for.”

Without another sound, the two men left like shadows, seemingly eager to be away as fast as was possible; but they were not so fast as to avoid Ludente's parting advice, a statement adorned with whimsical half-humour, "And don't forget to wash your feet, brothers!"

Still smiling, Ludente perused once more the strange symbols beneath her feet. What they were she had no idea; magic was not an area in which she excelled, and she had little interest in it. He, of course, was an expert, and undoubtedly knew what he was doing. That others would be arriving soon was evidence enough that he trusted them to perform what ever was necessary with it. She, on-the-other-hand, had only to protect them until they were done –and then, as his parting words had told her, get her sweet little derrière as far away as possible. The Mademoiselle stepped gracefully off the board she had occupied, and moved nimbly across the joists, before alighting the stairs. Even as she moved, the sound of straining timber sounded sweet in her ears.

* * * *

Meli looked toward the canal once more. She had done this every so often, and Nigal knew well enough that the noise of yet another barge would soon drift into his own range. More refugees, he supposed; and he had seen enough of them already today, along with a number of merchant vessels and smaller pilot craft. How she managed it was a mystery to the dwarf, but she could distinguish a sound beyond his own hearing from the cacophony all about them. This was a busy town, and the din from its centre reached them easily here in their canal-side retreat. It was almost suffocating at times: the sounds of traders, hankerers, entertainers and workmen all swimming together in the stifling afternoon heat; however, for Nigal, there was no escaping its seductive pull.

"Tha's a dwarven Smith ye hear there, wee Meli," he spouted, pulling his head back. "Ye can tell from the sound. A dwarf caresses the metal, rather tha' beat it into submiss'n like ye other races."

Meli was looking down the flights of her arrow, examining each for any slight imperfection, and smoothing them where necessary. She let an arrow dip in her grasp, before saying: "Human Smiths made Jorn's armour, and that seems fine enough work to me." The arrow was re-elevated, and Meli took a minute slither off the shaft with her dagger. Nigal's face dropped and he put forward both of his hands, so that they were before the elf palms upward.

"Aye," he said, lifting his face again. "Aye, humans can be fine metal workers, bu' nay Smiths, nay proper Smiths. Dwarves pu' love into their work, an' humans ne' understand tha'. Jorn's armour 'll be a pile a broken rust afore three-hundred-summers a' dun."

Meli allowed herself a smile. "Most of that race would be happy to see fifty of those summers, Nigal. You forget, humans are a hurried race, quick to live and die. And as for Jorn," she continued. "He's been gone for too long now, Cathedral or no, and the light will fade soon. I should go and find him."

The dwarf shook his head vigorously, one hand stroking the full beard. His eyes flashed between the slender elf and the prone form of Quarn. "Nay, dunne go! Jorn would never wish it, and the wizard 'ere forbade ye leave. We should wai' till Jorn returns or the wizard wakes."

“But what if he doesn’t wake? Look at him, his skins like ash. The brightest thing about him is that translocation gem, or what ever he calls it. I’ve never seen him so pale, or for so long. Something is wrong, very wrong, and we need Jorn here to help.”

Nigal looked fixedly at her. “Aye!” he said. “It’s right what ye say. The wizard could die, and there’s nay a thing either a us can do. But lemme go in there; it’s a bad place, Jorn said so himself, and I ain’t afraid o’ a couple a bruises.”

“And I suppose you can follow his trail,” retorted the elf.

The dwarf threw his hands into the air and sighed. “Fine then, you go and ge’ y’self dun in. I’ll just stay ‘ere b’ m’self, daft old dwarf tha’ I am.”

Meli leaned over and kissed the dwarf on one of his rough, bearded cheeks, “You taught me too well to get *dun in*, you old fossil. I’ll be back again before you know. Jorn’s probably so engrossed with the temple he’s forgotten the time.”

The two stared at each other briefly, before diverting their eyes to the ground. The elf moved off without another word.

“Ta’ care,” called Nigal. “And remember wha’ I taught ye.”

The dwarf turned then toward the wizard and mumbled, “And wha’ d’ya think you’re playin a’, ya old fool? First the palad’n, and now th’elf. Its’nay goin’ as ya planned, is it?”

There was no reaction, no sign of life from Quarn; he continued to sit with the small red gemstone in his hand, staring off into some other world, his eyes barely open a hair’s breadth.

A large barge came past then, sitting low in the water. It was an unimpressive vessel, poorly maintained and ugly. The dwarf watched it drift by on the slow current until it had passed from sight. Nigal shivered once and frowned; but he did not think to ask himself why, or pause long enough to consider the complete absence of life on board or what that might mean; instead, he pushed it to the back of his mind, took a nip of dwarf spirits, and drifted off to the nostalgic sounds of the nearby anvil.

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The upper floor was entirely gone now, revealing the underside with its strange circle. Such a fascinating thing, thought Ludente, so big, and all swirls and unintelligible symbols. And soon to be changed or so she understood. The others would arrive presently and get to work, but, unless she found it to her immediate benefit, Ludente would retire to another room and let them be; the Mademoiselle saw no sense in taking chances with such types, especially when they dealt with things she did not understand.

Her defences in order, Ludente ascended the stair and waited. It was not long before she was disturbed. Po had returned, successful as always; for among his small entourage, there lay a large, steel-clad figure.

“Po, my darling boy,” she teased, “what ever have you brought for me now?” Producing a fan, the Mademoiselle wafted the air delicately about her face, before gifting the young man a delicious smile. She continued: “You know, Po, you are my favourite little helper. And do you know why?”

“Cos I, if it pleases your awfulness, do’s as you tells me, Mad’msele,” replied the scrawny looking fellow holding out his arm. “Though times afore, and this, it dos hurt terrible bad.”

Ludente looked down at Po, and saw then the great cut upon his arm. From the small fragments of white visible in the wound, it was obviously to the bone. "My poor, poor dear, come hither. Now, tell me, what did the beast do to you?"

The Mademoiselle's voice exuded concern, and Po responded by scampering up the stairway, before kneeling dutifully, his wounded arm outstretched for her inspection. "He cut me, Mad'mselle, even after we struck him on the head. And all cos we's thinks him weak, like those uvvers above an about. But he's not, no Mad'mselle, not this one." Ludente held Po's arm gently, and dabbed around the wound with a handkerchief. Po continued: "Sagson and Nilly and Bedre, all dead. All killed with his big sword, all in bits too!" Po paused for a moment, before continuing with a hushed voice, "Said some words, he did. Strangest words I ever heard. An' the sun...the sun itself came down to help him. We were blinded, Mad'mselle -like in that rhyme those others are always singin' to their babes, and we all sprawled about on the floor, writhin' and squealin', with some of us up again runnin into things. And then the sword, swingin' and whooshin' everywhere, stabbin' and choppin'. And more words, and..."

"But you got him, Po," interjected Ludente brightly, bringing the hanky up to her tongue, "you stopped that sun, did you not my poor dear, just as you stopped him too."

Po, oblivious now to the pain, and safe in his mistress' favour, nodded vigorously his accord, and was eagerly about to proceed, when the door swung open and the guards emerged followed by four tallish figures entirely covered in dark purple robes. The others had finally arrived.

* * * *

A short while later, Nigal stirred to find the magician's body still rigid. It had not moved now since a similar time last evening, and showed no outward sign of doing so. The initial shock of this having passed, the dwarf contented himself with the ever-growing familiarity of the situation -the form of his petrified friend was no longer a source of alarm in itself, being rather a comforting presence while his other companions were away. In the fading light, Quarn had even looked much like his old self, meditating as he had so often in the weeks and months past. But in the absence of any light things were different, he had been almost swallowed by the darkness. To most observers, this would have been normal, unavoidable even, but to the eyes of the dwarf, he was failing, giving in. The heat signature, once so strong, was fading fast, and magic or no without assistance Quarn would soon be dead.

Nigal moved his strong shoulders in circular motions, working the evening cool out of them, and then shuffled across to his companion. "Eh," he whispered, prodding the magician firmly, "Quarn, come ba' to us, ye hear. Nay go dayin' on us now, no' 'ere like this."

Silence descended again, and the dwarf sipped spirits. He listened to his own words repeat themselves in his head, over and again until they no longer sounded his, and then he whispered, "No' 'ere like this."

It was then, just as he felt the first chill tendrils of mist draw close about him, that the dwarf saw a movement from his companion. It was not a great movement but it was a start, and Nigal could not resist encouraging more. "C'meon, ye daft fool, wake up."

He could have been barely alive; the heat signature from his body was so weak as

to resemble one recently at peace. And yet still the finger twitched. A minute later, three of his fingers twitched, and then the hand curled into a fist.

“My thanks for your assistance, Nigal,” said Quarn, rotating his head around slowly. There were a few small crunching noises. “These old bones need a bit of a work out, do you not agree, old friend?”

“Aye,” replied Nigal, “this ‘ere mist ‘s comin’ in fast. Ge’s inta ye bones.” After a small pause, Nigal continued: “Thought I’d los’ ye there.”

Quarn smiled, flexing the rest of his body. Slowly, he looked around, and then he snapped: “Where are the others? Where is the elf?”

Nigal recounted events while the magician fumbled around him for his gear.

“Damn these old fingers,” said Quarn, irritably. “Come along, Nigal, we have to get moving. We do not have long.”

The dwarf began to protest, but at a look from Quarn fell silent. The magician was up and ready to go in moments.

They moved along the canal at a pace, diverting off when it branched a few hundred yards downstream. Nigal could hear the sounds of water lapping against the edge of the canal, and other, stranger, noises too. Without pause, Quarn elected to ascend one of the purpose-built cargo slopes that led into the town proper.

“Hey, wha’ in damnation ye think ye doin’?” said Nigal angrily. “Ye a human, ye daft fool, you canne see in this. Ye’ll slip an’ fall tha’ black water if ye no’ careful. An dunne think I’ll be fetchin ye out if ye do.”

“You know,” said Quarn with a humorous tone, “when you buy a puppy, to be a hunting hound for example, its little teeth are blunt, its legs weak, and it has not the faintest notion of anything in the world...”

“Wha’ in the world are ye on abou’?” said Nigal.

“But then,” continued Quarn, “with training, and exercise, it comes into its own: fast, aggressive, and crafty.”

“Aye! Aye, but wha’”

“But then it bites you. Takes hold of your hand and severs the fingers that feed it clean off. What would you do then, Nigal?”

“I’d n’er let a dog a mine bite m’ fing’rs. Bu’ if I loved it, it w’ nay bite me anyway. Dogs know if ye dunne love ‘em.”

Quarn looked across at the Dwarf then raised his eyes, before moving off at a greater pace than ever. “Oh, yes,” he sighed, “and I can see well enough because I cast a spell. And just so you know: if you see me doing something you’ve never seen before, it’s due to a spell.”

The pair wandered off then, through the labyrinthine streets and alleyways that made up the town, the dwarf almost trotting at times to keep pace.

* * * *

Meli moved into the temple slowly, merging with the shadows pooled in and about its large, arched doorway. Everything was unerringly quiet, not a sound broke from anywhere. Was it supposed to be this way? With the greatest care, the elf walked through the porch and looked within. The structure was ornate yet crumbling, and ordered most carefully: with shadowy alcoves; towering statues; black, grill-covered pits;

tiled mosaics; and thick, tall pillars that rose up, before arching over into pairs far above. All of it belied a lost decadence, showing now but a glimpse of the extraordinary artifice employed in its construction. For just a moment, the strange, derelict beauty of the place captured Meli's attention; she felt as though she was standing in a decaying forest of stone, overlooked by the worn, petrified faces of otherworldly effigies, all suffused in the quasi-natural light cast by half-shattered panes of tinted glass. She looked carefully at the broken figure on the far window, and thought then that some memory brushed at her – a sense of a people, or culture, barely clinging on to existence. The feeling passed as quickly as it came, and snapping out of the sensation, Meli looked again through the temple with a trained eye. It was hard for her to detect change in such an old building. Everything was already worn, and some things were broken, but she scrutinised everything carefully. Seconds later, and she had it. Most of the sconces were alight, but one was askance and extinguished, though grape-like clusters of wax yet hung there. Moving towards it, the elf noticed a dark patch on the stone, a stain of some type. Blood, perhaps? Drawing a dagger, she skipped between the pillars, approaching it from the side while looking everywhere about her. There was no sign of life; it was as if the priests had abandoned the temple.

But where then was Jorn? Meli's heart skipped in time with her feet, and her face flushed red. She was certain something had befallen the paladin...was he injured... dead? Meli pushed all thought of what might be from her memory; life as a warrior demanded the attention remain always in the present; one lapse of concentration was all it took.

The elf knelt upon the stone and carefully examined the stain, touching it with a finger, before attempting to gauge its scent. It was blood, she was certain, and recently spilled; something terrible had happened to Jorn, and she vowed there and then to do all that was necessary to save him, or avenge him were she too late for that.

Standing in a motion too quick and fluid to be human, Meli turned her head to the side and listened. It was there, the faintest of sounds, somewhere behind and to the right...the sound of breathing. The elf slid the bow off her shoulder, removed an arrow then knocked it. The bow was then reversed at a peculiar angle, with the bowstring pulled outwards and away from her, and the arrow it housed left pointing just beneath her right hip. The manoeuvre had taken a little under two-seconds to complete.

There was a voice, feeble and cracking, coming from under one of the large grates: "Please, don't shoot."

Adjusting her position, the elf tiptoed closer to one of the grates then knelt down before it. "Who's there?" she asked.

"Oh, please, please don't hurt us. We're only peaceful priests, minding our own business. We have been imprisoned...Can you get us out?"

Meli gave a faint smile, and her eyes swelled with water.

"Fear not, poor friends," said the elf, "for I bring you no harm. Hold tight and do not be fearful. I shall try to remove this grate."

With that, the elf put forth her delicate fingers and made to pull. But leaning forward, and bracing herself then to lift, she stopped as though in deep thought.

"It will not move," she said eventually, "I'm sorry. Stay still and I will try to find you some help."

"But Mademoiselle," called a voice in reply, "it is not so very heavy. And I did not

see you try that hard. Please, I beg you, try again.”

But Meli had gone, and was scouring the floor for any sign of Jorn’s passing. She may not have been a priest, but she knew how to don a vestment; and besides, rats had a very distinctive smell, especially giant ones.

It did not take her long to find some marks, even considering the disconcerting protestations of the two grill-bound priestlings. There were slivers of it, small scrapings from off the greaves and heels, and they directed her onward. Those responsible had dragged Jorn over the grillwork and stone floor, to a long flagstone that was loose at one end. Human armour was good for something then, Meli thought. It was good for being too heavy to carry. She prayed he was still alive.

* * * *

They had secured the prisoner well enough, and held him pending instruction from the foreboding robed figures. What they would do with him was not Ludente’s business, though it seemed he should serve as bait of some kind. These strange men had already altered some of the symbols, before then dismissing all else but her and the trussed knight from the room.

One of them approached her without seeming to acknowledge her presence. The cultist looked about him, at the walls, the floor, and then the room as a whole. In her place, Ludente watched him, disbelieving of the smug expression he self-supposedly concealed in the shade of his hood. Her eyes were sharp, even for those of her kind, and they told her reams about this piffling, arrogant male.

“I trust the area is secure,” he spat. “We of the brotherhood will be too busy conducting the ceremony to deal with such trifles ourselves.”

The Mademoiselle’s eyes flashed dangerously, but her voice remained soft. “Esteemed brother, pray fear not for your safety, for all is in hand. Save your strength for the task ahead in the knowledge you will remain unhindered to complete it.”

“We live in hope!” was all he replied.

Ludente left him with his three companions, who were making final preparations for the imminent ceremony, and retired to the most strategic part of the building. If she had to get out quickly, she had to be in the right place. The area was of comfortable size, being at one point a cellar or storeroom; and as the rest of the house, this one too was littered with old crates, boxes, barrels and piles of used cloth. Po was in the corner, nestled up on some of the latter, mewling like a newborn. The Mademoiselle tiptoed over to him, before running a hand through his hair. Poor, brave Po, always at her beck-and-call, always willing to please, and always unquestioning in his execution of her duty. He moved his head to reposition himself, his eyes opening to her. She leaned down and kissed his head, before whistling him a lullaby. Within moments, he was fast asleep. He would rest with her tonight, far away from this cruel pit, and she would allow him a short while to recuperate from his injuries. Then perhaps she would call on him again. Poor, dear Po.

The Mademoiselle knew, however, that rest was not an option for her, not yet. She would watch, listen and wait; things had run far too smoothly thus far, and she could not imagine them remaining so for the rest of the evening.

Then the chanting started. Composed of long, low eerie tones that crept throughout

the building, the sound sent shivers down Ludente's spine. The chant progressed on without reprieve, rising every few minutes in a mock crescendo of wailing, before dulling once more to the low, extended chants.

She was already feeling uneasy about the whole matter, when the tiniest sound caught her attention. It had come from the outrun stairway, the last place she expected. Moving across to the side of it, she crouched down and carefully drew her rapier from its scabbard. Then, nose twitching in anticipation, she waited.

* * * *

They stood in a side street, somewhere near the center of town. Nigal was almost breathless after five-minutes of running. Quarn had kept up a punishing pace, yet now looked in an awful state, his cheeks drawn from over-inhalation and his limbs visibly shaking. Their passage, however, had been interrupted on only a couple of occasions, and then most briefly, with the individuals concerned fleeing at great pace in whichever direction came first to mind. The dwarf could only conclude from this that magicians were more greatly feared here than steel, a thing he was prepared to remedy if necessary.

Quarn stopped and doubled over. "This," he wheezed, "This will not do at all. How am I to conduct my actions when so hampered?" Several deep breaths later, the magician stood upright again. "I am pleased, however," he continued, "to announce that our destination is close at hand."

The dwarf pulled the great axe from off his back, and held it before him two-handed. There was a glint in his eye. "Lead on then, m' friend, I'm eag'r for a fight."

"Excellent," said Quarn. "But first I must ascertain something." And with that, he began weaving his hand in a blur, and mumbling words at a rate the dwarf could not comprehend. As he finished, the magician cocked his head back-and-to-the-side, and then froze in place, concentration etched on his forehead.

Nigal quickly became aware that others had heard Quarn and were now coming over to investigate. With the magician so deep in thought, the dwarf quickly realised it was his place to see off any threat. He only hoped that the three of them approaching were all there were.

They surrounded him by one of the ramshackle back walls, leaving for now the magician as he was. They were taller than Nigal, and thinner, and they moved nimbly into position, forming a triangle about him. One of them held forth a piece of fruit, pushing it closer and closer, the thin arm extended. The dwarf did nothing but turn his head to find each of them, twisting around as the one behind paced back and forth.

"Fruit? Hey, boy, you wan' some tasty fruit?" The voice was harsh and sneering. Its owner pressed the fruit yet closer toward him.

"Ba' to ye homes, childr'n" said Nigal with menace, "or ye'll sure regre' tonight."

Laughter erupted as the fruit was pushed too close, and Nigal swung his axe disconcertingly fast, the blade arching outwards and down. Yet he was not fast enough – a small knife blurred across from one attacker to another, taking the piece of fruit neatly from the hand of the one before him, who back-stepped while drawing a short sword. Nigal's axe smashed harmlessly into the stone before him, the sound echoing through the alleyways. Its ringing was only overrun by the tittering noises made by his assailants, who considered the entire episode of great amusement.

“Hey, be good boy and don’t blunt your axe. Mamma can’t afford to get you another.”

Nigal half watched as the knife was tossed high over his head. It fell perfectly into the grasp of one of his companions, who hadn’t even needed to move his hand. It was a simple trick, and one he was never going to fall for. That said, the skill these men displayed left him sick to the stomach; this three-on-one was a fight he would rather avoid.

The knife, disguised as it was now as a harmless piece of fruit, moved at tremendous pace, blurring between each of his assailants as they moved in closer about the dwarf, trying always to distract him just enough to strike at an exposed flank. Nigal remained unmoving. He may well have been slower than they, and his hand-eye coordination weaker, but he was of an ilk not yet encountered by these overconfident rogues, and knew far more than they about coming out of a fight alive.

Throw...Catch...hrow...atch...row...tch...ro...Swing!

One of the men staggered back squealing with agony, his arm neatly severed at the elbow.

“Ye canne parry me if ye has t’ catch, child,” spat the dwarf.

The attacker collapsed to ground, staring disbelievingly at the space where his fingers would have been. Seconds later, he fell silent, unconscious from blood loss.

The dwarf’s blow did not, however, deter his companions, who suddenly possessed of a tremendous rage, adopted the strangest of stances. Once there, they squealed and writhed with either pain or pleasure as limbs twisted, hair grew and thickened, noses extended, and then finally a bald pink tail pushed its way free. Nigal stepped back several paces, watching with morbid fascination.

“Ere, Quarn,” he shouted, “this is ye mag’c shite. You sor’ it out.” The dwarf looked across at the magician, who was watching the scene, his face an image of utter glee.

“Can you not feel it?” he said, sniffing the air. “Their hurting...so much pain.”

“Warre the ‘ell are you on, Quarn?” spat the dwarf. “Fix ‘em.”

“Of course,” replied the magician, “No harm in enjoying the evening, though.” With that, the magician lifted the flat of one hand up to his mouth and blew. A jet of utterly frozen air gusted forth at terrific speed, enveloping the two abominations. When the dwarf dare uncover his eyes, there were two snowy statues.

“Tha’ w’ impressive, Quarn,” stammered the dwarf.

“Indeed, it was,” remarked the magician, looking thoughtful, before adding: “Now, it is very important you do exactly as I say. Where we are going is likely to be very dangerous, and one wrong move could get you killed.”

“Sounds norm’l t’ me,” laughed the dwarf.

But Quarn was not laughing, and when he spoke, his voice contained an element of menace. “Inside that building there is a ritual going on. It is a very complicated one, and disturbing it at the wrong moment could have dire consequences. You are to wait until I give the signal, understood?”

Nigal gave the magician a careful look, then said: “Yet ney thought t’ gimme ord’rs afore, an f’ good reason an’ all. Ye actin’ mighty peculiar, Quarn, and when we see

t'others, I'm getting' the palad'n to check you o'er. Till then, you do your stuff, an' I'll do mine."

"I did not consider you so stupid, Nigal," said Quarn, "but perhaps I was wrong. Do as you choose then. But get in my way, and you'll regret it."

The dwarf looked hard at Quarn, his eyes as wide as they had ever been. But the magician seemed entirely oblivious, and continued: "The paladin, for your information, is inside, and it is partly for his sake that I request you do as you're told. The location of the ranger remains uncertain, although I believe her close, if I know her at all."

With that, the magician made his way to the entrance of the house, which with the guards gone was now deserted. The dwarf followed him closely.

They were greeted by the sound of chanting.

"Tha's cultist chant'n. We've 'eard it b'fore, eh?" said Nigal.

"Silence," hissed the magician. "Wait for my signal."

From close by came the familiar voice of Jorn; he screamed continually, his words bursting forth and breaking into gibberish. And then, as if a moment of acceptance was reached, there came something comprehensible: "What new evil comes upon this house?" he said. "Lord of light, preserve your poor servant through this black time."

"It's Jorn," hissed Nigal. "We need t' go an' rescue him. Now!"

"Soon," replied the magician. "Soon we will go to him."

The dwarf moved off with his axe out before him, almost toppling the magician in his eagerness to reach the doorway. "T' 'ell with ye and y' ord'rs," snarled Nigal, "M' friend 's in th're, an' I'm..."

"So be it," whispered the magician, who pointed a finger at Nigal's back and spoke a word of power. The dwarf stopped.

Quarn went across to inspect the motionless warrior, examining him thoroughly, before punching him squarely on the nose. "Touch me again, runt," he whispered, "and I'll see you suffer a thousand times over. But for now... for now you must be prepared that you might hurt him."

The magician summoned forth further words of power, directing them into the dwarf's weapon, first sharpening, then bolstering, heating, and enchanting,

After he had finished, the magician paused then looked all around, at the house and adjoining street. He spat, brought his fingers together into tight fists, and looked up into the darkness. "Look at this place, brother, this nowhere! Look at these old, feeble clothes I have been forced to wear! Can you even imagine the degradation? Perhaps you never knew. Yet this, this is where you chose to send me, brother... where I have lived these last hundred years. And soon you will join me, live with me in this prison that I in turn may laugh at you!" The magician looked then at the dwarf, his mouth askew and his eyes alight with malice. "But I could not catch you alone, brother...not you, such a wily, suspicious coward. So I had to work. Yes, I had to work with insects, with puerile maggots. I had to nurture them, teach them, and even watch them crush their pathetic kin...and all for the greater evil. That I am reduced to such means, to the employment of such measures, is punishment enough. I mean, who else here, excepting that holier-than-thou little paladin, understands the greater anything? No one, not even you, my accursed brother, could comprehend the suffering I have had to endure, watching these infantile worms grow in influence. And they are strong now, brother, strong enough to tempt you, to lure you in." The magician stopped for a moment and looked down. "To think, all of

this because of me, who would feast on their livers in better times.”

The magician then settled down to listen to the crescendo of chanting, which was building up beautifully just as he planned.

* * * *

The sewer system was comprised of a complex network of lesser and greater tunnels, and was far more difficult to navigate than the twisting streets above. Had it not been for her skills, the elf would have become hopelessly lost after only five minutes. As it was, things were not so hard.

Meli found the tracks just as easy to follow underground as she have above –and it struck the elf that Jorn’s capturers were either overconfident or naive if they thought their movements would go unnoticed. New marks occurred with enough frequency for her to pick them up at speed, a number coming from Jorn’s armour scrapings, with the remainder being tracks proper. Meli guessed at around six individuals, although from the odd splash of blood and the depth of the indentations, she guessed their owners were carrying dead or wounded too. Regardless of anything else, Meli was now certain of at least one thing: from the smell and the prints, she knew she was following some kind of rat-people.

The elf knocked an arrow and moved forward.

Before long, Meli came to a set of stairs. She stopped. This was where they had taken him -up into a building above, she was certain. Yet she did not rush onward, for her instincts urged her to caution; something very dangerous was happening here. Listening carefully, Meli heard chanting; and although seemingly far away, its chill message infected her skin to crawl.

Stooping effortlessly down, Meli gathered up a minute stone, before tossing it to the top of the stairway. It made, as she had hoped, the smallest of sounds. But it was not for that she was listening, rather what came next. Unmistakeably, there was a movement: someone or something was directly above her. They were, however, a deft adversary, for the elf heard no further noise.

Looking carefully at the ceiling, Meli pondered the use of an armour-piercing arrow. Had Nigal have been present, he could have told her in seconds the chance of it penetrating the material, and the remaining force left to it on the other side. But he was not here, and such a mistake, were she to make it, would cost her dearly in the game she was about to engage.

Suddenly decided on a course of action, Meli drew her short sword inch-by-inch from its scabbard, until it was halfway free. Then, nocking a piled-arrow, she drew it back and loosed it toward the left-hand wall of the stairway. It deflected off the wall and arched over to the right, finding the floor above, before rattling along until it struck something. Meli was already half way up the stairs by this point, sword and dagger in alternate hands, and her head twisted to the right.

The ploy had failed, and the elf found herself face-to-face with a most innocent-looking young lady armed and ready with a rapier that slashed at her as she topped the stairway. Meli ducked barely in time as the blade zipped above her and then came down in a second, fluid motion. The rapier clanged on the cold steel of Meli’s dagger, before being pushed aside and held there by the short sword.

“On guard, Mademoiselle,” said Ludente, “is, I believe, the accustomed tradition in such matters.”

The elf pushed her way up onto the level. “Where’s Jorn?” she said.

The Mademoiselle stepped back to a secure position then adopted her preferred fighting stance, before saying: “But then, I suppose you know very little about good manners, do you.”

Meli took the opportunity offered by Ludente’s repositioning to push forward, moving in close enough that both her weapons might be effective. Once there, she proceeded to cut and thrust, adjusting her position expertly as Ludente intercepted and counter-struck.

“Tell me...where you...put Jorn?” said the elf disjunctedly, her concentration taken by a series of lightning-fast rapier thrusts. The Mademoiselle gave the elf a delicious smile.

“Why, dear thing,” she said, “must you continue to ask such a redundant question? When we both know that in a minute you will surely be dead.”

Meli pushed forward again, her weapons twisting and arching about her at a frenzied pace. Within the space of ten seconds, there came three astoundingly fast exchanges. The Mademoiselle’s dress was now cut in four places.

“I haven’t even begun to fight yet, bitch,” snapped the elf. “So, if you were thinking this was going to be easy, think again.”

Ludente, for all her calm exterior, quickly realised the quality of her opponent, and pondered for the first time the possibility she might actually lose. The elf was unpredictable, became better when insulted, and was in every way her match for speed and martial skill. This left the beleaguered Mademoiselle Ludente little room for manoeuvre, and none for error. Unless...

“Perhaps we can come to some arrangement,” said Ludente, parrying once more a double-bluffed dagger thrust. “I am to assume Jorn your lover?”

Meli paused. It was for only a fraction of a second, but it was enough. The sword and dagger dipped slightly, and the Mademoiselle thrust the rapier straight for the elf’s heart. Meli screamed in agony as the rapier bit flesh. But it was not as Ludente had wanted, and the smile that was to herald an outburst of victorious joy dissolved from her lips. The elf, even so preoccupied, had turned her body aside, and although it was not enough to escape the thrust entirely, the blade merely scraped her ribs and shoulder.

“So fast,” was all Mademoiselle Ludente could muster as she fell back wide-eyed. And then she ran, expending all of her effort in an attempt to separate herself from death via a number of the large crates. Meli pursued her, leaping after Ludente so closely that the floor had hardly time to creak. Her dagger she returned to sheath, aware now that one weapon would suffice to keep her opponent moving. And this she did, probing and thrusting in an attempt to predict the lady’s next move. But the Mademoiselle was good, as all rats were in a corner, and the elf was forced to content herself with directing Ludente’s flight.

After a minute, both women stopped, and Ludente turned to face the elf. There was only a short span between them, and no exit for Ludente. Their lungs heaving, and their eyes bright and alert, the women considered each the other, before their weapons were readied again.

“To the death,” said Ludente, nodding slightly.

Meli nodded her head, and steadied herself. But Ludente held up a hand to forestall her assault. "That I may die here," she said, "I ask that you graciously acknowledge a tradition among my people."

"Ask it," said Meli, her blades poised.

"We have a tune we whistle before going to the other world, and I should not wish to forgo custom in case it is me, and not you that falls."

Meli took a deep breath, "Make it quiet...and short. And no tricks."

With that, the Mademoiselle began to whistle. It was a quiet tune, and struggled to find any presence against the chanting. But somehow, it did come through, although the elf heard it not as a lament, rather a lover's air reserved for tender times. It made her think immediately of Jorn, and water pooled in her eyes. A trick, she thought, gripping her weapons; but the Mademoiselle had allowed her own to slip down, its point resting against the floor; and she herself held no position to regain its control quickly. Meli allowed the tune to take her, just a little way, to when she first saw him, against the temple entrance a few scant years ago. He had just been ordained, and even Nigal thought he looked fine and sturdy...for a human. Meli had looked into his eyes, seen the goodness there, and hope. She knew then that she would follow the light of those eyes where so ever they went. But she had not understood his calling, had not known his heart or that it would lead him to such dark places.

A pain, small but ever-present appeared at the base of Meli's spine. Ludente still whistled, though there was a smile on her lips, and the sound she emitted tinged with mock emotion.

"Po," she said, "my ever dependable Po. Whenever I need you, you are always there."

If there was a response, the elf did not notice it; from somewhere above she heard the sound of his voice, lonely and afraid, screaming to his god for assistance. She closed her eyes, yet tears found their way between the shut lids and rolled down her cheeks. She had failed him.

"Yes Po," said Ludente, "she came in from the sewers. Which means that our little priests failed. Ah, well, never mind, they were useless anyway."

The Mademoiselle looked at the elf as she raised her rapier. "Unlike this one," she continued. "This one, Po, gave me quite a lot of trouble. If it had not been for you, my love, I do not know what might have happened."

"She after him, Mad'mselle?" asked Po. "She come for the shinin' one?"

Ludente approached the elf, cautiously at first, but then, seeing the defeated look, employed more confidence. Standing directly before her, Ludente ran a gloved finger beneath one of Meli's eyes and collected a tear. Then tasting it, she looked past her captive at Po.

"You know, my dear," she said, "I think she may be in love."

Po giggled hysterically. "You are funny, Mad'mselle. Elves don't luv 'umans. She must be cryin' with fright."

Mademoiselle Ludente raised the tip of her rapier until it settled against Meli's chest. "No matter," she said, "this little love story is about to end. What say you, Po?"

Abruptly, the chanting stopped, and a cold, shivering light penetrated even to that place where the three of them stood. They all gasped despite themselves.

"I'm not likin' this Mad'mselle," said Po. "I'm thinkin' we should run and let

lovers be.”

Mademoiselle Ludente withdrew the rapier and sheathed it. “Very well, Po,” she said. “Their fate is not ours, and we must away.”

And then, speedily they took to the stairs, and Po descended; but before Ludente followed him, she turned to the elf, she said: “His sword lies in the crate, there, for what good it will do you.”

* * * *

A frigid glow expanded through the doorway, penetrating the bodies of both the magician and dwarf. In the distance, dogs began to howl uncontrollably.

The magician breathed in slowly, before stretching his arms high and wide.

“Ahhh,” he exclaimed, “the white, white ice of home. Too long have I missed your chill embrace.”

Then the magician turned to the dwarf, and pointing spoke another word of power. The dwarf moved into the doorway, finishing the sentence he started minutes earlier. “goin’ in t’ ge’ ‘im out,” he said, before adding: “Aach, m’ nose smarts.”

Nigal moved forward and broke the door, sending fragments in every direction. Within, the cultists screamed for assistance. None came, and one-by-one their cries ceased. By the time Quarn graced the scene, they were all dead, or dismembered and dying.

The dwarf, having dealt with the immediate menace, concentrated his weight against a hemisphere of swirling energy that separated him from the paladin and a strange portal of cold, white light that stood at its centre. He called to his companion as he pushed, but for all his great strength, the field appeared unaffected.

“You will not break that,” said the magician, while resting a hand on the doorframe, “and he cannot hear you either. No thing, including sound, can pass through that screen except that which is truly bonded to one inside, or crafted especially for the purpose.”

“Then how can we help him?” screamed the dwarf. “How?”

“We must wait to see what happens,” replied Quarn. “I will try to deactivate the spell, and then, perhaps, an opportunity will present itself to strike against the coming evil.”

The paladin staggered around in the sphere, oblivious to anything but his most raw sensations. He looked blind and deaf, alone in a pit of darkness from which he knew no respite. Occasionally, he would turn toward the centre of the sphere and scream, while at other times he would scream toward the house doorway.

Nigal cried in fury and swung his axe at the shield. It bounced harmlessly away.

“Save your strength, idiot,” snapped the magician, before adding with exultation: “He is coming!”

Quarn rubbed his hands together as Nigal looked transfixed toward the strange gateway. Within it, the dwarf could see a small figure walking forward, a silhouette, a black spot upon the white. It came closer and the dwarf began to understand.

“A dem’n,” he whispered. “B’ all t’ gods.”

As if in some way echoing the dwarf’s lamentation, a voice, either mental, verbal, or both, broke through the bubble. “A human. By all the abyss. A man-pup, and all alone too.”

“Away,” screamed Jorn. “Away, minion of darkness, lest the powers of light strike thee down.”

The laughter was terrible and eldritch, and on both sides of the sphere. The paladin fell to his knees.

“There’s no gods down here, little man,” continued the demon. Gods don’t live in the abyss.”

The figure in the portal was large now, and looming, filling the sphere with a shadow so dense the paladin seemed buffeted by it.

“Almost there,” whispered Quarn, “just a few more steps.”

There was a clang, the ringing of cold steel. It echoed clearly about the small room uninhibited. Meli stood at the side of the sphere, Jorn’s sword resting against the floor.

“Nothing can enter, but that truly bonded to one inside,” she whispered.

The magician turned to the elf saying: “No! Drop the sword, you fool. You will not undo all that was set in place.”

But Meli was not listening. She stepped firstly toward the field, and then inside it.

“Impossible,” screamed the magician. “A paladin bonds with naught but his god.”

Nigal strode around to the side of the magician, where he stood, legs apart and axe before him. “Aye, true enough,” he said coolly, “but then m’ybe she’s bonded to ‘im. Eith’r way, ye and I are hav’n words.”

She was blind and deaf, but she was not afraid. Meli held the paladin’s sheathed sword out on her palms before her. “Jorn,” she whispered, “I have your blade.” And then he was there, his arms around her.

“You are here. You are here,” was all he could say.

The great, dark presence bore down on the two, almost overwhelming them, and Jorn could sense for a moment the utter evil of this being in another more definite way, in a way he could not explain, and he knew his god was with him. He sensed also that there was yet another close by behind him. At that moment then, even amid such darkness, Jorn felt there was hope, and he pulled his blade free, calling on his god for light. And it came.

The area was flooded with brilliance like the sun, and the darkness fled to the centre of the portal. Within it, there stood a towering, bestial figure.

“Foolish mortal,” laughed the guttural voice, “your pitiful toys are nothing to me.”

Meli drew her bow at lightning pace; on it was an arrow, delicately carved, and engraved with a number of strange symbols Quarn had showed her. The demon looked perplexed for the briefest moment, and then screamed out in fear and rage. A second later, he was gone, the word “brother” left echoing in their minds. Meli released her fingers and the arrow flew; too late, it vanished into the portal, which was now closing rapidly.

“I will not be left here,” screamed Quarn, moving toward the portal.

“Then y’ll have to come past me, old friend,” threatened the dwarf, motioning to the magician.

The magician strode forward. He could still breach the sphere and make the portal; for even now, the essence of his brother was concentrated sufficiently. “Foolish maggot,” he scoffed at the dwarf, “you are incapable of harming one such as I.” Then he remembered; but by that time the axe was already flying.

The Shadow Fiend

A Demon of Pure Darkness

By David "Jester" Gibson

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"Then black despair, the shadow of a starless night, was thrown over the world in which I moved alone."

- Percy Bysshe Shelly, Revolt of Islam

Appearance

The Shadow Fiend is a creature made entirely of shadows. The Fiend is humanoid in shape, standing over six feet in height. The creature is unusually gaunt and its long limbs add to its slender appearance. From a distance and in dim lighting it may even appear to be an elf. The Fiend itself is featureless; its entire body is made of smooth unmarred blackness that seems to absorb the light in the area. There are no visible eyes, mouth or any other identifying facial feature. The Fiend is distinguished from other humanoid shadows by its unusual number of digits. Its right hand has six fingers while its left has seven.

The Fiend is can easily be mistaken for a regular shadow in appearance, but this error becomes noticeable once the Shadow Fiend is realized to be a corporeal being. Likewise, the Fiend's unique nature is revealed if it deigns to speak. When it does, the voice comes from the inky blackness itself; the Fiend's voice is slow and cold with an indiscernible accent. While the voice is not inhuman it sounds unpleasantly unnatural.

Unlike other Fiends or Outsiders, the Shadow Fiend has no way to easily disguise its form. It often conceals itself

with a long cloak of coarse fiber and stays near the shadows. Although it can take the appearances of its victims for short periods of time, the Fiend seldom relies solely on this ability as it never lasts long. The Fiend only has a small Reality Wrinkle, little more than a dozen feet around it. Inside its wrinkle, light dims and the air becomes noticeably cooler.

Phylactery

The Shadow Fiend has no Phylactery. If it is slain, the Fiend is irreversibly dead. If it exists for long enough and grows in power, it may eventually decide to create a phylactery for itself.

The Shadow Fiend

CR 11; Medium Outsider (Evil, Extra planar); HD 8d8+24; 65 hp; Init +10 (+6 Dex, +4 Improved Initiative); Spd 30 feet; AC 22 (+6 Dex, +6 Natural); Atk 2 claw +10/+5 or +13/+8 (1d6+2); Face/Reach 5'x 5'; SA Ability Drain; SQ Damage reduction 10/magic, darkvision 60', immunities, shadow blend, spell resistance 23; AL LE; SV Fort +9, Ref +12, Will +6; Str 15, Dex 23, Con 16, Int 20, Wis 11, Cha 6.

Skills and Feats: Appraise 16, Disguise 9, Gather Information 11, Hide 19, Intimidate 9, Knowledge (Arcana) 16, Knowledge (Planes) 16, Listen 17, Move Silently 19, Search 19, Sense

Motive 11, Spellcraft 16, Spot 11; Improved Initiative, Investigator, Stealthy, Weapon Finesse.

Background

The Shadow Fiend was neither born nor created; it exists solely as the result of coincidence. The history of the Arak people tells of an event centuries ago when their former master, Gwydion, almost escaped from the Obsidian Gate. As the gate closed around him Gwydion attempted to force his way through the closing portal. As it snapped shut, the limbs that Gwydion had managed to force into the Demiplane were severed and fell lifeless to the ground. One of the larger pieces of Gwydion survived the shock and clung tenaciously to a perverse semblance of life.

Even Gwydion himself is unsure how the fragment managed to endure, despite being separated by an entire dimension. For decades, it did little more than exist as another shadow in a realm of darkness. Slowly Gwydion managed to exert his influence over the fragment, pushing it towards self-awareness. Eventually the Shadow Fiend gained enough consciousness for Gwydion's dark purposes.

The Obsidian Gate holds Gwydion captive and there is no way to open it except with the Regalia of Arak, a collection of relics. After years of contemplation, Gwydion realized that if he could not get the key he could craft a new one. The sorcerer fiend envisioned a mystical lock-pick, the Regalia of Gwydion. Though this regalia would not open the Gate entirely, it would pry the portal wide enough to allow Gwydion to force his way through, one piece at a time.

The Fiend could not risk using the services of the changelings in the

Shadow Rift for fear of its purposes being discovered. The Shadow Fiend left the Rift and ventured out into the Core on a quest to find the craftsmen needed to construct the Regalia of Gwydion. Once the items were constructed and enchanted, the Fiend would use the Regalia to free its master.

The Shadow Fiend has no real physical requirements, drawing its power from the Plane of Shadows. However, in the larger Core it has found its connection to the other Plane diminished, and as the days pass it grows weaker. The longer it exists away from the Shadow Rift, the more the Fiend fades into nothingness. To further its existence the Fiend draws strength from other creatures, draining the life force of living beings.

Personality

The Shadow Fiend is not a true living creature, it has no individual identity beyond a rudimentary consciousness. However, since it has gained self-awareness, the Fiend has realized it does not wish to go back to its previous mindless state. The being is unsure of its fate if its master and greater self is ever released. It knows that once freed, Gwydion will have no use for the independent fragment and is not sure if it could rejoin with Gwydion after so long. Also, the longer the Shadow Fiend exists, the more it becomes accustomed to its independent existence.

As it steals the energies of other beings, the Fiend takes a part of them into itself. The more lives it taps, the more the Shadow Fiend realizes what it is lacking as a true independent entity. Currently these thoughts are minor and easily ignorable, but as time passes they will only get stronger.

Combat

The Shadow Fiend is loath to engage in combat for it knows if it dies, its task of freeing Gwydion will remain undone. As well, the Fiend has developed a growing sense of self preservation. It will use its abilities to flee or hide from foes with superior power or numbers. If forced to engage in battle, the Fiend strikes mercilessly and draws life energy with its clawed attacks. It relies primarily on its natural weapons or with the Regalia of Gwydion if any has been constructed.

The Shadow Fiend, while physically daunting, lacks the creativity to make full use of its abilities. It is cunning but not innovative. It does know enough to drain the mind from obvious leaders and use their tactical knowledge or experience against their allies or to improve its own tactics. As the Shadow Fiend is not truly a living creature, but more a construct of an Outsider, it is immune to many spells or spell-like effects that work on living creatures.

- * Immune to mind-affecting effects such as charm or ESP. The Fiend's mind is alien and untouchable.

- * Immune to Critical Hits. There are no organs in its body, nor any weak spots to exploit.

- * Immune to disease, death, paralysis, poison, sleep, and stunning effects. The Fiend has no biological functions that can be impaired by toxins or sickness.

- * Immune to fatigue and exhaustion, the Shadow Fiend has no need to eat or sleep or rest.

Shadow Blend (Su): In any lighting condition save full daylight the Shadow Fiend can step into shaded areas and disappear, being granted full concealment. This ability continues to

function even under the effects of a *Light* or similar spell.

Light Vulnerability (Ex): A *Light* or similar spell cast directly onto the Shadow Fiend's body weakens the shadow-stuff that makes up its frame. As long as the spell is in effect, the Fiend suffers a -2 penalty to its armor class. Bright lights do not blind the Shadow Fiend, but it does feel uncomfortable around them avoiding them if possible.

Shadow Dependence (Ex): The Shadow Fiend draws its subsistence from a connection to the Elemental Plane of Shadow. This connection is heightened in the Shadow Rift; however, outside of the Rift the Fiend has no easy way to replenish its existence and instead cannibalizes its own energy. For every day spent outside of the Shadow Rift, the Fiend loses one Hit Point. The only way for it to survive or heal itself is to draw energy from others with its *Ability Drain* ability.

Ability Drain (Su): Unlike most creatures that drain the life-force of other creatures, the Shadow Fiend does not specialize in only draining a single form of energy. Instead, it can drain a living creature of any ability score. Fortunately it can only drain one type of ability with any given strike, decided upon before it makes the attack. For every successful hit, the Fiend drains a single point from a statistic of the Fiend's choice. On a successful Fortitude Save (DC 12), the loss is only temporary and can be healed with time.

For every point of energy stolen the Fiend temporarily gains power. The gain is dependent on the type of energy stolen and the effects are cumulative:

- * Str- Increases damage from its claws by +1

- * Con- Heals itself for 5 points of damage

- * Dex- Increases initiative by 1
- * Int- Gains knowledge of victim's memories (see below)
- * Wis- Receives a +2 bonus to any skill shared with victim
- * Cha- Takes on the victim's appearance (see below)

Draining constitution is used to preserve the Fiend's life outside of the Shadow Rift and is the only way it can heal damage inflicted on itself. Individual bonuses (except for damage healed) last for a single hour for every point drained up to a maximum of twelve. Any energy gained after this is lost as the Fiend has reached the limit of its form. When it reaches this limit the Fiend can no longer drain energy except to heal itself.

If the Shadow Fiend drains an individual's Charisma it begins to take on their physical appearance and traits, as per the effects of an *Alter Self* spell. This is only a temporary change and lasts no longer than any other bonus. The Fiend occasionally uses this ability to disguise itself while walking amongst people.

After the Shadow Fiend drains a victim's Intelligence, it gains glimpses of the subject's memories and experiences. The Fiend can fully recall any event in the individual's life for the standard duration, after this the Fiend loses all but the strongest emotions. All other memories fade like a dream. This tortures the Shadow Fiend with memories of experiences it will never know firsthand, but proves to be too valuable a source of information to pass up.

The Regalia of Gwydion

The first goal of the Shadow Fiend is to hire craftsmen to make a series of items. These are the Regalia of

Gwydion, needed to break down the dimensional barrier and free the Fiend's master. Most of the Regalia are to be constructed of common materials that only require the talents of a skilled artisan to craft. For items requiring rarer construction materials, the Fiend has arranged for small shipments of raw goods to be brought up from the Shadow Rift by creatures loyal to Gwydion. The Shadow Fiend may instead choose to hire unwitting adventurers to retrieve the materials for it or find quantities from another source. Once the item is completed, the Fiend then enchants it using its own life force as fuel for the black magics.

To enchant the Regalia, the Shadow Fiend spends a full uninterrupted six hours preparing the item through ritual incantations while using the shadowstuff that makes up its own body to coat the object. After that, a portion of life energy is transferred into the item from the Fiend empowering the item. This full ritual inflicts 2d6 points of damage on the Shadow Fiend and causes the permanent loss of 1 Hit Die. However, the Shadow Fiend can drain the life energy from another source instead of itself. The ritual still inflicts the 2d6 points of damage on the Fiend, but instead it is the donor that loses the Hit Dice or Level, as per the effects of the *Energy Drain* ability. The ritual must begin after the sun sets and conclude before sunrise.

The following is a list of the complete Regalia:

- * *Band of Gwydion*: The Band of Gwydion is a wide onyx ring carved smooth from unblemished stone. The ring is always cool and slick to the touch, feeling much like ice against the skin. Although not engraved, when closely examined it appears as if there is

a faint wave pattern to the ring. If the ring is examined for some time, the pattern appears to ebb and flow beneath the surface of the ring. The ring works as a *Major Ring of Fire Resistance*.

* *Boots of Gwydion*: These relics are a pair of thin leather boots that are almost to knee-high. The boots are made from a smooth glossy black fabric that does not appear to be made from typical animal leather. The edging and detailing of the boots is done with scaly hide prepared from black vipers. The boots are very lightweight and thin soled, but still quite hardy and durable. They function as *Boots of Elvenkind*.

* *Bracers of Gwydion*: These wrist-guards are crafted from thick leather hide and inlaid with silver stitching and detailing which forms a knotwork pattern down the top of the guard. The *Bracers* are buckled on with a series of small silver clasps that run along the bottom of the guard. The *Bracers* act as a *Ring of Evasion*, granting the feat of the same name.

* *Fang of Gwydion*: The *Fang* is a small thin dagger, the blade ornately carved from bone and set into a steel handle. The handle is wrapped in the same type of leather used to make the *Boots of Gwydion*. Wounds inflicted by the *Fang* fester painfully, oozing with dark pus and taking twice as long to heal naturally. Magical healing does nothing to heal wounds caused by the *Fang* unless a *Remove Curse* spell is cast first. Additionally, the *Fang* operates as a +2 dagger.

* *Headpiece of Gwydion*: The headpiece is a thin metal headband made of alternating intertwined strands of silver and mithral. Set in the band and spaced equally apart are twelve small black opals. Each oval opal is highly polished, catching the light and creating a

twinkling halo effect around the wearer's head in the proper illumination. The knotwork of silver imperceptibly tightens and loosens to fit the head of the wearer. The *Headpiece* acts as a *Helm of Telepathy*.

* *Pendant of Gwydion*: The *Pendant* is a single obsidian stone shaped like an angular teardrop dangling from a short silver chain. The volcanic glass is highly polished and flawless, with edges honed to remarkable sharpness. The stone is so highly polished that it reflects the faces of all who look into it, though only as a dark distorted image. The *Pendant* acts as a +2 *Amulet of Mighty Fists*.

* *Rod of Gwydion*: This item is a thin dark wooden rod embroidered with a detailed knotwork pattern similar to the *Headpiece*. The *Rod* is just less than two feet in length and very lightweight, almost appearing more like a wand. When held, the pattern feels as if it is wriggling and stretching like dozens of serpents although the pattern never changes to the eye. The rod functions as a *Staff of Charming*.

* *Wings of Gwydion*: The *Wings of Gwydion* are comprised of a long black cloak that drapes down to the ankles and comes complete with a large cavernous hood. The clasp is a small platinum disc etched with the various phases of the moon. The cloak itself is smooth and silky to the touch but feels unnaturally warm, as if the cloak itself were generating heat. It seems to drift and float of its own accord, moving as if there was a gentle breeze fluttering it about. It acts as *Wings of Flying*, transforming into a large set of bat wings.

* *Blade of Gwydion*: The *Blade* is the most powerful item of the Regalia and is crafted in the mirror image of the mythic *Sword of Arak*. The cost for its creation

on the Shadow Fiend is twice as steep as for other Regalia, in terms of both damage and the loss of Hit Dice. It can still transfer the loss onto someone else. The blade is forged of black mithral and the hilt of ivory. Instead of a wailing banshee the hilt is carved with the image of Arak himself, in intense torturous pain and agony. Any Shadow Fey that sees the sword considers it a blasphemy of the highest order.

The *Blade* is a +2 Keen long sword that acts as a +4 weapon for determining the bypassing of Damage Resistance. The *Blade* also acts as a natural weapon in regards to the Shadow Fiend's *Ability Drain*. As the weapon is designed to combat Arak it is considered a Bane weapon against all forms of Shadow Fey, but not other forms of Fey such as dryads. It has several other additional powers based around command words, all of which have to be spoken in the Arak tongue.

'Make' - *Shadow Conjuraton*

'Find' - *Locate Creature*

'Shock' - *Fear*

'Enwrap' - *Evard's Black Tentacles*

'Waste' - *Ray of Exhaustion*

'Hide' - *Nondetecion*

'Obscure' - *Darkness*

Each power can be activated only once a day and acts if cast by an 8th level Sorcerer.

As long as the Shadow Fiend exists, the special powers of the Regalia work only for it. Its life-force is too entwined with the Regalia for anyone else to successfully use them. If the Fiend is slain, the items become usable by anyone but still retain the Fiend's essence and its connection to Gwydion. An adventurer using a piece of the Regalia might find their dreams plagued

by Gwydion or their thoughts mirroring those of the Fiend. The Shadow Fiend possesses as many or as few of the Regalia as appropriate for the Campaign.

The Shadow Fiend in your Campaign.

Adventurers can encounter the Shadow Fiend in a variety of ways. As it requires the energy of living beings to continue to exist, it could draw attention by leaving a trail of bodies or attacking an NPC friend of the players. The Shadow Fiend is not an easy foe to track; as it is smart enough to not leave too many bodies in one place and it leaves no telltale marks on its victims. It tries to avoid focusing on one type of prey but often falls back on derelicts and other dregs of society who will not be missed.

The Fiend can also be introduced through its construction of the Regalia. It seeks out the greatest craftsmen in the cities it comes to and has them construct the needed items. Failure to provide an item of sufficient quality is fatal to the artisan. However, success seldom guaranties survival, as once the Fiend has the item it needs someone to fuel the enchantment of the Regalia.

Lastly, the Shadow Fiend could turn against its former master, believing that the only way for it to survive is through preventing Gwydion's release. It will do this by hunting down and destroying the Regalia of Arak or slaying all those it sees as allies of Gwydion, whether they are minions of the sorcerer fiend, or one of the many innocent dupes caught in his web of deception.

Letters of the Levkarest

Temptress

An Original Story

By Renee True

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Within every legend is a kernel of truth, and the legend of the Levkarest Temptress is no different. Through the many generations since this evil woman was defeated, fiction has filled the void left by fact. But the time has come to revise history. Recently, whilst cleaning out an unused room, I came across a collection of letters carefully stored in a wooden box. The letters are addressed to 'Julianna' of Vor Ziyden and came from her cousin 'Dierdre Fobear' of Levkarest. The pages were yellowed with age, and very brittle. Thinking I would find little of interest, I casually perused them. The more I read, the more enthralled I became! There is no doubt in my mind that the missives originated from the Temptress herself, and chronicle the development of her malevolent nature. I submit them to you, for your interest and to set the records straight. Without further adieu:

Dear Julianna,

Greetings, beloved cousin! May the sun shine always on your face!

Life here is anything but sunny. As you know, my father disappeared two weeks ago, and every day we hold less hope of his return. I have taken over the management of the Fobear Estate in his stead, and have been finding it a very difficult position. The taxes are staggeringly high, and it seems the enforcers are constantly increasing their collection service charges. The bribes are rapidly growing out of hand, and little resources remain for food, clothing and repairs.

I am not ashamed to admit I was desperately unhappy and consumed with hopelessness. The coffers were emptying at an alarming rate, and the enforcers were leaving for other estates. I am in no mood to attend the local Fall Equinox Festival tomorrow night, but Sallia (my loyal handmaiden) urged me to do so. We will be taking extra care with my wardrobe to make up for my lack of cheer. I am considering the forest green gown of velvet – as you know, it sets off my brown hair and hazel eyes very well. Pray for good fortune to find me, dear Julianna! I grow despondent in my troubled life.

Despairingly yours,
Dierdre Fobear

Dear Julianna,

Greetings, cherished cousin! May the wind be always at your back!

Your prayers must have reached their aim, as my situation is greatly improved! I attended the Fall Equinox Festival last week, in a poor mood. However, once at the celebration, I began feeling better. I found myself conversing with a well-dressed older lord. He seemed so sympathetic, and I found myself relating all my recent problems to him. He invited me to his estate for dinner the following evening, and I happily accepted.

Dinner was sumptuous! He was a perfect gentleman and an entertaining host. After the last course, he suggested we adjourn to the library for dessert and spirits. Once the servant had left us, he approached and leaned in very close. I was astonished, but what could I do? This man had provided an open ear, a comforting shoulder, and a splendid banquet! After a few hours that seemed to drag on forever, I bundled up to leave. He walked me to the door, and asked what he could give me to show his gratitude and friendship. Having been taught at a very young age to start high so as to leave room for bargaining, I replied, "500 gold pieces." Can you imagine my surprise when he wordlessly put a small satchel in my hand? 500 gold pieces! A small dent in my debt, but a dent nonetheless! I see him again in three days, and hope to receive another gift. The sun seems brighter today, dear cousin! May your life be brightened as well!

Optimistically yours,
Dierdre Fobear

Dear Julianna,

Greetings, adored cousin! May the path be smooth before you!

My situation is slightly changed since my last communication, and for the better! Through my benefactor, I have been attending gala events of which I would otherwise have been ignorant. Through the course of these parties, I met a younger gentleman, Samuel, from several estates over. He expressed interest in supporting me, and being that he is much more pleasing to my eye than my first sponsor, I decided to switch my allegiance and service to him. A short trip to the apothecary solved the lingering existence of the first, and freed my time for the second. Do not be shocked by my behavior, my friend! This is a difficult world, and one must do what one can to survive.

Yours truly,
Dierdre Fobear

Dear Julianna,

Greetings, favorite cousin! May the birds sing gaily about you!

I am very excited, and must share with you my news! Samuel is bringing me to a truly extravagant affair in four days, and I know this is my opportunity to step from 'struggling' to 'successful.' It is rumored that Maxwell Pauntery will be in attendance – imagine, one of the most mysterious and wealthiest man in all of Borca! He is my target, and I will acquire him. I am about to step out to my favored apothecary, to purchase deadly poison for my current benefactor, and a beautifying facial cream for me. I ask you

to pray for my success in this endeavor. May your supplications fly to the gods on golden wings!

With love,
Dierdre Fobear

Dear Julianna,

Greetings, enchanting cousin! May the rain fall only in the night!

The facial cream works wonders! My skin is perfect ~ no scars, wrinkles, or blemishes! There is a slight discomfort, as though the skin is pulled too tight, but it is nothing in comparison to the effects! In fact, the change is such that I do not care to have Samuel see me ~ he may suspect my motives. Well, absence makes the heart grow fonder! I am sending along a sample of the cream for you to try. Enjoy!

Your true friend,
Dierdre Fobear

Dear Julianna,

Greetings, much-loved cousin! May your coin purse never want for wealth!

You shall be happy to hear that my plan has worked wonderfully! I was able to pique Maxwell's interest during the gala event, and have been invited to a private dinner party later in the week. He is a wonderful man, and I believe I will be able to derive much pleasure and benefit from him. I have sent Samuel a beautiful arrangement of roses as a parting gift. The thorns and petals are treated with poison, so that they kill by touch or smell. I feel some small remorse for the servants who may expire from smelling the bouquet, but all reach their end one day. I have visited my apothecary again and asked him to concoct a beautifying body potion, similar to the miraculous facial cream he had earlier provided. You said it did not work as well for you? That is strange. Perhaps it was compromised during its transportation. You would approve of Maxwell, I know. Perhaps you will meet him one day!

Happily yours,
Dierdre Fobear

Dear Julianna,

Greetings, treasured cousin! May the wine flow freely to your cup!

It is quite late tonight, and the moon and stars light the page as I write. It has been a busy day, and I wanted to keep you abreast of the changes. My body is racked with pain, making it hard to sleep, and I may as well put my time to good use.

My apothecary succeeded beyond my wildest dreams. When I awoke this morning, I found I had grown to a statuesque 6 feet tall! My hair has become blonde, and my hazel eyes appear bluer today. Because of the rapid changes in height, proportions, and coloring, I was forced to call in an emergency tailor to design and deliver a new gown for tonight's dinner with Maxwell. He did an amazing job, and would you believe he asked for nothing more than to gaze upon my beauty? For my transportation, Maxwell sent over a carriage pulled by four matched bays. Dinner was exquisitely delectable, and the

evening's entertainment was more than satisfactory. I left with enough gold to purchase an entire wardrobe fit for a queen! That is, if I had to pay for such things.... Perhaps you should consider playing up your feminine side more often ~ these men are fools!

Beautifully yours,
Dierdre Fobear

Dear Julianna,

Greetings, young cousin! May your path be made straight and smooth!

I had a disturbing incident today, and would appreciate your interpretation. The most disturbing part of the day is that the rest did not disturb me. As all days do, it began in the morning. My faithful Maxwell had sent over a stunning songbird, with a note saying that it reminded him of my beauty. At first I was upset that he considered such a common creature even remotely reminiscent of my beauty, but I forgave him. He is just a man, after all. As I was in my study, perusing a map of neighboring estates, the incessant chirping began to irritate my nerves. In a fit of rage, I snapped the bird's neck. At the sight of blood, madness overcame me, and I found myself devouring the feathery creature. Sallia witnessed the incident and was horrified. I rushed to her side and struck her with such a blow that she fell dead at my feet. My survival is based on my image, and a silly little servant girl will not destroy all I have built! I sent a note to Maxwell thanking him for the gift, letting him know how much I have enjoyed it. Did I do wrong? I do not feel so. I hope Maxwell sends more birds. Life is easy when you have an admirer. I recommend you obtain one!

Stunningly yours,
Dierdre Fobear

Dear Julianna,

Greetings, youthful cousin! May the years be as kind to you as they have been to me! Today is the one year anniversary of my father's disappearance. At the time, I was distraught. What a fool I was! His abandonment showed me the mettle I had within me. I have the Fobear Estate firmly in hand, and it is time to expand my interests. Two of the neighboring properties, Slayton Acres and Caen Manor, are now under my control. It was a simple matter of contriving an invitation to their homes for dinner, and once I had them captivated, I killed them. I suppose you may ask why I didn't kill them outright. Two reasons, my dear cousin: first, it is easier in the eyes of the law when a man has a clearly stated last will and testament leaving his estate to me. But second and more importantly, it is more satisfactory to destroy a weak man than a strong one, rather like crushing a slug under one's heel. And these men were spineless.

There is a third property I would like to have. You may remember riding our horses through the fields of Muggeridge Hall, fishing in its sparkling streams, and hunting rabbits in its dense forests. The current lord of that estate, Alfred, refuses to meet with me. I must have that land, and I have a plan to go about it a different way.

Enough talk of external works! I was glad to hear you have recovered from your bout of illness. For my part, my pain is still acute, and lately my back has been itching

something fierce. I hope I have not contracted that illness with the damaging spots! That would surely delay my plans.

Deviously yours,
Dierdre Fobear

Dear Julianna,

Greetings, innocent cousin! May the best of life be yours!

Praise be mine, for my cunning plan worked flawlessly! Remember Alfred Muggeridge, who refused to give me his land? I found another weakling to aid me. The local magistrate, Edward Bluestone, agreed to meet with me yesterday morning. During the course of our meeting, I was able to convince him that Alfred is an enemy of the state who is plotting against Her Lady Ivana Boritsi in a most foul manner. Edward immediately ordered the execution of Lord Alfred Muggeridge on the charges of high treason, and as a reward for unmasking this dangerous man, I was awarded his estate! Brilliant, no?

It is a fortunate occurrence that this latest conquest only involved words and force of will, as my pain has become so great it is difficult to concentrate at times. I felt so alive during my meeting with the magistrate! As if I were discovering latent talents of persuasion... my words seemed to come from another, but so closely matched my own intentions that it felt like second nature. I hope you are able to find and cultivate your talents, as this world is ripe for the picking!

Triumphantly Yours,
Dierdre Fobear

Dear Julianna,

Greetings, cousin and friend! May you remain always in my favor!

The most amazing thing happened today! I was in my library this morning, renegotiating the payment contract with my enforcers, when a cleric from the Church of Ezra was admitted into my presence. He stood far from me as though afraid, and in a shaking voice informed me that he had come to heal my sins and correct my path. Heal my sins?! I have only helped to rid the world of feeble men. Correct my path?! My path has brought me fortune. Of course, I laughed at him and kindly suggested that he dive off the balcony into the pool below for a refreshing dip. And, Julianna, he did! The man must have known we were four stories up. It was an exhilarating feeling, telling a man to do something, and having him acquiesce so quickly. I feel my power grow every day!

This reminds me to tell you of a strange occurrence. I am growing feathers! Perhaps it is from my delectable evening meals of live birds, but in any case my back is now covered in beautifully glossy black feathers. Thankfully, my powers of persuasion are enough to make any witness believe they are viewing a glorious cloak, should the need ever arise to undress. These mortals are idiots! I crave a challenge!

Ambitiously Yours,
Dierdre Fobear

Dear Julianna,

Greetings, cousin! May the men fall before you in droves!

I will admit to you, my mind is bothered. Since the young cleric's visit I have undergone a period of introspection. It has forced me to realize that though I have fortune and beauty, I do not yet possess fame. As wonderful as I am, I must have the adoration and respect of those around me! This realization has caused me stress. My back is aching more than usual, and my shoulder blades seem to be protruding a bit. No doubt my muscles are tense with disgust at the situation.

Troublingly yours,
Dierdre Fobear

Dear Julianna,

Greetings, cousin! May your appearance grow into such beauty that men fall before you in reverence!

I am feeling much better this week, as I am sure you will be glad to hear. I've begun to put my many and various suitors in charge of smaller sections of my estate. My lands had become so broad, stretching to the Luna River, that I was spending too much time with the boring details of estate management. I now have 18 faithful beaus who report back to me once a week. Maxwell remains close to me and has become my second in command. My enforcers are the best that money can buy, which is ironic since I do not pay them in a monetary sense. Because of my new little government I am able to spend my time traveling and relaxing.

If you could see me now, you would not recognize me! Gone are the dirty-blond tresses, the drab hazel eyes! Instead, I possess golden tresses that cascade like a treacherous river, promising man pleasure and dealing death instead. My eyes are a piercing blue, able to make a man or woman bend to my will with a single glance. The only thing not flawless is my back, where my shoulder blades have grown into strange feather-covered protuberances, almost like wings. I have taken to wearing a large fur cape to disguise the malformations. But if that is the most I have to suffer for my ethereal beauty, I gladly accept it. If only this pain would subside...

Commandingly yours,
Dierdre Fobear

Dear Julianna,

Greetings! May the rules of society not limit your potential!

A happy coincidence occurred today! My manager-suitors have been bringing back troubling news. Apparently, my ungrateful subjects require religion. I would have them worship me, but the message is not getting across very clearly. A neutral third party would be required.

Just as I had reached this conclusion, a troupe of clerics were admitted into my office. It was meant to be, thought I. The leader of the group informed me that they were there to discuss my rise to power. Just think of it, cousin, I am a threat to the great and powerful Church of Ezra! While the leader spoke, I looked at each of the other priests in

turn. I willed them to obey me, to view me as their goddess. I do not know why I thought it would work, but lo and behold, it did! I concentrated on the leader last. After the entire group was mine, I sent them out to my various realms of influence, to teach the commoners who their true leader is. Praise be mine!

Divinely yours,
Dierdre Fobear

Dear Julianna,

Greetings! May you remain in my favor all the days of your life!

You may have heard that the area of Hedaya was destroyed by my order. Please let me explain. I have labored long to create my empire. For an empire to run smoothly, there needs to be a clear leader, a clear chain of command, and a clear set of rules. If one of these three pieces is missing, the empire erodes. In Hedaya, things were starting to go bad, and I had to destroy it before the taint spread to other areas of my realm. My manager-sutor, Robert Coatsworth, had not visited in a few weeks, and was beginning to make strange decisions. The people of that region did not hold me in high regard, and the tithes from the area were second-rate, when the tithe-train bothered to appear. I ordered Coatsworth back to the castle to report, but he refused. He called me unspeakable things, cousin; names not fit to be repeated! But I did not strike in anger. Hedaya was a bad apple, poisoning the rest of the barrel. I commanded that it be burned to the ground, with no survivors. And it was done so. My remaining manager-suitors are now under orders to maintain their weekly visits, or suffer the penalty of death. Since Hedaya, there have been no further outbreaks of disrespect and blasphemy. My realms are back to being orderly and productive.

Worthily yours,
Dierdre Fobear

Julianna,

Greetings.

You may not hear from me for a little while, as I need to hide away. The battalions of the Great Cathedral of Levkarest, in conjunction with the armies of Lady Ivana, are marching towards my castle. It will blow over; it was just a little thing... Another contingent of clerics came to 'convert' me three days ago. Usually I would send them out into my realm to do my works. Lately the Church has been sending so many clerics that my need for them has abated. Rather than sending these clerics out, I commanded them to fight each other to the death, for my amusement. And I was amused. But it appears I may have miscalculated the effect of my actions on the Church of Ezra and the Lady of Borca. This is not the end, merely a pause. They shall be made to pay for this inconvenience.

Deirdre Fobear

Dearest Julianna,

Greetings and salutations, most beloved cousin! You are closer than a sister to me, like a part of myself! May all the joys that life has to offer be yours, loved Julianna!

When will you be coming to visit me, my pet? I pray that it is soon! We shall have such wonderful times together, like when we were children!

The mess between me and the Church and the Lady has been resolved. It was simply a silly misunderstanding, nothing to worry about. Many of the absorbed estates have been put under separate management, and my holdings have decreased substantially. For my safety, the Lady has decreed that I must stay on my lands at all times. And so, treasured cousin, you must come to visit! Feel free to bring along whatever friends you would like. All will have a grand time and forget their troubles.

It was to you that I wrote my troubles and successes. You are my conscience. You are my second half. You simply must come to visit.

Your most humble servant,

Dierdre Fobear

And so ends the story. If Julianna accepted Dierdre's invitation, she never returned from her trip. Did you, gentle reader, see what I saw unfolding between the lines? The increasing beauty, the constantly growing pain, the taste for live animals, the wings, the incredible powers of suggestion and charm? Truly, this Dierdre became a fiendish woman.

~ Dr. Therylon Flemiquent

Needful Things

Selling Your Soul and other Deals with the Devil

By Stephen Sutton aka ScS of the Fraternity
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Existence, say learned sages, is defined by suffering, while suffering in turn is caused by desire. Certainly this pessimistic theory holds most true for humans, for no creature is so well defined by its desires. Driven by subconscious needs and societal expectations, humans suffer for their countless desires, compelled to the futile task of fulfilling their insatiable yearnings. Love, power, material wealth; these are the things for which humans thirst, even as cruel fate denies them. Victims of their own limited minds, no people are as covetous or as miserable as mankind.

There are countless humans who live in quiet desperation, living from day to day, scheming and dreaming. To many outsiders, they are objects of pity and symbols of the price of progress. Yet there are others, those who see man's desires as a vulnerability to be exploited. Trapped in the limited temporal plane, the puny mortals can scarcely imagine existence beyond their miniscule lives. Those who prey upon mankind have learned of this weakness and have mastered the art of trading meaningless materials for a truly precious commodity. For in the hasty pursuit of desire, men often forget the importance of the one treasure that makes their pitifully brief lives meaningful.

Read now of mankind's ultimate damnation, of the sale of the immortal soul.

Infernal Agreements

Throughout the multiverse there are entities that defy the comprehension of man, foul intellects that lurk in the lonely barriers between time and space, waiting for the opportunity to possess a mortal soul. Some know these beings as the Dark Powers, the hypothetical bogeymen of the mists, while others attribute these entities to gods or even demons. These entities exist as little more than rumor, related to the world by raving madmen or the fiery preaching of clerics in impassioned sermons.

Described as a mysterious whisper, an incomparable compulsion, or even personified as a stranger in black, these vile beings are predators, personifying temptation and the damnation that follows. Their power is to bargain with mortals, to grant the most grandiose dream to their foolish prey, in exchange for possession for their immortal spirit.

Enigmatic beings, they are powerful beyond measure yet bound to bizarre rules and unlikely motives. These foul things make their deals with but a tiny few mortals, choosing their victims seemingly at random. Most myths and rumors related to these infernal bargains suggest that the purpose of these foul arrangements is to drive mortals to evil, specifically to push weak and covetous beings to greater

evils. Though united in purpose, these arrangements occur in a variety of different forms.

Faustian Contracts: The most celebrated form of arrangement is the Faustian Contract, the most blatant form of the infernal agreement. This contract is initiated by a fiend known as a “merchant”, being who subsists on the damnation of mortals. These “merchants” offer their victims a straight exchange, using a formal contract. This contract can be a spoken agreement between the two parties, though more often the deal is made with a parchment contract.

Written agreements are explicitly outlined in painstaking detail, most of which is included in the “fine print”, a script drawn so small that it is ignored. This allows the merchant to invoke all manner of clauses and loopholes to frustrate and deny the victim. Spoken agreements are just the opposite, kept vague and undefined. In such cases the agreements are enforced to the letter, warping the intention of the agreement. Regardless of form and semantics, all Faustian contracts are united in effect, to manipulate the victim into selling his or her immortal soul.

The Voice: The voice is a more subtle and insidious form of temptation. While the Faustian contract is initiated by an external entity, the voice is an internal element. In such a case, the victim detects a voice inside of his own thoughts, buried amongst his own conscious thoughts. Its host immediately recognizes this voice as his own thought, merely a reflection of his own mind. All the while the invading entity entrenches itself inside the brain.

From its vantage point this insidious invader manipulates its victim, entering his memories and warping his

perceptions. This entity taunts its victim, haunting his thoughts for days on end. Ever patient, the voice waits for a moment when its host is especially vulnerable, at a time of tragedy or need. When such an opportunity dawns the voice makes its pitch, offering to help. Unlike a Faustian contract, this agreement need never make mention of the cost to the victim. Indeed, the only consent required is a verbal affirmative, spoken aloud. Few can imagine the number of souls led to damnation simply by shouting “yes”.

This agreement is a powerfully intimate arrangement, occurring only in special circumstances. Whosoever bargains with this dark voice is destined to walk a path of corruption and woe, doomed to become a servant of these vile forces spreading mayhem and misery across the demiplane.

The Power of the Dark Side

Those who sign away their immortal souls drink from a potentially limitless well of power. There is no end to power that can be invoked by these dreadful powers. Indeed, it is even theorized that the agreement is merely an excuse for infernal entities to release havoc and misery upon the temporal plane. The price for a soul is varied and diverse, though humans remain a predictable species, so more than a few wishes are common.

Material Wealth: Humans forever covet the materials of others, whether that is land, shiny baubles, or cold, hard currency. Tales abound with agreements where foolish mortals trade their spirit for treasures. In many instances the loot is delivered indirectly, often through grisly means. A pauper who sells his soul might find a dying man in the street holding a bag of

diamonds. Whatever the exact circumstance, the recipient of the wealth must pay a terrible cost for the gain. For example, in the case of the dying man, the pauper must choose between saving the man's life and taking the treasure. Such a price can take nearly any form, so long as it accomplishes at least one of two goals; to drive the recipient to evil, or to cause a much pain and misery as possible.

There is no set price for a human soul, though miserly fiends are as stingy with gold as they are mercy. Usually a set amount is agreed upon during the bargain, if only in metaphorical terms. A "mountain of gold" or a "king's ransom" usually consists of a total ten thousand gold coins, or the equivalent in artwork or jewels.

Faustian contracts are notorious for their endless clauses and loopholes, many of which are exercised to rob a mortal of ill gotten gold. Often the gold is slowly bled out with an endless storm of creditors, tax collectors, thieves, confidence men and mysterious accidents and arsons. Many fiends take a perverse joy in allowing their pawns to enjoy their vile treasure until they are accustomed to wealth, only to undermine their fortune and send them tumbling back down to the gutters.

Power: A small, petty creature by nature, humans forever dream of power. Power comes in many forms, all of which appeal to foolish mortals. Some crave the base strength to cause harm and havoc, while others dream of ungodly magic. Many misguided humans hunger for love and worship, while others prefer to rule with fear and intimidation. Whatever the shape or form, the lust for power is a selfish desire exploited by the darkness.

The powers granted are varied immensely, tailored to suit the sick desires of the victim. Most powers are humble mutations, no different than a failed powers check. The victim may be slowly transformed into a true monster, taking on the powers and the vulnerabilities one at a time. A fair number of the dark denizens of the mists have evolved through such a process, beginning with the moment they willingly sold away their soul.

Another common "boon" is sorcery, the power to wield arcane magic. In many cases, the mortal is granted a single level in the sorcerer class with a spell list determined by the individual deal. For example, a woman who sells her soul to gain popularity would be granted sorcerous power and the charm spell in her spell list. It is not uncommon for higher level characters to exchange a number of levels in a previous class for levels in the sorcerer class. In this case, a character may exchange a number of levels equal to his charisma modifier. For example, a sixth level expert with a charisma of 14 could exchange two levels in expert for two levels in the sorcerer class.

Ever bound to the physical world, many victims of these infernal bargains trade their precious souls for magical items. Such items are usually potent artifacts in the hands of their owners, usually attuned to destruction and always incomparably evil. These vile trinkets often possess minds of their own, which almost invariably overpower the weak will of their "owner", and enslave the mortal bearer's mind and body. Fiendish grafts and symbiots (see fiend folio) are other options available in an abyssal arrangement, though somewhat less common.

Revenge: Revenge is a living thing; say the vistani, a beast that wanders about, devouring all that it encounters. The desire for revenge is very similar to the quest for power, distinguished only by self destructiveness. Those mortals who wish for power seek to improve themselves through vile means, while those who seek merely vengeance care nothing for themselves, wanting only to bring pain and destruction upon those who wronged them.

To sell one's soul for revenge is to unleash a plague upon all mankind, for never does such a malignant bargain end as simply as it begins. The wish for vengeance is always twisted to draw a many hapless victims into the maw of destruction. Curses are a common result of such an infernal arrangement, though more often than not, these bargains lead to the summoning of some foul outsider to accomplish the deed. These "avengers" are engines of murder and mayhem, called forth to reap a harvest of blood. There is nearly no end to the plethora of monsters that can be summoned on the quest for revenge, from aberration assassins to hordes of vermin.

The Cost

Unbeknownst to foolish mortals, the sale of one's soul carries a terrible cost. Without one's essence, the body and mind undergo an awful wasting period as the last vestiges of the individual spirit slowly fade away.

Outward Signs: Humans who have lost their soul begin to show a number of unusual outward signs to indicate their state. Firstly, a soulless mortal casts no shadow. Though visible to the normal observer, light seems to physically pass through the creature with

no impediment. For the purposes of spells and effects such as *searing light*, the soulless being does indeed exist and suffers the effects, even though the light does appear to pass right through him. Likewise, the creature does not cast a reflection in a mirror. For these reasons, soulless beings are often mistaken as vampires by inexperienced hunters.

Next, a soulless person cannot be detected by magical means. Spells that rely on visual stimuli, such as clairvoyance or true sight can still reveal the creature's presence, but spells such as alarm and scry will not function. To mages who employ these spells, it is as if the creature simply does not exist.

Finally, all creatures with the animal type will react to the creature with fear and anger. Though irrational, these beasts will not abide by the presence of such a soulless being. The soulless mortal projects an aura with a twenty foot diameter where no animal will willingly enter, except to attack the source of the spiritual vacuum. Any attempt to calm or befriend animals will fail while the soulless creature lingers; familiars and other animal companions will not approach such an abomination, even be it their master.

Symptoms of Soullessness:

Humans who have lost their soul exhibit a number of symptoms as their mind and body decay. Firstly, the lack of life-force makes any attempt at magical healing impossible. The soulless being absorbs the divine energy but it is lost to the abyssal vacuum within. The being becomes exceptionally resilient to necromantic magic, however, as his life-force is no longer connected to his biological container. Any attempt to attack the character's spiritual essence, for example, a *trap the soul* spell, fails immediately.

Next, the victim loses his ability to express emotions. Though of little consequence to most, this is perhaps one of the most disturbing aspects of the bargain. Completely insulated from the emotional context of the world, the character becomes immune to fear, horror, and madness checks.

Finally, the soulless being begins to lose the last vestiges of his personal strength. Each week the victim suffers 1 point of temporary charisma damage, which will not heal. This drain continues until the character reaches a minimum of three, at which point they are little more than a lifeless meat puppet, incapable of feeling, much less expressing emotion. The demonic masters of these soulless creatures may halt, and even reverse this decay, should they feel it necessary to their greater plans.

The Fine Print

Naturally, a fiendish bargain is fraught with peril. First and foremost, the deal is enforced to the letter of the law. Devils are renowned for their ability to twist the intent of any agreement into a terrible parody of the former bargain. Far more intelligent than most mortals these infernal bureaucrats love nothing better than to bend the rules to the very brink of since all to cheat their victims of their prize. Whether an agreement is finely detailed or kept vague, a fiend will find a way to turn an agreement around.

Fiendish merchants are a far thinking lot, always plotting and planning ahead. With their demonic expertise these monsters are able to manipulate their hapless victims, entrapping them in a vicious cycle of pain and damnation. These malignant merchants wait patiently from the

shadows as their human stooges enjoy their ill-gotten gains. When the moment is right these fiends pounce upon some forgotten loophole, depriving their victim of the very treasure for which they sacrificed so much.

The ultimate goal of a fiend is not merely the capture of a soul, for what good is a spirit if it is not twisted to evil. Once a fiend purchases a human soul, the devil must attempt to corrupt its human victim, so that the soul becomes warped and stained with its former owner's evil. This is the purpose of fiendish loopholes; to give the demon leverage. Once the merchant uses its loophole upon its mortal dupe, the fiend makes a fresh offer. Though little better than the original bargain, this new deal returns to the human what treasures or powers have been lost. Perhaps more than anything else this is what induces a demon to select a specific victim, their suitability as a pawn in the service of evil.

This new arrangement requires the human participant to act out some atrocity in the demon's name. Such evil is varied, dependant upon the sick whims of the diabolic merchant. Many such fiends require their prey to commit murders, while others demand worship. A few fiends force their human stooges to spread diseases, and still others order their mortal slaves to form criminal organizations. When a mortal has been granted powers of enchantment they are often employed as spies and provocateurs to provoke societal unrest.

Breach of Contract

A few theologians scoff at the idea of the sale of a mortal soul, explaining that no mortal can sell what does not belong to him. The idea that the soul belongs, not to the mortal, but to his or

her god is a rather unpopular theory, though with each infernal contract comes a new convert. It is arguable that the goal of an infernal bargain is not for the fiend to possess a mortal soul, but rather to drive a mortal into acts of evil. Certainly such an act of deviousness is not beyond the abilities of a demon and the motive is surely attractive enough to warrant the effort.

If this theory holds true, a mortal who makes such a bargain is never truly endangered until he begins committing acts of evil. It may even be possible for such a victim to redeem himself of the evil acts committed. This is indeed a risky endeavor, since any fiend who has invested his energies into a demonic bargain is unlikely to let his pawns simply walk away. Most devils would not think twice about slaying a victim who attempts to redeem himself, though some more creative demons might use such an opportunity to place a pawn amongst the righteous.

Recovering from soullessness is a trying ordeal, beginning with religion. The subject must undergo a rigorous regimen of moral reconstruction, beginning with the acknowledgement of a higher power. To combat the dark energies of Hell, nothing less than a true god can save a soulless wretch. The succor of gods extends even amidst the swirling mists of Ravenloft and those who flock back to the light may yet find salvation. A cleric may begin the return of a soulless creature by casting an atonement spell. With the casting of this spell, the subject is protected from the wasting forces of soullessness, yet the damage done will refuse to heal.

The next step in this long journey begins with acts of pure goodness to balance against his evil deeds. This often involves charitable projects, acts of

self sacrifice or even a quest. In either case the subject must not profit in anyway from the experience, except for the experience of doing a selfless deed.

Finally, the repentant mortal must forsake the ill-gotten gains for which he bargained his soul. This may prove difficult, often requiring a special quest to remove the perverse gifts of a fiend. In cases where mortals bargain for material goods, these materials must first be destroyed and then replaced. For example, a repentant might have to destroy a fiendish sword and then assist in the creation of a similar, yet diametrically opposed magical weapon.

Once these three stages have been completed, the mind and body of the repentant begin to heal. Those fallen ones who have undergone such an ordeal may find the exposure to divine power has altered them, perhaps even awoken a deep-seated spark of righteousness, leading to their own entry to the ranks of clergy or holy warriors.

The Devil Went Down to Ghastria

A final aspect to the infernal bargains stands out from all other elements, if only for its utter absurdity. Though amazingly powerful, demons and devils are bound to a strict series of unspoken laws, many of which are as bizarre as they are incomprehensible. Amongst the most celebrated weaknesses of fiendish creatures is their irresistible compulsion to gamble.

A fiend can be compelled to gamble for any reason. Many mortals attempt to bargain for their soul by wagering it against some fiendish boon. Others may gamble with their souls for the spirit of a friend. In some cases a clever human cornered by a devil might

try to save himself by engaging the fiend in some game of chance. Should a mortal win such a gamble, he is granted a boon by the fiend, such as safety from the demon's claws. In the likely event that the demon succeeds, the mortal loses his soul.

By an unwritten law of the cosmos, no fiend can flatly refuse a fair wager. This compulsion is not to be taken lightly however, since demonic entities despise mortals who understand this weakness and will often take any opportunity to slay any such fool who uses such a wager and loses. Like all things associated with the infernal agents of evil, fiendish wagers are twisted and perverse mockeries of fairness. Though a fiend may not refuse a fair wager, there is nothing preventing a fiend from negotiating a wager balanced in its favor. A common strategy is for a fiend to bicker back and forth with its mortal challenger until the foolish human gives up and retracts his challenge, at which point the fiend might very well slay him out of irritation.

Fiends take a sick joy out of fixing seemingly fair wagers by twisting the intent of the gamble until the odds favor the fiend. Demons have a seemingly limitless repertoire of foul tricks, including decks of playing cards that can transform themselves from one card to another and coins that will always land

on one side. The most famous form of a fiendish wager is the contest, a battle of skills pitting human ingenuity against demonic talent. This wager appeals to the vainest devils who seek to flaunt their superiority over puny humanity.

This celebrated bargain is immortalized in the song of the Kartakan bards. These minstrels forever sing the tale of the Fiddling Fiend, a musician from the deepest pits of Hell, who rose from the pit to rob prideful bards of their souls. With a tune empowered with blasphemous genius he defeated all who were foolish enough to accept his challenge. The Fiddler's rampage claimed numerous victims, but was ended when the demon challenged Harkon Lucas. The Meistersinger soundly beat the fiend in a musical battle that could be heard across the Core. In the end, Lucas banished the Fiddler from Kartakan soil.

Even in the nigh impossible event when a fiendish wager is won by a mortal, the fiend seeks some way to spitefully twist the result. Indeed, the tale of the Fiendish Fiddler illustrates this point, for though the Fiend agreed never to touch Kartakan soil again, he remained free to roam upon the buildings and treetops, leading to the demon's new name, the Fiddler on the Roof.

The Gentleman Caller

Evil Comes Calling

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The hoofs pounded firmly against the stone paved roads; the legs pumping hard enough to cause sparks when the worn metal shoes connected with the well-traveled road. The Rider dug his heels into the side of the steed yet again despite knowing it could not go any faster, nor could that make him any less late. With the horse's next hasty breath, it let out a blast of saliva; a faint crimson tinged the discharge. The Rider pulled his flapping cloak back down tighter around him to ward off the chill in the misty morning air. Thick fog from the water clung to the river valley, hovering like a quivering insubstantial blanket over the rushing water hiding it from the early morning sun.

The hoofs now echoed over the final bridge threatening to dislodge cobblestones and most likely sending any unwary animal living under the bridge to a sudden watery grave. The house loomed into sight through the wavy fog; it seemed to materialize like a specter. The large imposing structure quickly loomed overhead. The wide protruding eaves caught the morning mist like a fading dream and dragged it steadfast into the cool and unforgiving reality and sent it crashing down as tiny drops of dew.

The Rider winced as he dismounted and something cool and wet slid down his back leaving a trail of shivers. He spurned the horse towards the stable hoping the lad in charge had heard his coming. It was unlikely the

horse still had enough vigour to run away. The rider would be impressed if it were still drawing breath later.

With his legs still shaking from the long ride, the Rider stepped up to the house. Knocking firmly on the door, he almost immediately began to fidget impatiently. The silver ring on his finger vibrated softly from the rapping. Slowly, almost imperceptively, movement could be heard from behind the thick metal-banded wood door. It was the slow rhythmic tapping sound of footsteps across a room, thick leather rapping on tile. The Rider rolled onto the balls of his feet then back to his heels then forced himself to stand perfectly still waiting for the door to unlock and open. A shiver threatened his spine and he hoped it was still the water.

The portal slid open and the butler inside gestured the traveler inward. He was expected, albeit days ago. The Rider nodded and paused for a second. He was unsure they would be satisfied with what he had discovered; it was not too late to turn and flee. Sinking his teeth into his lower lip, he stepped into the house and strode forward. The sound of a throat clearing made him jerk abruptly. He turned and looked at the butler who was pointing at a large mat at the front of the door. Sheepishly, the Rider wiped the wet travel dust from his boots before proceeding further into the manor.

He went immediately to the meeting room where he knew he would be expected. It was a large wood paneled

room with several voluminous curtains draped along the walls. It was illuminated by a series of gaslights fixed to the walls. Swords and shields also adorned the walls; they were decorative only and looked to have never been used. The main feature of the room was the large hardwood table that dominated the middle of the floor. It was heavily polished and smoothed to a mirrored sheen.

As he entered the darkened room, the Rider removed his heavy travel cloak and placed it on a peg by the wall. He hefted up his satchel and opened the bag and removed a large bundle of parchments bound together by twine. He placed it on the large table in the middle of the room, sat down, and began to re-examine his notes in silent preparation.

He looked up and jerked slightly as he was just now noticing the six figures sitting quietly at the far end of the table hidden in the shadows by their midnight black cloaks and immobility. Had they been there since he arrived or had they just entered?

The first figure spoke in a Richemulot accent. "So what have you discovered?"

The Rider stood and passed along his notes before returning to his chair. He sat in silence as the six perused his findings and preliminary conclusions. Parchments were passed back and forth in silence; only the muted rustle of the papers could be heard. Outwardly the weary rider sat with graceful patience while his inward self writhed with anticipation and suspense.

"There does not seem to be much fact in these." The forth cloaked figure said. It was impossible to tell if it was an accusation or a comment.

"There is little fact to go on. Mostly rumour and stories." The Rider

ventured. His fingernails silently bit into the palms of his hands. Loosening his grip, he laid his sore palms on the cool surface of the tabletop.

If they heard, they gave no outward sign but continued to pass around the sheets.

Eventually the first spoke again, "You have concluded that he is not one of the Masters then?"

The Rider nodded. "He is powerful and enigmatic, but the one known as the Gentleman Caller is not a Master."

"Then what is he?"

The Rider hesitated for a moment. "I... am not entirely sure. There is speculation of course, and several educated guesses, but nothing positive."

The Second sneered. It was not visible but unseen it spread across the table. "Well then Brother, what do you know for sure?"

The Rider steepled his hands in order to focus his thoughts. He began formally. "Esteemed and Exalted Brothers, the Gentleman Caller is an instigator of events and chaos. I found no reports of him becoming directly involved in a situation; he simply puts events into motion and then leaves."

"No reports of him engaging in combat then?"

The Rider thought for a moment. "Only a single time, in a covenant of Hala in Falkovnia. He and a... something else... slaughtered all members of the group. Except for one orphan whose body was never found and a single servant who hid in a closet. Some of what I discovered came from her. I found her in a small asylum just across the border in Dementlieu. She would scream for hours at a time and would only become lucid under the effects of very potent chemicals imported from Borca."

“What did she say about the Caller?” The Fifth asked examining the features of the Rider closely.

The Rider wet his lips and continued. “She spoke of a charming and seductive man who was able to bed several members of the covenant. She spoke of her secret, almost sinful, desire for him, and also of the powerful monster he became with large bat-like wings.”

“I see.”

The Rider continued, “Based on that report I consulted several volumes of lore including several Guides by the late Doctor van Richten.”

There was a humourless laugh from the Second. “I believe we have all read much on or by the *great* Rudolph van Richten and his adorable nieces, mostly due to the respected Monsieur Hibou.”

A quiet hiss came from the third cloaked figure beside him. “Silence your tongue Brother; it does nothing to say such things but risk antagonizing him.”

The Second looked ready to respond when the First raised his hand and silenced him. “Continue.” He directed at the Rider.

The Rider swallowed nervously and pushed his hands together harder to prevent them shaking. “As I was saying, I consulted the works of van Richten and other tomes and now believe the Gentleman Caller to be the fiendish creature known as a Succubus.”

“Incubus.” One of the cloaked figures replied. “A succubus is female, and the male is an incubus.”

“An incubus.” The Rider corrected. “Sorry. They are a demonic creature capable of charming people and are reasonably powerful. Invulnerable to much harm, magic is all but required to stop one.”

Gentleman Caller

Male Incubus: CR 7; Medium humanoid; HD 6d8+6, hp 48; Init +3; Spd 30 ft, fly 50ft (average); AC 20 (+2 Dex, +9 natural), touch 13, flat-footed 14; Base Atk +7 melee (claw 1d6+1); Full Atk +7 (2 claw 1d6+1); SA Energy Drain, spell-like abilities, *summon tanar’ri*; SQ Damage Reduction 10/cold iron or good, darkvision 60 ft, immunity to electricity and poison, resistance to acid 10, cold 10, and fire 10, spell resistance 18, telepathy 100ft, tongues; AL CE; SV Fort +6, Ref +6, Will +7; Str 13, Dex 16, Con 13, Int 17, Wis 14, Cha 26.

Skills and Feats: Bluff +19, Concentration +10, Diplomacy +14, Disguise +19, Forge +5, Gather Information +10, Hide +10, Intimidate +19, Knowledge (Arcana) +8, Knowledge (Planes) +13, Listen +13, Move Silently +10, Search +12, Sense Motive +10, Spot +8; Deceitful, Negotiator, Persuasive.

Reality Wrinkle: 1, 320 foot radius

Land-based Powers: *Suggestion*

Corruption Index: 3

“A fiend.” The Sixth said testing the word out on his lips. “An effective immortal so any plans are long term, generations in the making. Probably highly complex. We can deduce that much from its actions.”

“Can we?” The Second retorted. “For all we know it is a chaos bringer, simply spreading discord through the Realms.”

“True.” The Sixth replied. “But the plans demonstrated so far seem to imply some element of strategy and a larger agenda. The incident with the Fey in Tepest. Molocchio. Even the aforementioned incident in Falkovnia.”

"It is still an incubus. Just an incubus." The Second spoke with a strong flavour of sarcasm. "That seems far less impressive than the legends would have us believe. They are hardly the unstoppable or as highly intelligent horrors that other demons are."

The Rider nodded in agreement. "That is quite true Esteemed Brother, but I have reason to believe he is not a common incubus."

"Oh? Do tell."

The Rider cleared his throat. "I had come to the end of the trail I was following and had no more leads to exploit. Planning my next move in a tavern by sheer happenstance I sat beside a traveling bard dressed as a courtly fool. Knowing well the reputation for knowledge they have and judging from his well traveled appearance I ventured to question him in the slight hope he may know anything."

"A common bard?"

"There was naught that was common about him; he had, at all times, the most eerie smile that made him look like he knew exactly what I was thinking. He smoked his pipe and spoke in a distinct low Mordentish accent. I had barely started to subtly move the conversation onto the Caller when he began to talk of a carnival."

"A carnival or *the* Carnival? Isolde's Carnival?"

"The very same. He told of a being as good as demons are evil, and as powerful as some of the most devilish of their number. He gave it the name Ghaele."

There was whispering among the six and they conferred quietly. They all fell silent as the First again turned to the Rider. "Continue."

The Rider nodded obediently. "The bard did not tell me who in the Carnival

was or knew of the Ghaele and I had to discover that for myself, so I sought out the Carnival and conducted a series of fruitless interviews. Most of what I discovered is irrelevant to the subject at hand. I did learn, however, that according to legend Ghaele are akin to the knight errant of the otherworldly forces of good. It is therefore unlikely one of their numbers would be perusing a single unremarkable incubus. Unless said demon was an ancient of his kind and far more powerful than others."

Gentleman Caller

Male Greater Incubus: CR 12; Medium humanoid; HD 12d8+7, hp 87; Init +3; Spd 30 ft, fly 50ft (average); AC 22 (+3 Dex, +9 natural), touch 13, flat-footed 14; Base Atk +13 melee (claw 1d6+1); Full Atk +13/+7 (2 claw 1d6+1); SA Energy Drain, spell-like abilities, *summon tanar'ri*; SQ Damage Reduction 10/cold iron or good, darkvision 60 ft, immunity to electricity and poison, resistance to acid 10, cold 10, and fire 10, spell resistance 18, telepathy 100ft, tongues; AL CE; SV Fort +13, Ref +12, Will +15; Str 13, Dex 16, Con 14, Int 18, Wis 14, Cha 26.

Skills and Feats: Bluff +25, Concentration +14, Diplomacy +22, Disguise +25, Forge +5, Gather Information +21, Hide +15, Intimidate +25, Knowledge (Arcana) +13, Knowledge (Planes) +18, Listen +12, Move Silently +15, Search +14, Sense Motive +21, Spot +10; Deceitful, Negotiator, Iron Will, Persuasive, Stealthy.

Reality Wrinkle: 5, 280 foot radius

Land-based Powers: *Suggestion*

Corruption Index: 3

The Sixth cleared his throat, primarily to grab the attention of those

involved. “You make a logical point. However, you overlook that there are other ways for a fiend to be more powerful than just age.”

The Rider’s brow knotted with mild confusion. “I am unsure what you mean.” he stated praying silently that his ignorance was not too great.

The Sixth straightened slightly before explaining. “A man can be as powerful as a fiend through skill and occupation, even a small few of our number have the skills in magiks required to be the equal of an incubus. However, could not a demon too learn the Art?”

The Rider nodded with acknowledgment. “That is quite true. There have been a few reports of the Caller demonstrating powers that may not normally be found in fiends. It is quite possible he may instead be a practitioner of the Arts.”

“To warrant the attention of a Ghaele, he would need to be more than a dabbler.” The Third deduced. “However, he could not be too skilled otherwise his foe would be outclassed. It is unlikely the Caller would consent to be pursued if he were stronger than his opponent.”

The Fifth nodded. “True. Was there any report of a spell book or similar item?”

The Rider shook his head ‘no’. “Never reported carrying much of anything. At least not repeatedly. I could not even venture to guess what his phylactery could be.”

“A sorcerer then.” The First concluded.

“Does seem most likely.” The Fifth agreed.

Gentleman Caller

Male Incubus Sor8: CR 12;
Medium humanoid; HD 6d8+8d4+6, hp

68; Init +3; Spd 30 ft, fly 50ft (average); AC 22 (+3 Dex, +9 natural), touch 13, flat-footed 14; Base Atk +11 melee (claw 1d6+1); Full Atk +11/+5 (2 claw 1d6+1); SA Energy Drain, spell-like abilities, *summon tanar’ri*; SQ Damage Reduction 10/cold iron or good, darkvision 60 ft, immunity to electricity and poison, resistance to acid 10, cold 10, and fire 10, spell resistance 18, telepathy 100ft, tongues; AL CE; SV Fort +8, Ref +8, Will +713; Str 13, Dex 16, Con 14, Int 18, Wis 14, Cha 26.

Skills and Feats: Bluff +27, Concentration +16, Diplomacy +16, Disguise +27, Forge +5, Gather Information +18, Hide +10, Intimidate +27, Knowledge (Arcana) +14, Knowledge (Planes) +15, Listen +13, Move Silently +10, Search +12, Sense Motive +10, Spot +8; Deceitful, Negotiator, Iron Will, Persuasive, Stealthy.

Reality Wrinkle: 1, 320 foot radius

Land-based Powers: *Suggestion*

Corruption Index: 3

Typical Typical Sorcerer Spells per Day (6/8/8/7/5; save DC 18 + spell level) Spells Known (8/8/8/6/4): 0 – *arcane mark, daze, detect magic, flare, ghost sound, message, prestidigitation, read magic*; 1st – *cause fear, nystul’s magic aura, obscuring mist, shocking grasp, sleep*; 2nd – *darkness, locate object, summon swarm*; 3rd – *dispel magic, nondetection*; 4th – *greater invisibility*.

The First nodded. “We will examine your findings and make our decision on your report. We will send word for you when we are done. You are dismissed.” He said waving the Rider away. Rising slowly, the Rider bowed to the group before picking up his satchel and cloak and hastily exited the

room. Despite the warmth of the manor house, he wrapped himself in his cloak thankful it was over. Behind him, the six remained seated examining the notes. One of them rose silently and turned the lamps brighter fully illuminating the room. He sat back down and continued to read where he left off.

“Thoughts?” the First asked lowering his hood.

The Third put his thin pipe in his mouth and struck a match. “One. If the Caller is able to learn a craft there is no guarantee that the Ghaele could not also be a superior member of the species. Or an elder at that.”

“So what is the worse case scenario?” The Forth asked.

“Ancient fiend with magical abilities.” The Sixth stated.

“Highly powerful demonic abilities with knowledge of black magiks.” The Third added. “Possibly working on a decade-long scheme.”

“Or just creating anarchy.” The Second reminded.

“Motives aside a magical ancient fiend is a considerable obstacle.” The First said. “We will have to prepare ourselves for that eventuality.”

Gentleman Caller

Male Greater Incubus Sor8: CR 18; Medium humanoid; HD 12d8+8d4+7, hp 107; Init +3; Spd 30 ft, fly 50ft (average); AC 22 (+3 Dex, +9 natural), touch 13, flat-footed 14; Base Atk +17 melee (claw 1d6+1); Full Atk +17/+11/+5 (2 claw 1d6+1); SA Energy Drain, spell-like abilities, *summon tanar’ri*; SQ Damage Reduction 10/cold iron or good, darkvision 60 ft, immunity to electricity and poison, resistance to acid 10, cold 10, and fire 10, spell resistance 18, telepathy 100ft, tongues;

AL CE; SV Fort +15, Ref +14, Will +21; Str 13, Dex 16, Con 14, Int 20, Wis 14, Cha 26.

Skills and Feats: Bluff +32, Concentration +19, Diplomacy +24, Disguise +32, Forge +5, Gather Information +23, Hide +15, Intimidate +32, Knowledge (Arcana) +21, Knowledge (Planes) +22, Listen +12, Move Silently +15, Search +14, Sense Motive +27, Spot +10; Deceitful, Negotiator, Iron Will, Persuasive, Silent Spell, Stealthy.

Reality Wrinkle: 5, 280 foot radius

Land-based Powers: *Suggestion*

Corruption Index: 3

Typical Sorcerer Spells per Day; (6/8/8/7/5; save DC 18 + spell level)
Spells Known (8/8/8/6/4): 0 – *arcane mark, daze, detect magic, flare, ghost sound, message, prestidigitation, read magic*; 1st – *cause fear, nystul’s magic aura, obscuring mist, shocking grasp, sleep*; 2nd – *darkness, locate object, summon swarm*; 3rd – *dispel magic, nondetection*; 4th – *greater invisibility*.

The First stood up and gathered the report together. “We will continue this discussion later after a period of reflection. In the meantime consider options on how to exploit the possibilities to our advantage.” He stated heading towards a curtain on the far side of the room. Pushing it aside, he exposed a concealed door. “This does not change anything; we have no certainty for any of this information. We will wait until we have conformation before making any final decisions. Realistically, we are not even sure it is a fiend.” The First exited the room closing the door silently behind him. Slowly, the other five silently rose and did the same.

Demons of the Deep

Part II of The Waking Nightmare

By Joseph "Bela" Zeffelmaier
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"Captain...Captain..."

The voice sounded distant and hollow. Sylus Andropov wasn't sure where he was, but the darkness around him seemed oddly comforting. He was floating in it, lost in it, and it held him close, like a lover. He knew of the horrors that hungered for him beyond the darkness, but they couldn't reach him now. Not where he was...

"Captain! Wake up!"

He felt himself being shaken, and his eyes flew open. His callused hand shot up, and clutched someone by the throat. The darkness receded and sight returned. The face staring at his was a monster....pale blue, hairless skin, with soulless black eyes and a mouth full of fangs. But Sylus wasn't frightened. This thing bore a strong resemblance to some creature of Hell, but was in truth a close friend. He released his choke-hold, and the monster staggered back, gasping.

"Sorry, Tom. You startled me." Sylus stretched, his eyes bringing him back to reality. Tom Mako, his first mate, lay on the cabin's floor, gasping for breath. Tom was a caliban, and looked more like a shark than a man. He stood nearly seven feet tall, and his blue, scaly hide covered rippling muscle. That was why the shipmates he'd first served with named him Tom Mako. Rubbing his throat, Tom stood back up. The cabin swayed with the motion of the Nocturnal Sea, but Sylus' First Mate kept his footing.

"Sweet Ezra, Captain. I thought old age was supposed to make you soft. I'm gonna be coughing blood tonight."

Sylus rose from his bed. It was still dark outside, but looking out his window, he could see the sun starting to poke up over the horizon. The waves were calm now, but he'd sailed these seas long enough to know how quickly that could change. He stood up and faced Tom, though in truth only came up to the Caliban's chest.

"Is there something to report, Tom?" Sylus' voice still carried an early-morning growl.

"No sign of the Isle yet, no."

Sylus nodded. They'd set sail for the mysterious Nightmare Lands only two days earlier, and it would take another week at the earliest before they set sight on the accursed

isle. But the Mists had a way of twisting the compass, changing the winds, and setting a ship down anywhere they pleased.

"Then what is it?" Sylus poured Tom a cup of clean water, and the caliban gulped it down.

"Barker thinks he's caught sight of something. Figured you might wanna take a look yourself."

Sylus splashed some water on his face. "Define 'something' for me."

Tom shrugged. "Hard to say. But I trust Barker's instincts."

"As do I. Tell him I'll be on-deck shortly."

"Yes, Captain."

Tom left the cabin. Wiping the water from his face, Sylus stared into the mirror. And for the first time in a long time, he felt no fear of what he might see in the reflection. His eyes drifted to the strange wooden object, a dream-catcher, that hung above his bed. It was a gift from a strange man named Watches-The-Stars, an Abber Shaman from the Nightmare Lands. It was this very shaman who put him on his current quest.

Sylus had once been a famous mariner, the only man to sail the Nocturnal Sea to the Nightmare Lands and return to tell the tale. However, his trip had a terrible consequence. His son Aylor had perished in the journey, killed by the evil forces that rule the island. Distraught over the boy's death, Sylus began having horrible nightmares. It soon became clear that the night terrors were growing in intensity, and he was losing his very sanity. Only the assistance of the kindly Dr. Gregorian Illhousen saved the captain. The psychologist had revealed a dark truth to Sylus...the ill-fated captain had drawn the attention of The Nightmare Court, a malevolent cadre of creatures who preyed on the minds of mortal men and women. Illhousen and his allies drove the Court from Sylus' mind, and for a while, all seemed well.

However, the Nightmare Court was far from finished with either Andropov or Illhousen. Over the past few weeks, the nightmares had returned to Sylus. When he went to seek Illhousen's aid, he found that Illhousen and his entire Clinic had been wrenched out of our reality. Wielding dark and ancient magic, the Nightmare Court had drawn the entire hospital into the Nightmare Lands. That was when Watches-The-Stars first appeared to the retired mariner. Claiming to be one of a mystical race that live their lives within the Nightmare Lands, Watches-The-Stars spoke in riddles and portents that Sylus couldn't fathom. Using strange magic, the stranger put Sylus into a trance. In the dreamworld, he found his old ally Illhousen. The doctor begged Sylus to rescue him, for the Nightmare Man was hatching a dangerous scheme that could have dire consequences for both the Nightmare Lands and the waking world. Illhousen's beloved was with child, the first human child to be born in the Nightmare Lands. The lord of the Nightmare Court had begun corrupting the unborn child, and meant to take the child's place and be born into the world as a real, flesh-and-blood creature. Watches-The-Stars feared that this would allow the Nightmare Man to leave his domain and travel wherever he would, using his vast powers to destroy all reality.

And so, Sylus Andropov was mid-way through his second journey to the realm of dream and nightmares. Armed with newfound resolve and a strong and willing crew, he hoped he had a better chance this time. That is, if the Nocturnal Sea didn't wipe them all out of existence. He had too many friends who were lost under the waves, and he'd sailed enough to know that the dark waters almost hungered for tragedy and death.

The captain dressed himself, and then walked onto the deck. His crew was hard on work, but in good spirits. He found Black-Eye Barker climbing down for the Crows Nest, and waved him over. Barker was a short man, lean and strong, despite his age. Almost fifty now, the old salt had earned his nickname not only for his dark eyes, but for his tendency towards barfights. Still, he had better vision than anyone Andropov knew, and was perfect for spyglass duty, and the captain was glad to have him onboard.

Sprinting over to Sylus, Barker gave a quick salute. "Cap'n."

Sylus saluted back. "Tom tells me you've seen something."

"Ayuh." Barker nodded, never one for long-winded speeches. Sylus could tell that the experienced sailor was unnerved, and didn't take that as a good sign.

"Show me." he said, and tucked a spyglass in his coat. Barker led him up through the rigging to gain the best possible view of whatever it was Barker had seen. Nearly up to the Crow's Nest, Black-Eye stopped him and pointed. "There." the brusque man said.

Sylus pulled out the spyglass and adjusted their view. For a moment, he saw nothing. The captain glanced to Barker quizzically, but Barker simply pointed again. Sylus trusted his man, so he looked out again. After a few moments, his own eyes went wide, and he looked up from the glass.

"Sweet merciful Ezra!" he whispered.

Far off from the ship, something was rising from the water. None of the Prodigal's crew could see it without a spyglass, and for a moment, Sylus envied them. He thought it was a whale at first...a massive hump lurching out of the sea. But as he watched, the form leapt higher. It wasn't the bulky shape of a whale. This creature was long and lithe, with row after row of fins along its back. He couldn't get a good look at the thing's head, and was glad for it. He'd heard the legends, of course. But in all his long years at sea, he'd never seen one before.

"Sea serpent." Black-Eye choked.

Sylus pondered what to do. Then, he turned to Barker. "Don't tell the men. I don't want to spook them. But I want you to get Gunther and make sure the cannons are ready. If anyone asks, you're cleaning them. My orders. You get me, Barker?"

"Gotcha, sir" he grunted

Barker sauntered off to find Gunther Von Eck, their master-at-arms. The stoic Lamordian was likely up to his arms in metal-oil already. Sylus walked the main deck, his eyes often glancing out to the sea. He'd seen many things in his years and fought off

many creatures he'd label as "supernatural," but he'd never faced a legendary sea serpent. Every sailor worth his salt had a yarn about these famous beasts. Sylus had never paid them much mind, assuming them to be nothing but a mariner's fancy, or heat delusions. But Sylus was of strong mind, stronger than he'd been in a while, and he could not deny what he had seen. With any small amount of luck, the thing wouldn't approach the Prodigal. After all, how many men of science had touted the "more scared of us than we are of them" theory?

Sylus knew all too well what fools these men were.

Turning command of the Prodigal to Tom Mako for a while, the captain progressed back to his cabin. He summoned to him Watches-The-Stars. The strange Abber Shaman followed him into his room.

Sylus sat at his desk, and motioned Watches-The-Stars to sit as well. The Abber stared at the chair for a bit, poking it briefly. Satisfied that it was indeed real, and not a figment of his imagination, Watches-The-Stars seated himself. He then turned a quizzical eye to Andropov.

The Captain still wasn't used to the bizarre appearance of his guest. The Abber's body was covered head-to-toe with strange, swirling tattoos. They seemed more like arcane runes than actual pictorials. He wore only a leather loincloth and pouch-belt, and his head was shaved except for a single thick braid that hung from the top of his head all the way to his waist. Even stranger was Watches-The-Stars' natural tongue, a language composed mostly of clicks and grunts. Sylus was no stranger to other cultures, but in all his travels, he'd never quite met a man like Watches-The-Stars.

Finally, Sylus spoke. "You sailed to Nova Vaasa to find me, spent some time on the water, yes?"

Watches-The-Stars nodded.

"So you'd say you're no stranger to the seas."

Watches-The-Stars cocked his head. "You're no stranger to the seas." he repeated.

Sylus rubbed his temples. "Not what I meant. I was asking if you are familiar with the Nocturnal Sea."

Watches-The-Stars simply stared at him, apparently believing the conversation over.

"Well, are you?!" the frustrated captain grunted.

"I am more familiar with the sea than I was a week ago." the Abber replied.

"What happened a week ago?"

"I set sail for Nova Vaasa."

Sylus wasn't sure whether he wanted to laugh or scream. Obviously, the direct approach wasn't going to work. Instead, Sylus reached over and pulled a tome from his shelf. He flipped through several pages, finally finding the illustration he was looking for. It depicted a massive sea serpent, with its worm-like body rising in arches out of the

water. Its head was horned, its mouth full of fangs, and large fins jutted out of its back. He dropped the book in Watches-The-Stars lap.

"Have you ever seen anything like what is in this picture?"

The shaman lifted the book, turning it upside down and sideways. Finally, he spoke. "There is a serpent in our land unlike any other. It flies on wings like a bird."

Sylus nodded. Illhousen had also mentioned this 'Feathered Serpent' before, naming it as one of the most powerful forces in all the Nightmare Lands. However, it wasn't the snake he was looking for.

Sylus leaned on his desk. "The serpent I'm talking about is huge, as long as this ship. And it doesn't fly. It swims through dark waters."

Watches-The-Stars narrowed his eyes. It made the numerous tattoos on his face dance across his skin. "I have not seen this serpent. Or if I have, it wasn't real, so I forgot it."

Sylus sighed. He never cared much for mystics, placing his faith in a cutlass and a pistol. Still, he recognized their value in situations like this. Watches-The-Stars was the only man on his ship who qualified as an occultist. Unfortunately, he doubted that the Abber would be able to provide him with the information he needed. Sylus didn't trust the man, in fact he barely even knew him, but he recognized that he would need the Shaman when they arrived at the Nightmare Lands. Rubbing his eyes, he dismissed Watches-The-Stars.

He still had a long day ahead of him. Tom Mako had been with him on his first journey to the Nightmare Lands, so he felt confident in leaving the ship under his command for the time being. The captain walked to his bookshelves and began pulling out tomes. For most of the day, he poured over everything...from documents of sailors he personally knew, to fanciful folk stories. The accounts of sea serpents were few and far between, and none of them very informative. No one knew where they came from. They came in many sizes, from the size of five men to the length of several ships. They always seemed hell-bent on destroying whatever boat they crossed and devouring whoever they found there. That alone made Sylus question the veracity of these tales. Still, the Captain read on, desperately searching for any fact that might prove relevant. And once again, he came up with nothing.

The sun had begun to sink beneath the horizon when Tom Mako came barreling through the door. "Cap'n. You'll wanna see this."

Sylus stretched; scarcely aware of how many hours he'd spent reading. He followed his first mate up the stairs, and before he even hit the deck, he could hear the commotion. He pushed his way past his own men, who had crowded along the aft side. There, floundering in the water, was a patchwork raft. And on this raft was a man who looked equally broken. He was thin, and his skin was sunburned and blistered. His hair was sun-bleached, and his clothes were little more than rags. He looked like he'd been lost at sea for weeks and the lack of supplies on his raft added support to the theory. Most notable was the ragged black patch covering his left eye. At first, Sylus thought the man

to be an emaciated corpse, but soon the sharp-eyed Captain noticed the slight rise and fall of the castaway's chest.

A moment of suspicion flashed through Sylus' heart. Who was this man? How had he gotten abandoned this far into the Nocturnal Sea? And why did he appear now? But in the end, Sylus was a man of compassion. "Get him onboard. Now!" he called to his crew.

Ropes were lowered, and sailors dropped to the raft. In a few minutes, the castaway had been hefted onto the Prodigal. The crew scrambled for water and medicine, but before anyone could attend to the man, Watches-The-Stars walked forward. He clutched a small bag around his neck and began to chant in his strange tongue. Soon, many of the man's harsh blisters began to heal over, and charred scabs fell off revealing pink skin underneath. The crew stumbled back as the Abber Shaman's magic healed some of the strange man's wounds.

Before any of the crew could voice their wonder, the stranger began to cough. He sounded like a drowning man gasping for air, and his spindly arms flailed about. Tom Mako had him in a strong grip quickly, holding the man as he struggled. Despite the obvious size difference between the two, the stranger fought like a man possessed. Sylus knelt down by him, grabbing the man by the chin. "Who are you? Your name, man!"

The man's face was ruddy and covered with a mangy beard. His wild red eyes darted this way and that. "Where...What am I..." he gasped. His voice was thick with a Darkonian accent. He took in the ship quickly, and it only made him more frenzied. "Head back to land! Now, before it's too late! By the Eternal, get off the sea!" he screamed, his throat horse and bloody. One of the sailors had brought the man a waterskin, which he gulped down with a vengeance. "The Deep Demon is coming, and he'll kill you all!"

The crew was immediately taken aback, and worried whispers began to fly. Black-Eye Barker looked the most concerned. Sylus noticed that many of the crew who'd never sailed with him before seemed especially unsettled. Sylus leaned into Tom. "Get this man cleaned and dressed, then bring him to me. And by the gods, keep a sharp eye at the sea."

With that, Sylus rose. "Keep your heads about you!" he bellowed to the crew. "We're sailing dangerous waters, and you all know it. Lose your nerve now and you'll never make it back home." And with that, he stormed to the front of the ship as his men sprang back to work. In one quick motion, he extended his spyglass and began his search.

The "Deep Demon" he'd called it. Indeed, it looked large enough to do some serious damage. But no one had spotted it for most of the day. It didn't seem as though it was following them, or if it was, it was being very stealthy. Still, sighting both the serpent and this stranger in the same day did not bode well. He didn't need Watches-The-Stars to tell him that.

Before long, Tom Mako brought the more-presentable stranger to Sylus. "He's all yours, Cap'n" he said, then took his leave.

Sylus offered his hand, and the stranger shook it. "Sylus Andropov, captain of the Prodigal. Who might you be?"

The stranger met his scrutinizing gaze with his one good eye. "Boliver Kern. Once the captain of the merchant ship The Lady's Grace."

Sylus furrowed his brow. "No longer?"

"My ship lies on the bottom of the Sea. Destroyed by the most horrific creature I've ever seen. Cost me an eye, my crew, and my livelihood."

"This Deep Demon you spoke of."

Kern nodded. "I apologize if I startled your men. I've been on that raft for three weeks, without food for a week, and without water for three days. My mind has not been at its most sound."

Sylus paused for a moment before replying. "My men can hold their own."

Kern leaned on the railing, looking at the sea. "They are new to you, yes?"

"Some have been with me for years."

"But not all? Not even half, if I guess correctly."

Kern was correct, but Sylus wasn't comfortable with the course of the conversation. "We're headed to dangerous territory, this ship and I. We'll set you off on the first safe port we find before then."

Kern untied his blonde-grey hair, letting it blow in his now-shaven face. "You may not get the chance." Sylus turned to face him, unsure how to take the comment. Kern continued. "The Demon is out there. It still hungers, and mark my words, it will attack."

"Let's suppose that I believe this sea serpent is indeed out there. How do you know it means to attack?"

"Because I'm still alive. I don't know why, but it hungers for me. You would've done well to let me die on the waves." Kern took a long drink from his new waterskin. "And I never called it a sea serpent, Captain Andropov."

Sylus was silent.

"You've seen it, haven't you?" Kern inquired.

"I've seen something."

"Long and serpentine. But it has arms like a man, and huge soulless eyes. And a mouth full of fangs. And very, very big."

Sylus sighed. "I saw something like a snake, rising out of the water. I didn't get that good of a look."

Kern spun to face him. "That's it, man! Mark my words. The beast is near, and it will kill you all unless you defend yourself. What sort of weapons does this ship have?" Kern had sprung into action, shaking off whatever weakness he may have had. His good eye sparkled with anticipation, and to Sylus, he seemed more like a warship captain than the master of a merchant vessel.

"We have six cannons. Harpoons. Most of the men can also use pistols. And all of them have cutlasses."

Kern grabbed Sylus by the collar. "Cutlasses? Look at this, man!" He pointed to his eyepatch. "This is what a cutlass will get you! I leapt onto the beast's back, and it tore

my face open. I survived only because enough of the ship survived to float away on. Get your damned cannons ready and..."

Suddenly, Boliver Kern was stopped dead in his tracks. The click of a flint-lock pistol silenced the man. A rotund man dressed in a Lamordian workshirt and breeches, covered in grease, pointed the weapon. "They tell me a man named Boliver Kern is on our ship," the Lamordian hissed. "A man with an eyepatch, a man from Darkon. Now, I am fifty-four years old, I am. I sail these seas for many years, on many ships. And once before, I saw a man from Darkon with one eye."

Kern tried to spin away, but Sylus knew and trusted Gunther Von Eck. The burly sailor grabbed Kern by the hair and held him fast. Gunther kept speaking. "This man I saw, he served no merchants. No, he did not. The only relations he had with merchants were to sink their ships and steal their wares. He flew a black flag on a black ship." With that, Gunther placed the barrel under Kern's chin. "The ship was The Seawolf. And the captain wasn't Boliver Kern. That bloody bastard went by the name Blackblood."

Sylus' eyes went wide. He, like any true man of the sea, had heard many tales of Captain Blackblood and his deadly vessel the Seawolf. He was a ruthless pirate who'd made a name for himself within the past few years. He raided ships going from the Core to Sri Raji and Souragne. They say he dwelled on a hidden island, where he and his cutthroats would drink and murder over stolen gold. They particularly enjoyed leaving one victim alive, but tortured. Then they'd set the poor soul adrift, to either be claimed by the waves or rescued, to spread the tales of the dreaded Blackblood.

Kern's one eye glanced this way and that. "Whoever this man is...I'm not him. Ezra preserve me, I'm just a poor mariner who's come too close to death already."

Gunther spit on his face. "My brother was a shipwright, sailing back to Lamordia from Souragne. You and your filth sank him before he ever made it home." Gunther's voice rose to a hateful scream. "He never saw his wife and children again, you scum! So go ahead! Tell me you're not him! Say it again! See if your damned lies will keep this bullet from your brain!"

Kern fell to his knees, sobbing. "Gods, man! I'm not some pirate! I beg you, spare my life! I've done nothing wrong!"

Gunther's pistol wavered in his hand. The Lamordian simply stared at the pathetic castaway. He'd never actually seen Capt. Blackblood, but he couldn't deny the fact that this pathetic man matched the descriptions, what few there were. He felt his fiery temper rise and fall like the sea. But before he could decide whether or not to end Kern's life, all Hell broke loose.

The first warning was Black-Eye Barker's hysterical screaming. The crew looked around, and a few of them caught sight of the tip of a huge tail going beneath the waves. The air around them seemed to shimmer, and the temperature had risen noticeably. The

Prodigal lurched to the side as the water churned beneath it. Sylus immediately looked over the water, and saw a massive shape swim beneath the ship. It was like a huge shadow moving with supernatural grace, and it was the size of a whale.

"Man the cannons!" Sylus cried out. "Batten down the hatches and prepare for battle!"

The words had scarcely left his lips when the massive beast finally showed itself. It rose out of the water behind the ship, and the crew all fell to their faces as the Prodigal nearly overturned. Though it bore an eel-like tail, it was no sea serpent. It had a torso like a giant's, with clawed hands that clutched the ship. Boards creaked and snapped under its unholy strength. Its body was purple and scaled, and ridged with fins. But the crew trembled in utter terror as the beast's face burst from the sea. It was massive and horned, with two pale white eyes spread nearly to the sides of its face. Its massive mouth was opened far too wide and filled with row after row of teeth. Its haunting eyes showed no sign of intelligence or mercy.

Making no attempt at clever attack, the beast slammed its massive head into the aft of the ship. Sylus began to slide towards it as several men fell overboard. They were the lucky ones, as even more found themselves trapped in the Deep Demon's jaws. The creature had positioned itself away from the side cannons, but several of the crew scattered for their weapons. Gunther led the first volley, firing the shot he intended for Kern. The weapons simply had no effect, aside from drawing the Demon's attention to Von Eck.

The big Lamordian winced as he saw the deadly claw reaching for him. He stood frozen with a terror he'd never known. But before the final blow could fall, Gunther found himself knocked out of harm's reach. Boliver Kern had thrown him aside, and found himself in the beast's clutches instead. He screamed bloody agony as the Deep Demon squeezed, thrusting its filthy claws into his skin. Tom Mako tried to leap up to Kern, but the thing had already lifted him away, holding him over his mouth and letting his blood drip into its maw.

Sylus regained his footing, and grabbed Watches-The-Stars. Tom Mako began shouting orders, but he couldn't be heard over the screaming. Already four men were shredded in the Deep Demon's mouth. Others were slipping under the turbulent water, not likely to ever resurface. Mako looked everywhere for his captain, but couldn't find him. "Sylus!" he screamed, and received no answer. The beast's tail wrapped around the prow, and the ship's rocking made it impossible to maintain footing. Sylus would never abandon his men, so Mako assumed that his old friend had gone overboard.

The men needed leadership now more than ever. Tom bellowed over the cries "If this thing means to kill us, we're taking it with us all the way to Hell!" And with that, he grabbed a rope swinging from the mast. With one leap, he swung onto the Deep Demon's shoulder. The men, inspired by the First Mate's courage, soon followed suit. Many jumped onto the thing's slimy hide, hacking with cutlasses and slamming with belaying

pins. Mako resorted to a more primitive attack, sinking his own fangs into the Seep Demon's throat. He nearly gagged on the Abyssal ichor, but continued to rend.

"Back to the ship, boys!" came a loud call.

The sailors were all professionals, and heeded the call of Sylus Andropov. The Vaasi captain ran forward, holding something no one could see. Watches-The-Stars stood in front of him, chanting, gesticulating, and helping him heft a heavy load. They both strode to the Deep Demon, and at the last minute, the Abber Shaman stepped aside.

Sylus ran up a shattered beam, bringing himself level with the demon's face. In his arms, he held a deadly weapon-The Prodigal's deck gun. Shaped like a small cannon, this weapon fired deadly scatter-shot, blowing all before it into pieces. Normally, it was used to defend against boarding enemies, and Sylus intended to use it for the same reason. After the Abber finished his chanting, Sylus screamed at the top of his lungs.

"PULL!!!"

Watches-The-Star pulled the firing cord, and Sylus set his footing. In a deafening roar, the deck gun bust forward with flame and metal. An eerie glow accompanied the shot as the shrapnel tore into the Deep Demon's face. Huge chunks of flesh burned away from the Demon's face as it slumped into the water, stinking of brimstone and death. It screamed words of pure evil as it sank beneath the waves. The crew clutched their ears as though the language was burning their minds.

Sylus was thrown into the air from the powerful shot. He was heading straight over the edge as Tom Mako reached for him. But the airborne Captain slipped through his grasp. Sylus was barely conscious as he fell towards the railing, and off towards the water. It was then that he felt Boliver Kern grab him by the collar. With a primal yell, Kern hurled Sylus back towards the ship. Andropov fell to the deck, his eyes hazy and his head ringing. Kern barely held his footing, covered in his own blood. He nodded, then collapsed to the ground.

When Sylus awoke, he found he had been healed of the most serious wounds. Almost a day had past, and the sun was setting again. Tom filled him in, as best he could. The ship was still serviceable, though damaged. They would have to set port somewhere soon, to repair some of the sails and reinforce the mast. They'd lost ten men, including Gunther Van Eck, who'd gone to join his brother in the murky depths. The crew was shaken, but his spectacular save with the deck gun had inspired confidence and perseverance. But then, there was the question of Boliver Kern.

The castaway-turned-minor-hero sat in the brig. Captain Sylus Andropov entered and sat down on the other side of the bars.

"A lifetime ago, I'd have left you here to rot. I don't know how, but I know you're connected to the thing that attacked my men and nearly sank my ship." he said.

"I am. I don't know why it seeks to destroy me, but I'm afraid I brought all this upon you."

"Gunther Von Eck was a good man. He named you as a pirate."

"I've been called many things in my life. Some truths, some lies. But despite the eyepatch, I am no pirate."

Sylus skulked about. "My offer still stands. I mean to drop you off at next port. But I'll be honest. We lost many good men today, and where we're going, I'll need all the help I can get. If by the time we reach land, you choose to stay with us, I may well keep you on. If I decide I can trust you. You saved my life, and that means something, but I'm still a far way from trusting you. You understand me?"

Boliver nodded.

"You spook the men, I tell you truly. They don't know what to make of you. This cell will be your room, for your protection and theirs. When you work, I'll let you out. If you need anything, it'll be brought. And if you prove yourself, the key is yours."

Sylus Andropov turned to go. Without looking back, he spoke one last time. "If you are the good man you claim to be, you'll find a second home on this ship. But if I feel you've betrayed us, I'll stick a dagger in your throat 'til you swallow the hilt."

When Sylus was gone, Boliver Kern leaned back. He suspected that the Captain believed that the Deep Demon was gone, killed in a maelstrom of gunpowder and metal. Kern knew better. The Demon would be back, thirsty to kill. And as to how it survived and why it would return...he suspected he knew the answer to that as well. He rubbed his eyepatch, knowing the treasure it held. Resting in his socket was the rarest treasure he'd ever found at sea...a huge pearl, the color of blood. It was beautiful and perfect and priceless. He'd stolen it from a sea cave just before his first encounter with the Deep Demon. Even now, it seemed to pulsate with a strange semblance of life, and for a moment, Kern was sure he could almost hear the Deep Demon's roar. He waved it off, certain it was his imagination. The Blood Pearl was his, and he knew that when he returned to civilized lands, he could sell it for a fortune. He would be a man of wealth and prestige. He would dine on the finest foods, drink the rarest wines, and lie on beds of silk and sin.

And he would almost be able to forget the name Blackblood.

Grave, Mist, and Pyre

Genasi of the Dread Realms

By Jason "Javier" True

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Dear Ladies Weathermay-Foxgrove,

I would like to apologize for taking so very long in sending this letter and information to the both of you. It was not due to a lack of interest in your questions, but rather that I merely did not have much information on that particular topic. While I am well aware of the monstrosities that are referred to as "dread elementals", the concept of humanoids carrying such elements within their very veins truly intrigued me. Therefore, I took it upon myself to thoroughly research the topic over the last nine months.

Editor's Note: It is no secret that Doctor Anthony Reuland is an expert in both the fields of biology and arcane philosophy. It is due to these specialties that we approached the renowned professor and asked for his professional opinion. We did not realize, however, that he would make it his personal mission to find out so much about this topic. -LWF

The concept of various creatures mating with humans and creating unusual offspring is not unfamiliar to me. The half-elves of Darkon and Sithicus are a prime example of such unions. I have studied numerous other creatures and their half-breed offspring over the course of my career, but your question about elemental crossbreeding truly intrigued me. Could such a union be possible? What sort of creatures would be born? Would they possess the

innate qualities of their elemental heritage within their mortal bodies?

For your convenience, I have condensed and outlined my findings below. You should find all of your initial questions have been answered. There are also some extra details to more fully flesh out the information in case you should ever come across one of these "dread genasi" in person. As always, I would be more than happy to provide you with any more details or information that either of you may need.

*Doctor Anthony Reuland
Ste. Ronges, Richemulot*

Origin

Genasi are beings that are descended from elementals or elemental-related outsiders from other planes. In our world, we know that the elements are not always based upon the typical air, earth, fire, and water. Several scholars and wizard have noted that the elements can be twisted into darker versions; mist, grave, pyre, and blood. These violent and destructive elementals show no desire to create anything but mayhem and death. I would daresay that no dread elemental would knowingly sire a child, but there are a few instances that a genasi has been born with the dread elements in their veins.

I have two theories as to how such an event can occur. First and foremost, I believe that a dread genasi can be born to a normal genasi who bears a child within our world. Many scholars

speculate on how our world permeates and corrupts plants and animals. Such an influence on an elementally-touched baby could very well twist the unborn child's heritage. An air genasi, for example, could very well give birth to a mist genasi after living in our world for several years. Second, I believe that the dread elementals may leave a taint on people that could be passed on to their future offspring. A fighter may carry the unseen taint of a grave elemental in his flesh, but it does not appear until he sires a child months or even years later. The problem with this theory is that it is difficult to discern who has such a hidden taint and how it is passed on to his or her children.

Heritage

While there are four different types of dread genasi, the race has some basic traits of which you should be aware. Due to their elemental heritage, dread genasi possess the unusual characteristic of being a native outsider and not a humanoid. This has three principle effects:

First, spells or effects that only affect humanoids do not affect the genasi. A wizard's *charm person* or *dominate person* spell will do him no good when directed against a dread genasi.

Second, spells and effects that target extraplanar creatures might affect a dread genasi. Weapons created to battle elementals or even vile fiends might prove more effective against a dread genasi. Likewise, a spell that drives extraplanar creatures away, such as a priest's *banishment* spell, would work just fine against such a creature.

Finally, dread genasi are tied to our world so strongly as to be considered a native of our plane. Most creatures

that come from beyond our world cannot be brought back from the dead without truly powerful spells, but a dread genasi can be raised and resurrected normally.

Mist Genasi

By far the most common of the four types, mist genasi can be found wandering among the different lands. Much like the fog and mist, these genasi will come to a town for a short time before disappearing as mysteriously as they arrived. It is difficult to tell if they stay for such a short time due to their elemental nature or some other cause. From my experiences with them, however, mist genasi seem to be the most easily accepted into a society.

Mist genasi tend to be a strange mixture of flighty and mysterious. They tend to skip from topic to topic, but it seems that they always gain more from a conversation than what they give. I found myself constantly having to redirect a conversation I had with one mist genasi in order to get him to answer my questions. Despite my exasperation, I found the mist genasi to be very pleasant and polite.

Mist genasi look generally human except for two or three distinguishing features related to their elemental ancestor. Some examples of these features include:

- ❖ pale white skin
- ❖ thin, slightly translucent skin
- ❖ grey or white hair
- ❖ long, wispy hair
- ❖ a light, airy voice
- ❖ clothes and hair constantly move as if being blown by a breeze
- ❖ their breath is visible, even in warm climates

Mist genasi age at a slightly slower rate than humans. While it is difficult to say for certain, they seem to have a

longer life expectancy as well. It appears that their life expectancy is about 120 years.

Racial abilities: Mist genasi have the following traits:

- ❖ +2 Dex, +2 Cha, -2 Con: Mist genasi are surprisingly agile and enchantingly mysterious, but they tend to be frail and sickly.
- ❖ Medium size.
- ❖ Mist genasi base speed is 30 feet.
- ❖ Darkvision up to 60 feet.
- ❖ *Cloak of Mist* (Sp): Once per day, a mist genasi can cast *obscuring mist* as a sorcerer of her character level.
- ❖ Keen Eyed (Ex): Mist genasi can see through fog, rain, smoke, and other atmospheric effects unusually well. Reduce the miss chance caused by concealment by 10% when the target's concealment results from such atmospheric disturbances.
- ❖ +1 racial bonus on saving throws against air-based spells and effects. This bonus increases by +1 for every five character levels the genasi gains.
- ❖ Outsider: Mist genasi are native outsiders.
- ❖ Automatic languages: Common, home domain. Bonus languages: Any (except secret languages, like Druidic).
- ❖ Favoured Class: Bard. A mist genasi's wanderlust and natural charisma make them excellent bards.
- ❖ Level Adjustment +1: Mist genasi are slightly more powerful and gain levels more slowly than most common races.

Grave Genasi

Grave genasi are not nearly as common as the mist genasi, but these genasi tend to stay in one general location. The main reason why more of

them have not been seen is due to their reclusive nature. These genasi value their privacy, and many of them will hide away in graveyards, crypts, and catacombs to get away from the rest of the world.

Grave genasi tend to be slow and ponderous, but these features make them very observant of their surroundings. It is not uncommon for a grave genasi to spend several hours patiently watching some event unfold, such as a flower blossom or a person die. Their morbid fascination with death and decay make them unwelcome in most communities. The fact that they hold no value for life makes them potentially dangerous, but their tendency for isolation keeps them from being more of a threat.

Grave genasi look generally human except for two or three distinguishing features related to their elemental ancestor. Some examples of these features include:

- ❖ dark brown or black skin
- ❖ leathery or gritty texture to the skin
- ❖ black eyes like deep pits
- ❖ deep and gravelly voice
- ❖ thick, coarse hair
- ❖ sweats mud instead of water
- ❖ smells faintly of rot

Grave genasi age at a slightly slower rate than humans. While it is difficult to say for certain, they seem to have a longer life expectancy as well. It appears that their life expectancy is about 120 years.

Racial abilities: Grave genasi have the following traits:

- ❖ +4 Con, +2 Wis, -2 Dex, -2 Cha: Grave genasi are hardy and observant, but they tend to be slow moving and emotionally distant.
- ❖ Medium size.
- ❖ Grave genasi base speed is 30 feet.

- ❖ Darkvision up to 60 feet.
- ❖ *Return to the Grave* (Sp): Once per day, a grave genasi can cast *soften earth and stone* as a sorcerer of his character level.
- ❖ Breathless (Ex): Grave genasi do not breathe, so they are immune to drowning, suffocation, and attacks that require inhalation (such as certain spells and some types of poison).
- ❖ +1 racial bonus on saving throws against earth-based spells and effects. This bonus increases by +1 for every five character levels the genasi gains.
- ❖ Outsider: Grave genasi are native outsiders.
- ❖ Automatic languages: Common, home domain. Bonus languages: Any (except secret languages, like Druidic).
- ❖ Favoured Class: Ranger. A grave genasi's connection with the earth and distaste of urban centers of the living make them ideal rangers.
- ❖ Level Adjustment +1: Grave genasi are slightly more powerful and gain levels more slowly than most common races.

Pyre Genasi

Pyre genasi tend to be the least common (or at least shortest lived) type of genasi, but most people are aware of a pyre genasi as soon as they are nearby. The violent and destructive nature of fire flows strongly in their veins, and it is rare for one of them to control these desires. Pyre genasi tend to spend most of their time roaming if only it is to find new spots to raze or to avoid an angry mob.

Pyre genasi tend to be hot-blooded and quick to anger. One pyre genasi, who I found frequenting a tavern in

Invidia, started and won three different fights before finally finishing his first drink. While I have known humans that display similar behaviour, this fellow seemed to have an unnatural strength and speed on his side. Unfortunately, I did not get to question him further due to an unexplained fire that occurred in the stables that night.

Pyre genasi look generally human except for two or three distinguishing features related to their elemental ancestor. Some examples of these features include:

- ❖ charcoal grey skin
- ❖ red or orange hair that moves like flames
- ❖ eyes that glow like embers
- ❖ voice that crackles like fire
- ❖ body like smells like ash or smoke

Pyre genasi age at a slightly slower rate than humans. While it is difficult to say for certain, they seem to have a longer life expectancy as well. It appears that their life expectancy is about 120 years, but few ever make it that long.

Racial abilities: Pyre genasi have the following traits:

- ❖ +2 Str, +2 Dex, -2 Con, -2 Wis: Pyre genasi are strong and quick, but they tend to have low stamina and are easily distracted.
- ❖ Medium size.
- ❖ Pyre genasi base speed is 30 feet.
- ❖ Darkvision up to 60 feet.
- ❖ *Start the Blaze* (Sp): Once per day, a pyre genasi can cast *produce flame* as a sorcerer of his character level.
- ❖ Heat (Ex): A pyre genasi's body produces an extraordinary amount of body heat. A pyre genasi deals 1 point of extra fire damage whenever it hits in melee or in each round that it maintains a hold while grappling.

- ❖ +1 racial bonus on saving throws against fire-based spells and effects. This bonus increases by +1 for every five character levels the genasi gains.
- ❖ Outsider: Pyre genasi are native outsiders.
- ❖ Automatic languages: Common, home domain. Bonus languages: Any (except secret languages, like Druidic).
- ❖ Favoured Class: Fighter. A pyre genasi's fiery temper and hunger for destruction make them well suited to the life of a fighter.
- ❖ Level Adjustment +1: Pyre genasi are slightly more powerful and gain levels more slowly than most common races.

Blood Genasi

Blood genasi seem to have the easiest time blending in among humans. They do not have many telltale signs, and their behaviour does not draw unwanted attention. In addition to all of this, their ability to be quiet and methodical makes it difficult to keep track of them. Blood genasi, not unlike the grave genasi, seem to hold very little value for life. In fact, blood genasi seem to draw a great deal of satisfaction in being the one to deal the killing blow. Whereas pyre genasi revel in destruction, blood genasi are cold and calculating in dealing death. A particular blood genasi, who I followed for nearly a week, seemed to be the source of a string of serial killings. While not every blood genasi is a cold-blooded killer, I did notice a frightening tendency among them.

Editor's Note: This information made Laurie and I wonder if there is any connection between the blood genasi and the infamous Midnight Slasher of Karina.

While we wouldn't want to stereotype this strange race to such horrors, there does seem to be some eerie coincidences. -GWF

Blood genasi look generally human except for two or three distinguishing features related to their elemental ancestor. Some examples of these features include:

- ❖ bright red, flushed skin
- ❖ matted hair that looks like clotted blood
- ❖ eyes that are constantly bloodshot
- ❖ gurgling voice
- ❖ smells of iron

Blood genasi age at a slightly slower rate than humans. While it is difficult to say for certain, they seem to have a longer life expectancy as well. It appears that their life expectancy is about 120 years.

Racial abilities: Blood genasi have the following traits:

- ❖ +2 Dex, +2 Int, -2 Cha: Blood genasi are naturally quick and intelligent, but most people find their personalities and behaviour to be unpleasant.
- ❖ Medium size.
- ❖ Blood genasi base speed is 30 feet.
- ❖ Darkvision up to 60 feet.
- ❖ *Pool of Blood* (Sp): Once per day, a blood genasi can cast *grease* as a sorcerer of her character level except that this ability uses blood in place of grease.
- ❖ Bloodscent (Ex): A blood genasi's senses are incredibly well honed to the presence of blood. She can locate wounded living creatures (having blood or other life-sustaining fluids) with this ability as if using the scent special quality.
- ❖ +1 racial bonus on saving throws against water-based spells and effects. This bonus increases by +1

for every five character levels the genasi gains.

- ❖ Outsider: Blood genasi are native outsiders.
- ❖ Automatic languages: Common, home domain. Bonus languages: Any (except secret languages, like Druidic).
- ❖ Favoured Class: Rogue. The sneaky nature of the blood genasi makes them prime candidates for the rogue class.
- ❖ Level Adjustment +1: Blood genasi are slightly more powerful and gain levels more slowly than most common races.

Dread Genasi Racial Feats

While the both of you are still young and inexperienced, I am sure that you have read enough of your Uncle Rudolph's writings to know that every creature is unique. Not every vampire hidden away in some crypt has the same powers and abilities. In fact, many a monster hunter has fallen due to the variation in the salient abilities of the creatures they hunt. These variations can also be found among the already strange and elusive genasi.

Detailed below you will find a collection of abilities and powers that I noticed during my studies. While these powers may not be earth-shattering, these elementally-touched humanoids are able to use them without the need of spells or other arcane items. I would also remind you that this list is by no means all inclusive. There are bound to be many more dread genasi hidden in our societies, and they are bound to possess other yet undiscovered powers.

Editor's Note: With the likelihood of the existence of such creatures being so minute, I sincerely doubt that there would

be a wide variety of innate abilities and powers. It seems that there are not enough of them being born to have such evolution and differentiation in powers. Due to the lessons of Uncle Rudolph, however, Laurie and I are willing to admit that dread genasi may exist who possess abilities not commonly found among others of their kind. - CWF

Blood Form [Dread Genasi]

You are able to convert your body to a purely liquid state.

Prerequisite: Elemental Ties, base fortitude save +3, blood genasi.

Benefits: By fully accepting your elemental heritage, you are able to transform your body into a pool of blood and back once per day. This acts as *gaseous form* spell cast by a sorcerer of your character level except that this ability uses blood instead of mist.

Special: You may select this feat more than once. Each time you take this feat, you can assume your blood form one additional time per day.

Cloak of Flame [Dread Genasi]

You can envelop your body in a layer of protective flames.

Prerequisite: Base Will save +2, pyre genasi.

Benefits: By focusing the internal heat and fire of your body, you are able to cast *fire shield* (warm version only) once per day. The spell is considered to be cast as if by a sorcerer of your character level.

Special: You may select this feat more than once. Each time you take this feat, you can cast *fire shield* one additional time per day.

Elemental Ties [Dread Genasi]

You have taken on some additional aspects of the type of element that infuses your bloodline.

Prerequisite: Base Will save +5, dread genasi (blood, grave, mist, or pyre).

Benefits: Due to your close relationship with the elements, you gain a +4 saving throw against paralysis, poison, sleep, or stunning.

Fireproof Flesh [Dread Genasi]

Your skin has become partially immune to the ravages of fire.

Prerequisite: Elemental Ties, pyre genasi.

Benefits: Due to your connection to extreme heat and flames, you gain a small amount of resistance against fire-based spells and effects. You gain fire resistance 5/round.

Special: This resistance does not stack with fire resistance from other sources (such as a *resist elements* spell). You take the higher resistance when determining how much fire damage you avoid.

Ghastly Presence [Dread Genasi]

You are able to exude the stench of the grave so strongly as to sicken those around you.

Prerequisite: Base Fortitude save +2, grave genasi.

Benefits: Due to constantly surrounding yourself with death and decay, you are able to cast *stinking cloud* once per day. The spell is considered to be cast as if by a sorcerer of your character level.

Special: You may select this feat more than once. Each time you take this feat, you can cast *stinking cloud* one additional time per day.

Boney Exterior [Dread Genasi]

Your skin has been thickened and toughened due to your charnel heritage.

Prerequisite: Elemental Ties, grave genasi.

Benefits: Due to your connection to the grave, you gain a +4 natural armour bonus to your armour class. This bonus stacks with any other natural armour bonus you may already possess.

Traveler of the Mists [Dread Genasi]

You are adapt are traveling through the mists without losing your way.

Prerequisite: Base Will save +4, mist genasi.

Benefits: Whenever you travel via a Mistway, the chance of the Mistway drifting is decreased by 5% for each character level you possess (to a minimum of 5%).

Special: You can travel with up to five other creatures, which must remain within 30 feet of you or become lost. If you travel with more than five creatures, the chance of the Mistway drifting is normal.

Wall of Mist [Dread Genasi]

You can call forth a thick bank of fog to fill an area.

Prerequisite: Base Will save +2, mist genasi.

Benefits: Due to your innate connection with the mists, you are able to cast *fog cloud* once per day. The spell is considered to be cast as if by a sorcerer of your character level.

Special: You may select this feat more than once. Each time you take this feat, you can cast *fog cloud* one additional time per day.

Wounding Strike [Dread Genasi]

You know how to strike vital spots with a particular weapon to cause lasting damage.

Prerequisite: Proficient with weapon (slashing and/or piercing), base attack bonus +5 or higher, blood genasi.

Benefits: By using your special training with a specific weapon, you can cause a

bleeding wound to a creature. The injured creature loses 1 additional hit point each round until the wound is bound (a DC 10 Heal check) or the creature dies.

Special: You may select this feat more than once. Each time you take this feat, you apply the ability to wound a creature to another weapon.

Theari

Protectors of the Innocent

Andrew "alhoon" Pavlides

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Beliefs, wishes, hopes and strong emotions have power in Ravenloft. So does a truly good heart, as the heart of child untouched by the corruption age brings. It is always hard for a family to lose a child and even more, if the death was violent. People always believed and most importantly *hoped* that the children that died became angels and found the happiness that was stolen from them in life. When these emotions are accompanied by the touch of an angel's soul and sorrow, a Thear is spawned.

The anchorites of Ezra tell of the servants of their Goddess; invisible cherubs that guard the innocent. Though no one dares say whether these myths are true, there are those who swear that they have had a "guardian angel" protecting them. Theari (Singular: Thear) are a race of peaceful celestials. They resemble innocent little children, boys or girls, but only 1½ feet tall with small silvery wings.

While they are clearly creatures of otherworldly goodness, they seem to originate from the dark world of Ravenloft. At times, someone might claim a strange similarity of a Thear with a child he or she knew; usually a child that died a violent death. The question remains how a realm of such evil could spawn such creatures.

When a truly innocent child dies a violent death within the Reality Wrinkle of a good outsider, the child usually reincarnates as a Thear, a

protector of the innocent. The good outsider, in whose Reality Wrinkle the child died, instantly feels the child's demise. At that moment, he or she can use some of his or her spirit to help the tormented soul of the child to form a Thear. If the outsider decides to pay the price, he or she takes three negative levels that never result in actual HD or level loss.

The newly incarnated angel possesses the child's memories and personality but gains a sense of duty, as well as a faint air of sadness. A Thear returns to its parents and family while they sleep and it invisibly whispers reassurances to them. It confirms to the sleeping family that it is happy and has a purpose now; to protect other parents from the grief such a loss brings. A few Theari allow their siblings to see them and tell them similar things while they are awake.

Theari

	Tiny outsider (good, mists)
Hit Dice:	3d8 +3 (16hp)
Initiative:	+4
Speed:	15 ft. (3 squares), fly 40 ft. (good)
Armor Class:	16 (+2 size, +4 Dex), touch 16, flat-footed 12
Base Attack:	+3/-5
Attack:	Spells, rays +9
Full Attack:	Spells, rays +9
Space/Reach:	2.5 ft./2.5 ft.
Special	Spells, spell-like

Attacks:	abilities
Special Qualities:	Damage reduction 5/evil & cold iron, angel qualities
Saves:	Fort +3, Ref +7, Will +7
Abilities:	Str 6, Dex 18, Con 13, Int 12, Wis 14, Cha 14
Skills:	Spot +6, listen +6, perform (singing) +7, knowledge (local) +6, sense motive +8, survival +7, animal empathy +7, hide +15, move silently +10, concentration +5, diplomacy +8
Feats:	Iron will, track
Environment:	Any
Organization:	Solitary or pair
Challenge Rating:	3
Treasure:	None
Alignment:	Always good (usually neutral good)
Advancement:	4 HD (tiny); 5 – 8 HD (small)
Outcast Rating:	1

Combat:

Theari take it upon themselves to protect children and keep the peace. They don't use weapons or damaging spells. Theari avoid harming living creatures, even if they are evil. Rather than harm a living creature, they would cast a "hold person" spell or they would use their bodies as living shields. To most they seem "foolish" and "weak", for few can understand that even when they *have* to resort to violence they *cannot* find within themselves the *cruelty* needed to resort to such violence. The only exception to their aversion to violence regards

the undead horrors of Ravenloft and the evil outsiders that stalk the world.

Since they are peaceful and physically weak, Theari rely on others for help when violence is absolutely necessary. Naturally, the Theari will not seek the assistance of people they don't believe have a good heart. When they can, Theari invisibly observe individuals, examining how these people behave to their friends and families. In times of need, they call certain individuals whose behavior marks them as truly good beings.

Spells: As a 3rd lvl cleric with access to the domains of good and protection. They also have the domain abilities of those domains.

Usual spell – list:

0: *Create Water, Cure minor wounds x2, Detect magic, Purify food and drink.*

1st: *Cure light wounds x2, Protection from evil, Remove fear.*

2nd: *Hold person, Lesser restoration, Shield other.*

Angel Traits:

—Darkvision out to 60 feet and low-light vision.

—Immunity to acid, cold, and petrification.

—Resistance to electricity 10 and fire 10.

— +4 racial bonus on saves against poison.

—*Protective Aura (Su):* Against attacks made or effects created by evil creatures, this ability provides a +2 deflection bonus to AC and a +4 resistance bonus on saving throws to anyone within 10 feet of the Thear. Otherwise, it functions as a *magic circle against evil* effect with a radius of 10 feet (3rd caster level). This aura can be dispelled, but the Thear can create it again as a free action on its

next turn. (The defensive benefits from the circle are not included in a Thear's statistics block.)

—*Tongues (Su)*: Theari can speak with any creature that has a language, as though using a *tongues* spell. This ability is always active. However, creatures that have lost dark power checks feel uneasy near a Thear, or become frustrated or angry. A Thear's OR increases by one, for each step of corruption the listener has taken. For example, a Thear speaking to a human who has lost 2 Power Checks has an OR of 3. When speaking to a Darklord, a Thear has an OR of 7. Theari have OR of 0 when speaking to creatures with the innocence quality and Paladins.

Invisibility (sp): Theari are usually invisible as if under the effects of an invisibility spell cast by a 3rd lvl caster. They can also suppress the invisibility as a free action and it can be dispelled. Theari can become invisible again as a standard action.

Spell-like abilities: As a 3rd lvl caster.

- At will: *Disrupt Undead, Guidance, Light, Mending.*
- 2/day: *Bless, Emotion: hope, Mage hand*
- 1/day: *Aid, Calm emotion, Daylight.*

Sacrifice self (sp): Theari can sacrifice a portion of their life force to use the following spell-like abilities as a 5th lvl caster (not 3rd):

- Minor powers: At the cost of 1 point of temporary constitution damage per spell: *Bless water, Hold portal, Protection from evil, and Remove fear.*
- Major Powers: At the cost of 1 negative level per spell: *Cure disease, Lesser restoration, Magic circle against evil, Resist elements, and Shield other.* The negative levels always go away without permanent effects at the rate of one negative level every 12 hours.

Heaven Sent

A Hound-Faced Guardian Angel

By Jason "Javier" True

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"It is my moral responsibility to protect the innocent and helpless against the threats of evil. I do not question how difficult the task might become or how long it will take. If I should protect even one soul from devastation, my mission in life would be successful."

- excerpt from the Oath of the Blessed Protectors

Goliath stands over six and a half feet tall and weighs nearly three hundred pounds. While he is very heavy, one would immediately notice that this weight comes from the thick muscles that cover his well-toned body. As if his massive size was not already intimidating, his broad shoulders and meaty fists identify him as an able combatant. Likewise, his strong legs indicate that escaping enemies will not get very far.

His immense size is not Goliath's most unusual feature, though. Short, grey fur covers him from head to toe. While he spends most of his time hidden under his thick, green cloak, this strange coverage cannot be constantly hidden. Goliath's most prominent feature, however, isn't his fur. It is his head. In place of a human head, Goliath has the long ears and hanging jowls of a bulldog. Sharp teeth protrude from his dark lips, and his tongue occasionally lolls out from his mouth.

In the Beginning

Goliath, who had recently celebrated the three hundredth anniversary of his creation, was considered to be young in the eyes of the immortal celestials. As is typical with youth, Goliath tended to be fervent and impatient. The hound archon was a powerful force for goodness and law, but it was not uncommon for him to react impulsively and sometimes foolishly.

In fact, this imprudent behavior tended to cause him more trouble than benefit. Goliath would frequently jump into fights before assessing the strengths and weaknesses of his foes. He would strike before thinking out a proper strategy. While Goliath was righteous in his actions, the lawful archons viewed him as problematic. The hound archon needed to hone his wisdom and judgment in order to truly be both good and lawful. Therefore, Goliath was sent out of Mount Celestia by his fellow archons in order to improve himself.

Goliath traveled around the Outlands and visited many of its gate towns. He battled various fiends and learned about different cultures. As he traveled, the experiences made him a more effective and refined being of goodness and law. By the time Goliath had returned to Mount Celestia, he had become what the other celestials had hoped for; a truly lawful good archon.

Using his newfound knowledge and abilities, Goliath defended the less fortunate and taught the unenlightened. The once brash archon was now a calm and serene instructor for mortals who came to Mount Celestia. He taught them how to survive off the land and how to properly defend themselves from harm. It was not uncommon for the hound archon to be found traveling the heavenly slopes with half a dozen students.

Unfortunately, Goliath's soul still burned with a defiant spark. He tried to purge himself of the occasional chaotic impulse or random thought, but the inherent chaotic taint kept him from truly finding peace in the plane of law and good. Knowing that he couldn't remain with his brethren, Goliath took his students and went forth to find a new home. Leaving the celestial mountain behind him, Goliath first went to Sigil to collect his thoughts and determine where he and his students should go next. It was an ironic twist of fate that the hound archon would inadvertently walk through a magical gate and leave his previous life and students behind.

Moral Dilemma

As the magic of the gate faded and the mists slowly spread before him, Goliath received his first view of the Demiplane of Dread. A dark forest of twisted trees surrounded him, and the hungry howls of wolves came from deep within the black shadows. Goliath did not fear such animals, but this world gave him an uneasy feeling. It was as if the forest itself possessed a sinister taint.

Goliath traveled for two full days and nights before he met any of the natives of this strange land. A young man in tattered clothes lay battered and

bleeding in a small clearing. Seconds later, a shadowy figure stepped forth from between the trees and wielded a silver longsword that blazed with magical power. Goliath could make out very little about the figure beneath the banded armor and heavy cloak, but the threatening gesture of the sword gave him all the information that he needed to know.

Goliath charged forward and placed himself between the injured man and his attacker. The shadowy figure lunged at the hound archon and swung his blade. With an uncannily quick reaction, Goliath drew his own blade and deflected the attack. Both figures lunged and parried for several moments. The battle would have continued throughout the night if the wounded youth had not suddenly jumped to his feet.

Both of the swordsmen watched as the young man howled in agony and transformed into a large, wolf-like beast. Goliath immediately realized his folly. His attacker was the virtuous one and not the supposed innocent that had lain upon the ground. In the moment of thought, the werewolf bounded into the night and away from its pursuers.

Heated words were spoken between the Goliath and the werewolf hunter for several minutes, but both defenders of good soon realized the nature of the mistake. The mysterious figure introduced himself as Robert Myster, a member of an organization known as the Circle. Through the course of the night, Robert explained to Goliath the tenets and practices of the Circle and what it meant to be a Knight of the Shadows. Goliath listened with interest, but the lack of strict laws and practices bothered his celestial nature.

When the morning sun rose upon the pair of do-gooders, Robert left in pursuit of his adversary and Goliath began to ponder his next course of action. He greatly admired the Circle's devotion to helping those in need, but a Knight of the Shadows stayed hidden away until he or she was needed. Goliath saw the need for a more constant presence of stalwart defenders against the monsters of the night. If what Robert told him was true, then each and every village needed to be protected against the hordes of evil beasts that were waiting for their moment to strike.

Leaving the clearing, Goliath headed south in order to find a suitable spot to start an academy, where he could train men and women to protect themselves and others from harm.

Twisted Influence

After nearly a month had passed, Goliath found an abandoned building where he could start his academy. The place lay a couple hundred yards north of the Arden River in Valachan. Even though the building was in need of repair, it was big enough to house a few dozen people.

Goliath hired carpenters and stone masons to make the needed repairs as he set about planning how he would create his organization of defenders. After several weeks, the contractors had finished their work. Goliath sent them on their way as the first of many humans showed up at his doorstep. Goliath's many honorable deeds had spread throughout the towns and villages of Valachan and Verbrek. Almost two dozen men had arrived to train underneath him.

Everything went very well for the first week of training, but Goliath noticed a strange effect on the men

training at his estate. After so many days, the men slowly began to transform. Their bodies shifted in ways that began to make them appear more feral and dog-like. His students were slowly transforming into impulsive and hostile animals.

Fearing that something was amiss, Goliath sent all of his students away in order for him to study what had happened. Gathering various books and equipment, Goliath began researching the strange changes that befell the men. After several weeks of intense studying, the weary archon finally discovered what had happened; his celestial energies interacted with the land in such a way as to warp the living things around him. It was his own inner battle between justice and disorder that caused the mortals around him to become twisted mockeries of his ideals.

Goliath was horrified and disheartened by this discovery. How could he fulfill his plans if he could never remain near his students? Would he be forced to forever travel from place to place and leave his taint on the people? Was there no way he could overcome such a monumental obstacle?

As the hound archon began to lose all hope, a realization came upon him. The changes that occurred had been minute and consistent. Perhaps he could perfect a program and ritual that would allow him to keep his students for short sessions and not cause them any undo harm. Even as he sent word for his students to return, Goliath began studying arcane patterns and rituals that would help preserve his men. By becoming a shining example of truth and law, Goliath would keep his imperfections from harming others.

Bringing Order to Chaos

With the help of several arcanists and wizards, Goliath developed a way to bestow a small portion of his powers to his students without horribly mutating them. His apprentices go through an intense program for one month. During this time, they are challenged not only physically, but also mentally and spiritually. At the end of each week, these students undergo a mysterious ceremony. Those men and women who complete this initial training are referred to as “Blessed Protectors” and are sent back to their homelands to defend their communities.

Those who fail the training process become neither man nor animal but rather an undomesticated and violent amalgamation of the two. These poor creatures have both their bodies and souls twisted into embodiments of mockery. Many of them become chaotic wanderers, and some even become evil abominations. Unfortunately, almost of all those that fail the process become hopelessly insane.

Once a month, the blessed protectors may make a return trip to Goliath’s estate. If they have served their communities well, Goliath will provide additional training and rituals. As the blessed protector receives the archons additional blessings, he or she gains greater strength of both body and spirit.

Current Sketch

To this day, Goliath spends the majority of his time at his fortified estate in Valachan. Due to his appearance, many monster hunters mistake him as a werewolf or other type of lycanthrope. Even though Goliath abhors such creatures as well, it is difficult to talk reason into a human that already has his

or her mind set. By staying at his estate, Goliath prevents the repetition of experiences like the night he had met Robert Mystor in the forest.

Goliath still occasionally feels wanderlust and a thirst for adventure due to his impure heart, but these desires have diminished over the years spent in the Demiplane of Dread. The archon continuously feels the drive to protect the innocent and helpless from the depravities of evil, but his force of will keeps him from recklessly partaking in such activities. During the times that he most strongly feels these drives, Goliath will travel across the lands and right any wrongs he comes across. These treks are growing and growing fewer and farther between, as Goliath realizes that his greatest responsibility lies in training those who come to him to be Blessed Protectors. The protection of this world is his greatest responsibility, and he must prepare defenders to do the task that he cannot.

Dread Possibilities

- ❖ During one of his treks, Goliath saved a merchant caravan from being robbed by a group of highwaymen. Later that day, the PCs encounter this same group of roguish men. Disguising themselves as the wronged party, the highwaymen claim that they were part of a merchant caravan that was attacked by a strange type of werewolf.
- ❖ Baron Urik von Kharkov has set his eye upon the small school and its classes for would-be protectors. While he does not dare attack the establishment himself, the Baron has hired groups of adventurers to stop this cult of the ‘Wolf God’ before it can cause any lasting harm to his land.

- ❖ The home village of the PCs is being threatened by attacks during the full moon of every month. Each set of attacks become stronger and more deadly. To save their homes, the PCs are sent to Goliath to be taught the art of the Blessed Protectors.
- ❖ A prominent monster hunter has heard rumors of a dog-headed fiend residing within Valachan. Mistaking the description for that of the arcanoloth, Inajira, this monster hunter has begun the preparations to destroy this abomination. The PCs are left to determine the true nature of this 'fiend' and either help or stop the legendary fiend-slayer.

Goliath

Hound archon Rgr8: CR 12; OR 5; Medium-size outsider (archon, good, lawful); HD 6d8+8d10+32; hp 122; Init +5; Speed 40 ft. or 60 ft.*; AC 23 (touch 11, flat-footed 22); Atk +17 melee (1d8+3, bite) and +12 melee (1d4+2, slam) or +19/+14/+9 melee (1d8+5, flaming long sword +2) and +12 melee (1d8+2, bite); SA favored enemy (devils) +2, favored enemies (shapechangers) +1, spell-like abilities, spells; SQ alternate form, aura of menace, damage reduction 10/+1, darkvision 60 ft., immunity to electricity and petrification, low-light vision, magic circle against evil, scent, spell resistance 18, teleport, tongues; AL LG; SV Fort +13 (+17 against poison), Ref +8, Will +10; Str 17, Dex 13, Con 15, Int 13, Wis 17, Cha 15.

Skills and Feats: Concentration +9, Craft +6, Heal +8, Hide +8 (+12*), Jump +10, Knowledge (arcane) +6, Knowledge (nature) +6, Listen +10, Move Silently +8, Search +6, Sense Motive +10, Spellcraft +6, Spot +9, Wilderness Lore +9 (+13*);

The Twisting

As with all celestials that find themselves within Ravenloft, Goliath possesses a reality wrinkle that causes twisted changes to occur in those around him. In particular, any mortal creature that spends more than seven days in Goliath's reality wrinkle begin to change into warped versions of the hound archon. For each day after one week that a person stays within Goliath's reality wrinkle, they need to make a Will Save (DC 12) or have their current alignment switch to a chaotic version. Likewise, their bodies slowly transform over the course of time. For each week past the first that a person stays within the reality wrinkle, they must make a successful Fortitude Save (DC 15) or be transformed into a canine-based broken one (*Denizens of Darkness* p.29).

There are only **two** known ways to avoid these twisting effects. First, a person could steer clear of prolonged contact with Goliath's reality wrinkle. By only visiting for a few days every couple of months, a mortal creature would not be exposed to the energies that mutate their body. Second, a mortal creature can embrace the effects through a specified program of training and divine rituals. By becoming Blessed Protectors, the humanoids allow themselves to become a vessel for a small amount of Goliath's celestial energies. Instead of being warped, they become twisted in very specific ways (see *Perilous Pursuits*).

Ambidexterity, Dodge, Improved Initiative, Mobility, Spring Attack, Track, Two-Weapon Fighting.

Ranger Spells per Day: 2 / 1.
Base DC = 13 + spell level.

Signature Possessions: +2 flaming long sword, +1 leather armor of light fortification, heavy cloak, potion of cure light wounds, potion of cure moderate wounds, and wand of sleep.

Outcast Rating 5: Due to his canine head and furry body, Goliath has a difficult time being initially accepted by most people. His kind words and dignified actions help people to accept him, but there are still those who would consider him to be a werewolf, fiend, or worse.

Alternate Form (Su): Goliath can assume any canine form of Small to Large size (except that of a werewolf or other lycanthrope) as a standard action. This ability is similar to the *polymorph self* spell but only allows canines. While in canine form, he loses his bite, slam, and weapon attacks, but gains the bite attack of the form he chooses.

*While in canine form, Goliath gains the higher of the two listed speeds and a +4 circumstance bonus to Hide and Wilderness Lore checks.

Aura of Menace (Su): A righteous aura surrounds Goliath when he fights or gets angry. Any hostile creature within a 20-foot radius of him must succeed at a Will save (DC 17) to resist its effects. Those who fail suffer a -2 morale penalty to attacks, AC, and saves for one day or until they successfully hit Goliath. Any creature that has resisted or broken the effect cannot be affect again for one day.

Scent (Ex): Goliath can detect approaching enemies, sniff out hidden foes, and track by sense of smell.

Spell-Like Abilities: At will-*aid*, *continual flame*, *detect chaos*, and *message*. These abilities are as the spells cast by a 14th-level sorcerer.

Teleport (Su): Goliath can *teleport without error* at will, as the spell cast by a 14th-level sorcerer, except that he can only transport himself and up to 50 pounds of objects.

Tongues (Su): Goliath can speak with any creature that has a language, as though using a *tongues* spell cast by a 14th-level sorcerer. This ability is always active.

Perilous Pursuits

The Blessed Protector

By Jason "Javier" True

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The group of small children screamed and huddled closer together as the werewolf let out another ferocious howl. Three mangled bodies lay scattered among scraps of leather and iron from their armour. The ground hungrily drank the spilled blood, which pooled around the lifeless rescue party.

"Is this the best your pitiful town can send?" the werewolf growled as he kicked a helmeted head. He did not look over as the young boys and girls cried out again. While their screams of fear pleased him, the werewolf was hungry for a challenge. This town was the third one he had ravaged this month, and not a single one of them had a provided him more than a belly full of meat. Looking at the group of children, the werewolf licked his bloody lips with his tongue. He might be denied a suitable opponent, but this night was not a complete loss.

As the werewolf approached the defenseless group, a strange scent carried to him through the wind. Lifting one little girl who was barely four years old, the werewolf spun around to face the direction of the scent. To his surprise, a golden dog came running out of the dark forest and into the moonlit clearing. The faces of the children lit up at the sight of their shining yellow rescuer.

"Reginald?" the girl in the werewolf's grasp hesitantly questioned.

"Silence!" the werewolf angrily growled as he tossed the girl into the

rest of the group. It was bad enough that there was not a single man in this village that could put up a decent fight, but now he had to debase himself by fighting some human's pet. The werewolf furrowed his brow. There was something not quite right about this animal, but he could not figure it out.

"Your reign of terror is at an end, monster," the golden dog spoke in the language of man. Moving itself between the werewolf and the children, the dog's body shifted and changed until a human man dressed in golden armour stood there. Hefting a broad sword into the air, the man spoke again. "You will bring no further harm to these children or their village. I will make sure of that..."

The werewolf lifted his face to the sky and let out a long eerie howl. He lowered his head expecting to see the would be defender quivering in fear, but the man stood there defiantly. Perhaps this one would be more of a challenge after all.

The blessed protectors are an organization of good individuals who help those who are in need, protect the innocent from harm, and punish anyone who would bring death and despair to a peaceful land. While the Knights of Shadow appear from the mists when they are needed to fight against evil, the blessed protectors remain at home,

constantly guarding against evil's assault.

The life of a wandering adventurer does not suit most blessed protectors. They prefer to stay in the more civilized regions in order to protect people. It is common for a blessed protector to become a member of the town guard or even a constable. In fact, some of the more charismatic protectors become captains or attain other high-ranking positions involved with a town's defense. Sometimes, however, a blessed protector takes on the role of a bodyguard for an important aristocrat or holy person. When their patron needs to travel to specific locations, the blessed protector travels with him.

Blessed Protector

Most blessed protectors are fighters, rangers, or paladins. In fact, a large portion of the blessed protectors are paladins who answered the call. Occasionally, clerics and monks adopt this class as well, but most clerics are multiclass cleric/fighters due to the rigorous demands of the program. Rogues and bards sometime will take a few levels as a blessed protector, but their natures keep most of them from pursuing it as a long-term career. While arcane spellcasters rarely find this class appealing, there have been a couple wizards and sorcerers who oversee the protection of their communities.

Hit Die: d10.

Requirements

To qualify to become a blessed protector (bpr), a character must fulfill all of the following criteria.

Alignment: Any good.

Base Attack Bonus: +5

Skills: Knowledge (local) 2 ranks, Knowledge (religion) 4 ranks.

Feats: Back to the Wall, Courage, Endurance.

Special: The character must put himself in considerable danger in order to protect or save another person, who is unable to fend for themselves.

Special: When being initiated into the blessed protectors, the character makes a sacred vow to the organization. This vow is a promise to help those who are in need, protect the innocent from harm, and punish those who would bring death and despair. If the character ever knowingly breaks this vow, then they lose all supernatural and spell-like abilities of this class and can never gain additional blessed protector levels without proper atonement.

Class Skills

The blessed protector's class skills (and key ability for each skill) are Climb (Str), Craft (Int), Heal (Wis), Intimidate (Cha), Jump (Str), Knowledge (local) (Int), Knowledge (religion) (Int), Listen (Wis), Profession (Wis), Ride (Dex), Search (Int), Sense Motive (Wis), Spot (Wis), and Swim (Str).

Skill Points at each Level: 2 + Int. Modifier

Class Features

All of the following are class features of the blessed protector prestige class.

Weapon and Armor Proficiency:

A blessed protector is proficient with all simple and martial weapons as well as all types of armour, but not shields. Note that armor check penalties for armor heavier than leather apply to the skills Balance, Climb, Escape Artist,

Hide, Jump, Move Silently, Pick Pocket, and Tumble.

Defensive Stance (Ex): Due to extensive training and divine rituals, the blessed protector's body becomes much stronger and sturdier than a typical human's. When the need arises, a blessed protector can become a powerful fortress of defense. In this defensive stance, a protector gains extraordinary strength and resilience, but he cannot move from the spot that he is defending. He gains a +2 to Strength, +4 to Constitution, a +2 resistance bonus on all saves, and a +4 dodge bonus to AC.

The increase in constitution raises the blessed protector's hit points by 2 point per level, but these hit points disappear at the end of the defensive stance when the Constitution score drops back 4 points. Unlike temporary hit points, these extra hit points are not the first to be lost. While in a defensive stance, a protector cannot use skills or abilities that would require him to shift his position, such as Move Silently or Jump. A defensive stance lasts for a number of rounds equal to 3 + the character's (newly improved) Constitution modifier. A protector may voluntarily end his defensive stance prior to this limit. At the end of the defensive stance, the protector is winded and takes a -2 penalty to Strength for the remainder of the encounter.

A blessed protector can only use his defensive stance a certain number of times per day as determined by his level. Using the defensive stance takes no time itself, but a protector can only do so during his action. (A blessed protector cannot, for example, use the stance when struck down by an arrow in order to get the extra hit points from the increased Constitution.)

Scent (Ex): Due to the ties to a hound archon, blessed protectors gain the scent special quality (see Monster Manual). This ability allows the protector to detect approaching enemies, sniff out hidden foes, and track by sense of smell. Blessed protectors can identify familiar odours just as other humans identify familiar sights.

Protection from Evil (Sp): A 2nd-level blessed protector has purified his mind and body enough that he can accept a small shard of divine goodness into themselves. By doing this, the blessed protector can now use *protection from evil* on himself or another once per day. His effective caster level is equal to his protector level. The blessed protector can use this spell twice per day at 5th-level and three times per day at 8th-level.

Wild Shape (Su): At 3rd-level, a blessed protector gains the spell-like ability to *polymorph self* into any Small or Medium-size canine form (but not a dire or lycanthropic version) and back again once per day. Unlike the standard use of the spell, however, the blessed protector may only adopt one form. As stated in spell description, the blessed protector regains hit points as if he has rested for a day. Note: The canine creatures available include some unusual animals but not unnatural beasts. The blessed protector may *wild shape* into a wolf, for example, but not into a blink dog. The blessed protector does not risk the standard penalty for being disoriented while being in her canine form. The blessed protector can use this spell twice per day at 6th-level and three times per day at 9th-level.

Magic Circle Against Evil (Su): By 10th-level, a blessed protector has been permeated with such a large amount of celestial energies that he is

constantly surrounded by an effect that duplicates a *magic circle against evil* spell as cast by a cleric of his blessed protector level. This supernatural ability can be dispelled or suppressed, but the blessed protector can resume its protection as a free action.

Tireless Defender (Ex): After years of experience and sacrifice, the blessed protector has the strength of will to endure when others would fall. A

10th-level blessed protector no longer suffers a penalty (-2 Strength) at the end of a defensive stance.

Multiclass Note: Paladin characters can freely multiclass into and out of this prestige class. In other words, you can give your paladin PC a blessed protector level, then return to the paladin class for your next level, take a blessed protector level after that, and so on.



The Blessed Protector

Level	Base Attack Bonus	Fort	Reflex	Will	Special
1 st	+1	+2	+0	+2	Defensive stance (1/day), Scent
2 nd	+2	+3	+0	+3	<i>Protection from Evil</i> (1/day)
3 rd	+3	+3	+1	+3	Wild shape (1/day)
4 th	+4	+4	+1	+4	Defensive stance (2/day)
5 th	+5	+4	+1	+4	<i>Protection from Evil</i> (2/day)
6 th	+6	+5	+2	+5	Wild shape (2/day)
7 th	+7	+5	+2	+5	Protective stance (3/day)
8 th	+8	+6	+2	+6	<i>Protection from Evil</i> (3/day)
9 th	+9	+6	+3	+6	Wild shape (3/day)
10 th	+10	+7	+3	+7	<i>Magic Circle against Evil</i> , Tireless Defender

Children of the Night

Marcus La Monte

By Tadelin Darkblade
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"I'm glad I'm already dead, Iosef. It's really hard to get killed twice..."

Marcus La Monte

Medium human skeleton Ftr 7/Wiz 3/DvD 1: CR 12; Sz M Undead (5'8" tall); HD 11d12; hp 115; Init +9; Spd 30; AC 21 (touch 16, flatfooted 17); Atk: +17/+12/+7 melee (1d10+5/19-20/x2, +1 heavy flail), +19/+14/+9 melee (1d8+7 +1d6 fire, +3 flaming throwing returning heavy mace), +20/+15/+10 ranged (1d8+7 +1d6 fire, +3 flaming throwing returning heavy mace); SQ Damage reduction 5/bludgeoning, darkvision 60 ft., harm's way, immunity to cold, life sense, undead traits; AL NG; SV Fort +8, Ref +10, Will +6; Str 18, Dex 20, Con -, Int 18, Wis 12, Cha 10.

Skills and Feats: Bluff +3, Climb +12, Concentration +4, Hypnotism +4, Knowledge (arcana) +10, Listen +9, Monster Lore (undead) +8, Profession (farmer) +3, Ride +6, Search +8*, Sense Motive +5, Spellcraft +10, Spot +8*, Alertness, Combat Casting, Courage, Expertise, Improved Disarm, Improved Initiative, Jaded, Weapon Focus (heavy flail, heavy mace).

* These skills have an additional bonus of +4 when the target is a living creature.

Languages: Mordentish*, Balok, Darkonese, Draconic, Falkovnian, Lamordian.

Wizard Spells per Day: 4/3/2.
Base DC = 14 + spell level.

Spellbook: 0 - *detect magic*, *mending*, *read magic*; 1st - *charm*

person, enlarge, grease, identify, insatiable thirst, jump, mage armor, message, mount, shield, true strike, unseen servant; 2nd - flaming sphere, web.

Signature possessions: +1 heavy flail, +3 flaming throwing returning heavy mace.

Marcus is nothing more than a skeleton, his mortal form having perished long ago. His choice in clothing tends toward the older Mordentish style, with a deep hooded cloak to conceal his face and undead nature from those around him. When traveling, Marcus usually keeps his mace at his side, and a shield attached to his back, content to carry the flail on his shoulder. At home, these belongings are stored away in the attic of his home, a place considered haunted by many.

Background:

Born to common farmers in 563 BC, Marcus enjoyed the simple life. Working his parents' farm in southeastern Mordent was the only thing he wanted, along with the love of a girl in the village named Helen. As per custom at the time, Marcus even served in the local militia, even going into battle on more than one occasion. All went well for Marcus, he and Helen were set to be married when a sudden event changed the future of Mordent.

With the activation of the Apparatus and Mordent's subsequent drawing into Ravenloft, a strange creature appeared in the mists around the village. The fiend destroyed much, killing all who stood against it, including Helen. Marcus fumed and brooded over his loss. Later that year, a paladin going by the name of John came to the village and told them of an evil wizard to the north who was to blame for creature - something he called a "mist ferryman" - and sought to gather an army.

The paladin found Marcus an eager apprentice and together they gathered a humble force from the militia. John and Marcus attempted to recruit a band of adventurers, including a strange robed man whose very presence chilled Marcus to the bone. These wanderers refused to join John's crusade and even attempted to dissuade them from their task. In an attempt to convince the travelers, John joined the adventurers on a hunt for a rampaging monster, only to die in the beast's jaws. Marcus found himself alone and leaderless, but despite the warning of the outlander warriors he was determined to gain his revenge against whoever killed his beloved, and lead the army himself.

As a whole, the army lacked experience, being nothing more than a collection of people that John had rallied to his cause. Shortly after they crossed into Darkon, the dead rose to meet them. Unprepared for resistance, the group's morale faltered, and they quickly fell. Marcus quickly lost his life to the growing horde of undead, fading into the grey sleep of death.

Marcus suddenly found himself awake and standing in a forest in Western Darkon in the wake of the Requiem. He was unaware of how much

time had passed and wandered for a short while, eventually finding a pool and checking his reflection. Very little could compare to the shocking horror that gripped Markus' rotting mind. In time, Marcus was befriended by a half-Vistani named Iosef. Noting his obvious intelligence and his lack of hostility towards him, Iosef asked Marcus to join him on his quest to find the missing Rudolph van Richten. While they would fail in the endeavor, the two would travel on and experience many adventures.

After many exploits, Marcus and his companions were swept up by the mists and returned to Mordent the very week that Marcus left for Darkon. His companions, knowing nothing of what truly transpired that day, put forth all the effort they could to convince the paladin John and the still-living Marcus to give up the effort against Azalin, but they met with nothing but failure. Each attempt Iosef and crew made to convince Marcus that he was fated to die only strengthened his resolve to join Helen.

After this event, the mists returned them to their normal time. Marcus learned that his former home has since been considered haunted, but he purchased it anyways, believing that any ghosts living in the house would at least know him for who he was, and that he'd have someone to talk to.

Current Sketch:

Marcus La Monte has long since given up on returning to his normal life. While he still works the lands of his home, he spends his nights studying a book on magic he acquired from a small bookshop in Vallaki. The book's contents are nothing more than the basics of arcane study, and he's devoted much time to learning more about the

craft to further help him deal with the ghosts lurking in his estate. On occasion, Iosef visits him and brings him along for some adventure. Marcus eagerly follows his friend for the opportunity to test his new knowledge.

While his knowledge of Mordent's history from 590 BC to present is sketchy, his knowledge of the time prior is normal. In the last few months, Marcus has uncovered a bit of information about the paladin John. Rumor states that he has risen from the dead to complete his last task. The rare individuals that have survived an encounter with the undying knight tell that he is searching for anyone related to his failed mission and that the crusader has muttered the name Marcus on more than one occasion.

Combat:

Marcus' undead nature makes him a difficult opponent in melee combat. While his skill with weapons is quite diverse, he focuses his attention on the flail and more recently the mace. When faced with foes wielding bludgeoning weapons, Marcus will begin the fight by attempting to disarm them. If faced with opponents wielding blades, Marcus will feign injury at each appropriate blow.

Special qualities:

Harm's Way (Ex): Marcus can choose to take an attack directed at his charge as a free action.

Immunity to cold (Ex): As a skeleton, Marcus is immune to cold.

Life Sense (Sp): Marcus can determine the location and number of living creatures within 60 feet.

Dread Possibilities:

Marcus' home in southeastern Mordent is rumored to be haunted. While Marcus has never encountered a ghost, he's noted that no one can spend the night in his house with feeling mildly disturbed the next morning. In truth, a bastellus lives in the building, tormenting and feeding on those who sleep in the building. Marcus is fully aware that something is amiss within his house, but the incorporeal undead seems to elude him.

With Azalin's constant research and desire to gain knowledge outside of Darkon, Marcus' sudden revelation of self and reawakening is due to a plan of Azalin's suddenly set into motion by his dispersal. Marcus has no knowledge of this, and he very well could be a way for Azalin to extend his vision beyond the realm of Darkon. As it stands, on any return trip into Darkon, Azalin peers into Marcus' mind to see exactly what he has encountered and experienced, even if Marcus himself isn't aware that he noticed.

The former paladin John is unhappy with his untimely death; he has been roaming the lands searching for Marcus, Iosef, or anyone else in the group that separated him from his followers. In his undying dementia, the paladin sees these people as infidels that must be stopped at all costs.

Heinrich's Curiosities

Four Fiendishly Foul Items

By Jason "Javier" True and Joseph "Bela" Zeffelmaier
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Any arcane or divine spellcaster has the potential to construct items of magical might. Using the correct combination of worked materials and mystical energies, they create truly wondrous things. Not every magical item, however, is produced for the benefit of mankind. In truth, mankind does not produce every magical item. Some are spawned by fiendish hands and spew forth from the bellies of the hells. I would question if any of these items could be truly used for anything other than the diabolical purposes for which they were originally designed.

Detailed below, you will find four such tools of evil that the Order of the Guardian has come across over the last few decades. While we do not know all of the details of these vile items, I hope that this information helps you in your missions to search and destroy. Please be wary, though. The Order has already lost several good men and women to such endeavours....

*Brother Jacob
Order of the Guardian*

Armour of the Hellfire Knight

The Armour of the Hellfire Knight is clearly of otherworld origin, and anyone gazing upon it will recognize that fact. This full suit of plate mail is forged of an unknown metal. Black and

semi-reflective, it appears quite cumbersome. In truth it is very light, weighing half that of a regular armoured suit. The joints are locked together to form fierce edges, and barbs jut out from beneath both forearms. The gauntlets are clawed, and spikes line the knuckles. The boots are high and treaded, attached to the legs with human-leather straps. They add a full three inches to the wearer's height.

The most noticeable part of the suit is the breastplate. A large pentagram is forged into the front, running the entire length of the plate. It is inlaid with a strange, red metal that seems to flow like blood in certain light. Upon close inspection, etched faces of screaming mortals dot the surface as well. However, these can only be seen up close by a keen eye. Along the shoulders and back, a great black cape hangs like a shadow. It is so light as to almost seem immaterial, but it is not at all transparent. It seems to be made of pure darkness.

Finally, and most disturbing, is the helm. It covers the entire head and is crowned with two bone horns that jut forward. Blasphemous runes are carved upon these horns. The faceplate is a massive diabolical visage comprised of cruel eyes, flaring nostrils, and a fang-filled maw. The wearer's true face cannot be seen behind it. Two large serrated ears curl up and behind the helmet. The entire suit brings to mind

hideous nightmares and an evil far older than man.

History: The Armour of the Hellfire Knight was indeed forged in the fires of the Nine Hells. Brought into existence in Phlegethos, the Armour tasted blood before man or fiend ever wore it. The devil blacksmiths, working their foul art, mixed the blood of fallen Blood Warriors into the still-molten metal. The metal was then poured into a massive cauldron, and nine mortal virgins were lowered in afterwards. This infernal metal was forged and pounded into shape while evil wizards infused it with numerous spells. But it was the final heresy that resulted in the most deadly aspect of the armour. Hundreds of spikes, collected from hamatula, were carefully attached to the interior of the suit. They took root in arcane magic and folded themselves into the layers of metal. The Generals of the Nine Hells gazed upon this creation and were well pleased.

Despite its infernal origins, the suit was not intended for the armies of Baator. Instead, it was sent into the realms of man. The most wretched of mortals, those whose souls were blacker than midnight, would find themselves drawn to its dark power. However, any who donned the armour found it impossible to remove. Those who wore it would soon find themselves enslaved to its monstrous will. The source of its power was also the root of its curse. Born of fiendish blood and vile acts, the Armour of the Hellfire Knight wanted nothing more than to lay waste to the righteous and lead the forces of evil.

The Armour's first victim was a squire named Rafferty. He had served an unworthy knight for many years, and his heart burned with intense jealousy. Too long had the arrogant Sir Garrett

claimed Rafferty's good deeds as his own, and the abused squire wanted his just moment. It was then that he stumbled upon the Armour, seemingly hidden in a dark cave. In the shadows, Rafferty couldn't quite make out the sinister design but could sense the power. The moment he donned the first gauntlet, the fiendish spikes sunk into his flesh. The essence of pure evil pumped into Rafferty's veins, fanning his envy into blinding hate. With burning rage, he took the armour as his own, piece-by-piece.

When Rafferty emerged from the cave, all traces of his former self had been erased. He instinctively knew what powers the awful armour commanded, and he wielded them against all he felt had wronged him. Sir Garrett was the first to die at the Hellfire Knight's hands, followed by all who had ever served him. The thing that was once Rafferty cut a bloody swath through the kingdom, and the minions of darkness soon fell in step behind him. The evil forces were drawn to the Armour like moths to a malevolent flame.

Little time passed before the entire kingdom rallied their forces against the Hellfire Knight and his dark army. The battle was long and awful, with a staggering death count. Finally, a battalion of priests defeated the Knight, striking down the living creature that was giving life to the vile Armour. However, fate, or perhaps more sinister forces, played its hand at that moment. As the holy men descended upon the Armour, a strange mist billowed out of the ground. When the mist had cleared, the Armour of the Hellfire Knight was gone, swept away into the Demiplane of Dread.

Where the suit of armour turned up next was a mystery, although it was first

found by the Order of the Guardians in Nova Vaasa. Their divinations revealed that the plate mail was even more evil and powerful than it appeared. Building a sanctuary in the Vaasan foothills, they named themselves the Hidden Forge and secreted the Armour deep within the earth. Many years went by as the guardians attempted to discern the Armour's origin and possible means to its destruction. But only the most pious and pure of mortals can stand in the Armour's presence for very long without feeling its dark pull.

The next victim to the Armour was Sister Cora. A small and frail woman, she'd been abused by the men of her town as a youth. The vengeful fire inside her had subsided but even life within the Order of the Guardians could not extinguish the hateful blaze. At first, the Armour was simply an evil object needing to be destroyed, but as time went on, she began to see the power it represented. It was her fervent belief that it could be a powerful instrument for good if wielded by a righteous person. The moment she donned the helmet, she realized her mistake. Once again, the wretched needles sank into warm flesh and filled Sister Cora with unspeakable evil. In a few moments, the Armour had found a new wearer and magically fitted itself to its new prey.

The new Hellfire Knight cut her way out of the Hidden Forge, killing ten of her fellow priests along the way. What happened after that remains a mystery, although it is strongly believed that the Hellfire Knight ended up in the service of the Black Duke for a while. Eventually Cora was killed, and once again the Armour fell, awaiting a new mortal to enslave.

Its current whereabouts remain a mystery, and the Guardians of the

Hidden Forge still devote their lives to its recapture and destruction.

Powers: The Armour of the Hellfire Knight functions as +3 Heavy Fortification Full Plate Armour, with the following special abilities:

- ❖ The wearer of the armour has his/her Strength magically enhanced by +4.
- ❖ The wearer is only encumbered as though he/she was wearing half-plate.
- ❖ The wearer gains the ability to see perfectly in darkness, both normal and magical.
- ❖ The wearer gains the Leadership feat, which only affects Lawful Evil and Neutral Evil creatures.
- ❖ The wearer gains three natural attacks – two clawed gauntlets attack with a +10 to hit and +5 to damage and the horns attack with a +8 to hit and +5 to damage.
- ❖ The wearer's type changes to Outsider and gains immunity to poison, fire, and fear effects as well as cold and acid resistance of 10. The wearer also gains a Spell Resistance of 15.
- ❖ Three times a day, the wearer can focus the malevolence of the Armour to create a magical effect identical to the *fear* spell.
- ❖ The Armour also grants the wearer the following spell-like abilities as if cast by a 13th-level sorcerer: At will- *Burning hands*, *Comprehend Languages*, *Obscuring Mist*; 5/day- *Fire Shield*, *Fire Trap*, *Locate Creature*, *Wall of Fire*; 3/day- *Animate Dead*, *Cloudkill*, *Nightmare*, *Summon Monster V*; 1/day- *Antimagic Field*, *Circle of Death*.

Curse: The true curse of the Armour of the Hellfire Knight is quite

simple: it virtually erases the mind and will of any who dare to don it. When placing even a single piece of the Armour on the body, it immediately grafts hundreds of small needles into the wearer's flesh. These infernal spikes are magically potent and ignore armour. The wearer must immediately make a Will Save (DC 35) or have his alignment forever changed to lawful evil. Nothing short of a *Wish* or *Miracle* can save the wearer after this change occurs. If the wearer makes the save, the Armour remains dormant and cannot be worn by this individual. Even attempting to don it again makes this person violently ill.

If they fail the save, however, then they find that their mind is filled with dread images. They are flooded with the hate and pain of every previous wearer, as well as the unthinkable wretchedness of a true devil. The process takes 5 rounds to finish, and upon completion, the wearer is a force of pure evil. Only death can remove the Armour, as the innumerable needles graft the Armour to its new vessel like a second skin.

Once attached, the armour compels the wearer to seek revenge on anyone the wearer feels may have wronged it. Once vengeance has been achieved, the new Hellfire Knight begins to draw other evil creatures to it. As mentioned before, the Armour was designed to cut down the forces of good and swell the forces of darkness.

Since coming to the Dread Realms, however, it has gained a new purpose. The Hellfire Knight can sense the presence of any Lawful Evil Outsider and will seek it out. If such a fiend has more hit dice than the Hellfire Knight, the wearer will serve it willingly. If the fiend has less, the Hellfire Knight will demand the creature's fealty. But more than anything else, the Hellfire Knight is

filled with the Armour's all consuming desire to return to the Nine Hells and he/she will explore almost any avenue to achieve it.

Means of Destruction: In the years the Hidden Forge had the Armour in their care, nobody could discern a way to destroy the infernal suit. One of the order members, however, has recently hit upon an idea during his travels. Brother Alders traveled briefly with the Carnival, and has come to believe that the Carnival's mistress, a strange being called Isolde, is in truth a fallen angel. It is his opinion that perhaps her mystical, shining sword could spell the Armour's doom.

Assassin's Conscience

At first glance, the Assassin's Conscience appears to be an unremarkable dagger. The simple hilt is comprised of interwoven bands of smooth, charcoal grey metal. The blandness of the light grey blade is only interrupted by the razor sharp edges and strange symbols. These infernal runes are etched lightly and gilded with gold on each side of the dagger's blade. While most scholars cannot decipher their meaning, the words are actually an ancient version of the yugoloth language. Anyone able to translate the infernal writing would discover two key words: one side reads "assassin," and on the other side, "conscience."

History: The Assassin's Conscience was created in the volcanic furnaces of Gehenna by the most talented of yugoloth blacksmiths. Dull grey ores, mined from the deepest bowels of the Grey Wastes, were smelted and worked into a sturdy metal blade. Several wizards cast fiendish spells and enchantments upon the still

red-hot metal. Finally, the blade was cooled in the insidious waters of the river Styx. However, the creation of this weapon was not as impressive as the idea behind it.

Nearly six hundred years ago, the General of Gehenna developed the idea of the Assassin's Conscience. After watching the human mercenaries that served in the yugoloth armies, the infamous General realized that these mortals were imperfect beings. They were capable of performing great feats of evil, but their emotions tended to keep them from fully reaching their potential. Many a human had lost his or her life during the Blood War because of fear of, or compassion for, an adversary. If these emotions could be removed, then the humans could rise above their shortcoming.

The first test was not a complete success. Even though the emotions were removed from the humans, there was no drive or desire left. The test subjects no longer feared or loved, but they also no longer cared. The General of Gehenna was disappointed but not defeated. He sent the test subjects to their deaths and assembled a new group of blacksmiths and wizards to recreate his tool of man's undoing. Thus, the current version of the Assassin's Conscience was born. The accursed dagger would erase all emotion from a mortal's heart, leaving a fearless and pitiless killer. At the same time, the weapon provides a strong impetus for the victim to continue fighting.

The dagger was given to one of the most promising mortals in the yugoloth's service, a human assassin named Kristoff Lunner. Kristoff was a talented spy and murderer. He excelled at the art of stealth and disguise, and not one of his targets ever escaped from

death. As a reward for his service, his yugoloth masters gave him the dagger. Kristoff carried the weapon for almost a week before the sinister magic of the dagger worked its effect. Being a man of evil, Kristoff did not immediately notice the slow loss of his feelings. Day by day, the dagger drained the heart and soul from the depraved murderer. It was not until the very end that Kristoff noticed that he no longer felt the same satisfaction and joy from a kill. Even when doling out death, Kristoff was a hollow and emotionless shell.

Several months passed and Kristoff continued to fulfill his contracts, but the overwhelming apathy robbed him of his drive. The talented assassin would have ended his career if he had not stumbled upon a small blessing. During an intense battle, Kristoff used the Assassin's Conscience to finish off his target. As the lifeblood fled from his victim, a flood of emotions swept over him. The cold assassin felt joy again, although it lasted for only a few moments. Even if he couldn't retain the feeling, the intelligent assassin figured out how to obtain a momentary respite from his empty existence. By killing another with the yugoloth dagger, he could experience a small portion of his lost feelings.

Unfortunately, the lifespan of a mortal is brief in comparison to a fiend's existence. Kristoff was an excellent assassin, but there came a time that even he fell to the blade of another. The dagger has passed from one person to another over time. The Assassin's Conscience traveled across the planes and was eventually pulled into the Demiplane of Dread.

Since this dagger does not possess any flashy powers or telltale signs, it is nearly impossible to trace its history

over all the years. Some historians say that the dagger has been used in Paridon, Invidia, and other locations with histories of cold and calculated killings, but there has been no proof to support such claims. Only the continued existence of this vile dagger is known for sure...

Powers: The Assassin's Conscience functions as a +3 keen-edged dagger with the following special abilities:

- ❖ The wielder of the dagger has their Intelligence magically enhanced by +4.
- ❖ The wielder of the dagger is immune to all spells that influence emotions (e.g. *cause fear* or *emotion*).
- ❖ The wielder is immune to fear and horror checks.

Curse: The curse of the Assassin's Conscience is complex in its simplicity, which continues to make the yugoloth creators smile slyly. Each day that a person has the dagger in their possession, they need to make a Will Save (DC 24) to avoid the emotionally draining effects of the evil weapon. If the save is successful, nothing adverse happens to the owner. Once the owner of the dagger fails a save, however, he or she begins suffering 1 point of Charisma each day. The Charisma loss continues despite rest or future Will Saves until the character reaches a score of three, which leaves the owner as a cold and emotionless being. Nothing short of a *Miracle* or *Wish* can restore the lost Charisma and emotions to the victim.

Besides the *Miracle* and *Wish* spells, the Assassin's Conscience holds the key in easing this apathetic state, though the effect is temporary. Each time the Assassin's Conscience is used

to deal a killing blow to a living creature, the wielder of the dagger becomes the recipient of the *emotion* spell that lasts for 10 minutes per hit die of the slain creature. The emotion bestowed can either be chosen or assigned at random, but the otherwise emotionless recipient tends not to care as long as they can feel something. The ability to feel any emotion, despite how short-lived, drives most owners to kill again and again.

Means of Destruction: There are currently no known ways to destroy the Assassin's Conscience. Many scholars have speculated that a ritual involving strong emotions would be necessary. One theory proposes plunging the dagger in the heart of the wielder's one true love, but this method has neither been proven nor refuted. The irony is that the sacrificial mortal would not truly be the wielder's "true love," as the wielder is incapable of such emotion.

The Shroud Drakonis

To the average observer, the Shroud Drakonis resembles an ordinary long cloak. It is of the high-collar variety, almost obscuring the wearer's entire face. It is dark black in color, but has an almost ruddy sheen under certain light. One school in the arcane arts can detect sinister other-dimensional energy radiating from it. When examined with *detect magic* and *read magic* spells, a very clever observer might notice a smattering of strange, eerie runes etched at random points on the Shroud's interior. The runes translate into a magical trigger written in a very old Abyssal tongue, spelling the word "Malvolarith," but woe to any who speak this unholy phrase.

History: An otherworldly demonologist/occultist named Dracanis Vystario created The Shroud Drakonis. The madman had dedicated his life to the study of the ancient world of demons, a time that most arcane scholars would not dare to explore. He grew powerful in his obsession. Vystario created many magical items and uncovered many fiendish secrets even before he was wrenched from his home world and into the Demiplane of Dread. When he found himself in Barovia, he found that many of his precious experiments and items had been thrown to the various corners of the demiplane, and he dedicated his life to their retrieval. His whereabouts are still unknown.

Vystario had created the Shroud Drakonis shortly before his unforeseen relocation. He tortured the secrets of its creation out of a half-demon/half-derro by using a sonic reverberation chamber that could bypass demonic resistances. Most of the Shroud's construction method is a secret held by Vystario and a few truly deranged fiends, but the Shroud itself was created out of the hides of half-fiends who were kept alive during the skinning process. The ragged flesh-cloth was then soaked in the blood of six paladins for a month. The specific incantations Vystario used remain a mystery, but the spells are of the most dangerous sort of demon-magic. When finished, he had a beautiful cloak that could force a mortal down the path of corruption.

When the cloak was donned and the correct trigger spoken, it would graft to the wearer's back, creating a pair of massive, reptilian wings in the process. While these wings would grant the wearer the power of flight, the continual

pull on the victim's mind would lead him to acts of true vileness.

When Vystario was pulled into Ravenloft, the Shroud Drakonis materialized in Paridon, in the attic of a priest of the Divinity of Mankind. The priest noticed the cloak not long after its appearance and was immediately wary of it. He refused to wear or even touch it, and the Shroud was eventually sealed off in the attic. By circumstances that remain unsolved, the priest's small house fell to a flash-fire, killing the priest and destroying the house. Only the Shroud Drakonis and a few other items survived the blaze.

An unknown number of years passed, and an up-and-coming scientist named Alistaire Wyngarde bought the Shroud in an auction. Dr. Wyngarde was obsessed with the notion of man-made flight and had created numerous aero-experiments, all of which had met with disaster. Wyngarde had no concept of the Shroud's power when he purchased it, but nonetheless felt a strange compulsion to own it. A few months later, he was housing a visiting lecturer from Dementlieu who immediately sensed the Shroud's magical nature.

The two men have since begun deciphering its secret runes. However, Wyngarde is becoming more and more possessive of his prize and secretly intends to murder his colleague as soon as the last runes are deciphered. When he dons the cloak and speaks the forbidden word, he will at once have gained the means of flight and Paridon will have gained a demonically empowered madman.

Powers: The Shroud Drakonis functions as a means for the fiendish graft 'Membranous Wings' (as detailed in the d20 version of the Fiend Folio).

These wings become permanently affixed to the wearer's back, resembling the dark red wings of a succubus. The wearer gains the ability to fly at twice his or her normal land speed with an average manoeuvrability. The wearer also gains the fiendish qualities of fire and cold resistance 10.

These wings, however, are quite large. Even when folded, the wings are quite noticeable. The wearer must go to extreme lengths to hide them from view, such as tying them down with cords. They must succeed in a Disguise check (DC 27), and even if successful, suffer a -2 to their Dexterity as they find it very uncomfortable to move.

Curse: The curse of the Shroud Drakonis is its ability to warp the mind of its wearer. Each day, a wearer of non-evil alignment must make a Will save (DC 15) to resist its infusion of evil. Failure results in the loss of 1d3 points of Wisdom, as the wings begin to drive the wearer mad. When the wearer reaches a Wisdom score of 0, they become creatures of pure chaos and evil. The results vary from victim to victim, but they often involve the wearer believing they are truly a demon.

Once the Shroud has assumed the form of wings, it cannot be willed to return to its original shape. It will remain grafted to the victim until they die. When this happens, the wings fall off and immediately transform back to the Shroud of Drakonis so that they may continue their cycle of madness.

Means of Destruction: Not many have speculated on any way to destroy the Shroud, as its existence is not well known. However, Vystario secretly suspected that should the Shroud Drakonis be devoured by a pure demon, one that has never attempted a power ritual, it might be wiped out of existence.

Face of Apomps

The Face of Apomps is a uniquely disturbing mask, comprised of a corpulent face, replete with sagging jowls and a fang-filled maw. It seems to be made from a type of sickly yellow-green leather. In actuality, the leering mask was once a fiend's face that had been removed, preserved, and converted into this monstrosity. Ruby lenses are fitted in the sockets, giving the impression of glowing red eyes. Several small cords of fiendish leather are used to fasten the mask to the wearers face. Most noticeable of all is the small obsidian triangle adorning the forehead. While no intricate patterns are engraved into the stone, a powerful magical aura emanates from the triangle and throughout the rest of the mask.

History: Neither mortal nor fiend claim to have created the Face of Apomps, but historians have traced the origin of this mask to the prison plane of Carceri. The mask was crafted from the flesh of a shator and one of the mysterious obsidian triangles of the gehreleths was grafted into the forehead. Several enchantments were worked into the final product, but nobody has managed to discern which spells were used. It is currently impossible to recreate this demonic visor, but only a madman would desire to do such a thing.

Archibald Asp, a renowned planewalker, was the first person to discover the Face of Apomps outside of Carceri. The tiefling bard took the mask into his possession and continued on his way toward Sigil. Even though Archibald was a clever man, curiosity took hold of him by the third day of travel. Securing the mask to his face, the tiefling felt a surge of intense arcane power flow through him. The mask granted him the knowledge and ability to

cast spells that he was never able to master before. Removing the mask, Archibald concealed it in his backpack and continued his journey. After two weeks and several uses of the mask, Archibald reached the City of Doors.

Though Archibald was generally respected by his peers, he had made several enemies during his time traveling the planes. With the use of the mask, the bard was finally able to exact his revenge. Entering Sigil, Archibald placed the magical mask on his face and began searching for his foes. Unfortunately, arcane might was not the only thing that the mask bestowed upon the tiefling during his recent journey. The Face of Apomps had also driven him insane.

Archibald watched as all sorts of humanoids and monstrosities eyed him viciously. He could sense their hatred and fear of his newfound power. They desired the mask for themselves, and he must strike first if he wished to keep his prized possession. Before anyone in the street knew what was happening, Archibald began blasting them with fireballs while laughing maniacally.

It did not take long for the Harmonium peacekeepers to show up and subdue the deranged bard. They carried him and his mask away for judgment. The Face of Apomps, however, did not get as far as the barracks or prison. The lure of power was too great for one Harmonium member, who stole it and disappeared through a portal into the Demiplane of Dread.

The Face of Apomps drove the mutinous Harmonium member to violently attack a small village in Hazlan, where the deluded man eventually fell to a magical arrow. The mask was taken by a Hazlani wizard and

both disappeared into the smoking remains of the village. Many people have since owned the Face of Apomps, but the mask frequently changes hands as each owner is destroyed by their own nihilistic behavior. While the mask offers great power, it drives the wearer to extreme madness.

In addition to the power and madness of the mask, it is rumoured that the gehreleth that donated the skin and obsidian triangle was never destroyed. While this statement might only be the ravings of paranoid madmen, there do exist such fiends in this world. If such a fiend were indeed still alive, then anybody associated with the Face of Apomps could be in grave danger...

Powers: The Face of Apomps functions as an ordinary mask, with the exception of the following special abilities:

- ❖ The wearer gains the ability to see perfectly in darkness, both normal and magical.
- ❖ The wearer gains a +4 magical bonus to their armour class.
- ❖ The wearer gains acid, cold, and fire resistance of 10.
- ❖ The wearer gains a Spell Resistance of 13.
- ❖ The mask also grants the wearer the ability to cast a specific set of spells as if a 9th-level sorcerer.

Mask spells per day: 6 / 7 / 7 / 7 / 4. Base DC = 13 + spell level.
Spells Known: 0- *Arcane Mark, Dancing Lights, Daze, Detect Magic, Disrupt Undead, Ghost Sound, Mage Hand, Ray of Frost*; 1st- *Burning Hands, Chill Touch, Color Spray, Magic Missile, Shocking Grasp*; 2nd- *Darkness, Flaming Sphere, Melf's Acid Arrow, Shatter*; 3rd-*Fireball, Lightning Bolt, Stinking Cloud*; 4th- *Ice Storm, Wall of Fire*.

Curse: The curse of the Face of Apomps is born of its inherent connection to the gehreleth race. The gehreleths are fiends of intense hatreds and random destruction, and this mask transfers these drives to its wearer. The mask slowly distorts everything the wearer sees or hears in order to drive him or her into a deep and destructive paranoia. Whispered words are conspiracies and simple glances become vicious looks.

Each hour the Face of Apomps is worn, the wearer must make a Madness save (DC 23). If the save is successful, then the wearer suffers no adverse effects. If the Madness save fails, then the wearer suffers the effects of paranoia (see page 73 of the Ravenloft Campaign Setting). Even if the wearer removes or loses the Face of Apomps, his mind is permanently damaged. Nothing less than a *greater restoration* spell could ever return the victim's mind to its original state.

The Face of Apomps uses this severe paranoia to promote the use of its

spells. The insane wearer sees family and friends as conniving thieves and will use *fireballs* and *lightning bolts* to destroy any sort of threat. A paranoid character must make a Will Save (DC 18) every encounter to avoid casting his destructive spells. Failure results in the wearer casting his most powerful spell and continuing until either he or his foes are dead.

Means of Destruction: The delusions and paranoia associated with long-term contact with the Face of Apomps thwart most rational studies. Sage and scholars simply cannot wrap their minds around the destruction of the mask when they are constantly being coaxed into destroying everything else. The few people who were not driven insane by the mask suggest that a long purification process would rob the despicable device of its powers. One wizard suggested that the mask would crumble to dust if it were to view one hundred consecutive years of peace and harmony.

Scottie's Vengeance

The Sorrowful Tale of the Erie Board of Trade

By Blake Alexander

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My Dear Professor Van Worth,

Although I have little skill with firearms nor knowledge of the occult mysteries, in my own small way I have taken up the crusade against the great evil that threatens not only our lives, but the sanctity of our very souls.

It is my belief that knowledge is a key factor in our battle and because of this I have spent the last few months since our meeting scouring over the publications that are at my disposal in the hope of identifying any hint of evil lurking in the shadow of civilization.

Of special interest is a story that appeared in several newspapers along the waterfront of North American's Great Lakes. After some research, I have traced the tale to its original publication in the August 20, 1883 edition of the New York Sun. I have included a clipping of the article along with this letter. I pray that it may serve in our struggle against the blight upon our world.

*Timendi Casusa est Nesoire,
Marcus SinClair*

The Strange Yarn Spun by an Old Sailor: The Cruise of the *Erie Board of Trade* and the Singular Mishap That Befell Her One Starlit Night in Saginaw Bay

Down in the lower part of South Street the other day, an old sailor sat on an anchor stock in front of a ship chandler's store. He was an intelligent-looking man and was fairly well-dressed for one of his calling. Other sailors were seated on a bale of oakum, on a wide-mouth pump without a plunger, and on the single stone step of the store. The ship chandler and a young friend sat in chairs just inside the door. The group was talking about ghosts. One of the men had just told his experience.

"Well, I saw a ghost once. I saw it as plain as ever I saw anything. The captain of the schooner I was on and the man in the waist both saw it, too. There wasn't a drop of liquor on board. It happened up on the Lakes, and I reckon you know the captain. It was the talk of the docks the whole season."

"I know a Captain Jack Caster of Milan. He's the only fresh-water captain I'm acquainted with," said the ship chandler.

"He's the man. I heard him speak of you once. It was a little over ten years ago. I was before the mast then. It was at the opening of the season, and I was in Chicago. I'd been through the canal from Toronto on one of these little canallers. What with tramping through mud with a line over my shoulder and taking turns around snubbing posts every time the schooner took a notion to run her nose into the bank, I'd got enough of canal schooners. I heard at the boarding house that some men were wanted on a three-masted schooner called the *Erie Board of Trade*. The boys gave her a pretty hard name, but they said the grub was good and that the old man paid the top wages every time, so I went down and asked him if he'd got all hands aboard. He looked at me a minute, and then asked me where my dunnage was. When I told him, he said I should get it on board right away.

"I was in her two round trips. The last trip up was the last on the Lakes. Not but what times were pretty good there. We were getting \$2.50 a day for the first trip out and \$2.00 the last. We messed with the old man, and, what with fresh meat and vegetables, and coffee with milk, it was a first-cabin passage all around. But the old man made it hot for most of us. There wasn't any watch below in the day, and we were kept painting her up on the down trip and scrubbing the paint off again on the passage up. Skippers don't handle the belaying pins quite so much up there as they do down here when arguing with the men, because there is a lot of shysters around the docks waiting to get the men to tie the vessel up for it. A man who's handy in fisting a mainsail will generally find pretty fair cruising.

"The first trip around to Chicago every man but me got his dunnage onto dock as soon as he was paid off. I'd seen worse times than what we'd had, and when I got my money I asked the old man if he'd want anyone to help with the lines when the schooner was towed from the coal-yard to the elevator. He said he reckoned he could keep me by if I wanted to stay, so I signed articles for the next trip there. When we were getting the wheat into her at the elevator we got the crew aboard. One of them was a red-haired Scotchman. The captain took a dislike to him from the first. It was a tough time for 'Scotty' all the way down. We were in Buffalo just twelve hours and then we cleared for Cleveland to take on soft coal for Milwaukee. The tug gave us a short pull outside the breakwater, and we had no more than got the canvas onto the schooner before the wind died out completely. Nothing would do but we must drop anchor, for the current, settling to the Niagara River, was carrying us down to Black Rock at three knots an hour.

"When we'd got things shipshape about decks, the old man called Scotty and two others aft and told them to scrape down the topmasts. Then he handed the boatswain's chair to them. Scotty gave his chair a look and then turned around, and touching his forehead respectfully, said, 'If you please, sir, the rope's about chafed off, and I'll bend on a bit of ratlin' stuff.' The captain was mighty touchy because the jug had left him so, and he just jumped up and down and swore. Scotty climbed the main rigging pretty quick. He got the halliards bent onto the chair and sung out to hoist away. I and a youngster, the captain's nephew, were standing by. We handled that rope carefully, for I'd seen how tender the chair was. When

we'd got him up chock-a-block, the young fellow took a turn around the pin, and I looked aloft to see what Scotty was doing. As I did so he reached for his knife with one hand and put out the other for the backstay. Just then the chair gave way. He fell all bunched up 'til he struck the cross-trees, and then he spread out like and fell flat on the deck, just forward of the cabin on the starboard side. I was kneeling beside him in a minute, and so was the old man, too, for he'd no idea that the man would fall. I was feeling pretty well choked up to see a shipmate killed so, and I said to the captain: 'This is pretty bad business, sir. This man's been murdered,' says I.

"When I said that, Scotty opened his eyes and looked at us. Then, in a whisper, he cursed the captain and his wife and children, and the ship and her owners. It was awful. While he was still talking the blood bubbled over his lips, and his head lurched over to one side. He was dead.

It was three days before the schooner got to Cleveland. Some of the boys were for leaving her there, but most of us stayed by, because wages were down again. Going through the rivers there were four other schooners in tow. We were next to the tug, and some lubber cast off the towline without singing out first. We dropped our bower as quick as we could, but it was not before we'd drifted astern, carrying away the head gear of the schooner next to us and smashing in our own boat under the stern.

"There was a fair easterly wind on the Lake, and as we had got out of the river in the morning we were standing across Saginaw Bay during the first watch that night. I had the second trick at the wheel. The stars were shining bright and clear and not a cloud was in sight. In the northwest, a low, dark streak showed where the land was. Every stitch of canvas was set and drawing, though the booms sagged and creaked as the vessel rolled lazily in the varying breeze.

I had just sung out to the mate to strike eight bells when the captain climbed up the companionway and out on deck. He stepped over to the starboard rail and had a look around, and then the lookout began striking the bell. The last stroke of the bell seemed to die away with a swish. A bit of spray or something struck me in the face. I wiped it away, and then I saw something rise up slowly across the mainsail from the starboard side of the deck forward of the cabin. It was white and all bunched up. I glanced at the captain, and saw he was staring at it too. When it reached the gaff near the throat halliards, it hovered over an instant, and then struck the cross-trees. There it spread out and rolled over toward us. It was Scotty. His lips were working just as they were when he cursed the captain. As he straightened out, he seemed to stretch himself until he grasped the maintop mast with one hand and the mizzen with the other. Both were carried away like pipe-stems. The next I knew the ship was all in the wind. The square-sail yard was hanging in two pieces, the top hamper was swinging, and the booms were jibing over.

"The old man fell in a dead faint on the quarter deck, and the man in the waist dived down the fore-castle so fast that he knocked over the last man of the other watch. If it hadn't been for the watch coming on deck just then, she'd rolled the sticks out of her altogether. They got the headsails over, and I put the wheel up without knowing what I was doing. In a minute it seemed we were laying our course again. The second mate was just beginning to

curse me for going to sleep at the wheel, when the mate came along and glanced at the binnacle.

"What the _____ is this?" he said. 'Laying our course and on the other tack?'

The young man by the ship chandler had listened with intense interest. "Here," he said. "That story is true. I was there. I'm the captain's nephew you spoke about. I was reading in the cabin that night. As the bell began to strike, I felt a sudden draft through the cabin, and my paper was taken out of my hands and out of the window before I could stop it. I hurried out of the cabin after it, but as I got my head up through the companionway I heard the crash of the falling masts. When the schooner began to go off on the other tack, I saw a bit of waterspout two miles away to the leeward, and --"

The ship chandler laughed.

"Did you find your paper?" he asked.

"No!" said the young man.

"I thought not," said the ship chandler.

"Well," said the old sailor, "the main facts in this story can be easily verified. The next voyage the schooner was sunk. The insurance company resisted payment on the grounds that she had been scuttled by her captain. During the trial of the case, the story of the death of Scotty and the loss of her topmasts under a clear sky was all told under oath. Anybody who doesn't believe it can see a copy of the printed testimony by applying to Rosberg & Barker, the ship chandlers at 1789 Central Wharf, Buffalo"

Scottie

(Third Magnitude Ghost, Bowlyn Variant)
 Medium-Sized Undead (Incorporeal)
 Hit Dice: 4d12 (hit points 30)
 Initiative: +6 (+2, Dex, +4 Initiative)
 Speed: Flying, 30 ft. (Perfect)
 AC: 15 (+2 Dex, +3 Deflection)
 Attacks: Incorporeal touch +7 melee
 Damage: Incorporeal touch sickness 1d6 (1d6+6 vs. ethereal)
 Face/Reach: 5 ft by 5ft./5ft
 Special Attack: Manifestation, mind games, seasick touch, telekinesis
 Special Qualities: Undead, Incorporeal, +5 Turn Resistance
 Saves: Fort +4, Ref +3, Will +2
 Abilities: Str 15, Dex 15, Con-, Int 10, Wis 12, Cha 16
 Skills: Balance +6, Hide +8, Listen +8, Profession (Sailor) +6, Search +8, Spot +10
 Feats: Alertness, Ambidexterity, Dodge, Power Attack
 Climate/Terrain: Great Lakes, North America
 Organization: Solitary
 Challenge Rating: 4
 Rating:
 Treasure: None
 Alignment: Chaotic Evil

The Spirit of the sailor, known only as Scottie, still waits to complete the vengeful curse that filled his dying words. Although Scottie has seen his

revenge brought upon Captain Jack Caster and the *Erie Board of Trade*, his spirit still lingers upon the water of the Great Lakes waiting to fulfill the remainder of his curse upon the others whom he also cursed that day-most notably the family of Captain Caster and the owners of the Erie Board of Trade.

Combat

Scottie will follow the same pattern as he did in the attack on the *Erie Board of Trade*, attacking once per night in an indirect manner whenever possible. Since Scottie served as a Great Lakes sailor, he is acutely familiar with the working of vessels upon these waters and will use that knowledge to its fullest. In the final portion of the tale of the *Erie Board of Trade*, it becomes clear that Captain Caster attempted to end Scottie's haunting by scuttling his ship upon the rocky shore. Since this tactic proved ineffective for the captain, it can be assumed that either he was unsuccessful in scuttling his vessel upon the shore or that Scottie's curse has somehow made him resistant to this aspect of the Bowlyn's weakness (DM's Choice)

Manifestation (Su): When Scottie manifests he can strike with his touch attack and be attacked by opponents on the Material and Ethereal Planes as well. His appearance will, however, cause *fear* as the spell cast by a 12th level sorcerer (Will Save DC 15 to resist)

Mind Games (Su): Scott has the ability to create images in the minds of the living. This ability acts just like a *major image* spell, except for the fact that these images are actually phantasms. The spell takes affect as if it was cast by a 7th level sorcerer. (Scottie's apparent growth during his manifestation during

the sailor's account is attributed to this power)

Seasick Touch (Su): When Scottie successfully attacks a living target with his seasick attack 1d6 damage is dealt. In addition, the victim must make a Fortitude save (DC15), or be instantly overcome with nausea (see Bowlyn description, on page 28 of *Denizen of Darkness*, for more details)

Telekinesis (Su): Scottie can use *telekinesis* once per round as a free action, as if he were a 12th-level caster. This power only affects objects.

Ending the Haunting

For Scottie's spirit to be set to rest Captian Jack Caster must be publicly declared responsible for the seaman's death. This could include something as official as a court proceeding or as simple as one of Captain Caster's descendants proclaiming the Captain the guilty in front of witnesses. Short of this, only the death of all those associated with Scottie's curse will end the haunting.

Adventure Hooks

- The Player Characters are crew or passengers on a ship on which either

a family member of Captain Jack Caster or the one of the former owners of the *Erie Board of Trade* is traveling while on the Great Lakes, thus attracting Scottie's attention.

- One of the Player Character's themselves are descendants of Captain Jack Caster and they find themselves caught up in the Scottie's curse while traveling upon the Great Lakes.

Credits and Acknowledgments

My special thanks goes to the *Sennit*, a Great Lakes literary journal where in I first came across the ghostly tale of the *Erie Board of Trade*. That account can be found at:

<http://www.mindspring.com/~sennit/ghost.htm>

I would also like to thank James Donahue for his website The Mind of James Donahue for providing additional information about the Erie Board of Trade. Donahue's thoughts regarding Scottie's haunting can be found at:

http://perdurabol0.tripod.com/the_mindofjamesdonahue/id142.html

The Grande Elizabeth Hotel

Haunted Hideaway of the American Aristocracy

By Stephen Sutton aka ScS of the Fraternity

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To the elite of 1890, life is filled with burdens the commoners of the world could never understand. Between the pressures of fame and the obligations of high society there is little time for rest. Old money nobility vie against self-made millionaires while blue blood debutants duel with stage starlets for position at the top of the heap. All the while newspaper reporters root through their lives in the quest for scandalous stories. These Victorian aristocrats forever seek a refuge in which they might escape the pressures of their world. They turn their eyes to the quiet countryside, quaint seaside hamlets, isolated islands and mountain overlooks for safe haven, where they can escape the rigors of nobility.

The Grande Elizabeth Hotel is such a retreat, a hidden hideaway and playground for the elite. Nestled in the depths of the wilderness, this lavish hotel opens its doors only the finest clientele, ensuring the atmosphere to which its guests are accustomed. The estate is a vision of luxury and splendour, a monument to the grandeur of the Victorian elite. From its perch over looking the slopes of the Rocky Mountains, it offers guests the chance to survey the natural beauty of the world they have come to own. The Grande Elizabeth has become a second home to many of the American aristocracy, an escape from the darker side of their lives of luxury.

Unfortunately, no escape is absolute. As the rich withdraw from their world, dark things follow. The Grande Elizabeth Hotel has played host not merely to the elite of Gothic Earth, but also to their hidden woes. Beneath the veneer of mahogany and the glow of polished brass lies buried the shadowy secrets of the Hotel's past. Most such secrets stay silent, kept silent by the staff, ignored by the clientele. Yet even still the walls of the Grande Elizabeth whisper to one another, and that which was buried refuses to rest silently.

The Grande Elizabeth Hotel

The Grande Elizabeth Hotel is a sumptuous estate, nestled in the wilderness of the Montana Rockies. Perched atop the scenic mountainside, the hotel is located above a quaint hamlet through which runs the Utah North railway, a tributary of the Central Pacific. Once the site of a humble gold mine, the town of Hallsville now services the needs of the Hotel. Guests are ferried from the train station to the hotel by coach through most of the year, and by sleigh in the winter. This isolated village is home to quaint taverns and trendy shops that sell luxuries far beyond anything the village folk could ever afford.

The Grande Elizabeth is built upon a smooth sloping hill, ideal for skiing. The roadway to the Hotel is a long and winding path through the mountain, maintained by the villagers. The path is

easily negotiated for most of the year, but can be quite treacherous for inexperienced sleigh teams during the winter.

When guests finally arrive, they are greeted by a mighty edifice. Four stories tall, the Grande Elizabeth is built in the style of a magnificent mansion. Two wide wings stretch from the center, reaching out to the guests with a welcoming embrace. These are the East and West wings, the temporary home for the guests of the Grande Elizabeth. At full capacity, these rooms could house a total of one hundred guests and servants, though they rarely carry much more than half such a number. Triangular roofs top the huge brown brick structure, Greek columns towering along the walls bordering the banks of windows and balconies.

The centerpiece of the building is “the tower”, a circular structure bedecked with columns and grand windows. The tower is the site of the main lobby, the dining room, ball room and the overlook balcony. The great windows of the overlook and the ballroom are easily visible from the exterior, in the night they glow with lamp light like two eyes stacked upon one another.

The interior of the hotel is as impressive as the exterior. Built to cater to the most discerning tastes, nothing within the Grande Elizabeth is anything less than the finest quality. The tone is set in the lobby where guests are ushered across a marble floor beneath a tall vaulted ceiling lighted with shining brass chandeliers. The front desk is nestled between two curving stairways, which lead up to the ballroom and dining rooms above. While an army of bellhops snap to the orders of the desk clerk, guests are invited to sit in the hotel

lounge, a sumptuous resting place dominated by the finest leather chairs circled around a massive stone fireplace.

From the lobby guests are taken by their bellhop on a tour through the heart of opulence. The walls of the Grande Elizabeth are built of strong redwood, the floors blanketed with plush red carpet. Every doorknob, lamp, candle holder and wall hanger is made of shining brass, diligently polished by the staff. Images of cherubs, olive leaves and classical images adorn nearly every surface. The rooms themselves are exclusively large suites with rooms for several visitors and their own staff of servants. Each guest’s room is decorated with works of art, fine crafted furniture and bookcases containing works of great renown from western literature.

Once settled in, guests may partake of any number of the pleasures offered by the Grande Elizabeth. The second floor of the Tower is split between the dining room and the ballroom. The dining room is an extravagant room, serviced by a world class kitchen neatly tucked away out of sight on the first floor. The room can be lighted with great hanging chandeliers to offer light in the evening and in the day by the massive balcony windows. The cavernous ballroom is located opposite the dining room, and boasts its own balcony and windows.

Above the second floor is the overlook balcony, a room built to offer guests an inspiring panorama of the majestic mountainside. Accessible by spiral staircase from either wing, this overlook has no walls but is surrounded by glass. From the cosy leather chairs of the overlook, guests may survey the vista for endless miles. Naturally cold in the winter, this room is heated by a fireplace in the center.

The staff of the Grande Elizabeth tends to all the whims of its guests, providing nearly any service imaginable. A games room in the East wing boasts billiards tables, dart boards, chess tables and equipment for croquet. The hotel boasts a significant hunting lodge, offering guests rifles, ammunition, cold weather gear, as well as cleaning and taxidermy services. Skies, snowshoes, and sleds are made available to guests in the winter.

Beneath the hotel is a winding labyrinth of wine cellars and storage areas. The entire hotel is honeycombed with state of the art ventilation leading from the mighty coal furnace in the basement. A network of pumps links the hotel to a natural well in the mountain; ensuring guests receive a steady supply of water for drinking, bathing and other necessary purposes.

The opulence of The Grande Elizabeth is reserved only for the richest, most elite of all the Americas. Reservations must be approved by the manager, who ensures that only the cream of North American society enters. For the sumptuous pleasures of the Grande Elizabeth guests pay an extravagant price, which is compiled from all of the services rendered. The management never discusses the bill with its guests. As the manager is fond of remarking, if someone need ask the cost of a stay at the Grande Elizabeth, it is clear that they cannot afford it.

History

The history of the Grande Elizabeth began with one Walter Pratt, an accountant to an alcoholic heir. For several years Walter managed the estates of his patron, even as the young man fell further and further into debauchery. Yet Pratt gladly bore the responsibility, for

in his spare hours Walter dallied amongst the elite of Boston. A natural sycophant, he lived life vicariously through the rich and famous people he met. Yet though he flattered and toadied with all his skill, acceptance amongst these blue bloods eluded him. Failure hardened his resolve, however, and Walter steeled himself to the task of joining the upper crust. Finally it dawned upon him that the only way to become accepted by high society was to become their host. So was it that Walter Pratt envisioned the Grande Elizabeth.

Walter had little difficulty persuading his employer to invest in the scheme, for the wealthy heir had already succumbed completely to vice. The endeavour itself would take many years as Walter chose the perfect location, retained the most experienced staff and assembled the materials. Finally the extraordinary edifice was completed. As the staff began to prepare the Hotel for its opening Pratt sent a telegram for his employer to join him and view the fruits of his investment. The reply from Walter's employer came back, announcing that the hotel had been sold, destroying all of Pratt's sycophantic fantasies. The staff found Walter Pratt hanging from the chandelier in his office.

Dale Hoffman had made a fortune in the hotel industry, owning an army of tiny hotels throughout the United States and Canada. Hoping to earn respectability in the circles of high society, and a reprieve from his nagging wife, Hoffman purchased the Grande Elizabeth in 1881. The Hoffmans managed their hotel for three years, collecting a circle of loyal clientele and establishing a reputation of unprecedented luxury. Unfortunately,

stresses began to develop in their marriage.

Hoffman had been known for his rough social graces, but after moving into the Grande Elizabeth his foul language degenerated into abuse. He began to suffer from insomnia and bouts of rage and paranoia. The Hoffman marriage began to disintegrate, feeding the angry fires that raged in Hoffman's head. Many of the staff suffered under the capricious tyranny of their employer as he slipped further and further into madness. It was almost a relief to the staff when in 1884 Mr. Hoffman was shot by his wife in self-defence.

After Hoffman's death the Grande Elizabeth came under hard times. The scandal from Hoffman's murder drove away customers and caused Mrs. Hoffman to withdraw from the outside world. The aging widow spent her last years locked away in the abandoned hotel, using the Grande Elizabeth as her private residence. For three years she lived as an eccentric recluse, squandering her late husband's fortune. As the stories told, the profound isolation of her home drove Mrs. Hoffman to an obsession with the occult. Rumours filtered back to civilization, whispers of mystics, fortune tellers, psychics and ghost hunters prowling the grounds of the Grande Elizabeth.

Present

Whatever Mrs. Hoffman activities might have been, they ended in 1888, when Mrs. Hoffman died from a fall down the stairs. The hotel was quickly bought by a small business consortium that made much needed repairs to the hotel and reopened it to customers. In that time much of the scandalous rumours have subsided and the Grande

Elizabeth Hotel has become a renowned retreat for the American elite.

The Board of Directors of the Grande Elizabeth have hired Simon Enfield, a former butler, as the general manager. Enfield is a small, spindly man, nearly completely bald and possessed of a nasal voice that all but screams condescension. Simon is renowned for an attention to detail bordering on anal, as well as a fair measure of snobbery. Since his appointment in 1888, Simon has worked hard to re-establish the reputation of the Grande Elizabeth and to quell the old superstitions that have attached themselves to the hotel. He has run the staff ragged to ensure that the hotel is nothing less than perfect. Simon will brook no disrespect from his subordinates; many a staff person has been fired for asking too many questions.

The hotel staff has been expanded to a total of thirty bellhops, cooks, groundskeepers, maids and waiters. The Grande Elizabeth has retained the services of a group of teamsters to ferry goods and people up and down the mountain, as well as several local men to maintain the roadway.

The clientele of the Hotel comes mainly from the West coast of the USA, though visitors from the East, Canada or wealthy tourists from abroad are not unknown. Most of the guests of the Grande Elizabeth are the privileged heirs of high society, many of whom bring their families. The Grande Elizabeth has handled many functions, including high society weddings and other extravagant get-togethers.

Forbidden Lore

Buried beneath a veneer of mahogany and brass are the grim secrets of a sorted past. The hotel staff speaks in hushed whispers of the strange happenings they have experienced; though they fear the retribution of their manager should they let the rumours slip out. There are certain halls that the maids will never use after sundown, paths down the mountain that the groundskeepers never travel and rooms that the staff will not open to guests.

There are guests who claim to have been assisted by a mysterious man who claims to be the manager, and yet vanishes in the blink of an eye. This mysterious visitor bears a striking resemblance to the late Walter Pratt, whose humble photo adorns the wall behind the front desk. Though he is loath to admit it, the current manager has complained to the custodians that the chandelier in his office seems to swing on its own volition whenever he leaves the room. The ghost of Walter Pratt may appear to be a benevolent spirit, yet such an unstable, obsessive personality might easily turn against the guests or staff.

The great ballroom in the Tower was constructed by the late Mrs. Hoffman, under the advice of a spiritualist. It is said that the ballroom was used by the departed eccentric as a summoning room during séances. The more superstitious servants believe that the spirits invoked remain trapped within in the room. The staff has often found the tables and chairs overturned, stacked upon one another or otherwise disturbed. The staff has given up keeping the room in order, so they close it off to the guests until it is needed. Though harmless for

the moment, these poltergeists may escape into other areas, possibly forcing the management to seek assistance in removing the restless spirits.

Room 49, located in the East Wing was once the private residence of the Hoffmans and was the site where Mrs. Hoffman shot her husband in self defence. One dark evening, enraged by some imagined slight, Dale Hoffman attacked his wife with a steak knife. The former hotel magnate absorbed five bullets into his chest before he collapsed. When Simon Enfield assumed his position as manager he opened room 49 and found a grisly stain still left in the rug. Even after three changes of the carpeting, the stain remains. For a time Enfield hoped to use the room as servant quarters, but anyone who slept within the room suffered from horrible nightmares. Ever the sceptic, Enfield waits for someone to house in the room, if only to disprove the childish rumours. There is no telling what fate might befall someone foolish enough to accept Enfield's challenge.

The mountainside around the Grande Elizabeth is a popular site for skiers and numerous ski trails are maintained by the groundskeepers. There is one trail that the groundskeepers have attempted to close off to the public, planting brushes and saplings in the futile attempt to obliterate the trail. The old staff can recall a tragedy in 1882, when a guest died tragically on the Southern path. While skiing one night the young man took a fall from a precipice and broke his leg. Two days latter a search party was drawn to the precipice by cries for help, only to find a frozen corpse and no plausible source for the sound.

The incident was hushed up, but two years latter another life was taken when a local hunter fell from the same precipice. The group with the victim claimed that their friend was lured to the cliff by mysterious cries for help. Though they will not speak of it to outsiders, the groundskeepers know that when the snow begins to fall some malignant *thing* awakens. This mysterious entity calls out to unsuspecting victims on the Southern path, luring them to an untimely fate on the jagged rocks. It is unknown if this mysterious siren is a restless spirit, some foul thing summoned by Mrs. Hoffman in her years of dementia or something else altogether.

Adventure Hooks

The Grande Elizabeth can be used in many different ways in nearly any Masque of the Red Death campaign. The Grande Elizabeth is a decadent backdrop for any adventure. Wherever the rich and privileged go they are followed by their scandalous sins. As an isolated location, the Grande Elizabeth could be the site of a murder mystery, a safe house for members of qabal or even the refuge of some villain.

As a site of suicides, murders, tragic accidents and mystical meddling, the Grande Elizabeth is perfect stalking ground for ghost hunters. If a group of adventurers can find some means of gaining access to the Hotel, they will find no shortage of restless spirits. The spirits within the ballroom, the ghost of Walter Pratt and the spiritual stain of Hoffman are just a few possibilities sources of a haunting. The mysterious thing from the Southern Path could also prove a challenging encounter should the players be lured into its clutches.

Furthermore, the rumours of Mrs. Hoffman's involvement in the occult are true. Haunted by the spirits of her husband and the late Walter Pratt, Mrs. Hoffman delved into mysticism. Before she died, Mrs. Hoffman gathered together a sizable group of psychics, sorcerers and mystics, nearly forming a true qabal. There is no telling what strangeness was worked in those years; no one alive knows what dark secrets might be waiting to be discovered. Many of these occultists were unhappy to lose the hotel as their base of operations; they may very well attempt to reclaim it by force and duplicity.

Credit

Contributors

Andrew “alhoon” Pavlides

apavlides24@hotmail.com. Creator of the Theari. I'm a 24 years old Greek and I've played D&D since I was 9 or 10 years old. My favourite world is Ravenloft and while I don't have all the 3E products, I support the line as much as I can. I have played and DMed Ravenloft about 3 - 4 years, since I read "I, Strahd. The War against Azalin". The Theari was something buzzing in my head for a long time, after many and many moral discussions of how could an angel, a creature of pure goodness, kill people. With the Theari, I try to give another approach on the protector of the innocent. Not one that with sword drawn kills the beast, but one who secretly makes the life better to all those around it.

Blake Alexander

Blake_Alexander1@yahoo.com. Author of Scottie's Vengeance. Blake's first experience with role playing games predates the publication of the first edition Advanced Dungeon and Dragons hard cover books. Ever since he's spent his leisure time spinning tales of dark terror and great adventure for his players. When not planning such exploits, Blake enjoys exploring historical accounts in hopes of uncovering the tales there in.

Conrad “Chaos Nomad” Clark

Dyazion1@aol.com. Author of the Second Time Around. An avid philosophy enthusiast, Conrad tends to enjoy spending time in bars, torpedo-

fishing inebriated punters, often sending them over the edge and into a perpetual spiral of madness –and yes, he made the power checks... Areas of interest are: the Philosophy of Mind, specifically Personal Identity; the Philosophy of Religion; Modernism; and, The Gothic. He first became interested in Ravenloft during the Red Box era. His favourite authors include Poe, and Tolkien.

David "The Jester" Gibson

jester_canuk@hotmail.com. Author of the Shadow Fiend and the Gentleman Caller. David contributed 3.0E stats of Rudolph Van to QtR#2, his take on the Carnival's creepings in #3, and much on the Abber in #6. A traveler in the Mists since he found the Red Box and has not looked back since. He enjoys making jokes and long walks on the beach and his pet peeves include all vampires that aren't hot Goth chicks and werewolves that aren't housebroken.

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zetelmaier@aol.com. Co-creator of Fiendishly Foul Items. Joseph Zettelmaier is a professional actor, playwright, stage manager, and fight choreographer living in Michigan. He's been a raging Ravenloft fan for over ten years, when first introduced to the Black Box set. Thanks to Carolyn, Henry, Jason S. & especially Jason T. for keeping the fires burning.

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to my wonderfully patient husband, Jason, for his support and sense of humor.

Tadelin Darkblade

develaine@geocities.com. Author of Children of the Night: Marcus La Monte. Tadelin is a paranoid hack who really thinks the Dark Powers are keeping their collective eye on him. When he's not experimenting with trying to turn computers into bizarre things or tormenting his players as a DM, Tadelin manages to find some spare time to work on seeing if he can beat a casino playing by the casino's rules. And no, he doesn't know that it's not possible legally.

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Pursuits: the Blessed Protectors and co-creator of Heinrich’s Curiosities: Fiendish Foul Items. With the possible exception of Planescape, Ravenloft has been my favourite setting to both play and DM. These particular tastes probably explain why I have a tendency to use various fiends in my Ravenloft campaigns and have a gothic atmosphere to many of my Planescape adventures. In fact, I would like to give a special thank you to my angelic wife, Renee, who has been both supportive and understanding of all of my role-playing interests.

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stephensutton@hotmail.com. Creator of Needful Things and the Grande Elizabeth. I’d like to thank all of our contributors. We couldn’t have produced this issue without you guys!