

ARDRA



MANAGING EDITOR:

James Introcaso

PRODUCTION AND PLAYTEST DIRECTOR:

Lars Bakke

EDITORS: Sadie Lowry,
Hannah Rose**AUTHORS:** Alex
Clippinger, Marcello De
Velazquez, Basheer Ghouse**GRAPHIC DESIGN/
LAYOUT:**

Jen McCleary

COVER ART:

Zuzanna Wuzyk

TITLE LOGO:

Tom Schmuck

**ACCESSIBILITY
CONSULTANT:**

Chris Hopper

**COMMUNITY
COORDINATOR:**

John Champion

CUSTOMER SUPPORT:

Bobby McBride

**MCDM CONTRACT
QA SENIOR TESTER:**

Spencer Hibnick

TESTERS: Nathan Clark,
Cassandra “Dig” Crary,
Alecson de Lima Junior,
James Dewar**INTERIOR****ILLUSTRATIONS:***Embrace the Flesh:*

Patrik Hell

Nightmare Dragon:

Weapon, Character:

Henrik Rosenborg.

Dragon Lair: Faizal Fikri

*What They Know May Hurt
You:* Gustavo Pelissari**CARTOGRAPHY:**

Miska Fredman

MCDM IS:Lars Bakke: Development &
Production

Jerod Bennett: Technology

Geoff Chandler: Marketing &
Operations

Grace Cheung: Art

Matt Colville: Writing &
DesignAnna Coulter: Production &
OperationsNick De Spain: Art &
Art Outsource Management

Jason Hasenauer:

Art & Art Direction

James Introcaso: RPG Line
Developer**PLAYTEST
COORDINATORS:**

Aaron Flavius West

AJ Metzger

Alex Hencinski

Anna Guimarães

Bennoni Thomas

Claire Buzzelli

Clayton Salamon

Janek Dalkowski

John Bryant

Madeleine Bray

Reuben Hung

Shane Parker

PLAYTESTERS:

Adam McLaughlin

Alexander L. Lossius

Andy Heinrich

Brandon Wanner

Brett DeCosimo

Brian Diehl

Bryce Beggs

CarlsXeEinar

Casey Bell

Casey Williams

Christopher Teale

Cory Muraglio

Daniel Franco

David Fleming

Eran Arbel

Fábio Mesquita

Gabriel Sortica Reichmann

Guilherme da Silva Moser

Harrison Howe

Hazel Margaris

Jack Dewhurst

Jacob Richardson

Jai Gautam

Jake Lagerstrom

James M

Jeanne Parker

Jeff Cochran

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Leonardo Vechi

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Naif Milaat

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Nathan Lee

Nev

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Trae Block

Venlar

Vinícius Bellé

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Zachary Paquette

0XiDi

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

When the articles for this issue of *ARCADIA* were just a conversation and before a single word was ever written for it, I had a burning desire to do a horror-themed issue. I imagined it for the October 2022 issue, *ARCADIA* 21, but it turns out that when you only do three articles per magazine, it's easy to unintentionally themify. If *ARCADIA* 7 was "We apparently made a nature issue!" this time it's "Oops, mostly spooky stuff!"

The nature of horror in our heroic fantasy roleplaying game is both inherent and questionable. The game has a whole core book just dedicated to monsters! Its lore describes how these creatures cause mayhem and mischief, while their stat blocks tell us what violence these things that go bump in the night use to achieve their goals. (Goals, I might add, that often amount to "eat people.") That right there is horrific stuff!

On the other hand, the game gives player characters the tools to annihilate these creatures in combat (there's a whole core book dedicated to that, too), which makes most encounters with monsters more like a scene from an epic action movie than a slasher or a psychological thriller. *Halloween* would have been a different movie if Jamie Lee Curtis's character knew the *fireball* spell.

Yet, as GMs we must give our players scares from time to time. Many adventures, horror or not, are most satisfying when the player characters face danger despite their fear and overcome forces that would send others screaming back to their mommies. That's what makes a hero! To best achieve that satisfaction, the GM gets the players to fear for their characters' lives (in a safe, fun way, of course).

Most of us don't run horror-themed campaigns, but we all use elements of the genre to achieve that fun bit of terror and tension. We describe the stench of death in a necromancer's lab, the sound of distant chittering in a web-

filled cavern, or the shadows looming under the surface of a moonlit lake, because we want the players to know that this place is dangerous and that their characters are grade-A badasses just for answering the call to adventure.

Having fun with horror isn't all on the GM. A huge part of making a game's scares work is player buy-in. A player who sits down and is ready to be scared when the story calls for it will have a much better time, and they'll help everyone else get immersed in the story. But a player who folds their arms and dares the GM to scare them is probably going to be bored and pull other folks in the table out of the moment (much like an audience member at a comedy club who arrives with a "just try and make me laugh, funny person" attitude is in for a miserable time). When our GMs invite us into the darkness, it's our job to go in with teeth chattering, then punch evil in its spooky face.

This issue has delicious horror in several flavors. First, [Basheer Ghouse](#) lets players create their own body horror stories with the Way of the Flesh monk subclass in "Embrace the Flesh." Then [Alex Clippinger](#) delivers psychological horror through the most devious creatures we've had in *ARCADIA*'s pages yet in "The Nightmare Dragon." Finally, [Marcello De Velazquez](#) has three NPC informants that force players to face talking rodents, mind-controlling magic items, and a deadly masquerade to gain vital information in "What They Know May Hurt You."

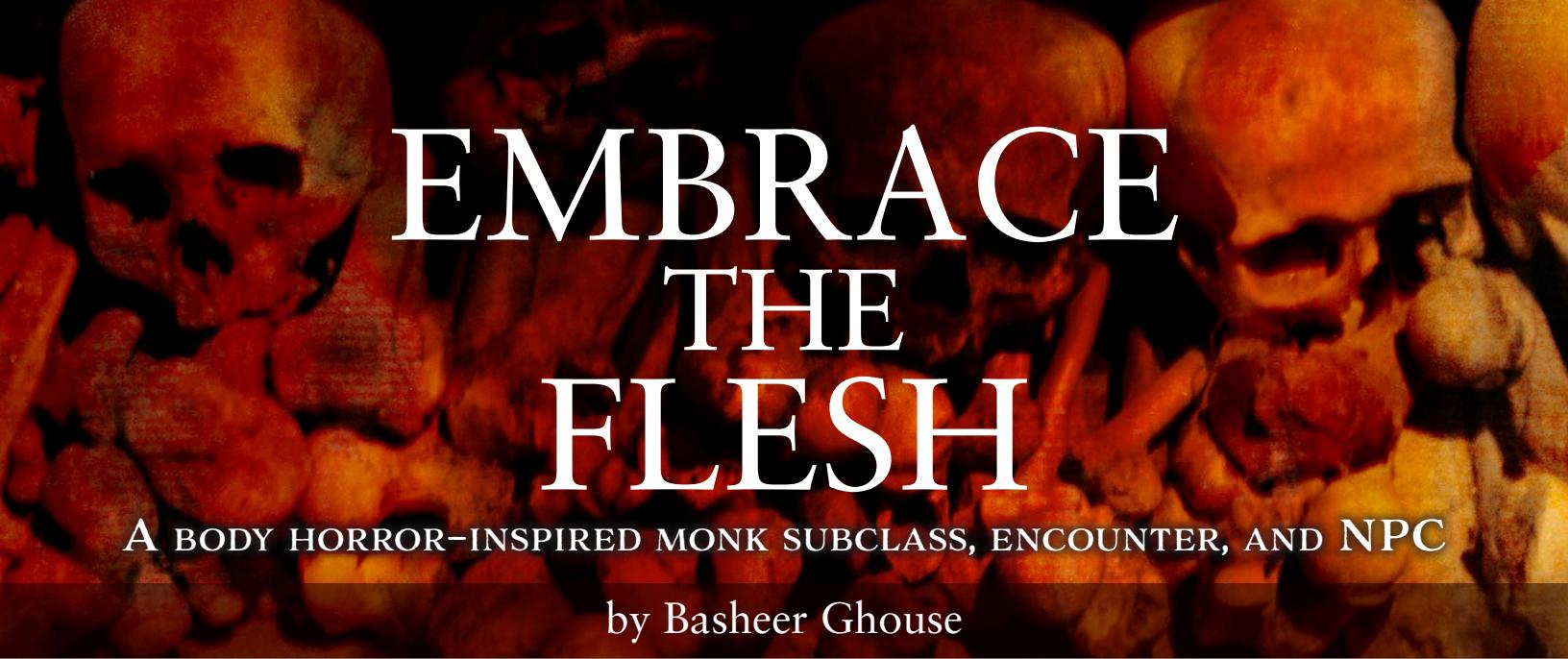
So read on ... if you dare!!!

[Dracula laugh](#)

coughing ... sputtering ... panting ...

[Dracula laugh again!](#)

Ex animo,
James Introcaso
Managing Editor



EMBRACE THE FLESH

A BODY HORROR-INSPIRED MONK SUBCLASS, ENCOUNTER, AND NPC

by Basheer Ghouse

Content Warning: This article contains body horror, gore, child abandonment, famine, and really, really big spiders.

THE ASCETICS SAY YOUR BODY IS A TRAP, POISONING YOU WITH ITS NEEDS. THE MYSTICS SAY IT IS A PRISON, TO BE TRANSCENDED WITH MEDITATION. THEY ARE WRONG. YOUR BODY IS MEAT. IN ALL ITS FRAILTY, AND ALL ITS GLORY, AND ALL ITS HORROR.

—MEHAL KHAR, ADHERENT OF FLESH

This article presents a new monk subclass, Way of the Flesh, as well as an encounter, NPC, and retainer themed around this monastic tradition, which takes inspiration from *Carrion*, *Prototype*, *Venom*, and similar body horror stories. This subclass lets you play a protean abomination who lashes out with fleshy pseudopods, pulling your body through dungeons or urban environments and taking on the forms of your victims.

THE WAY OF THE FLESH

A dwarf swings through the streets of a desert city, limbs stretching impossibly as she grabs the edges of rooftops before flinging herself forward at bone-breaking velocity. A dragonborn snaps a guard's neck and, as he lowers the corpse, assumes his victim's face, form, and voice. Flesh sloughs from the body of a human, their very being unraveling before they reform as an elf with long, scythe-like limbs that lash out at enemies in every direction, unleashing a maelstrom of gore.

This is the Way of the Flesh. Some adherents start down this path after becoming afflicted with disease, poisoned by alchemical concoctions, or suffering from aberrant parasites. They discover the Way of the Flesh as a method for survival in a hostile body. Other practitioners are philosophers, musing on the relationship between self and body and how deeply the mind can warp its housings. As a disciple becomes more skilled in this tradition, the distinction between their flesh and that of their victims blurs; the adherent's true body becomes an amorphous mass, optimized for mobility and violence.

SHAPE THE FLESH

At 3rd level, you unlock the first secrets of the Way of the Flesh. You sprout lethal pseudopods, capable of ripping apart your foes and pulling you across your environment. The reach of your unarmed strikes increases to 10 feet. This reach increases to 15 feet at 11th level and 20 feet at 17th level. You can use these pseudopods to grapple other creatures, but they don't increase the number of creatures you can grapple and they can't wield weapons, shields, or spellcasting foci. Creatures you grapple can make melee attacks against you no matter how far away you are.

Additionally, you can spend 1 ki point on your turn to make your limbs stronger and more flexible for 10 minutes (no action required). For the duration, you can use the Dexterity (Acrobatics) skill instead of Strength (Athletics) when you attempt to grapple or maintain a grapple. In addition, when you take the Attack action, you can forgo one attack to grab a Medium or larger object within reach of your unarmed strike and pull yourself to an unoccupied space within 5 feet of the object. This movement doesn't provoke opportunity attacks.

MIND IS MATTER

At 6th level, you learn the second secret of the Way of the Flesh—that all people are meat, and that the only thing separating your identity from others is that they aren't part of you yet. When you reduce a Humanoid within your reach to 0 hit points, or use an action to handle a Humanoid's corpse, you can absorb a sample of its flesh. You can hold a number of samples equal to your proficiency bonus, though you can only ever collect one sample from any given Humanoid. If you gain a sample while you have the maximum number of samples, you replace an existing sample of your choice.

While you have a sample, you can spend 1 ki point to take either of the following actions:

- **Impersonate.** You consume your sample to take on the form of the sampled creature for 1 hour or until you end your transformation as a bonus action. You make yourself—including your clothing, armor, weapons, and other belongings on your person—look like the creature. Your statistics remain the same, except for your size, which changes to match the creature's size. While disguised in this manner, you can use the Wisdom (Insight) skill instead of Charisma (Deception or Performance) to impersonate the creature. When the transformation ends, the sample is destroyed.
- **Interrogate.** You rip memories from the absorbed creature. After performing this action, you have 10 minutes to ask one question of the creature's flesh, and it responds as if it were an intact corpse and you had cast *speak with dead* on it, except that the answers are thorough, and the creature can't lie to you or withhold information. After answering the question, the sample is destroyed.

FREE THE FLESH

At 11th level, you shed more of your body's limitations, your bones snapping and melting away as you become a creature of unrestrained, violent movement. As a bonus action, you gain the following benefits for 10 minutes:



- Whenever you successfully grapple another creature, you can pull your target into an unoccupied space within 5 feet of you or pull yourself to an unoccupied space within 5 feet of the target.¹
- You can move through a space as narrow as 1 inch wide without squeezing.
- Moving through difficult terrain costs you no extra movement, and spells and other magical effects can't reduce your speed or make you paralyzed or restrained.
- You can spend 5 feet of movement to automatically escape from nonmagical restraints, such as manacles or a creature that has you grappled.
- You have a swimming speed equal to your walking speed.

You can use this feature a number of times equal to your proficiency bonus, and you regain all expended uses when you finish a long rest.

¹ You can use this feature to reposition allies or enemies! Cool!

CHARNEL APOTHEOSIS

At 17th level, you understand that your body is just a collection of mass you can unravel and knit together with a moment's thought. As an action, you can spend 5 ki points to dissolve into a pool of flesh and reform, teleporting to an unoccupied space that you can see within 30 feet of you. After you reform, all creatures of your choice within 30 feet of you must make a Dexterity saving throw. On a failure, a creature takes $5d10$ slashing damage and is pushed five feet away from you and knocked prone. On a success, a creature takes half as much damage and isn't pushed or knocked prone. Damage from this feature is considered magical for the purpose of overcoming immunity and resistance to nonmagical attacks.

RETAINER OF THE FLESH

While monks of the Way of the Flesh rarely congregate in the monasteries and formal orders enjoyed by other monastic traditions, they are drawn to great adventurers. More traditional monks of the flesh follow barbarians, fighters, and other monks whose skills they respect or wish to emulate. Philosophical monks become retainers to clerics and druids, more interested in receiving their wisdom and opinion on metaphysical conundrums than the traditional motivations of a retainer. Afflicted monks who follow this path due to a disease, parasite, or alchemical experimentation follow spellcasters. For more information about retainers, see [Strongholds & Followers](#).

ACOLYTE OF THE FLESH

ARMOR CLASS Medium (AC 15)

PRIMARY ABILITIES Dexterity, Wisdom

SAVES Strength, Dexterity

SKILLS Acrobatics, Insight

SIGNATURE ATTACK *Unarmed Strike*. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +6 to hit, reach 15 ft., one target. *Hit:* 7 (2d4 + 2) slashing damage.

SPECIAL ACTIONS

3rd-Level (3/Day): Get Over Here. The acolyte makes two signature attacks with a reach of 30 feet. If both attacks hit the target, the acolyte pulls the target to an unoccupied space within 5 feet of the acolyte.

5th-Level (3/Day): Leashing Escape. The acolyte chooses up to two allied creatures it can see within 30 feet of them. The acolyte moves 30 feet without provoking opportunity attacks, then pulls those allies into unoccupied spaces within 5 feet of the acolyte. After being pulled, attack rolls against those allies have disadvantage, and the allies make Dexterity saving throws with advantage until the start of their next turns.

7th-Level (1/Day): Unleash Carnage.

The acolyte makes a signature attack against every creature of their choice within 30 feet of them. Each creature hit by this attack takes an additional 4 (1d4 + 2) slashing damage and is knocked prone.



THINKER'S BLOCK

Everyone has their own way of working through failure. Some head into the wilderness, seeking inspiration. Others throw themselves into their work, brute-forcing their issues. A few relax, clearing their mind before returning to whatever ails them. And Charity May, self-taught monk of the Way of the Flesh, murders people in a spider-filled temple.

This encounter is appropriate for four to five 5th-level characters.

THE SET UP

Charity May is a 19-year-old female human. Though skilled at the physical, self-centered parts of the Way of the Flesh, she has found herself at an impasse, unable to progress further in the tradition due to her dissatisfaction with the world, as she tries to find the meaning of life. What is the point of it all if all creatures simply end up in an eternal, monotonous afterlife?

Out of ideas, Charity has taken to challenging travelers to a duel in an abandoned roadside shrine to a forgotten god of revelry, killing those who accept the challenge. She figures that either someone will have an answer for her, she'll discover an epiphany through violence, or one of her victims will kill her.

The characters could be investigating the disappearance of several mercenaries traveling through the area, or looking into reports of a wandering duelist who killed all of her opponents. For a less antagonistic option, Charity approaches the characters with complete honesty, explaining that she's trying to work through a philosophical problem and she thinks best while fighting for her life. She requests a battle to the death at the shrine, though she doesn't mention that her chosen arena is filled with flesh-eating spiders.

CHARITY

Charity May is tall, pale, and gangly, with gaunt features and a tired expression. She wears a simple green tunic and heavy pants, both of which have been inexpertly mended many times. When she fights, her ribs split and extend from her back as many-jointed pseudopods, the bones cracking unnervingly throughout the battle. Though she speaks confidently and at length, Charity is abrasive and tends to annoy people with her eloquence rather than convince them of anything.

As a child, Charity was orphaned by a brutal and extended famine, forced to grow up on her own in a town where few had enough food for themselves, never mind anything to spare for a starving child. She taught herself

the Way of the Flesh to survive, pushing her body past its limits and warping it into a weapon to hunt wolves and half-starved deer in the woods, or take food from those who had more than her. It was a lonely, friendless life, but one that pushed her to learn quickly.

Once she was old enough to work, Charity became a mercenary, turning her one skill into a socially acceptable way to survive. This worked for a time, until she grew increasingly disillusioned and unhappy with her life. Friendless and miserable, her closest companions are a family of giant spiders she feeds with corpses, and her increasing surety that there's no point to anything she does, or her continued survival, has led to a mental block in her development as a monk.

ROADSIDE SHRINE

Charity faces her foes in an abandoned shrine atop a wooded hill, just outside the nearest town. The roof has long-since collapsed, leaving a dozen half-destroyed pillars and a web-strewn hall. When the characters enter, read the following text aloud:

Charity steps into the temple and turns to face you. Webs and dust sully the cramped space, sunlight filtering through the shattered roof and illuminating the rubble. "Thank you for humoring me," she says as many-jointed pseudopods rip from the back of her tunic, impaling a pillar and pulling her atop it. "My last opponents were as empty as I. Fury and hatred and nothing beneath. I hope you prove more talkative—or at least a better fight." From the darkness comes the scuttling sound of arachnid legs.

ENVIRONMENT

Charity fights in a shrine to a long-forgotten god of revels and faded murals of frolicking, drunk satyrs adorn the walls. The floor is covered in dust and spiderwebs, and a dozen stone pillars, each 5 feet wide and 10 feet tall, dot the interior. Each pillar has AC 17, 27 hit points, and immunity to poison and psychic damage.

Spiderwebs stretch between the pillars, creating two 20-foot-cubes of web near the center of the shrine. When a creature that isn't Charity or a spider starts their turn in one of the cubes, they must make a DC 11 Dexterity saving throw. On a failed save, the creature is restrained. A restrained creature can use their action to make a DC 11 Strength check, freeing themselves on a success. The webs are flammable. A 5-foot cube of webs exposed to fire burns away in 1 round, dealing 2d4 fire damage to any creature that starts its turn in the fire.

TACTICS

The characters face Charity May (see the end of this article for her stat block), two **giant spiders**, and four **giant wolf spiders**. The spiders consider Charity a friend and fight to the death to defend her and their home. They stop attacking only if Charity orders them to do so.

Charity uses her Bone Harpoon bonus action to pull herself onto pillars and her reach to attack more vulnerable characters and spellcasters, using them as bludgeons against their heartier companions. She only uses Spine Burst if she can avoid hitting the spiders. If reduced to 15 or fewer hit points, Charity calls off the spiders and retreats, fleeing into the wilderness with her arachnid friends.

TALKING DOWN CHARITY

Charity talks to the characters throughout the fight. At the start of each of Charity's turns, choose or roll for something for her to say on the Charity Dialogue table to direct Charity's train of thought and shape the conversation. Characters who succeed on a DC 12 Wisdom (Insight) check can tell that Charity wants someone to talk to but is only comfortable doing so in the context of a fight.

If at least half the characters engage Charity in conversation during the fight, they can talk her down and resolve the encounter nonlethally. The specific arguments aren't important. So long as at least half the characters make an effort to engage Charity in conversation, Charity works through the worst of her crisis at the end of the third round of combat. She still has a long way to go, but realizes that maybe violence isn't the answer to her problems.

Charisma checks aren't necessary to succeed, though players who would prefer not to roleplay their dialogue can choose to outline the gist of what they're saying or, if they choose, make DC 17 Charisma (Persuasion) checks as a bonus action instead. On a success, they engage Charity in conversation.

If the characters help Charity through her crisis, she thanks them, calls off the spiders, and the fight ends. If the characters ask her to travel with them, she does so (possibly as an **Acolyte of the Flesh** retainer). Otherwise she leaves to seek out her own answers.

CHARITY DIALOGUE

d6	CHARACTER DIALOGUE
1	"Why do you fight? What is worth risking death?"
2	"The world is filled with privation and suffering, and you can never stop it all. Who are you to challenge that?"
3	"We'll all die. All of this turns to dust. How can anything be worthwhile in the face of that?"
4	"Each of us is the product of blind luck, arbitrary and pointless and stupid! How do you live with that?"
5	"Are you enjoying this? How are you enjoying this!"
6	"I turned myself into this! I killed people! And for what? A few more meals before a pointless afterlife?"

CONTINUING ADVENTURES

If Charity May survives the encounter, you could make her a reoccurring part of the campaign. If she doesn't adventure with the characters, she can leave to carve her own path and return to find the characters again, perhaps arriving in their hour of need with a healthier outlook on life, new friends, and a genuinely worrying number of pet spiders.

If Charity escaped, or was defeated but allowed to live, she doesn't take the loss personally. A future meeting could feature a Charity who has grown past her issues on her own and views the attempted murder of the characters with some degree of embarrassment, or one who has fallen under the influence of a greater evil and become a true villain.

CHARITY MAY

Medium Humanoid (Human), Lawful Evil

ARMOR CLASS 17 (Unarmored Defense)

HIT POINTS 97 (13d8 + 39)

SPEED 45 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
10 (+0)	20 (+5)	16 (+3)	13 (+1)	15 (+2)	9 (-1)

SAVES Dex +8, Con +6, Int +4, Wis +5

SKILLS Acrobatics +8, Perception +5, Stealth +8

SENSES passive Perception 15

LANGUAGES Common, Elvish

CHALLENGE 6 (2,300 XP)

PROFICIENCY BONUS +3

Evasion. If Charity is subjected to an effect that allows her to make a Dexterity saving throw to take only half damage, she instead takes no damage if she succeeds on the saving throw and only half damage if she fails.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. Charity makes three pseudopod attacks, or makes two pseudopod attacks and uses Smash.

Pseudopod. Melee Weapon

Attack: +8 to hit, reach 20 ft., one target. **Hit:** 9 (1d8 + 5) slashing damage. If Charity hits a creature twice with this attack in the same turn, they are grappled (escape DC 15). Charity has three pseudopods, each of which can grapple one creature.

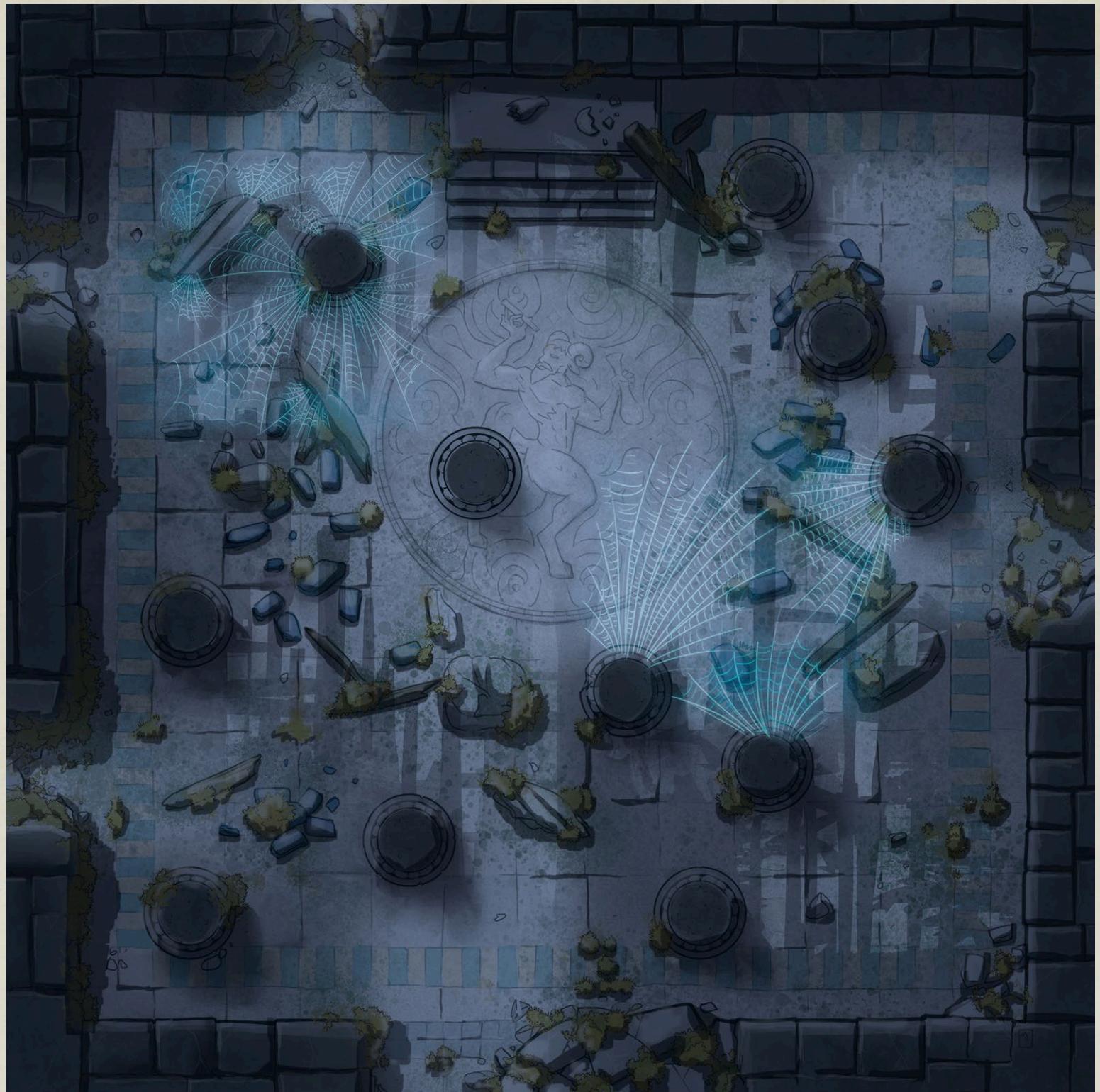
Smash. If Charity has a creature grappled, she flings them at another creature within 60 feet of her. Both creatures must make DC 16 Dexterity saving throws. On a failure, a creature takes 12 (2d6 + 5) bludgeoning damage and is knocked prone. On a success, a creature takes half as much damage and isn't knocked prone.

Spine Burst (Recharge 5–6). Charity emits a 45-foot cone of sharpened bones. Each creature in the area must make a DC 16 Dexterity saving throw. On a failure, they take 13 (3d8) piercing damage and their speed is reduced to 0 until the end of their next turn. On a success, they take half as much damage and their speed isn't reduced.

BONUS ACTIONS

Bone Harpoon. Charity moves 20 feet in any direction, including vertically, without provoking opportunity attacks.





THE NIGHTMARE DRAGON

COMMUNITIES DREAD SLEEP AS THEY'RE PLAGUED BY A DRACONIC PARASITE OF LEGEND.

by Alex Clippinger

Content Warning: This article is about an evil dragon that tortures their victims with nightmares.

Dragons are the subject of cultural fascination, a focal point for myth, religion, art, and arcana. The awe of their power and mystery comes with an equal portion of fear, and it is this terror that is the nightmare dragon's genesis and feast. Nightmare dragons are liminal beings, all but nonexistent in the physical world—but nevertheless capable of inflicting physical harm.

There's no singular description of a nightmare dragon. Like nightmares themselves, they constantly warp and shift, twisting to encompass the amalgamated fright of its victims. A creature of dreams made manifest, a nightmare dragon's appearance and behavior can resemble imagination and inaccurate myths as much as any flesh-and-blood drake. To behold a nightmare dragon is to witness their very anatomy writhe under your regard, no detail quite the same from one moment to the next.

BIRTHED BY FEAR

Nightmare dragons are psychic beings, born from other creatures' fear of dragons. Instances of common fright won't spawn a nightmare dragon; the circumstances that birth these wyrms are unique in their origin and intensity. Examples of recorded nightmare dragon inceptions can be found on the Nightmare Dragon Origins table.

The confluence of such intense emotion in unusual circumstances takes root in the Astral Plane, creating an entity that eagerly gluts itself on the terrors and anxieties of its original hosts. A nightmare dragon is created full-grown and possesses an ancient dragon's greed and appetite for victims' fear. They quickly outgrows the ability to

NIGHTMARE DRAGON ORIGINS

d6	DRAGON ORIGIN
1	A city is harried by night terrors in the wake of a recent dragon attack.
2	A sleeping god dreams of ancient dragons.
3	A once-in-a-generation artist channels their fear of dragons into their breathtaking work.
4	An alien entity can't help the way their phobia of dragons is expressed through their psionic powers.
5	A uniquely powerful child is convinced their terrible dreams of draconic destruction are real events.
6	An old dragon slayer is haunted by their own guilt.

sustain themselves on the fright of their unwitting creators and turn to invading the dreams of their creators' neighbors and kin.

NAMES AND PERSONALITY

Nightmare dragons are a reflection of the fears held by their original hosts and the phobias of their prey. As their sense of self develops, they take on a name that reflects those specific fears. You can use the Nightmare Dragon Names table to get inspiration for a nightmare dragon's name.

NIGHTMARE DRAGON NAMES

d4	DRAGON NAME ORIGIN
1	A name based on nightmare images, such as Blood Under the Door, or The Empty Room.
2	The name of a real dragon that historically or recently terrorized the local community, like Mirsyth the Wind-Scourge
3	The name a child has bestowed on them, like Night Teeth or Mister Clix
4	A mimicked sound captured from dreams; [A Scream from Below], [The Flesh Rips Wetly]

NIGHTMARE DRAGON PLANS

d4	PLAN
1	The dragon is driven entirely by hunger, and will feed on psychic energy until the universe is empty or they burst like a tick.
2	The dragon wants to become fully real by crossing from the Astral Plane to the Material Plane.
3	The dragon wants to ascend to godhood, seeking dominion over all dreams.
4	The dragon is a gourmand, ruthlessly seeking the richest and rarest flavors of nightmares.

THE NIGHTMARE VILLAIN

Tyrant or terror, the nightmare dragon can act as an interesting primary or secondary villain in a high-level campaign. They could be the cause or one of the symptoms of a broader series of psionic events or the most significant consequence of some unnatural disaster. Even powerful characters have fears and nightmares of their own, fueled by past horrors or future dangers, and a villain composed of dread itself is the perfect way to emphasize that no amount of powerful spells or magic weapons can ensure their safety.

You should discuss themes of dread and terror with your players before introducing a nightmare dragon in your game, including what topics are hard or soft limits for each player. It's important for the players to be comfortable so they can be having fun even as their characters are frightened and panic-stricken. And if they are all-in for nightmares, this conversation can also be a chance to glean some information about how you can most effectively terrify each of the characters with a nightmare dragon in your campaign.

PLANS AND MOTIVATIONS

Because nightmare dragons are birthed by intense fear and anxiety regarding dragons, their motives are largely shaped by the collective mix of facts, rumors, and legends the population holds about such creatures. Understanding a nightmare dragon is an investigation of a community's culture, history, myths, and bedtime stories. You can use the Nightmare Dragon Plans table to determine such a creature's schemes and motivations.

A nightmare dragon is what people make of it. What seems a terror is ultimately an expression of grief, fear, and trauma held by hosts. Learning secrets and understanding and resolving the underlying problems in a community are tactics that weaken a nightmare dragon's hold. Who would imagine wounding so terrible a creature by teaching a child there's no reason to be afraid of the dark?

MINIONS AND FOLLOWERS

As the nightmare dragon's predation and influence over a community grows, they tend to attract worship from both the like-minded and the fearful. As they exist in the Astral Plane, the dragon isn't always aware of other creatures that claim to align with them. If they are, the dragon's opinion of such hangers-on can range from amused acceptance to disgusted hostility. A nightmare dragon's outlook is strongly influenced by the personality traits of dragons—real or imagined—imprinted on them by the hosts that first formed them. For example, a nightmare dragon shaped by those with a fear of red dragons relishes any chance to play the domineering tyrant.

Pious Prey. Afflicted populations that become aware of the dragon may attempt to deify them in order to spare themselves. It's almost better if the dragon directs these followers instead of a directionless, increasingly desperate cult trying anything they can think of to appease the psychic parasite.

Dream-Eaters. Terrified prey can make for amusing subordinates, but are rarely useful. Fortunately, more useful servants are found among the ranks of night hags, oni, and others that prowl the borders between dreams and reality.

Manifest Echoes. The stronger a nightmare dragon becomes, the thinner the line between their Astral residence and the waking world. Bits of thought and dream begin

seeping into the Material Plane, manifesting as everything from common beasts to bizarre dream-creatures. People dream intensely about others they've met in passing, creating incomplete and unrealized imposters that act like unsettling half-finished sketches of personality.

UNUSUAL EVENTS

A nightmare dragon's predation begins slowly and accelerates as their strength and appetite grows hand-in-hand. The effects of the dragon's presence, whether intended or unintended, belie their existence long before the true cause of the events is clear. The Nightmare Dragon Rumors and Story Hooks table provides strange happenings the characters can discover that might lead them to a nightmare dragon.

NIGHTMARE DRAGON RUMORS AND STORY HOOKS

d6	RUMOR OR HOOK
1	The children are acting strangely. Their play has turned to huddled whispers. They try to sneak knives to bed.
2	The businesses of regional hedge mages, temples, and apothecaries are booming as people seek a cure for bad dreams.
3	The community has become a hive of delirious activity as residents throw weary late-night festivals to stave off sleep.
4	A city is gripped by fear and confusion as people begin spotting their childhood nightmares and imaginary friends lurking in the streets.
5	The characters are well-known, but their reputation is tarnished when half-manifested dream versions of them go out of control.
6	The city's wealthy residents begin sleepwalking their way into fatal doom.



NIGHTMARE DRAGON TACTICS

As obvious a step as it may seem, review the dragon's stat block and other features carefully. While some of these mechanics mirror similar dragon traits and actions, making note of key differences will distinguish the experience of confronting a nightmare dragon from encounters with other kinds of dragons.

Persistent Fear. High-level adventurers can usually avoid the frightened condition, especially if they prepare for the fight with spells like *heroes' feast*. The nightmare dragon's Phobic trait, their Clutching Bile breath weapon, and their ability to use their Horrifying Presence before or after attacking means that even well-prepared adventurers will often suffer the frightened condition while fighting them.

Frightening Defense. High-level characters can reliably hit a target even when the frightened condition imposes disadvantage on their attack rolls. The dragon's key survival mechanism is that the same fear makes them resistant to damage, regardless of type. If the dragon can keep most or all of its enemies afraid of them, they can mitigate the majority of damage directed and wait for their lair's key mechanic—the Lull—to escalate.

The Ticking Clock. When the fight begins, the Lull is a non-issue that has no hope of rendering a creature unconscious. As a warning flag to the characters, a GM might have them roll long before the Lull is a threat and narrate a brief but easily-ignored wave of drowsiness. As the Lull increases, descriptions of an escalating, hypnotizing rhythm can indicate a growing threat.

The threat of the Lull becomes clear the moment a character drops unconscious and, even worse, is soon puppeted by the dragon's eerie Somnambulist trait. The characters are confronted with the fact that the dragon, likely already challenging them with fear mechanics, has an ability to momentarily incapacitate them without even reducing them to 0 hit points.

Transparency and Challenge. The nightmare dragon is a cruel creature and, by extension, offers a mechanically cruel encounter. They are designed to force characters to deal with conditions (namely, the frightened and unconscious conditions) in unconventional ways. It's more than understandable for players to want to pause the action, strategize with one another, and ask for clarifications when confronted with new mechanics or difficult challenges. Fully understanding the nightmare dragon's mechanics won't necessarily make it easier to defeat, but intentionally obfuscating what is happening to the characters once a mechanic comes into play certainly has a chance to harm the experience.

DEATH BY NIGHTMARE

Victims of nightmare dragons endure horrifying night terrors, sometimes for weeks on end, as the dragon feeds on their negative emotions. What these dreamers don't realize is that their sleeping minds are pulled into the Astral Plane, directly into the dragon's ever-changing lair. The dragon molds the lair's appearance to unnerve and disorient prey, trying to get the most from their meal. These sessions usually culminate in the nightmare dragon's appearance as they confronts, attacks, and starts to devour their victim. At the peak of the victim's terror, the dragon releases their prey from the astral tether, sending them screaming back to consciousness in their own beds.

The dragon's connection to each victim strengthens as they feeds on them repeatedly, until this dream-parasite inevitably kills their host. Body and mind fail in the face of overwhelming, sustained terror, or the victim's projected mind becomes trapped in the astral lair, never to awaken again. In extreme cases, the mind-body connection is so strong that the mortal wounds of the dragon's assault manifest in the physical world, and the gruesome aftermath of a full-grown dragon's assault renders itself in the confines of a single bedroom.

Sometimes a nightmare dragon devours their original host as voraciously as they would any other prey. In other cases, the dragon leaves their creators alive for extended periods of time, savoring the host's nightmares like a gourmet. Some nightmare dragons are even convinced they're incapable of killing their host.

A NIGHTMARE DRAGON'S LAIR

The dragon's lair, like their physical form, exists in the Astral Plane. From the outside, the lair is a massive, nebulous, glistening black mass that planar denizens ignore if uninformed or avoid if knowledgeable. The lair can be breached from the outside with a sufficient force of will; finding the lair in the first place is the real challenge.

ENTERING THE DREAM

Some spells allow creatures to enter the Astral Plane, but specifically navigating to the nightmare dragon's lair is another matter. The *plane shift* spell allows the caster to specify a destination on another plane of existence, but without knowing the nightmare dragon's chosen name or seeing the lair themselves, the result of the spell may be less than precise.



It's much simpler to access the lair the old-fashioned way, as bait. Seasoned adventurers have survived harrowing experiences, battled terrifying creatures, and endured loss and hardship in climactic situations. To put it simply, their lived experience is a nigh-irresistible banquet to a nightmare dragon, and a group of adventurers with shared histories are likely to be pulled into the lair if even one of their comrades is drawn to the Astral Plane. Alternatively, any creature with the *dream* spell prepared can cast it in a special manner, projecting their minds and the minds of any chosen companions to the nightmare dragon's lair as long as they go to sleep in an area affected by the dragon's predation.

If the characters project their minds or astral selves to the dragon's lair, they are nevertheless in mortal peril. Forming a psychic link strong enough for their projected selves to harm the dragon is a two-way street; if a character dies in the dragon's lair, they die on the Material Plane.

REGIONAL EFFECTS

A nightmare dragon's lair doesn't affect the surrounding region in the Astral Plane, but a number of phenomena occur in the area of the Material Plane where the dragon's victims live:

- An aura of dread pervades the region within 1 mile of affected areas. Sapient creatures in these areas have disadvantage on saving throws against being frightened, regardless of the source.
- Animals, especially domesticated animals near affected homes, show signs of exhaustion and distress. In rare cases, livestock are found killed with unmistakable but inexplicable evidence of attack by a large predator.

- Community members and visitors find themselves unusually tired, even nodding off in public places, as the dragon's influence attempts to lull potential victims to sleep.

LAIR FEATURES

The nightmare dragon's lair on the Astral Plane is an amorphous inky-black structure filled with a ever-shifting caverns. The surface of the lair is solid enough to walk on, but slick to the touch and with a slight, rubbery give. The lair reflects the thoughts and emotions of the dragon that dwells there, and constantly shifts and warps to suit the dragon's needs; forming barricades, spines, and simple structures as commanded.

The Lull. The nightmare dragon's deadliest weapon isn't their bite or bile, but the hypnotizing, sedative effect of their lair known as the Lull. The Lull is represented by a Lull score, which starts at 1 and grows or shrinks in the following ways:

- The Lull increases by 2 at the start of each round the dragon is in combat, before any creature turns, lair actions, or other effects.
- The Lull increases by 1 each time a creature fails its saving throw against the dragon's Clutching Bile action.
- The Lull increases by 1 each time a creature fails its saving throw against the dragon's Soporific Thrum lair action.
- The Lull decreases by 1 each time a creature regains consciousness because of the dragon's Somnambulist trait.

On initiative count 20 of each round (after lair actions), up to three creatures of the dragon's choice within its lair must each roll a number of d8s equal to the current Lull score. If the total is greater than or equal to the creature's current hit points, the creature falls unconscious. An affected creature remains unconscious until it takes damage, someone uses an action to shake or slap the sleeper awake, or the dragon uses its Somnambulist trait to direct it. The Lull score resets to 1 if the dragon dies or the lair is unoccupied by creatures hostile to the dragon for at least 1 hour.

LAIR ACTIONS

On initiative count 20 (before the effects of the Lull but losing all other initiative ties), the dragon takes a lair action to cause one of the following effects; the dragon can't use the same effect two rounds in a row:

- **Manifest Terror.** The glossy substance of the dragon's lair creates a Medium or Large manifestation in an unoccupied space within 90 feet of the dragon. The manifestation resembles a creature feared by previous or current victims, but is considered an object. It acts on initiative count 10, has a speed of 25 feet, and can attempt to grapple or shove a creature within 5 feet of it as an action (+8 to the ability check). A creature grappled by the manifestation is also restrained. At the start of the manifestation's turn, the dragon can teleport to an unoccupied space within 10 feet of the manifestation. On initiative count 1, the manifestation collapses back into the substance of the lair.

- **Nightmare Geography.** The dragon creates up to four terrain segments within the lair, which are any combination of 10-foot-diameter, 10-foot-high pillars, 10-foot square, 10-foot-deep pits, or 15-foot-long, 5-foot-high, 5-foot-thick walls. Each creature in an affected space must make a DC 21 Dexterity saving throw. On a failed save, the creature is either pushed to one side of the new terrain or is raised by or lowered into the new terrain (dragon's choice). A creature that succeeds on their saving throw moves to the nearest unoccupied space of their choice. On the dragon's turn, the dragon can spend 5 feet of movement to enter a pillar or wall segment, reemerging from any other pillar or wall segment of their choice.

- **Soporific Thrum.** Each creature of the dragon's choice within 120 feet of them must succeed on a DC 21 Charisma saving throw as a hypnotic tone fills the lair. The Lull increases by 1 for each creature that fails the saving throw, but no other effect occurs.



NIGHTMARE DRAGON

Gargantuan Dragon (*Shapechanger*), Typically Neutral Evil

ARMOR CLASS 21

HIT POINTS 402 (23d20 + 161)

SPEED 40 ft., fly 80 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
26 (+8)	14 (+2)	24 (+7)	21 (+5)	17 (+3)	22 (+6)

SAVING THROWS Int +12, Wis +10, Cha +13

SKILLS Insight +17, Perception +10, Stealth +9

DAMAGE RESISTANCES acid; all damage dealt by frightened creatures

DAMAGE IMMUNITIES psychic, poison

CONDITION IMMUNITIES blinded, charmed, frightened, petrified, poisoned

SENSES truesight 60 ft., darkvision 120 ft., passive Perception 20

LANGUAGES All languages known by victims they have fed upon

CHALLENGE 24 (62,000 XP)

PROFICIENCY BONUS +7

Legendary Resistance (3/Day). If the dragon fails a saving throw, they can choose to succeed instead.

Somnambulist. When an unconscious creature begins their turn within 120 feet of the dragon, the dragon can direct the creature to perform up to two of the following actions:

- Stand up if they are prone
- Move up to half their speed in any direction, except into an obviously deadly hazard
- Make one melee weapon attack with disadvantage against a creature within reach

The dragon can direct a creature even if they have 0 hit points and are otherwise incapacitated, as long as they are unconscious. If the creature has at least 1 hit point, they wake up at the end of their turn and are no longer unconscious.

Phobichor. Creatures within 30 feet of the dragon can't benefit from any spell or other effect that grants immunity to or suppresses the frightened condition.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The dragon makes three Nightmare Physiology attacks or uses Clutching Bile if it is available.

Nightmare Physiology. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +15 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. *Hit:* 22 (4d6 + 8) of the dragon's choice of bludgeoning, piercing, or slashing damage.

Clutching Bile (Recharge 5–6). The dragon disgorges a torrent of viscous bile in a 60-foot-line that is 10 feet wide. Each creature in that line must make a DC 22 Wisdom saving throw, taking 71 (13d10) psychic damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one. Creatures that fail the saving throw are also affected by the dragon's Phobichor trait until the end of their next turn, regardless of their proximity to the dragon. Until the start of the dragon's next turn, the ground along the line is difficult terrain for the dragon's enemies as sticky hands grasp at them from the bile.

BONUS ACTIONS

Horrifying Presence. Each creature of the dragon's choice within 120 feet of the dragon that is aware of them must succeed on a DC 21 Charisma saving throw or become frightened for 1 minute. A creature can repeat the saving throw at the end of each of their turns, ending the condition on themselves on a success.

LEGENDARY ACTIONS

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

Detect. The dragon makes a Wisdom (Perception) check and automatically learns the location of any frightened creature within 120 feet of them.

Lash Out. The dragon makes one Nightmare Physiology attack.

Fleeting Dream (Costs 2 Actions). The dragon becomes a cloud of smoke and flies up to their flying speed before returning to their normal form. While in their smoke form, the dragon doesn't provoke opportunity attacks and can move through creatures and objects. Creatures the dragon moves through must succeed on a DC 21 Wisdom saving throw or take 16 (3d6 + 6) psychic damage.

Sleepwalk (Costs 2 Actions). The dragon uses their Somnambulist trait against an unconscious creature within 120 feet of them. The affected creature wakes up at the start of their next turn if they have at least 1 hit point.

WHAT THEY KNOW MAY HURT YOU

INFORMANT NPCs AND ENCOUNTERS

by Marcello De Velazquez

For adventurers, information makes the difference in saving lives, finding treasures, and toppling kingdoms. Those who trade critical pieces of knowledge often hide in the back alleys of the seediest city neighborhoods and move among everyday folk, while others operate within selective, high society organizations. They can be the last person you expect to provide help or a trusted friend who betrays you.

Who are these informants? Where can you find them? What do they know? What does their information cost? This article provides NPC informants who add adventure, excitement, and intrigue to your campaigns.

IMIRICH THE RAT

I KNOWS WHYS YOU COME. I SEE. YA GOT CHEESE, YA GOT SHOES, OR YA JUST HAVE NOTHIN' TO LOSE?

—IMIRICH THE RAT (OR A LOYAL FRIEND OF HIS)

Imirich the Rat's reputation for knowing all the "talk on the dock" makes him a welcome presence in any dockside town or port city in your campaign. The characters may learn of Imirich's existence from drunken dockhands, from friendly freelancers, or from tipping an extra silver piece to a local tavern server. They are directed to an alleyway between two abandoned buildings and told to bring something Imirich finds appealing: blankets, cheese, clothing, fish, or plants.

Any harbor local or ship captain can give clues as to who they think Imirich the Rat is. Some say the informant is "a now-dead drunken augur who occasionally got something right," while others believe he is "a whelp of

a street urchin that skirts through market crowds, peddling rumors and truths." Oddly enough, both accounts are correct.

WHO'S THE RAT?

An eccentric sea druid, Imirich lived in a seaside shantytown. Each day he stumbled out of his alleyway home, drunkenly proclaiming portents of ill omen. Wherever he went, a swarm of rats followed behind like dogs after a master. Almost none took him seriously—though the few who did realized that his prophecies always came to pass. By the time the community realized the truth in his slurred words, the druid vanished.

Right after Imirich disappeared, dockside market-goers saw an influx of street urchins that ran grifts, picked pockets, and stole food from vendors. Like the old druid, the children were followed by swarms of rats. Each time an urchin was captured by the town watch, they would barter for freedom in exchange for the location of a more serious criminal. Watch log entries note that each of the children claimed the same name: Imirich.

RAT CONNECTION

Imirich succumbed to rotgut poisoning and died quietly in the company of his rats. As he perished, the druid cast a unique version of the *awaken* spell on one of the loyal vermin. This rodent was already astute, and the transformative magic further granted him the ability to beguile the weak-willed.

The rat had watched Imirich squander his gift for years. With new sapience, the rodent hired urchins to watch and listen for information, a commodity the animal believed could turn a profit. The rat took the name Imirich and told his youngster agents to use the name if they ever got arrested.

IMIRICH

Small Beast, Neutral

ARMOR CLASS 12

HIT POINTS 7 (2d6)

SPEED 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
7 (-2)	15 (+2)	10 (+0)	18 (+4)	16 (+3)	7 (-2)

SKILLS Insight +5, Perception +7

SENSES darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 17

LANGUAGES Common, Druidic, telepathy 60 ft.

CHALLENGE 1/4 (50 XP)

PROFICIENCY BONUS +2

Pack Tactics. Imirich has advantage on an attack roll against a creature if at least one of his allies is within 5 feet of the creature and the ally isn't incapacitated.

ACTIONS

Bite. Melee Weapon Attack: +4, reach 5 ft., one target. **Hit:** 4 (1d4 + 2) piercing damage. If the target is a creature, it must succeed on a DC 10 Constitution saving throw or contract a disease. Until the disease is cured, the target can't regain hit points except by magical means, and the target's hit point maximum decreases by 3 (1d6) every 24 hours. If the target's hit point maximum drops to 0 as a result of this disease, the target dies. A diseased

Rodent Imirich never uses his Dominate Person action on the street urchins; they pilfer, spy, and bring their gains to the dockside alley of their own accord. There, rats deliver the loot and information to Imirich, whose lair sits through the sewer grates and beyond the reach of anyone but the rodents.

IMIRICH'S ALLEY

The alley reeks of rotten fish, cheese, and other garbage. Trash is strewn about the alley floor, and stacked crates veil sewer grates that descend to Imirich's cramped lair. Barrels on both sides of the alleyway entrance collect runoff from rooftops.

The alleyway is 15 feet wide, and the street stretches 30 feet before it dead-ends. The rickety remnants of two bricklayer scaffolds run along the alley walls. Ten feet up, old wood planks and mended fishing nets serve as walkways for Imirich's urchins (noncombatants), who rest and watch from the safety of the scaffolds. Ropes dangle from their frames to the alley floor.

Rats dart and scurry among the alley's trash. At the alley's end stands a well-maintained burial mound with sea-

creature can repeat the saving throw at the end of every 24 hours, ending the disease on a success.

Dominate Person (2/Day). Imirich can attempt to beguile a humanoid that he can see within 60 feet of him. The target must succeed on a DC 14 Wisdom saving throw or be charmed by Imirich for up to 1 minute. If Imirich or creatures friendly to Imirich are fighting the target, it has advantage on the saving throw. While charmed, the target is telepathically linked to Imirich as long as they are both on the same plane of existence. Imirich can use the link to issue commands to the target while Imirich is conscious, which the target does their best to obey. As an action, Imirich can take total and precise control of the target. Until the end of Imirich's next turn, the target can only take the actions chosen by Imirich and doesn't do anything that the rat doesn't allow them to do. Imirich can cause the target to use their reaction, but Imirich must expend his reaction as well. Each time that the target takes damage, they make a new Wisdom saving throw. If the saving throw succeeds, the effect ends.

REACTIONS

Thwarting Thoughts. When a creature Imirich can see within 60 feet of him targets another creature with an attack, he can broadcast a telepathic rebuke to the attacker. The attacker must succeed on a DC 14 Wisdom saving throw or the attack misses.

themed trinkets scattered upon it. This is all that remains of the original Imirich.

ENTERING THE ALLEY

Children immediately confront any visitors, asking who they are and if they need information. One child presents themselves as Imirich, while rat Imirich watches from behind a grate. The children know bits of information, but if posed questions beyond their knowledge, Imirich telepathically provides them appropriate answers. If the characters move to harm any of Imirich's allies, **swarms of rats** attack, or Imirich uses his Dominate Person action to bring help—the streets are never without dockside **thugs, bandit captains, or guards and veterans** of the watch for Imirich to enthrall.

BITS O' INFO

Years of information-gathering and scavenging allow Imirich to provide the following information:

- Vessel arrivals and departures
- Sewer worker activity (or unusual happenings in the sewers)

- Favored drinking establishments of ship captains
- Dock watchmen patrol routes
- Contents of port warehouses
- Crimes committed in local alleyways or at night

PAYING THE PRICE

Imirich never gives out information without asking something in return. Speaking through an urchin, he demands to know who visitors are before asking them what it is that they want. His answers are rapid and repeated—insightful characters might notice that the speakers' mannerisms are erratic and inquisitive, like curious vermin.

For small pieces of information (such as the departure of a vessel), the cost of information is simple, though possibly perplexing to characters who don't realize a rat is in charge: children's clothes, fresh scraps of food, or wheels of cheese. If the characters are caught cheating or deceiving Imirich, the rodent commands numerous swarms of rats to strike at the adventurers at inopportune moments (such as during rests or when making key ability checks). These attacks continue until the characters leave town or offer suitable compensation to Imirich.

If Imirich learns that the characters are adventurers and they ask for information more difficult to obtain, the rat requests they complete one of the following tasks.

Rattle Their Chains (Levels 1–5). Imirich asks the characters to dismantle operations of the local Ratcatcher's Guild. They are given directions to the guild warehouse and are told to destroy the stored rat traps within and leave a message: "Never cross Imirich the Rat or his friends again." Eight guild guards (**thugs**) and two **mastiffs** protect the warehouse at all times. Shortly after the characters depart for the warehouse, Imirich dispatches two urchins to shadow and report the character's progress. A character who succeeds on a DC 17 Wisdom (Perception) check detects the nimble agents. If the characters are defeated, they are turned over to the dock watch.



The Cat Lady (Levels 1–5). Imirich requests that the characters chase off the local cat lady from her dockside home. The cat lady is a retired adventurer, Portia-Mae Opiene (**priest**). She wants nothing more than to move to the tranquil countryside. Life along the bustling docks has grown unsettling. However, she lacks the patience to corral her irritable pets: three **panthers** and ten **cats**. When the characters attempt to help, the felines flee into the dock streets! If they're rounded up, Portia-Mae graciously thanks the characters and soon leaves town with her cats in tow. If the characters are unsuccessful, Portia-Mae sadly asks the characters to leave. If they refuse to leave without payment, she yells for the dock watch to come take away these grifters! Imirich the Rat learns of their success or failure through vermin spies tracking the characters.

ROADSIDE MAGDA

I REMEMBER THOSE ADVENTURING DAYS—TIRING AND FULL OF TRAVEL. REST YOUR BONES. HAVE SOMETHING TO EAT.

—ROADSIDE MAGDA

The quest for knowledge leads adventurers down many paths—over well-traveled coastal roads and grassy hill-locks, down dense forest trails and perilous mountain paths, and into deep dark dungeons and winding, cavernous tunnels. These long journeys can wear at adventurers' boot soles, horseshoes, and resolve. When travelers are worn and weary, the distant sound of rattling pots and comforting humming is a welcoming sign: Roadside Magda approaches.

Adventurers in your fantasy setting might know the name “Roadside Magda,” perhaps through tales of this traveling informant conquering dangerous dungeons, defeating monstrous menageries, or parlaying with some of the world’s most evil beings. In her waning years, Magda (*gladiator*) quite suddenly retired and built a rest stop tavern, the Heralded Haven, where she greets travelers with rosy cheeks, a beaming smile, and a friendly greeting: “Come over to my fire. Rest your weary bones. Plenty of space here for you.” From arrogant adventurer to malevolent monster, everyone gives in to Madga’s boundless kindness and finds rest in her tavern. Those who accept her hospitality can learn something valuable from the retired adventurer, as her adventuring experience and collection of stories from guests make her a trove of knowledge.

MAGDA’S PAST

As Roadside Madga tells it, she once owned a roadway stop called the Heralded Haven that was filled with cozy comforts. Her rules at the tavern are simple: no feet on chairs or tables, pick up after yourself, share a tale, no cursing, and no fighting. On the rare occasion when the rules were tested, guests delightfully watched on as Gran Mumm, the mummified remains of an adventurer, dealt with the unruly. However, when Magda speaks of her past, she always ends the tale with a sorrowful look, saying, “That’s when they came and burned the Heralded Haven to the ground—ran everyone off. It destroyed me.” She then corrects herself. “It almost destroyed me.” After this, she speaks no further, leaving abruptly to make sure bellies are full and guests are comfortable.

Almost everyone has heard of the day she speaks of, the day a horde of marauders burned her establishment to the ground. They chased off guests, cut down the foolhardy, and robbed victims of their prized possessions. In the chaos, Roadside Magda disappeared.

After a decade, news spread that Roadside Magda was alive. Travelers spotted her roaming the regional roadsides, setting up camps, and offering up hearty stews, tales, and smiles. Those who saw the aged adventurer noted where they were when they did. The reappearance of Roadside Magda has sparked a race by adventurers to be some of the first to get to her roving camps to learn what they can from the retired explorer. Maps with Magda’s known campsite locations are in high demand. A character who succeeds on a DC 15 Intelligence (Investigation) check in a settlement finds someone who knows Magda’s current location and gives up the information with a bribe worth 50 gp or a successful DC 15 Charisma (Intimidation or Persuasion) check.

MAGDA’S BACKPACK

Magda always meets the needs of her guests. She picks about the pockets, ties, and openings of her rather plain-looking, framed backpack, impossibly bringing forth from its depths anything she needs to provide the meal, fire, and other comforts. A *detect magic* spell reveals that the bag emanates conjuration and enchantment auras. If asked about the pack, Magda kindly remarks with a smile, “It’s all I could pull out of what was left. It’s enough, though.”

The magic pack is a *buttressing backpack* (see “Buttressing Backpack”) that cursed Magda. She has no idea that she is under its sway and uses it constantly, keeping enough camping equipment and foodstuffs in the backpack to feed up to ten people three meals a day for the duration of her travels.

A character who succeeds on a successful DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check notices that when Magda cares for a visitor, baubles on the backpack shake for a few seconds, then stop. If the *remove curse* spell or similar magic is cast on the pack, Magda immediately becomes a rage-filled, vengeance-minded berserker! She rushes for her spear and attacks the nearest camp guest (see “Buttressing Backpack”).

If Magda is convinced that the backpack causes her pacifist behavior, she is willing to get rid of it—but not without a favor (see “A Special Favor”).

Backpack History. Magda discovered the backpack while exploring a ruined temple devoted to an Amaphori, god of empathy and hospitality. From the moment she acquired the item, Magda no longer wanted to battle monsters, dungeon delve, and live an adventurer’s life—she just wanted to help as many beings as she could.



BUTTRESSING BACKPACK

Wondrous Item, Very Rare (Requires Attunement by a Creature of Good Alignment)

This plain, wood-framed rucksack is made of worn leather and sports several pouches, belts, and ties. Six divine baubles devoted to a good-aligned deity of the GM's choice are sewn into its flaps. The pack always contains the contents of an explorer's pack, and the main pouch of the bag functions as a *bag of holding*.

While attuned to the backpack, you are protected from death. When you are reduced to 0 hit points as a result of taking damage, you drop to 1 hit point instead, and one of the divine baubles or trinkets disappears. If an effect would kill you instantly without dealing damage, that effect is instead negated against you, and two baubles vanish. Each day at dawn, the pack regains 1d4 expended baubles. If all the baubles are lost, the backpack and its owner crumble to dust.

Curse. The backpack is cursed. Attuning to it curses you until you are targeted by the *remove curse* spell or similar magic. Removing the backpack or ending your attunement to it fails to end the curse. The curse binds your soul to the backpack in a pact of faith, fealty, and service to others, changing your alignment to lawful good. While attuned to the backpack, you gain the following bond: "I relentlessly seek out adventurers to aid." You also gain the following flaw: "I treat everyone with kindness and see to their comfort as best as I can." The curse represses any behaviors, thoughts, or words motivated by anger.

If the curse is removed, you go into a berserker-like frenzy for 1 minute. While in the frenzy, you attempt to kill the nearest creature you can see. A *calm emotions* spell or similar magic, or two successful DC 17 Charisma (Persuasion) checks, each made as an action, ends the frenzy.

TALK FIRST

You should confer with any player whose character wants to attune to the *buttressing backpack*. Explain the curse, then let the player decide if the curse is something they want their character to take on.

RESTING KNOWLEDGE

While in Magda's company, the characters may ask questions about where her travels have taken her, where she's headed, or if she knows something about their current quest. She answers these questions with a smile and a "Let me tell you, dearie ..." If the characters don't ask, Magda asks where they're going and why, and if she has information that can help, she offers it.

After years of adventuring and filling bellies, Magda has acquired a trove of knowledge. While her notes, journals, trophies, and other records were destroyed with the Heralded Haven, Magda still recalls many of their details. She can provide information about the following subjects, usually in the form of a story involving an adventurer she knew back in the day:

- Rare spell component locations
- Clandestine routes to evade bandits
- A dungeoneer's account of deathtrap dungeon rooms
- A lesser-known entrance to a villain or monster's lair
- Static fey lines within a day's travel
- Secret hideaways that guarantee uninterrupted rest

Magda has energy for one story per day, and she ends the story with, "That's enough for now, gotta take my bones to bed." If Magda believes the characters to be true heroes, she might share the tale of how she came upon "this ratty ole pack" (see "Backpack History" above).

A SPECIAL FAVOR

Magda kindly asks that those who want to hear a story give one first, specifically a personal tale about the character's adventures. The character who tells the tale must make a DC 15 Charisma (Performance) check if the tale is true, or a DC 19 Charisma (Deception) check if it's false, as Magda is kind, but not a pushover. On a success, Magda is impressed and shares a story that provides the requested information. On a failure, Magda smiles and asks the characters for one of the following favors before answering their question.

Roadside Rage (Levels 5–10). Magda asks the characters to track down the raiders who burned down the Heralded Haven. If asked why she hasn't done so herself, she remarks, "Violence ain't my way no more, but you

fine folks could make things right." Magda knows the location of the marauders' camp, but the backpack's curse prevents her from taking direct action. She provides characters with a map that contains a two-square-mile area marked "Reaver Camp." It is a day's travel away from Magda's camp, and the surrounding swamp is difficult terrain and impassable by land vehicles. A rubble-and-debris road leading to the camp is concealed by a movable wall of weaved foliage, which can be found by a character who succeeds on a DC 15 Intelligence (Investigation) check or Wisdom (Perception) check.

The raider camp consists of ten **bandits**, one **bandit captain**, two **cult fanatics**, and Jarisaen (**druid**), the leader. Jarisaen and the cult fanatics worship the Purifying Flame, an entity that demands destruction of landmarks by fire in exchange for power. If confronted, Jarisaen and the cult fanatics boast that the "sacrifice" of the Heralded Haven was "their greatest offering," then fight to the death. An account of the marauders' end earns Magda's thanks and information.

Camp Champ-erones (Levels 5–10). Magda asks the characters to help host her annual Festival of Respite, an all-day, open invitation retreat where all are welcome to rest and enjoy a wonderful meal. The characters must serve food while preventing the guests from harming each other. To get the information, they must keep the peace while following Magda's golden rule: "You don't get rested bodies and filled bellies by killing!"

The guests include Ser Gairland, a famous human **knight** and his entourage of five **veterans**; a troupe of four bard **hobgoblins** known as the Bloodbow Bannermen; Khalamoundyn, a **young green dragon** with some orange scales; and Augl Filkins, a necromancer **cult fanatic** and his treasured five skeleton pit bulls (**Undead mastiffs** that are immune to poison damage). The characters must keep Ser Gairland from killing Khalamoundyn, who some time ago ate his beloved warhorse. The Bloodbow Bannerman are irritated with Filkins' dogs, as their ghastly barking interferes with the creation of the hobgoblins' next dirge. Augl brags that he slipped an eviscerating elixir into the knight and dragon's drink, which will turn them into his undead minions unless he is convinced to provide the antidote.

THE SABLE GALA

PEOPLE WOULD KILL TO HAVE THAT INVITATION IN THEIR HANDS.

—THE HOST

In affluent city wards, luminaries, nobility, and glitterati vie for influence, popularity, and power. Within the endless power plays, a valuable fact or secret can thrust one to the highest position of aristocracy and topple others into squalor and obscurity. Those investigating the deepest mysteries of the aristocracy may be invited to the Sable Gala, a masquerade where dark secrets pass through liaisons and whispers among a coterie of assassins. Many wealthy aristocrats know about the gala, though they rarely speak of it.

Characters looking for information about nobility may have a rich patron who secures them an invitation. At best, guests have a memorable time and leave with the information they seek. At worst, they never leave at all.

GALA INFORMATION

Characters could attend the gala for information about one of the following subjects, but obtaining it won't be easy (see "Wanted Whispers"):

- Illegitimate children with royal bloodlines
- Covert contingencies surrounding a peace treaty between major cities
- Bribery and graft amongst temples leaders
- The location of a noble family vault
- The circumstances surrounding a noble's death
- The hidden vice of a prominent socialite

GALA HISTORY

Years ago, the city's assassins' guilds were at war. At the height of this bloody conflict, a mysterious being called the Host rose to prominence. Through clandestine audiences with war survivors and city luminaries, the Host brought the Assassin's War to an end with a truce, which unified the finest assassins in a lucrative partnership. As part of this, the Sable Gala was established as the assembly place of the affluent assassins and spies catering exclusively to nobility. The cities' assassins now indulge in luxury, and their clients hold newfound power—just as the Host wants.

THE HOST

Though retired during the Assassin's War, the Host (*assassin*) saw the benefit of unifying the guilds and putting himself at the helm. Using a *hat of disguise* and a *rod*

of security acquired at the height of his career, the Host brings assassins and clients together on the eleventh and twenty-second day of every month to the Sable Gala. The Host is always in attendance, dressed in similar regalia as the Regulars (see "The Regulars"), except for a tiny orchid tattoo on his wrist and face paint in the likeness of a frowning skull, veiled by an avian masquerade mask.

THE REGULARS

The Regulars are the regular assassin and client attendees at the Sable Gala. They dress in vibrant formal clothing that veils their most distinguishing features. All wear resplendent masks depicting animals. They mingle about and acknowledge the characters' arrival with a head nod, a curtsy, an alluring stare, or an inviting smile. Each of the Regulars is an infamous **assassin** or **bandit captain**.

The Regulars can include the following NPCs:

- **Emerald Ostrich.** Bedazzled horns betray this masked assassin's tiefling heritage. Enticing and flirtatious, they prefer to speak with those equally charming.
- **Onyx Boar.** This opal-masked braggart is too willing to reveal how rich he is. Lavishly dressed and gaudily jeweled, this loudmouthed dwarf enjoys peppering new company with questions about their past.
- **Diamond Adder.** This silver-eyed half-elf is the master of poisons among the Regulars. Courteous and shrewd, the subtle killer warms up to guests who appear roguish, swapping trade secrets.

THE VENUE

The event is held in an elegant ballroom created by the Host's *rod of security*. Attendees are sent an invitation containing instructions to access the space. Guests arrive at the top of stairs carpeted in red velvet, then descend into the ballroom, swept into the finest luxuries gold can provide. Tables covered in red cloth line the ballroom walls, holding succulent meats, exotic fruits, and wine fountains. Pleasant ballroom music from masked musicians on a buttressed stage fills the masquerade. Diamond chandeliers hang from the ceiling—which, upon further examination, depicts hands wielding daggers.

ENTERING THE GALA

Characters may attend the Sable Gala to find information on a hated enemy, learn more about a particular assassin or assassination, gather information about a noble family, or perhaps simply uncover the truth about the Host and the Sable Gala. Regardless of the motivation, the characters must acquire or receive an invitation to the gala. Word of the characters' pending arrival finds its way to the Regulars and the Host.



The onyx-glitter invitation placard politely requests that the characters “please dress immaculately to arrive spectacularly as eight evening bells ring from the city clock tower.” At eight bells, magic imbued in the invitation transports them to the masquerade.

As the characters enter at the top of the stairs, soft music plays and the sound of a ringing champagne glass sounds throughout the space, resonating from the ballroom walls. Moments later, the Host’s soft, inviting voice announces the arrival of the characters, which he refers to as the Guests. He then says, “All should mind the time—and let it be a splendid one. The gala ends in four hours.” Characters with a passive Wisdom (Perception) score of 15 or higher sense that the Host is somewhere on the ballroom floor among the Regulars. If the characters know to look for his tattoo (see “The Host”) and succeed on a DC 20 group Wisdom (Perception) check, they identify him. The DC for this check is reduced by 2 for every hour the characters spend searching and doing nothing else at the gala.

WANTED WHISPERS

As the characters mingle among the Regulars, the conversations begin lighthearted and friendly, focusing on the gala’s ambiance and small talk about the characters’ lives.

If the characters try to get significant information from the Regulars, the attendees politely dance around answering any questions directly, insisting that the answers to the Guests’ questions must be earned. To get information, a character must impress one of the Regulars with a dazzling display of oratory, finesse, or wit. Examples include posing a question in a poem, while dancing, while playing an instrument, or in dramatic prose. Characters asking questions must make a DC 13 Charisma (Performance) check. At the GM’s discretion, a character could substitute another ability check, such as a Strength (Athletics) check to pose a question while performing feats of strength or a Dexterity (Acrobatics) check to ask a question while tumbling. The DC for this check increases to 15 if the characters want information about the Sable Gala or the Host. On a success, the character receives a deafening round of applause, followed by a sound of clinking on glass calming the crowd. The Regulars part, revealing the Host, who then raises a wine glass and proclaims, “I’d like to propose a toast!” Proceed to “A Toast to the Tasked.”

If the character fails the check, a different character can attempt to ask the same question, but the DC of the check increases by 2. After three failed attempts, proceed to “The Woeful Waltz.”

A TOAST TO THE TASKED

Upon the Host's announcement, all of the Regulars raise champagne glasses toward the characters. The Host announces, "Well done. Well played! Now the price must be paid. The Guests will provide us aid." He then describes one of the following tasks, which must be completed to gain the information the characters seek.

If the task is completed, a Sable Gala page (**commoner**) finds the characters and hands them a familiar placard that contains the answer to their inquiry. If the task wasn't completed, this placard contains an invitation that magically transports them back to the Sable Gala right as the "Woeful Waltz" starts.

Lich's Blood (Level 5–10). The characters receive a rosewood box containing an enchanted silk kerchief. The Host informs the characters that the kerchief must be dipped in the preservative fluid of a lich's soul case and brought back to the Sable Gala. All the Host knows is that the soul case is on the second floor of the lich's home. The Host provides no other information, eager to see if the characters accept such a dangerous task with so few details.

If they accept, the characters are magically transported to the front gates of a luxurious manor. A successful DC 12 Intelligence (History) check reveals that the manor belongs to Humboldt Echzar, a famous troubadour in the realm. Secretly, Humboldt is a lich! To enter the manor, the characters must pass Humboldt's four private guards (**veterans**), three **hell hounds**, and two **wraiths** patrolling the manor grounds. Indoors, Humboldt's two **invisible stalkers** roam the manor freely.

Echzar's soul case is a glass lamp filled with a luminescent fluid, where a glob of lich's flesh floats. It sits on a nightstand in the master bedroom on the second floor, and the character can recognize it with a successful DC 17 Intelligence (Arcana) check. Should the characters encounter Humboldt, a **lich**, they can avoid combat if they appeal to the lich's vanity with a successful DC 15 Charisma (Deception or Persuasion) check. Otherwise, the lich attacks, preferring to chase the characters throughout the manor. Humboldt toys with them until it is no longer enjoyable, then locks them away in his dungeon to be his literal captive audience. If the characters complete the task, they are instantly transported back to where they opened the invitation, and the kerchief is gone.

Persona Non-Gala (Level 5–10). The Host reveals that an assassin betrayed them. Graun Vokken, a human **assassin** with a *short sword of wounding* and a *cloak of elvenkind* is a cunning master assassin who leads a new guild called the Skulking Scales. The characters must find the group's forest cave hideout, wipe out the assassins, and claim Graun's magic sword as proof of the deed done.

If the characters accept this task, they are magically transported to the forest containing the guild's lair. The cave entrance is veiled by thick foliage. Each hour the characters search the woods, they can make a successful DC 15 group Wisdom (Perception) check. On a success, they find the main entrance. The cave contains two deep gnome **bandit captains**, four half-orc **thugs**, and Graun. Unless the characters succeed on a DC 15 group Dexterity (Stealth) check, the Skulking Scales hear their approach and prepare an ambush. The assassins fight to the death unless a character succeeds on a DC 17 Charisma (Persuasion) to convince Graun to give up his sword to deceive the Sable Gala, which could give the Skulking Scales time to grow to prominence. When the characters claim the sword, they are instantly transported back to where they opened the invitation, and the sword is gone.

WOEFUL WALTZ

If the characters fail to impress the Sable Gala, the chandelier lights darken for a moment. When they come back on, the Regulars have removed their masks, revealing that each of their faces is painted in the bone-white visage of a grinning skull. The Regulars pair up and begin to dance as a waltz composed of a barrage of flats and sharps resonates through the ballroom. The Regulars dance closer and closer to the characters as the Host proclaims, "Your lack of guile is out of style. Your convincing? We're wincing. You're unworthy of the dance but deserving of a chance. Muster grace and leave this place. The lightest slight? A fatal bite." Then the Host disappears into the crowd.

The Regulars become a deadly swarm that the characters must overcome to reach a set of plush-covered doubled doors 50 feet away at either end of the ballroom. The couples spin gracefully en masse while holding hands and wielding blades as the mind-piercingly loud music plays. The swarm fights until the characters leave the gala or until killed.

Escaping the Gala. If the characters flee beyond the ballroom doors, they are transported back to where they used the invitation to enter Sable Gala. If the Host wishes to pursue the characters beyond the Sable Gala, he can send the Regulars to pursue them. If the characters personally slighted him, he also joins the chase.

If the Regulars are defeated, the Host is revealed as the last standing among them, his face painted in the visage of a frowning skull mask. He simply says, "You are uninvited," after which the characters are magically transported back to where they opened their invitation. Here, they realize they possess a beautifully penned letter with the information they sought.

THE REGULARS

Gargantuan Swarm of Medium Humanoids, Lawful Evil

ARMOR CLASS 14

HIT POINTS 150 (12d20 + 24)

SPEED 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
11 (+0)	18 (+4)	14 (+2)	13 (+1)	12 (+1)	14 (+2)

SAVING THROWS Dex +8, Int +5

SKILLS Acrobatics +8, Deception +6, Perception +5, Stealth +8

DAMAGE RESISTANCES bludgeoning, piercing, slashing

CONDITION IMMUNITIES charmed, frightened, grappled, paralyzed, petrified, prone, restrained, stunned

SENSES passive Perception 15

LANGUAGES Common, thieves' cant

CHALLENGE 10 (5,900 XP)

PROFICIENCY BONUS +4

Legendary Resistance (3/Day). If the Regulars fail a saving throw, they can choose to succeed instead.

Swarm. The Regulars can occupy another creature's space and vice versa, and they can move through any opening large enough for a Medium creature. The Regulars can't regain hit points or gain temporary hit points.

The Regulars have advantage on attacks against creatures that occupy the same space as them. When a hostile creature the swarm can see starts their turn in the same space as the Regulars, the creature takes 7 (2d6) slashing damage.

ACTIONS

Multiaction. The Regulars make four Slashing Strikes attacks.

Slashing Strikes. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +8 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 14 (4d6) slashing damage, or 7 (2d6) slashing damage if the Regulars have half of their hit points or fewer.

Cascade of Bolts. The Regulars release a hail of crossbow bolts in a 10-foot-radius sphere centered on a point the Regulars can see within 80 feet of them. Each creature in that area must make a DC 16 Dexterity saving throw. On a failed save, a creature takes 27 (6d8) piercing damage, or 13 (3d8) piercing damage if the Regulars have half of their hit points or fewer. On a successful save, a creature takes half as much damage.

LEGENDARY ACTIONS

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

Ballroom Blitz. The Regulars choose one creature they can see within 30 feet of them. The target must succeed on a DC 16 Strength saving throw or be knocked prone.

Pulling Promenade. The Regulars can move up to their speed without provoking opportunity attacks. A creature of the Regulars' choice that is in the Regulars' space or a creature the Regulars move through must succeed on a DC 16 Dexterity saving throw or be moved with the Regulars until the end of this movement.

Staggering Staccato. The Regulars choose one creature they can see within 30 feet of them. The target must succeed on a DC 16 Wisdom saving throw or their speed is halved until the end of their next turn.

Alluring Dance (Costs 2 Actions). The Regulars target one creature they can see within 60 feet of them. That target must succeed on DC 16 Wisdom saving throw or be charmed by the Regulars for 1 minute. While charmed in this way, a creature must use their movement and take the Dash action on their turn to move toward the Regulars. At the end of each of their turns, a charmed target can repeat the saving throw, ending the condition on themselves on a success. On a successful save, the target is immune to this effect for 24 hours.

RESOURCES

EMBRACE THE FLESH

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BASHEER GHOUSE is a freelance writer, cultural consultant, and indie game designer. He is a desi Muslim based out of San Jose and has worked with Paizo, Kobold Press, Wizards of the Coast, Darrington Press, and Rowan Rook and Deckard in the past. His game design focuses on body horror, political tangles, warfare, and Islamic history.



ALEX CLIPPINGER started in the tabletop space in 2016 and has had the honor of working with incredible publishers like Cubicle 7, Poison Potion Press, Loresmyth, and others. He spends all of his time on Twitter ([@aclippinger](https://twitter.com/aclippinger)) as he shuffles around his Midwest home. He's still there. He can't leave. It won't let him. The house has a pulse. The walls are warm and have a copper smell. Come visit!



MARCELLO DE VELAZQUEZ is a veteran, game designer and D&D Adventurers League organizer from Bellevue, Nebraska. When not designing or preparing RPG material, he interns as a mental health professional at an Omaha emergency shelter/treatment center. His love of tabletop roleplaying games is only overshadowed by his love for red velvet cake. Marcello's weekly D&D game has run for over five years now! His recent works include *Scion of Darkness* for the Ravenloft: Mist Hunters campaign and also *The First Forest*, a D&D Adventurers League adventure that premiered at GaryCon 2022! He hopes someday to be able to contribute to a major RPG sourcebook! You can find him streaming on Twitch on the [@borderkingdomsadventures channel](https://www.twitch.tv/borderkingdomsadventures). His work can be found in ARCADIA Magazine and on the [@DMs Guild](https://dmsguild.com).

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