ISSUE 416 | OCTOBER 2012

DRAGON

A Dungeons & Dragons® Roleplaying Game Supplement

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CONTENTS

3 MISTY MEMORIES

By Stan!

This month we raise Ravenloft from the dead. Boys and ghouls, you're in for a treat.

4 STRAHD AND VAN RICHTEN

By Sterling Hershey

Rudolph van Richten is the D&D game's most esteemed vampire hunter, but one legendary vampire has so far eluded him.

11 TWISTED BY DARKNESS

By Doug Hyatt

Because of your brutal deeds, the dark powers have turned you into a misshapen horror. It's not as bad as it sounds.

16 THE LIFE OF SOTH

By Claudio Pozas

Brace yourself for a tale of love, honor, corruption, and terror from beyond the grave.

23 IN A VAMPIRIC VEIN

By Walter Kammerer

Vampire heroes need more than blood to survive. Here's a collection of magic items popular among children of the night.

25 RAK TULKHESH, THE RAGE OF WAR

By Keith Baker

Rak Tulkhesh was destroyed long ago. But in these grim times, it won't be long before the Rage of War is reborn.

28 THE AWAKENER OF GOLEMS

By Ed Greenwood

A mysterious figure wields the power to bring inert golems temporarily to life under his control. But to what end?

33 THE WITHERING ONES

By Rodney Thompson

Kalak kept a horde of zombies hidden below Tyr. Now that he is dead, do these undead horrors pose a threat to the city above?

ON THE COVER *As envisioned by artist Tyler Jacobson, Count Strahd von Zarovich looks every inch the Barovian noble and cunning vampire lord as he welcomes you to his home, Castle Ravenloft. The count's assistant might have a disturbing appearance, but Strahd assures you the little fellow is harmless enough.*

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416

DRAGON | October 2012

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Misty Memories

By Stan!

With all the wicked thoughts that October inspires, it seemed like the perfect month to dive into the mists of Ravenloft® for a little D&D® with a tinge of Gothic horror.

My first job at TSR was as an editor on Ravenloft, polishing the tombstones on the Grim Harvest series of adventures. I've had a taste for the spookier side of D&D ever since, so this issue's theme is right up my dark and threatening alley.

For those who don't know, the Demiplane of Dread has its origins in the classic 1st Edition D&D module, *Ravenloft* (I6). Soon after, though, it was transformed into a whole campaign setting. The Ravenloft setting was a place where exceptionally vile villains from any number of worlds were brought by mysterious forces known only as the dark powers. Each villain was made the darklord of a small demesne, with great powers over the land and anyone in it. This power came with a price, though; each darklord was trapped by the mists and suffered under a unique curse that ultimately denied his or her heart's true desire. These lands came to be known as domains of dread.

Although Ravenloft as a whole did not make the leap into 4th Edition, the concept of domains of dread did. Rather than existing on the Demiplane of Dread, though, domains of dread now are said to be isolated realms within the Shadowfell. It takes only a bit of retrofitting to imagine the whole of the campaign floating somewhere in that dark, misty corner of the cosmos, and that opens up a world of possibilities.

In this month's issue, we bring you a creepy collection of macabre musings—articles that you can use when your campaign wanders into a dark and scary place. Whether it's the Shadowfell, beyond the mists of Ravenloft, or just in the darkest corners of the human heart, you'll be glad to have these pages tucked away in your satchel.

First among the darklords is Strahd von Zarovich—the villain of *Ravenloft*, and the most iconic vampire in all of D&D lore. It was from Strahd and his cursed existence that the Ravenloft campaign setting sprung, and this month's History Check article explores the links between this monster and the ultimate monster hunter, Rudolph van Richten.

Another darklord can be found among these pages, too. Lord Soth is the only character in the annals of D&D to be a key figure in two campaign settings—first as the lord of Dargaard Keep in the Dragonlance® setting and then as the Lord of Sithicus in Ravenloft. Learn his woeful tale in "The Life of Soth."

The lords who rule domains of dread aren't the only ones that the mists have cursed. When good people do terrible things, they draw the attention of the dark powers. "Character Themes: Twisted by Darkness" enables you to make characters who literally bear the marks of their past transgressions.

Bloodsucking fiends are powerful, but so are the adventurers who hunt them. "Bazaar of the Bizarre: In a Vampiric Vein" presents a collection of monstrous magical items that the children of the night can use to get an edge on their enemies (mortal or otherwise).

The days are growing shorter, there's a chill in the air, and no one knows what unholy creatures stalk the dark of the night. So, roll up a fresh character and march boldly into the mists . . . if you dare.

History Check: Strahd and van Richten

By Sterling Hershey

Illustrations by Tyler Jacobson and Miles Johnston

Welcome to the latest installment of this continuing series featuring iconic characters from the settings of the Dungeons & Dragons® game. Each History Check article recalls some of the game's classic characters and events, while adding new insight. Sidebars in the text provide guidance to Dungeon Masters and players as to what a character might know of these stories with a successful skill check.

This installment descends into the dark horror of the infamous lord of Ravenloft, Count Strahd von Zarovich, and brings to light the glimmers of hope provided by Strahd's rival, the master monster hunter Dr. Rudolph van Richten. It begins with a passage from the viewpoint of the sole survivor of a brutal attack, who escaped with a damaged copy of a mysterious book. . . .

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A Desperate Approach

"Madam Singer! I've searched for a Vistani caravan for weeks. It took many days to catch up with you. You are obviously in a hurry, but I beg you, please, I need information that only the Vistani can give. . . . Yes, I can pay. . . . Yes, I would be honored to ride with you inside the wagon as we talk. I do not wish to slow you down this gloomy night. . . .

"Madam, please put away your tarokka cards and crystal ball. I didn't chase you across many leagues for a reading or a prophecy. You see, I am the last of my family. A month ago, our estate was attacked in the dark of night. When I heard the screams of my family and friends, I panicked and ran into the countryside. When morning came, I returned home, ashamed of my fear and cowardice. I found everyone from the servants to the eldest of our noble house brutally slain. When I saw their broken bodies, anger and a thirst for vengeance replaced my shame and fear. While searching the house for any survivors, I ran across the charred remains of this book in the fireplace of my father's ruined library.

"As you can see, it is all but destroyed. All I can read is the title, Van Richten's Guide to Vampires. *My father seemingly ran afoul of one of these evil creatures and was researching how to destroy it, before it found him that frightful night.*

"People say the Vistani know much of vampires. Please, tell me how to defeat them. Tell me of this van Richten—does he know the means of their destruction?"

The First Vampire

"Oh, yes, young one, we know about vampires. Some would say too much. I'm sure you were warned to beware of the Vistani.

"Now, you are foolish to so quickly dismiss my mystical powers and the importance of the reading of your fortune. After all, how else did I know you were coming? Lucky for you, I foresaw your arrival, your desperation, and the weight of your purse. Otherwise, this caravan would be worlds away by now, and you would be wandering a long and empty road.

"Your father was incredibly fortunate to obtain one of van Richten's tomes. I foresee great shame will fall upon your family for its being destroyed while in your care. Not all will mourn its loss, certainly not the vampire who destroyed it. Perhaps not even the Vistani . . . well, not *all* of the Vistani.

"Van Richten is a name we know well. The Vistani are responsible, after a fashion, for setting him on this path. If not for our relatives, then van Richten's hatred of vampires, his unending battle against the supernatural, and his detailed tomes would not exist. He has saved countless mortal souls. His texts have enabled others to destroy thousands of terrible monsters and unholy beasts. Despite his good works, he would not thank us for providing his inspiration. As you will learn, he has every right to hate the Vistani.

"Van Richten is a famous monster hunter. He is the archenemy of vampires, werebeasts, the undead, and others who terrify an entire populace merely by their arrival in the area. These are van Richten's subjects of study, as well as his eternal foes.

"But to understand van Richten, you must first understand his greatest enemies—the vampires. If you want to take on your vampire, I can place you on the right path. Can you handle it? We shall see.

"Now, young one, we must start with the so-called first vampire. You're right to be skeptical of the title. He's unlikely to have been the first vampire to walk the world. On the other hand, it's said he's the first to be created by death itself. He certainly was the first vampire in his now famously tormented land, Barovia."

The Zarovans

Madam Singer, the narrator of this History Check, is a member of the Zarovan tribe of the Vistani. The Vistani's mysterious caravans travel vast distances and visit distant places, such as the Shadowfell and lands beyond.

More information about the Vistani can be found in *Player's Option: Heroes of Shadow,* the boxed set *The Shadowfell: Gloomwrought and Beyond*, and the Vistani articles in *Dragon* 380.

Triumph and Tragedy

"Count Strahd von Zarovich is the Lord of Barovia. The Vistani know him even better than van Richten does. Our people travel many lands, and some of them prefer to reside in Barovia—to be close to Strahd.

"Yes, young one, we know vampires. We know the most famous one of all very well. Personally, some might say. . . .

"Strahd excels at deceit and manipulation. Most of his subjects, the people of Barovia, believe he's a normal man. Even though they call him the "devil Strahd," they think he's simply an incredibly old man in the long line of von Zarovich. No matter how you approach them, they simply will not accept the truth.

"But believe me, young one, there is little about Barovia or its lord that you would consider normal. Long ago, Strahd arrived in Barovia as a strict but generally good-intentioned noble. He was a successful conqueror, and his army settled in the area. Strahd called his scattered family to join him at Castle Ravenloft, his new residence and his seat of power.

"You may not yet understand, but years of war and death weigh heavily on even the mightiest leaders. Strahd regretted the years of his youth that he lost to his efforts of conquest. A sinister darkness settled across his mind.

"Strahd ruled Barovia harshly. He was authoritarian, but not yet truly evil. It was a different kind of loss that pushed him over the edge.

"Do you know of love yet, young one? Yes? Unrequited love? Then you know the pain of longing, jealousy, and even madness that can befall those who are rejected by the object of their affection.

"Count von Zarovich, quite simply, fell in love. She was a young woman called Tatyana. He adored and pursued her. Of course, she rejected him. She called him 'old one' and worse. That treatment shattered his ego. Strahd knew she rejected him because she saw little but old age and death within him.

"Even worse, Tatyana fell in love with Sergei, Strahd's younger brother. From the moment Sergei had arrived at Castle Ravenloft with the family, Strahd had despised him for his youth and handsomeness. Word of their betrothal crushed Strahd. Jealousy and disappointment drove his soul down a dark path.

"But Strahd would not surrender, not even to death. No, he used his arcane powers to make a pact with death instead. On Sergei's wedding day, Strahd sealed the pact by murdering his own brother.

"Tatyana fled from Strahd, refusing to hear his attempts to explain himself. The castle guards shot the count during his pursuit. Consumed in grief and horror, Tatyana threw herself from the battlements of Castle Ravenloft. She disappeared into the mists a thousand feet below.

"The count should have died from his wounds, like any normal man. But the pact saved his life, in a way of speaking. He did not die because he could not. He became undead. He became a vampire, and his wrath fell upon the entire wedding party.

"Now, young one, you must understand that vampires usually are created by other vampires. Not so with Strahd. Such was the nature of his pact with death that when it was combined with his indomitable will, he was able to thwart the grasp of mortality itself."

Dreadful Transformation

"The land of Barovia changed when Strahd was reborn into unlife. Since that time, the fate of the people living there has grown ever darker.

"The borders of Barovia became enshrouded in an unnatural mist. The citizens discovered they were trapped, and they had little contact with the outside world. Any people who tried to travel through the mist found themselves back in Barovia . . . or were never heard from again.

"Any people except the Vistani, that is. We can pierce the mists when we desire, and the mists accommodate us. We can even take others with us at times, though those who know of this ability rarely ask for our aid. Travelers fear we'll leave them in an evil realm or abandon them in the mist. Those fears are not wholly unjustified. . . .

"The Barovians rarely try to escape. They fell into a peculiar mindset after the transformation, and thereafter had no difficulty in keeping to their own lands. Terrible creatures and powerful undead roamed the night. No one dared step foot outside their dwellings once the sun had set. No one ever opened their doors after dark, not even in response to screams or pleas for help from their friends and neighbors.

"We eventually discerned that Barovia had shifted into the Shadowfell, constituting its own realm enshrouded by a mysterious border mist. Strahd controls many aspects of his domain and can monitor some events. What's more, the mist has trapped

Roleplaying Strahd

Count Strahd von Zarovich is one of the game's best known and most popular villains. He has been used extensively by DMs to directly attack, torment, and interact with the player characters. Strahd is a complex, classic villain, with multiple motivations at any given time. He often toys with his enemies, and then crushes them when he tires of the game, or if they legitimately threaten him.

The count pursues his goals ruthlessly. He will personally attend to important matters using stealth, intimidation, or violence. Because time means nothing to Strahd, he will retreat if events go poorly for him. Waiting for a better opportunity is rarely a problem.

His goals are mostly personal ones. Strahd is haunted by recurring visions of his lost Tatyana and still hopes that she, or her reincarnation, might one day become his bride. Despite his never-ending desire, he has not yet succeeded. Many years might pass between these opportunities, during which Strahd might occupy himself with other matters. He rarely cares enough about Barovian affairs to dedicate time to them, unless they directly support or interfere with his plans. He occasionally attempts to escape Ravenloft, and he pursues powerful magic items that could threaten or aid him.

In an encounter with adventurers, Strahd is evil and lethal. He strikes suddenly, often with the help of wolves or undead allies. Breaks rarely fall the characters' way. They should feel fortunate to escape him and triumphant if they defeat him, albeit temporarily.

Strahd as effectively as everyone else. He, like his subjects, cannot leave. . . .

"It would be a mistake to think that Barovia is open only to Vistani travelers. Occasionally, the mist surrounding Barovia mysteriously appears on far-flung worlds or lands. Travelers enter a patch of ordinary fog or dense mist only to exit in Barovia. Most never escape and are forced to become permanent inhabitants. A few discover they might be able to depart by defeating the dark lord, Strahd himself.

"It might surprise you, young one, that over the decades, a few have even successfully fled. Though they might have won their freedom, Strahd has never been ultimately defeated. On occasions when he disappears for weeks or months on end, the Barovians continue living as though he is simply away, ready to return after any sunset. They know it can happen."

Enemies Not Yet Met

"Powerful people and evil creatures are never without enemies. If one's stature is measured by the quality of his or her foes, what does it say that Count Strahd von Zarovich and Dr. Rudolph van Richten are the fiercest of opponents? How does that change, when you consider that the mortal realm's most famous monster hunter has never personally fought one of his worst foes?

"Well, young one, the easy answer is that this story is not yet complete. Perhaps they will someday fight an epic duel—fangs versus mallet and stake. For now, it is accurate to say that they are already engaged in a more subtle conflict.

"In some ways, Strahd and van Richten are more alike than the good doctor would like to admit. Both prefer to outwit their opponents. Both use violence when it suits them. Both manipulate or recruit others to fight their battles, though their methods differ. It is said that van Richten has even entered Castle Ravenloft, but only to gather information, not to engage in combat with Strahd.

"I'm certain van Richten fears Strahd. Only a fool would not. Does this emotion stay van Richten's hand? I doubt it. Van Richten despises vampires above all others. I'm certain that despite his apprehensions, he is driven to find the means of Strahd's true and permanent destruction.

"The Lord of Barovia cannot be slain as normal vampires can be. In some corners it is said that vampires might be destroyed by the light of day. Indeed, Strahd cannot abide the sun and is dormant throughout the daylight hours. Even if he is destroyed by physical attack, magical force, or other violent means, he always, eventually, returns. As a mortal, van Richten has only one life to risk in such a confrontation. Even worse would be to fall to an undead foe and become one of them. So, he is right to be cautious with the devil Strahd.

"Which would the Vistani support in such a confrontation? Impetuous child! Do not insult us. Those that deal with Strahd do so in exchange for other opportunities. The Vistani need no such assistance. If Strahd were destroyed, the Vistani would go on. If van Richten were killed, the Vistani would not weep. The Vistani serve themselves.

"That last fact, young one, is why others warned you about the Vistani. It is why we are not trusted. They say we might sell anyone out at the first opportunity, if the price is right. Sometimes, they are right. Fortunately for you, your gold is good today. . . .

"Indeed, the Vistani know Barovia well, but we are not limited to that realm or anywhere else. Barovia is not the only dreadful domain to be claimed and held in isolation by the Shadowfell. In fact, there is a similarity between Strahd and the good doctor—because van Richten comes from another isolated domain of dread, one called Darkon.

"That place is out of Count von Zarovich's reach, but it is every bit as perilous as Barovia. Many of the same horrific, supernatural creatures lurk in both realms, as well as this world. Perhaps the mists are what provide them passage.

"Darkon's isolation is the reason I am not surprised that you had never heard of van Richten before you found this charred book. Your father's acquisition of it must be a long story at the end of a difficult journey. It is not the first of van Richten's tomes to reach this world, but such an event is a rare occurrence."

History Check

The following History check DCs assume the character making the check to be from a location outside Barovia or Darkon. Characters from those realms gain a +5 bonus when making a History check about Barovia or Strahd.

History DC 15: The character knows vague and dreadful tales regarding undead and supernatural horrors in a legendary realm called Barovia.

History DC 20: The character has heard rumors about Count Strahd von Zarovich and his harsh rule over Barovia. The stories imply that he is more than an evil human lord, but do not speak to his true nature.

History DC 25: The character knows that Barovia is a mist-enshrouded domain of dread in the Shadowfell, and is aware of rumored difficulties in entering or leaving the domain.

History DC 30: The character has heard tales that the Vistani of Barovia act as Strahd's spies and allies. The character has also heard that van Richten is interested in defeating Strahd.

History DC 35: The character has heard assertions of Strahd's true nature as a vampire and his status as the lord of his domain of dread.

A Father's Love

"So, we come to your tool of vengeance, young one—the book, and its author. Perhaps van Richten would not share your violent motivation nowadays, but he would understand it. He has lived through his own pain and heartache.

"Dr. Rudolph van Richten was once a modest, unassuming medical practitioner. Though his surgical skills were merely adequate, he was a talented herbalist. Perhaps he might have continued with his quiet career, if not for the intervention of fate and the Vistani.

"Many years ago, a Vistani tribe kidnapped van Richten's son, Erasmus. The boy was sold to a vampire of power and position called Baron Metus. No Vistani who knows of this incident has deigned to address what motivated this act—whether the Vistani had something to gain from Metus by delivering the boy, or whether the baron manipulated or bargained with them to carry out the deed. At any rate, van Richten immediately set about tracking the kidnappers and eventually caught up with them in the realm of Barovia.

"Then, after he extracted his son's whereabouts from the kidnappers, he traveled to the baron's estate to confront the vampire directly. Metus reacted with the lowest form of disdain, allowing van Richten only a sneer and a laugh before having the doctor evicted from his presence. Of course, if van Richten had mounted a direct assault at this time, it would have met with utter failure. He was not the great hunter yet.

"So, van Richten retreated to the grounds just outside the baron's estate to consider his next step. The doctor was shocked when his son came to him instead. It was a dreadful reunion. The vampire had corrupted Erasmus, and the boy was becoming undead. He pleaded for his father to kill him immediately, before he forgot what it was to be human and became another evil creature preying upon the world.

"Van Richten was heartbroken, but fearful of what Erasmus would become. You see, young one, when battling a vampire, you must be prepared to kill the beast, no matter what body it inhabits or what soul it once possessed. Van Richten understood all this, and for that reason he slew his son. . . .

"Tell me, young one, would you have done the same? If your vampire had corrupted your father, would you have taken mallet and stake to your sire's heart? In your hunger for vengeance, do you realize that failure might cause you to become the very thing you despise? Are you willing to put your remaining friends and family at risk if you fail?

Roleplaying van Richten

Rudolph van Richten is first and foremost a scholar and a doctor. Even after his knowledge and his role in the world have expanded, he retains these simple beginnings in his personality. He is forceful when need be. He is resolute in his goal of permanently removing the undead and other supernatural horrors from the world. He is small, middle-aged, and thin—hardly the type most adventurers would see as a successful monster hunter.

Van Richten is ready to help those who seek his knowledge. He is willing to share what he knows and eager to learn of others' encounters with the undead and supernatural. He is less willing to take up the fight himself, unless he can be convinced that the need is great or that failure would end in catastrophe.

"I put that question to you because, you see, Baron Metus took his revenge immediately. Van Richten returned home to find his wife dead—a debt, in the baron's eyes, repaid in kind. Filled with despair and vengefulness, van Richten turned away from the healing arts and dedicated himself to the destruction of Baron Metus and all of his kind."

Light in the Gloom

"Van Richten's wrath was naturally directed toward the vampires first. After carrying out Baron Metus's final destruction, van Richten reconsidered his motives. He turned from revenge to become a scholar of these terrible creatures.

"He soon learned of other great horrors and threats to the world. First and foremost, he studied other undead, which were related to the vampires in terms of their evil unlife. This knowledge led him to the truth about other unnatural and supernatural creatures. Some claims he initially disregarded as folk tales. Only personal encounters with creatures like werewolves opened his eyes to their existence.

"Still driven by the loss of his loved ones, he sought to rid his land of these terrors, and to share his knowledge to enable others to do the same. Van Richten preferred misdirection and subterfuge over personal combat. After all, he was just a healer and a scholar who felt that he had been forced into developing new talents to survive so that he could aid others.

"Through his studies, van Richten discovered the full reality of Darkon's existence—it was a realm trapped within the Shadowfell. How did he pass from one realm to another in this turbulent sea? Perhaps he fooled or bribed the Vistani to guide him through the mists. Maybe the mists simply allowed him to travel between the domains. However he managed it, van Richten discovered the truth about Barovia and Strahd's connection to that dreadful domain, and, in so doing, he uncovered Strahd's true nature.

"Now, young one, you should realize that as people age, they think more about their legacy and their impact on the world. Van Richten records and distributes his knowledge about his fantastic subjects. At his herbalist shop in Darkon, van Richten has penned a number of tomes, each on a different monster, collectively called *Van Richten's Guides*.

"Within these books, he records observations and notes revealing important aspects of his quarry's mannerisms, weaknesses, and abilities. Some who peruse these volumes will never come to believe that the creatures chronicled within actually exist. Nevertheless, van Richten hopes that those who *need* the information—those who have experienced the horror firsthand—will find his books and his discoveries vital to their survival. Perhaps people like yourself and your father, young one. . . .

"Well, the hour is late, and our time is at an end. The driver will halt just ahead to let you off. I fear your search for help will be a long one. I do not know whether my tale will prove helpful to you, but in any event I foresee you will learn much more after leaving my wagon. Beyond that, I can tell you nothing. After all, you chose not to have me read your fortune. . . .

"Good-bye, young one."

Epilogue

"My head filled with tales of ancient vampires, frightful domains, and monster hunters, I stepped down from Madam Singer's wagon. Lost in thought, I took several paces from the wagon before I noticed that the night had become much foggier than before.

"I expected to be near a riverbank that paralleled the road, but I couldn't see it. The fog obscured my vision. Then I realized it wasn't fog—it was mist. A tingling began to rise up my neck, along with a newfound feeling of dread. I spun back toward the wagon, but it was gone. I was alone in the mist.

"Not knowing what else to do, I started walking. Would I find the river, or a domain of dread? Darkon or Barovia? Van Richten or the devil Strahd? Had the Vistani left me in peril?

"Suddenly, I dearly wished I had agreed to Madam Singer's tarokka reading. . . ."

History Check

The following History check DCs assume the character making the check to be from a location outside Barovia or Darkon. Characters from those realms gain a +5 bonus when making a History check about Darkon or van Richten.

History DC 15: The character has heard wild rumors of van Richten's adventures as a legendary monster hunter.

History DC 20: The character knows of the existence of one or two of van Richten's books, most likely the ones about vampires and werewolves.

History DC 25: The character knows of van Richten's dedication to the destruction of supernatural, evil foes and his efforts to chronicle their weaknesses and traits in an extensive series of guides. The character also knows the most likely library or collection to hold a copy of a given guide.

History DC 30: The character knows that van Richten is from the realm of Darkon in the Shadowfell, and is aware of his general history.

History DC 36: The character has heard of van Richten's efforts to research ways to destroy Strahd and other dark lords of the domains of dread.

Adventure Hooks

Below are some starting ideas for DMs who want to use Strahd, Barovia, van Richten, or his guides in their campaigns. More about domains of dread can be found in the *Manual of the Planes*™ supplement and in the various domains of dread articles on *D&D Insider*. Additional information about Strahd can be found in the *Open Grave: Secrets of the Undead*™ supplement.

- The adventurers are waiting in a tavern for their most lucrative employer when his servant arrives carrying a small chest. The messenger hands the adventurers a note that reads, "Friends, if you are reading this, I have finally been defeated by my rival, Count Dron. He has no doubt turned me into an undead monster. Within this chest you will find the means to free me from this fate. If you succeed, my estate has orders to pay you at three times your usual rate." The adventurers open the chest to find a mallet, a wooden stake, a copy of *Van Richten's Guide to Vampires*, and a map of Count Dron's estate.
- The adventurers are hired to investigate the disappearance of the town mayor and several others who have gone missing on several different foggy nights over the last month. The fog is actually a manifestation of the border mists from Barovia. As they search one foggy evening, the adventurers pass through to Barovia. They locate the missing people, who have taken refuge in the village near Castle Ravenloft. They must discover a way to escape Barovia, either by defeating Strahd or convincing the Vistani to help. If they anger the Vistani in the process, they might be taken through the mist to Darkon or another domain of dread as payback.
- A wealthy sage or wizard wants a complete set of *Van Richten's Guides* for his library. He hires the adventurers to go to Darkon, find van Richten, and acquire a copy of each. After a long journey, the characters arrive to find van Richten dubious of their motives. He challenges them to prove themselves by pursuing several different legendary creatures on his behalf. They might also show their worth by defending van Richten against a sudden attack on his home.

About the Author

Sterling Hershey is an architect and a freelance game designer. He is a contributor to *D&D Insider*, was a designer on *Monster Vault: Threats to the Nentir Vale*, and has designed many *Star Wars Roleplaying Game* and *Star Wars Miniatures* game products.

Character Themes: Twisted by Darkness

By Doug Hyatt

Illustration by Jesper Ejsing

The sins of an adventurer's past can haunt her to her grave, but in the grim world of Ravenloft, guilt or remorse might not be the only consequence of committing an evil act.

Each moral misstep an individual takes risks drawing the attention of the dark powers. The motives and goals of these entities are unknowable, but a few facts about them are apparent.

These mysterious entities sometimes reward a character who transgresses, but the gift comes at a great price: a life cursed ever after with unrelenting pain and suffering.

Some who are touched by the dark powers take the form of the grotesque individuals known as misshapen, whose death-dealing extremities have been monstrously twisted. Others become haunted blades, doomed to feel their victims' dying terror for the remainder of their days.

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CHARACTER THEMES

Your character's theme is a career, calling, or identity that describes who he or she is in the world. Just as race and class create basic definitions about who your character is, theme adds a third character component to help refine your story and identity.

For information on using themes as part of character creation and rules for how to gain and use theme powers and features, see "Heroes of Nature and Lore" (*Dragon* 399), the first article in this series.

Each of the character themes in this article should apply only to a character who has committed a morally questionable or outright evil act. The dark powers have taken notice of the character's misdeeds and granted her the benefits of one of these themes. Accompanying these advantages, however, is a terrible affliction, which will have a substantial impact on how the character develops over the course of a campaign.

If you're interested in using one of these themes, you should work together with the DM and the rest of the party to make sure that everyone is comfortable with you roleplaying one of these character types. Although the "gift" from the dark powers can be treated as a mere annoyance if you so choose (an oddly shaped limb in the case of a misshapen, or an indefinable air of menace for a haunted blade), consider embracing the spirit of the Ravenloft setting and making your character's tortured nature an important part of the roleplaying experience.

Even at these depths of despair and depravity, all is not lost: An afflicted individual might yet find a way to atone for past misdeeds and thereby lift the curse of the dark powers. For others, though, the descent into darkness and evil can have but one end.

This article describes two new character themes, the misshapen and the haunted blade. They are designed for use in a campaign that uses or draws from the Ravenloft® setting, but can be part of any campaign that takes place wholly or partly in the Shadowfell.

Misshapen

When a person commits an act of brutal violence without the use of a weapon other than one's bare hands, the dark powers might consign the perpetrator to live afterward as one of the misshapen. The offender could be a thief who strangles his partner so he can keep treasure for himself, or a bounty hunter who holds his prey underwater until it drowns, or a jealous sibling who pushes his brother off a cliff, or a corrupt magistrate who tosses exculpatory evidence into the flames. Anyone who acts in such a way risks being noticed and cursed by the dark powers. When the powers decide to take notice, the individual is surrounded suddenly by the mists and experiences a gruesome transformation. The limb that carried out the foul deed becomes monstrously twisted and malformed. These unfortunates make up the ranks of the misshapen, and each must endure a continuing existence of solitude and suffering.

Most misshapen keep to themselves and hide their deformed limbs beneath their cloaks. (The afflicted appendage is almost always an arm or some other extremity used for gripping and manipulation, even if the limb that committed the evil deed was not actually of that sort.) Although a misshapen's mutated limb might be viewed by many (including that individual) as a horrible detriment, it does provide some benefit to the character, who gains extraordinary abilities from the altered appendage.

Despite the potential usefulness of these transformations they suffer, misshapen tend to avoid the villages and settlements of Ravenloft. When they travel through civilized areas, misshapen often meet suspicion and fear, because the common folk lack compassion or tolerance for things they cannot understand. Many a tale has been told of villagers chasing a monster from their midst, and in some of those cases the creature might not have been a true monster at all. As such, most misshapen would rather not risk capture or death at the hands of an angry mob. Occasionally, however, such a character does encounter kindness from strangers, and some societies might even welcome a misshapen into their midst.

Most often, the curse of the dark powers alters one of the misshapen's limbs to resemble that of an animal or monster, such as an ogre's fist or a tiger's paw. Over time, the curse might worsen or spread. The behavior of the affected limb could become unpredictable. It might occasionally act of its own accord, without its owner's consent, suddenly snaking out to grab a victim by the throat, or striking a creature that has angered or irritated the misshapen. In such cases, the offending limb responds to the emotional state of the misshapen and acts on his or her subconscious impulses. A misshapen beset with this kind of affliction must take special care to control or suppress angry reactions, lest the altered appendage suddenly come to life.

Some misshapen seek only to rid themselves of this curse, and will go to any lengths to obtain knowledge that might aid them in eliminating their condition. Other misshapen view their affliction as a blessing from the dark powers and see themselves as an evolutionary improvement over their unaltered companions.

Creating a Misshapen

Misshapen come from all walks of life, for no one is immune to the curse of the dark powers. Those with a wild, primitive nature, such as barbarians and fighters, seem particularly susceptible to the affliction. The curse also frequently strikes shifters, lycanthropes, and wilden, although members of any other race can be transformed if they commit an act of savage violence.

Starting Feature

After an individual is touched by the dark powers, one of its arms becomes twisted and malformed. With that affliction, however, comes a new source of strength. Using your altered appendage, you can snatch an enemy from the battlefield and hold it in your grasp.

Benefit: You gain the *grasping limb* power.

Grasping Limb — Misshapen Attack

You lash out with your malformed arm to grab a foe.

Encounter ✦ Shadow
Standard Action **Melee** 2
Requirement: You must have a hand free.
Target: One creature
Attack: Highest ability modifier + 2 vs. Reflex
Level 11: Highest ability modifier + 4 vs. Reflex
Level 21: Highest ability modifier + 6 vs. Reflex
Hit: 2d8 + your highest ability modifier damage, and you pull the target 1 square and grab it until the end of your next turn.
Level 21: 3d8 + highest ability modifier damage.
Sustain Standard: The grab persists until the end of your next turn, and the grabbed target takes 2d8 + your highest ability modifier damage.
Level 21: 3d8 + highest ability modifier damage.
Special: When making an opportunity attack, you can use this power in place of a melee basic attack.

Additional Features

Level 5 Feature

The dark powers of Ravenloft imbue the misshapen with the strength and agility of monsters or beasts. You can draw upon this power to scale difficult cliffs or leap across yawning chasms.

Benefit: You gain a +2 power bonus to Athletics checks and Acrobatics checks.

Level 10 Feature

As your curse progresses, you gain greater strength in your affected limb, and weapons wielded in that arm can strike opponents with enhanced force.

Benefit: When you push, pull, or slide an enemy with a melee attack, you can increase the distance of the forced movement by 1.

Optional Powers

Some misshapen embrace their deformity and become able to alter their bodies to fulfill a particular need. Through focused training, you can gain advantages with your physical mutations, such as increased strength in your limb, a protective layer of chitin, or enhanced powers of perception.

Level 2 Utility Power

The curse of a misshapen can sometimes grant superior vision, including the ability to see in total darkness. You can temporarily imbue your sight with the capacity to pierce the deepest shadows.

Shadow Sight — Misshapen Utility 2

Your eyes flare brightly, enabling you to see into even the deepest shadows for a time.

Encounter ✦ Shadow
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: Until the end of your next turn, you gain darkvision and ignore any concealment.

Level 6 Utility Power

When threatened, some misshapen can grow a shimmering black shell that roils with dark magic. You can surround yourself with an unnerving shell that repels nearby enemies.

Dread Carapace — Misshapen Utility 6

A thick shell surrounds your form, frightening your enemies away.

Daily ✦ Fear, Shadow
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: Until the end of the encounter, you gain a +2 power bonus to AC and Fortitude. In addition, when any enemy ends its turn adjacent to you, it must use a free action to move up to its speed away from you.

Level 10 Utility Power

By honing your skill with your malformed limb, you can take advantage of the feature that sets you apart.

Altered Extremity — Misshapen Utility 10

Capitalizing on your malformed limb, you can extend your cursed appendage to an unnatural degree.

Encounter ✦ Shadow
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: Until the end of your next turn, your reach increases by 1, and you gain a +2 power bonus to melee damage rolls.

Haunted Blade

When a mortal commits a cold, calculated act of violence with a sword, an axe, or some other weapon, he risks being cursed by the dark powers to a life of fear and suffering. Perhaps the warrior put an entire village to the sword in an effort to capture and kill one escaped criminal. Perhaps he desecrated a holy temple, shattering sacred relics with a great warhammer. Or perhaps he betrayed and executed an innocent friend with a headsman's axe. From such unspeakable deeds are born the haunted blades, warriors doomed to carry the terror of their victims with them for the rest of their days.

Even though some haunted blades commit their crimes in the name of a noble cause, they, like all of their number, have been singled out by the dark powers for a unique gift. The violent deed leaves the haunted blade forever changed. Henceforth, when such a warrior draws his weapon, his countenance takes on the appearance of a creature infused with dark power, and he becomes terrifying to behold. The sins from his past resonate with a haunted blade when he ventures into battle, and the fear and horror his innocent victims once felt emanates from him in waves of sheer terror. For a brief moment, the haunted blade is able to share with his enemies the deep fear he endures every day.

Whether a haunted blade has been chosen by the dark powers is open for debate. Some scholars posit that spirits of ancient magic weapons roam the domains of dread, and these spirits are drawn to acts of darkness like moths to a flame. Under this theory, the dark spirit gains access to the haunted blade's mind, lurking in the deep recesses of his brain. Although the spirit is unable to take control of its mortal host, when the haunted blade draws his weapon, the ancient spirit surges into it. The drawn weapon often becomes encased in shadow, and ebon tendrils snake forth from its surface, hungering for blood. Regardless of whether a haunted blade has been touched by the dark powers or invaded by a shadowy spirit of an ancient weapon (or perhaps both), the force inside the warrior will attempt to steer him down the path to evil.

Haunted blades often depend on their companions for support in their dark and treacherous journey. Many such characters are truly repentant, and seek out allies of good moral codes to help them make up for their past mistakes. Sometimes the darkness inside a haunted blade bubbles to the surface, however, and one might commit an act that its allies find troublesome. Such an act might be murdering a creature that has surrendered in battle, torturing a prisoner for information, erupting in sudden violence while in the peaceful confines of a city, or turning on a trusted ally.

A haunted blade often hears the whispers of the dark force inside him, urging him toward acts of betrayal, but this path is by no means an inevitable one. If you're interested in using this theme, talk to your DM and the other players to ensure that a character who might suddenly turn on his allies (which is entirely the player's decision; this theme does not mandate such an occurrence) is something the group finds fun to roleplay and an acceptable addition to the party.

Haunted blades carry within themselves the seeds of what it means to be a dark lord. At some point each one must choose which direction his or her life will take. Will a haunted blade continue the descent into darkness, winning more favor from the dark powers until finally becoming a dark lord? Or will he instead choose the path of virtue, trusting in his companions to show him the way back to the light? Until that day of redemption comes, when a haunted blade strides into battle with weapon drawn, his enemies will cower before him. They know instinctively that this darkness is not to be trifled with; it is a force of pure dread in a world already filled with horror.

Creating a Haunted Blade

Usually those who become haunted blades already have a strong, forceful personality. Warlords, paladins, and ardents are especially common among characters who have this theme; bards and warlocks who favor melee weapons also often become haunted blades. Regardless of race or class, haunted blades carry a darkness inside them and a capacity for evil that they must constantly strive to keep in check.

Starting Feature

Wherever haunted blades travel, they carry the fear felt by their previous victims. When you channel the darkness within you through your weapon, your enemies quail in abject terror. If a foe dares to drop its guard in your presence, you freeze it in its tracks with a well-timed strike.

Benefit: You gain the *blade of nightmares* power.

Blade of Nightmares **Haunted Blade Utility**

As your weapon becomes wreathed in dark energy, you strike a distracted opponent, which freezes in terror.

Encounter ✦ Fear, Shadow
No Action **Special**
Trigger: You hit an enemy with an opportunity attack.
Effect: The enemy is immobilized until the end of its next turn.

Additional Features

Level 5 Feature

Haunted blades are masters of coercion, able to force the weak-willed to do their bidding with only a subtle gesture or a few quietly spoken words. You have mastered the art of instilling fear in others with your words and your body language.

Benefit: When you make an Intimidate check, you can roll twice and use either result.

Level 10 Feature

The haunted blade's imperious presence on the battlefield gives other combatants pause. While your opponents hesitate, you leap quickly to the attack.

Benefit: You can substitute your Charisma modifier for your Dexterity modifier when making initiative checks.

Optional Powers

A haunted blade radiates power and authority. He expect others to be subservient before his fearsome presence. Your powers focus on enhancing your stature and your aura of menace on the battlefield, from imbuing each of your strikes with unbridled horror to scything your whispering blade through the bodies and minds of nearby foes.

Level 3 Attack Power

Haunted blades can channel their frightful presence into each of their weapon strikes. When you strike at enemies that surround you, you fill their minds with despair.

Blade of Dark Whispers — Haunted Blade Attack 3

Your foes tremble before the menacing whispers of your fearsome blade.

Encounter ✦ Fear, Shadow, Weapon
Standard Action **Close** burst 1
Target: Each enemy in the burst
Attack: Highest ability modifier vs. AC
Hit: 1[W] + highest ability modifier damage, and the target takes a –2 penalty to Will until the end of your next turn.

Level 6 Utility Power

Some haunted blades learn to adopt a stance that strikes terror into their enemies, causing them to recoil before each of their attacks. When you channel terror through your weapon, your strikes leave your opponents shaken and reluctant to remain near you.

Blade of Black Wind — Haunted Blade Utility 6

Dark winds howl around your weapon, and each time you strike an enemy, that foe recoils in terror.

Daily ✦ Martial, Shadow, Stance
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: You assume the blade of black wind stance. Until the stance ends, any creature you hit with a melee weapon attack grants combat advantage until the end of your next turn. In addition, when you hit an enemy with a melee weapon attack, you can push that enemy 1 square.

Level 10 Utility Power

Some haunted blades learn how to cultivate their connection to the Shadowfell. You can cause your form to shimmer in and out of the material world as you temporarily become a creature of shadow.

Blade of Flickering Shadows — Haunted Blade Utility 10

Encased in writhing shadows, your form begins to flicker, and your weapon ripples with ebon energy.

Daily ✦ Shadow, Stance
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: You assume the blade of flickering shadows stance. Until the stance ends, you are phasing, have resist 10 necrotic, and can change any untyped damage you deal with weapon attacks to necrotic damage.

About the Author

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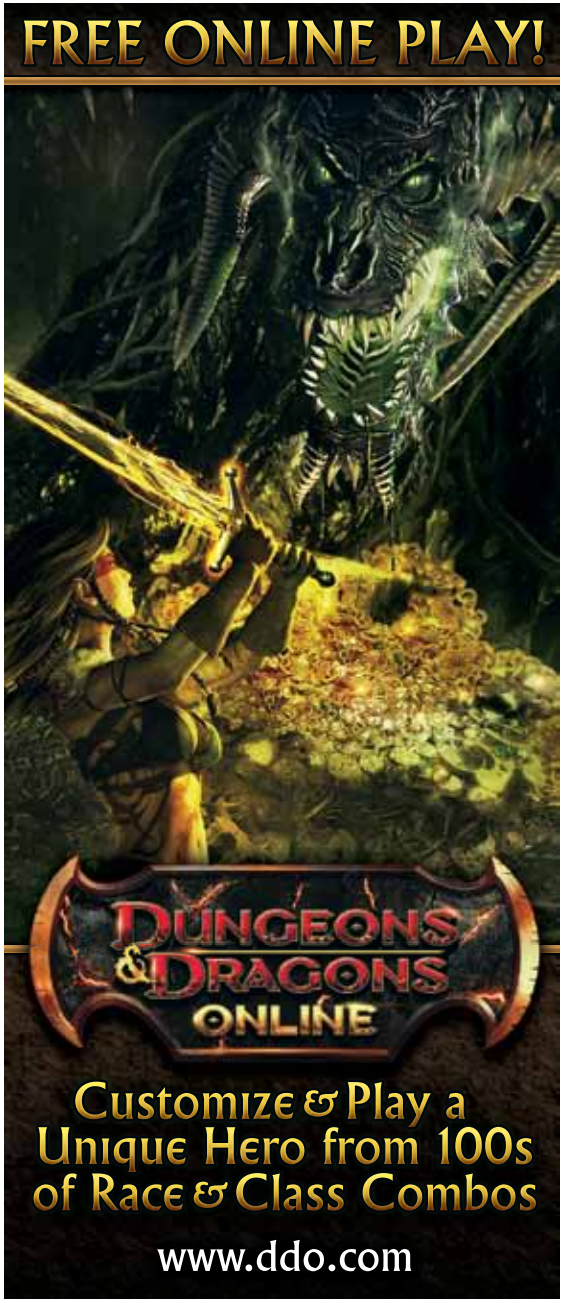

The Life of Soth

The Rise and Fall, and Rise and Fall, of a Unique D&D Villain

By Claudio Pozas

Illustrations by Ben Wootten and Keith Parkinson

"I forged my own doom. I am the cause of my damnation!"
—Lord Soth

Lord Soth, the master of Dargaard Keep, is a pivotal character in the world of Krynn, as set forth in the novels and game books of the DRAGONLANCE® setting.

Lord Soth, darklord of the domain of dread known as Sithicus, is a pivotal character in the world of the RAVENLOFT® setting.

They are one and the same . . . and yet, in a manner of speaking, they are not the same at all.

In the annals of the D&D® game, Soth is the only character who plays a key role in more than one campaign setting and series of novels. As you might guess, his story is a complicated one.

The narrator of this biography is the scribe Dannol, a minor member of the Order of Aesthetics, who once helped the honored Astinus of Palanthas in his work as the chronicler of Krynn's history. After the Chaos War ended, Astinus and every volume of work he contributed to disappeared from the Great Library of Palanthas. The head of the Aesthetics,

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Bertrem of Palanthas, has been striving to restore the missing texts with the help of his colleagues. Dannol's contribution to this effort is reproduced below.

History Reclaimed

"To Bertrem of Palanthas, from the pen of Dannol of the Aesthetics:

As you bade me do, honored Keeper of the Great Library, I have set pen to paper in an effort to once again chronicle the life story of Loren Soth, former Knight of Solamnia and Lord of Dargaard Keep. Let the following serve as a distillation of what I have come to know or believe I can suppose. In the hope that all who come after me will benefit from my efforts, I present them to you."

Truly, the world of Krynn has seen innumerable legends rise and fall among its denizens. But even in this world of storied chronicles and legends, few mortals have had a greater effect on the world's history than Lord Soth, the Knight of the Black Rose.

The Rose of Chivalry

Loren Soth was born some thirty years before the Cataclysm, into a family whose long tradition in knighthood earned it the stewardship of Knightlund, a fertile and prosperous province of Solamnia. Loren Soth was one of the most well regarded of the Knights of Solamnia, even to the point of achieving membership in its highest rank, the Order of the Rose. Although he was often described as impulsive, his deeds of bravery and skill in battle were peerless, and his reputation was untarnished.

Since plagues had killed many of his uncles, Loren Soth inherited the rulership of Knightlund. Proud of his position, the newly crowned Lord Soth designed and built a small keep amid the cliffs of the Dargaard Mountains. The design of the keep resembled a blooming rose, which was the symbol of Soth's order. Riding forth from Dargaard Keep, Lord Soth and his thirteen loyal retainers defeated all manner of brigands, goblins, and ogres.

But for all his devotion to the Oath and the Measure that guides every Solamnic Knight, Lord Soth had more material concerns. The gallant knight maintained an expensive lifestyle, and the construction of Dargaard Keep also helped to deplete his coffers to an uncomfortable extent. When the time came for him to choose a wife, Lord Soth wed Lady Korinne Gladria, the only daughter of a minor but wealthy nobleman from the city of Palanthas. It is unknown if Loren and Korinne truly loved each other at this time, or if the wedding was just a convenient way for Soth to combine his fame with Lady Gladria's fortune.

Regardless of what their feelings for each other might have been, the union between Loren and Korinne was unfruitful, and no heir was born to them. Over time, it became widely known that Lord Soth had grown apart from his wife; he spent much of his time away from Dargaard Keep, patrolling the countryside and attending official functions of the Knights of Solamnia.

Doomed Love Blooms

In the last spring before the Cataclysm that would change the fate of Lord Soth—and all of Krynn with him—the call went forth for a Knight's Council in the great city of Palanthas. Though he was not particularly eager to attend the council, Lord Soth was duty-bound to do so. Still, he took his time riding to the meeting in the company of his thirteen retainers, determined to enjoy the countryside and the many inns and taverns along the way.

While on the road, Soth and his followers chanced upon a group of elf priestesses being harassed by a band of ogre brigands. The humans made short work of the creatures, but the ogres' leader spirited away one of the priestesses, causing Soth to chase him. For all its brutish prowess, the ogre was no match for a seasoned Knight of Solamnia, and Soth emerged triumphant. Soon after this victory in battle, Soth began to lose his heart to the one he had saved, the elf maiden Isolde.

Young, naïve, and possessed of almost unearthly beauty, Isolde Denissa was on her way to Palanthas to take her vows as a Revered Daughter of Paladine. Chaste and virtuous, as one who sought the blessing of Paladine must be, she nevertheless could not deny the feelings she felt for her rescuer. Her eyes reflected the love that was dawning within her as the handsome knight carried her back to the rest of her group. Courteous as ever, Lord Soth offered to escort the priestesses for the rest of their journey, and they gladly accepted the company of the knight and his thirteen men-at-arms. As the days went by, Soth and Isolde exchanged meaningful glances and little more. The knight, all this time torn between upholding his honor and giving in to his passion, finally made a decision one day. Loren Soth promised himself that he would rise early the next morning and press on toward Palanthas, leaving Isolde and the other priestesses behind. It was an act that would have saved him from disgrace and served as a testament to his self-control, but this turn of events would never come to pass.

Later that same day, the elf maid set out to harvest herbs and Lord Soth went out hunting. While they were away from their companions in this fashion, Loren and Isolde chanced upon each other and surrendered to their mutual passion. Enraptured, Soth soon thereafter proposed marriage to ease the guilt he saw in Isolde's eyes. He sent word back to the seneschal of Dargaard Keep, ordering that Lady Gladria be permanently removed. Whatever guilt he might have felt from the issuance of this order was soon

forgotten when he was once again basking in Isolde's intoxicating presence.

Dishonor Revealed

As their journey continued, Lord Soth and Isolde were often seen talking and smiling at each other, which raised suspicions among the priestesses concerning the knight's true character. When the priestesses and Soth's retainers reached Palanthas, each group went its way, the elves as guests in a fine house while Soth and his retainers were lodged among the other knights.

Days later, Soth was visited by the head of the Knights of Solamnia and the leaders of all three orders, and he was arrested for dishonorable behavior in seducing the elf maiden and for the mysterious disappearance of his wife. At first Soth offered no resistance, believing that Isolde had learned of his previous marriage and thus had forsaken him. In truth, as he would find out too late, it was Isolde's companions who brought Soth to the attention of the authorities.

The details of Soth's travels and his trial are known from the records kept by the Knights of Solamnia. He was tried and found guilty of the charges against him, and sentenced to be executed with his own sword. Soth was paraded around Palanthas in disgrace, while the people hurled filth and insults at him. As the citizens began to act like a mob—and upon seeing that his fellow knights did nothing to stop them—Soth became blind to his own guilt, claiming everyone else to be no different from him. He vowed revenge on the city before being taken back to his cell.

That night, Soth's loyal retainers came to rescue him from captivity. To Soth's amazement, Isolde was with them. As they fled the city, she explained that she had fallen ill upon arriving in Palanthas. As the other priestesses treated her, they discovered she was with child and immediately denounced the knight to his superiors.

Soth's retinue raced back to Dargaard Keep, with an army of Solamnic Knights at their heels. Loren Soth and Isolde were married in a small ceremony within Dargaard Keep, even as the Knights of Solamnia besieged the rose-shaped castle.

The Blasted Rose

As the siege went on, Soth's mood began to worsen. He drank heavily, for wine was easier to come by than water. His servants—apart from his retainers—fled from his violent punishments, and it was through their testimony that these events became known. His castle, once his mightiest achievement, was being eroded by catapult boulders and flaming missiles. Not even the presence of Isolde and the prospect of soon seeing the birth of his child could soothe Soth's mood. When he struck his wife in a flash of rage, Soth realized how far he had fallen. Embracing his wife, he prayed for the first time since his arrest in Palanthas. Soth and Isolde beseeched Paladine for a way to restore honor to their lives. Miraculously, the God of Good answered that prayer. And in doing so, Paladine spoke of the Kingpriest of Istar.

In distant Istar, the Kingpriest was spearheading a crusade against Evil, and he had become determined to wipe it from the face of Krynn—oblivious to the Law of Gilean, God of Neutrality, which states that "Both Good and Evil must exist in contrast." Although the Kingpriest's early efforts were well intentioned, his definition of "Evil" had grown to encompass everything and everyone but himself.

Lord Soth was granted a vision of the fate that awaited Krynn if the Kingpriest's hubris went unchecked. He foresaw the Kingpriest raise his arms and demand that the gods give him power to eradicate Evil. He foresaw the gods' response in the form of a flaming mountain that struck Istar, obliterating thousands. Soth realized what would happen if he failed to intervene: Krynn would be doomed. If he followed the quest and succeeded, his life would be forfeit in the bargain, but his honor would be forever restored.

The promise of redemption stirred Soth from his self-destructive spiral. He bade his wife farewell, gathered his thirteen loyal knights, and—cloaked by divine intervention—set out for Istar to confront the Kingpriest.

Soth never reached the great city. During his journey, he came across the same elf priestesses who had denounced him to the Knights of Solamnia. Filled with self-righteousness, Soth proudly proclaimed the importance of his mission to these clerics of Paladine. The elves—themselves beholden to the Kingpriest—scoffed at his assertions. In counterpoint, they whispered doubts into Soth's ears. Although the elves didn't lie, they prompted Soth to reexamine not only his quest, but also his marriage: Was the child Isolde bore even *his*? The conflict inside himself became impossible to ignore.

Just as Isolde was giving birth to the boy Peradur, Soth turned away from his gods-given mission and raced back to Dargaard Keep. When he stormed back into his castle, he mistook Isolde's distressed expression for an admission of guilt. Soth ignored the baby she cradled in her arms and cursed them both. At that very moment, the fiery mountain that Soth had seen in his vision struck Istar. The Cataclysm had begun.

The Rose Goes Dark

As earthquakes began to ravage the continent of Ansalon, Dargaard Keep was the victim of one such upheaval. Half of the castle crumbled down the cliffs that surrounded it, and a hundred-candle chandelier fell upon Isolde and the half-elf baby. As the flames set tapestries and clothing ablaze, Isolde held out

the infant Peradur and begged Soth to save him. His heart poisoned by jealousy and his temper thus inflamed, he refused.

Finally, with her last breath, Isolde cast a curse upon her husband. "You will die this night in fire," she cried, "even as your son and I die. But you will live eternally in darkness. You will live one life for every life that your folly has brought to an end this night!" With that, the flames engulfed Soth, charring his armor and searing his flesh. Soth witnessed the flames burning everything around him, wood and stone, cloth and iron. His retainers, loyal unto the end, attempted to flee, to no avail. None that were inside Dargaard Keep survived.

And yet the afterlife held no rest for Lord Loren Soth. Isolde's curse would not let him truly die.

Shaking off the debris and ashes of his fallen home, the creature that once was Loren Soth arose, encased in his own armor. Of all the intricate designs that decorated the armor, only a single rose survived, blackened by the fire. As he came to learn, his divine powers, once fueled by Paladine, became terrible magics of death and hellfire.

Isolde's curse spared no aspect of Soth's life. His retainers, once loyal beyond reproach, turned into skeleton warriors. Dargaard Keep became an ashen ruin, distorted by the fire and ravaged by the Cataclysm. Where once it was shaped like a beautiful rose, now it was blackened and crumbling like a wilted flower. And the priestesses that were so instrumental in Soth's downfall were doomed to serve him as spectral banshees. Soth's realm was cloaked in a perpetual twilight where undead diseases ran rampant, and the area was renamed Nightlund.

His senses dulled by the pallor of undeath, Lord Soth couldn't savor the world beyond his armor. All he had were his memories, and he clung to them like a drowning man clinging to a piece of driftwood. As if punishing himself for his misdeeds, Soth commanded the banshees to sing him a dreadful dirge every night, recalling his downfall. Few creatures have ever witnessed this horrifying spectacle, and fewer still have retained their sanity after hearing the banshees' song.

Servant to the Blue Lady

In the years following the Cataclysm, Lord Soth's tale became a half-remembered legend, changing with each new telling. Nightlund was all but deserted, for the living had no place there. In time, Soth pledged himself to the service of Paladine's eternal rival, Takhisis.

The Queen of Darkness was plotting a way to enter Krynn in her full divine splendor, and she raised a vast dragonarmy to conquer the world in what came to be known War of the Lance. When the call went out to Soth to join this dragonarmy, he made it known that he would serve the first Dragon Highlord that dared spend the night in Dargaard Keep. Thus did Soth come under the sway of Kitiara uth Matar, the Blue Lady, Highlord of the blue dragonarmy. Strong,

THE SONG OF SOTH

And in the climate of dreams
When you recall her, when the world of the dream
expands, wavers in light,
when you stand at the edge of blessedness and sun,

Then we shall make you remember,
shall make you live again
through the long denial of body

For you were first dark in the light's hollow,
expanding like a stain, a cancer

For you were the shark in the slowed water
beginning to move

For you were the notched head of a snake,
sensing forever warmth and form

For you were inexplicable death in the crib,
the long house in betrayal

And you were more terrible than this
in a loud alley of visions,
for you passed through unharmed, unchanging

As the women screamed, unraveling silence,
halving the door of the world,
bringing forth monsters

As a child opened in parabolas of fire
There at the borders
of two lands burning

As the world split, wanting to swallow you back
willing to give up everything
to lose you in darkness

You passed through these unharmed, unchanging,
but now you see them
strung on our words—on your own conceiving
as you pass from night—to awareness of night
to know that hatred is the calm of philosophers
that its price is forever
that it draws you through meteors
through winter's transfixion
through the blasted rose
through the sharks' water
through the black compression of oceans
through rock—through magma
to yourself—to an abscess of nothing
that you will recognize as nothing
that you will know is coming again and again
under the same rules.

—by Michael Williams

determined and charming, Kitiara was the perfect partner for Lord Soth. The death knight became Kitiara's personal agent in her plot to gain the overall leadership of Takhisis's dragonarmies.

At first, Soth's reward would be the elf maiden Laurana, who served as the Golden General for the armies of Good and was Kitiara's rival for the affection of Tanis Half-Elven. Soth kidnapped Laurana at Kitiara's behest, so Kitiara could present the elf maiden to Takhisis herself when the dragonarmy assembled before the Queen of Darkness. As it turned out, this plan was foiled by Tanis and the fabled Heroes of the Lance. This apparent setback didn't diminish Kitiara's ambition, however, and at the same time Soth's affections shifted from the angelic elf maiden to the Blue Lady, with her crooked smile and fiery temper. This turn of events would be Kitiara's undoing.

After spending some time consolidating her control over the dragonarmies, Kitiara uth Matar was approached by her half-brother, the archmage Raistlin Majere, who told her and Lord Soth about his plan to venture into the Abyss and confront the Queen of Darkness in her own domain. Convinced that her brother would fail—and worse, bring down Takhisis's wrath upon her—Kitiara sought to sabotage his efforts. Under her orders, Lord Soth snuffed out the life of Lady Crysania, a cleric of Paladine upon whom Raistlin's plans seemed to hinge. Unwittingly, Kitiara and Soth enabled Raistlin's plans to come to fruition through this action.

As Raistlin ventured into the Abyss, Kitiara began a dalliance with her brother's apprentice, the dark elf Dalamar. Enraged at the notion of Kitiara falling into the arms of the elf wizard, Lord Soth concocted a plan to drive them apart and ensure that the Blue Lady would be his for eternity. Soth informed Dalamar that Kitiara would attack the city of Palanthas but leave his Tower of High Sorcery unscathed in deference to her brother. At the same time, Soth told Kitiara that Dalamar had betrayed her, and he convinced her that the dark elf intended to side with Raistlin in his fight against the Queen of Darkness. According to what the death knight told her, Kitiara's only chance to stop her brother was to attack Palanthas and kill Dalamar. As an additional benefit of this plan, Lord Soth would exact his revenge upon the city where he had been publicly humiliated centuries earlier.

In the end, Soth's plan succeeded. He razed a large part of Palanthas with the help of his skeleton warriors and banshee followers, then proceeded to the Tower of High Sorcery, where he confronted Tanis and Dalamar and discovered that he had arrived too late to save Kitiara. He gathered up her body and resigned himself to continued existence without the only flame that had brought pleasure to his undead existence.

The Rose Blooms Anew

Decades after the death of Kitiara, Krynn underwent a new upheaval that signaled the beginning of that world's Fifth Age—the Age of Mortals.

For many years, no one heard of Lord Soth's whereabouts. Many assumed that he was confined within Dargaard Keep for all this time, brooding interminably and waiting for a death that he knew could never come.

Meanwhile, strange rumors began to circulate—some recasting the events of Soth's life, making him out to be an even more monstrous figure than he was already known to be. These tales even go so far as to suggest that he was spirited away to a land of spectres—a place where he consorted with other creatures as evil as Soth himself (and perhaps more so). The salient features of these rumors have been distilled and presented here in a separate section. This is an

RUMORS OF LORD SOTH IN THE LAND OF SPECTRES

Here follows an alternate version of Soth's life, as cobbled together from various anecdotal sources, portraying him as even more monstrous than what we know of him and going into fanciful detail about his travails in some other spectral realm.

In the early days of his life, the Knight of the Black Rose was far from a shining example of chivalry. Even before ascending to his throne, he conspired with his father and their servant Caradoc to slay all of his sire's bastard offspring. When Lord Soth's first wife proved seemingly unable to bear children, she resorted to hedge sorcery in an attempt to give her husband a child. Some say that a mystic offered to make Lady Korinne fertile, but that the fruit of that pregnancy would reflect Lord Soth's true soul. The noblewoman accepted, knowing nothing of Soth's essential nature and believing her husband to be beyond reproach. When the time came she gave birth to a monstrous, misshapen creature that didn't survive long.

The Lady Korinne was never the same after that. She was unmindful of her husband's affections for the elf maiden Isolde, even though Soth was bold enough to house the elf maiden in his own castle after rescuing her. By the time he started for Palanthas again, riding alongside his retainers and the elf maiden, the word had already been given to Caradoc to get rid of Lady Korinne. And that wouldn't be the last time Soth betrayed a woman who trusted him.

After orchestrating the death of Kitiara, the warrior-woman he loved, during the siege on the city of Palanthas, it is said that Lord Soth spirited her body away to Dargaard Keep in hopes of retrieving her soul back from Takhisis's realm in the Abyss. He trusted his now-ghostly seneschal Caradoc with retrieving the warrior-woman's soul, yet the ghost also sought to blackmail Soth into restoring him to life. As the two undead quarreled over the arrangement, mists swallowed them and whisked the pair to a distant province, far from their world.

According to stories told by the Vistani about the mystical realm of Barovia, the Knight of the Black Rose—alongside a fellow Vistani called Magda—had an altercation of sorts with Count Strahd von Zarovich. At another time, Soth and Strahd allied against the neighboring ruler, Duke Gundar of Gundarak, but the partnership was short-lived. In the end, Soth entered the mists once again and was given a chance to avoid further punishment for his transgressions by kneeling down and repenting. He must have failed to do so, for the mists parted to reveal a large territory, which the native elves called Sithicus, "the land of spectres." This world within the world was to be Soth's domain and prison, forever taunting him with twisted reflections of his distant homeland. Even the song used by his banshees to torment him changed from night to night, further frustrating Lord Soth.

It is said that the Soth of this realm is barely a shade, a poor nightmare reflection of his former self. He idles his days inside magical mirrors where he lives the life of a honored knight, and his undead forces scour the land following rumors of a warrior-woman with a crooked smile.

area of Soth's history where more research is certainly called for.

What is known is that although Soth continued to exist in the Age of Mortals thanks to the intercession of the Queen of Darkness, his skeleton warriors and banshee tormentors were lost in the previous age. Alone with his thoughts for the first time since his death, Soth came to grips with his own failings.

As Takhisis posited herself as the One God of Krynn, a young girl became the leader of the armies of darkness. This young general, Mina, went to Dargaard Keep in hopes of recruiting Soth to her cause. In many ways, Mina was reminiscent of Kitiara, and Takhisis imagined this resemblance would be enough to earn the death knight's loyalty. But Soth refused to join Takhisis's army in the War of Souls, finally having come to terms with his own destiny. Infuriated at this rejection, Takhisis sought to coerce Soth by making him mortal again and threatening him with death. But the mortal Loren Soth vowed to search the afterlife for his wife Isolde and his son Peradur, in hopes of earning their forgiveness. Kneeling in the very spot where Isolde and Peradur had died, Loren Soth—his honor restored by his renunciation of the Queen of Darkness—was crushed by the crumbling ruins of Dargaard Keep.

In the aftermath of the War of Souls and Takhisis's death, the eternal gloom was lifted, and the sun shines again on a redeemed Nightlund. If his disobedience of a god led to Lord Soth's downfall, it was also the cause of his salvation.

Lord Soth, Death Knight

The statistics at right present Lord Soth as a death knight, as he exists after the Cataclysm.

Lord Soth speaks with a hollow, chilling voice. His eyes glow red behind the visor of his helm, and he wears black plate armor. His emblem, a black rose, is embroidered on his clothing and embossed on his shield.

Soth's immunity to fear makes him bold in combat, and he relies on his blindsight to see invisible enemies. He prefers to attack with his greatsword and to use *chilling glare* to gain combat advantage against a creature he has marked. He uses *wall of ice* to cut off his enemies' escape and to separate healers from allies who might benefit from their ministrations.

Soth, Darklord of Sithicus

If you want to use Soth as the darklord of Sithicus, use the statistics above and add the following powers.

Traits

Misty Torpor

When Soth drops to 0 hit points, he turns to mist and dissipates. He re-forms with his equipment on his throne in Nedragaard 2d6 days later at full health. During those days, the borders of Sithicus remain open.

Move Actions

Shadow Walk (teleportation) ✦ **At-Will**

Effect: If Soth is in darkness, he can teleport to any other area of darkness within his line of sight.

Closing the Borders

As the darklord of Sithicus, Lord Soth has complete control of the borders of his domain. Even this ability, however, is connected to the events of his shameful past. In order to seal his domain, all Soth needs to do is sing a song—the same dirge that, on Krynn, was sung to him each night by vengeful banshees. As Soth sings the song that recounts his sins and acts of cowardice in evocative imagery, his voice is joined by those of other lost sinners; the sound rises from the borders, so awful that no mortal can bear it. All who are attempting to flee must return to Sithicus or fall hopelessly mad.

Lord Soth, Death Knight **Level 18 Elite Soldier**
Medium natural humanoid (undead) XP 4,000

HP 338; **Bloodied** 169 **Initiative** +17
AC 34, **Fortitude** 31, **Reflex** 29, **Will** 27 **Perception** +10
Speed 6 Darkvision, blindsight 20
Immune disease, fear, poison, sleep;
Resist 20 cold, 20 necrotic; **Vulnerable** 10 radiant
Saving Throws +2; **Action Points** 1

Traits

☼ **Dread** (fear) ✦ **Aura** 1

Enemies in the aura deal only half damage to Soth.

Standard Actions

⊕ **Greatsword** (cold, necrotic, weapon) ✦ **At-Will**

Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +23 vs. AC

Hit: 2d10 + 9 damage plus 1d10 cold and necrotic damage, and the target cannot spend healing surges until the end of Soth's next turn. If this attack drops the target below 1 hit point, Soth gains an action point that he must spend before the end of his next turn, or he loses the point.

Effect: The target is marked until the end of Soth's next turn.

⊕ **Double Attack** ✦ **At-Will**

Effect: Soth uses *greatsword* twice.

Fireball (fire) ✦ **Encounter**

Attack: Area burst 2 within 10 (creatures in the burst); +21 vs. Reflex

Hit: 4d6 + 19 fire damage.

Miss: Half damage.

Wall of Ice (cold, conjuration) ✦ **Recharge** ⚄ ⁞⁞

Effect: Area wall 8 within 20 squares. Soth creates a wall of solid ice up to 4 squares high in unoccupied squares on the ground. The wall lasts until the end of the encounter or until it is destroyed. Any creature that starts its turn adjacent to the wall takes 15 cold damage.

The wall blocks line of sight and line of effect, and it can be attacked. The wall has Soth's defenses, ignoring any temporary bonuses or penalties, and each square of the wall has 20 hit points. The wall is immune to cold and has vulnerable 15 fire.

Minor Actions

Chilling Glare (fear) ✦ **At-Will** (1/round)

Effect: Close burst 5 (one enemy marked by Soth in the burst). The target grants combat advantage until the end of Soth's next turn.

Power Word (fear) ✦ **Recharge** when Soth spends an action point

Attack: Close burst 5 (one enemy in the burst); +21 vs. Will

Hit: Soth chooses one of the following effects.

1. The target loses two healing surges. If the target does not have two healing surges, the target instead takes damage equal to its bloodied value.
2. The target cannot attack Soth until the end of Soth's next turn. The effect ends immediately if Soth attacks the target.
3. The target is blinded until the end of the encounter, but can lose a healing surge as a standard action to end the effect.

Triggered Actions

Implacable ✦ **At-Will**

Trigger: Soth becomes marked, slowed, immobilized, dazed, or stunned by an effect.

Effect (Opportunity Action): Soth makes a saving throw to end the triggering effect, even if the effect would not normally end on a save.

Str 24 (+16)	**Dex** 22 (+15)	**Wis** 13 (+10)
Con 17 (+12)	**Int** 14 (+11)	**Cha** 20 (+14)

Alignment chaotic evil **Languages** Common
Equipment +3 *magic plate armor*, heavy shield, +3 *magic greatsword*, helm

About the Author

Claudio Pozas is a freelance artist and writer whose recent design credits include *Player's Option: Heroes of Shadow*™, *Player's Option: Heroes of the Feywild*™, and many contributions to *Dragon*. He lives in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, with his wife, Paula, his son, Daniel, and his pet dire tiger, Tyler. His art can be seen at claudiopozas.com.

Bazaar of the Bizarre:
In a Vampiric Vein

By Walter Kammerer

Illustration by Jason Juta

The items presented here were originally crafted for the use of vampires through the ages, so most of them are directly related to vampirism in some way. As with many other ancient creations, the passage of time has seen these items come into the possession and use of a variety of resourceful individuals.

Belt of Righteous Blood

Necromancers know that blood represents potency, in more than just a physical sense. At times, the blood extracted from an individual carries a trace of that person's moral fiber. For this reason, the blood of the righteous can comfort and nourish another spirit, even one clinging tenuously to an undead form.

Originally created to bolster the creations of an ancient necromancer, the *belt of righteous blood* has been adapted by vampiric adventurers to increase their ability to refresh themselves from within.

Belt of Righteous Blood Level 3+ Uncommon

The buckle on this well-worn belt holds a tiny vial of thick reddish liquid, purported to be the blood of the virtuous.

Lvl 3	680 gp	Lvl 23	425,000 gp
Lvl 13	17,000 gp		

Waist Slot

Property

The regeneration you gain from your Enduring Soul feature increases by 1.

Level 13: The regeneration increases by 2.

Level 23: The regeneration increases by 3.

Crimson Wick Ki Focus

The first *crimson wick ki focuses* were created by a secretive group of vampire mages. They believed that through mastery of the body's inner workings, they could enhance their spells by fueling them with blood. A product of this research was lamp wicks that, when soaked in specially prepared blood, became immune to fire but still allowed oil to burn cleanly. The mages found that by studying a wick's properties and meditating on its nature, a vampire could strive to emulate how the wick draws upon itself but remains unsullied.

Crimson Wick Ki Focus Level 4+ Uncommon

This braided wick burns brightly when placed within an oil lamp and ignited, yet is unconsumed by the flame. It inspires you to use your own inner resources to best effect.

Lvl 4	+1	840 gp	Lvl 19	+4	105,000 gp
Lvl 9	+2	4,200 gp	Lvl 24	+5	525,000 gp
Lvl 14	+3	21,000 gp	Lvl 29	+6	2,625,000 gp

Implement: Ki focus

Enhancement Bonus: Attack rolls and damage rolls

Critical: +1d6 damage per plus

Utility Power ✦ Encounter (Minor Action)

Effect: You lose a healing surge, and you gain a power bonus to damage rolls using this ki focus until the end of your next turn. The bonus equals twice the implement's enhancement bonus.

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Dark Hunger Ki Focus

Most people regard wolves as superb hunters and rightfully fear them. As fellow seekers of prey, some vampires see wolves as kindred spirits and welcome the opportunity to improve their own abilities by learning from their lupine comrades. One such group of vampires collected the bones and teeth of wolves and inscribed them with magical icons infused with the raw instincts of the wolf. The vampires found their hunting instinct and ferocity heightened, and their bloodlust became nigh unstoppable.

Dark Hunger Ki Focus Level 3+ Uncommon

Runes are carved into the surface of this dire wolf fang. As you study its intricate markings, you can feel the savage beast begin to stir within you.

Lvl 3	+1	680 gp	Lvl 18	+4	85,000 gp
Lvl 8	+2	3,400 gp	Lvl 23	+5	425,000 gp
Lvl 13	+3	17,000 gp	Lvl 28	+6	2,125,000 gp

Implement: Ki focus
Enhancement Bonus: Attack rolls and damage rolls
Critical: +1d8 damage per plus
Property
When you trigger your *blood drinker* power with an attack made with this ki focus, you roll d12s instead of d10s for that power's damage.

Phial of the Empty Vessel

An artificer in the service of an ancient noble house created the first *phial of the empty vessel*. His lord became insane after contracting a strange illness, and the artificer was tasked with finding a treatment. After extensive study, he learned that the disease both infused the victim with pernicious shadow magic and slowly drained his empathy and sense of connection to other beings. At his core was a void of moral darkness where the lord's humanity once resided. The artificer feared that if the affliction were left untreated, the lord would attempt to fill that emptiness with the blood of the innocent.

The artificer formed a small phial from simple glass and imbued it with an imperceptible enchantment of serenity. When the lord wore it, the pendant filled him with a form of inner strength that kept the emptiness inside him from taking over.

Phial of the Empty Vessel Level 4+ Uncommon

This small hollow crystal bottle dangles from a simple leather cord. Its delicate appearance belies a strength you can feel coursing through your body.

Lvl 4	+1	840 gp	Lvl 19	+4	105,000 gp
Lvl 9	+2	4,200 gp	Lvl 24	+5	525,000 gp
Lvl 14	+3	21,000 gp	Lvl 29	+6	2,625,000 gp

Neck Slot
Enhancement Bonus: Fortitude, Reflex, and Will
Property
While you have no healing surges, you gain a +1 item bonus to Fortitude, Reflex, and Will.
Utility Power ✦ Encounter (Free Action)
Trigger: You roll initiative and you have no healing surges.
Effect: You gain temporary hit points equal to five times this item's enhancement bonus.

Soul Siphon Ki Focus

During the height of the Nerathi Empire, a wealthy merchant was consumed by fears of her mortality. She eventually decided on vampirism as the best way to prolong her life. Yet even after becoming undead, the merchant remained obsessed with death. She took pains to record what she observed in her victims during the final moments of feeding upon them, and had her notes engraved on onyx tablets so that they might be as timeless as he was.

The few tablets that are known to survive to the present day describe methods of harnessing the fleeting spark of a life that is coming to an end.

Soul Siphon Ki Focus Level 3+ Uncommon

This small onyx tablet is no larger than your hand, its surface engraved with lines of text. It describes how to heed the signs that presage the death of your prey.

Lvl 3	+1	680 gp	Lvl 18	+4	85,000 gp
Lvl 8	+2	3,400 gp	Lvl 23	+5	425,000 gp
Lvl 13	+3	17,000 gp	Lvl 28	+6	2,125,000 gp

Implement: Ki focus
Enhancement Bonus: Attack rolls and damage rolls
Critical: +1d8 damage per plus
Utility Power ✦ Daily (Free Action)
Trigger: You kill a nonminion creature adjacent to you with an attack using this ki focus.
Effect: You gain two healing surges.

About the Author

Walter Kammerer is a freelance designer from New York City. He walked into a gathering of the NYC D&D Meetup group knowing next to nothing about the game. Four years later he finds his first article in *Dragon* magazine. He's still not sure how that happened.

EBERRON

Eye on Eberron

Rak Tulkhesh, the Rage of War

By Keith Baker

Illustration by Jim Nelson

It doesn't matter why you fight. You may love your nation; you may love only gold. But when blades are drawn, when fear and strength surge through your blood—in that moment, my lord is with you. And he will never let you go again.

—Mordakhesh

In the city of Thaliost, Archbishop Dariznu orders a criminal to be burned alive in the market square. In Sharn, officers of the watch pummel a Cyran whose only crime is being a refugee. In Aundair, a soldier wonders how he could have done the things he remembers doing at the battle of Shadukar . . . while in Fairhaven, Queen Aurala plans to start the war anew.

What drives this inhumanity and unreason? How can Aurala possibly believe that a return to war could benefit her people? From the outside, the actions of people such as Aurala and Dariznu appear to be madness . . . and perhaps they are. Or perhaps they are due to the influence of a terrifying and ancient force—possessed of a spirit so powerful that the shard to which his spirit was bound was shattered and spread across the world in an effort to dilute his effect as much as possible.

Nonetheless, this mighty fiend's power is on the rise. He draws strength from every blow struck in anger, and his will drives the peaceful to be consumed by hate. He is Rak Tulkhesh, one of the first children of Khyber, who also wears the title the Rage of War. A fiend with godlike power, he is the incarnation of every impulse that drives mortals to battle. Fear, greed, hatred—these are seeds that Rak Tulkhesh cultivates until they produce a bloody harvest.

The Rage of War has the power to shatter kingdoms. When he breaks the bonds that currently keep him in check, the mortals around him will become the savage vanguard of an ever-growing army, a force dedicated to slaughtering those that are too weak to serve their fiendish master. His return will usher in bloodshed beyond anything seen in the Last War.

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Those who resist the call to join his army of reavers will still feel his touch, urging them to acts of hatred and aggression. Minor arguments will spin into bloody feuds and massacres, and law will collapse in the face of vigilante violence.

It is fortunate indeed for the rest of the world, then, that Rak Tulkhesh is currently imprisoned. The pure essence of this soul is divided among a group of Khyber shards spread through the underworld. His spirit-pieces are confined in these shards by the pure light of the Silver Flame. Thus shattered and bound, he cannot bring his full power to bear on the world. But he can influence events in the vicinity of one of his shards, and he draws power from every act of violence and aggression. The Last War was a boon that allowed him to set his hooks in the hearts of thousands of soldiers and civilians. While many now regret extreme actions they took during the war, those actions have weakened the bonds of Rak Tulkhesh, giving him greater sway over those regions around his shards. The terrible violence seen in Thaliost and other occupied cities, the hatred directed against warforged and Cyran refugees, the voices of those calling for a new war . . . the breath of Rak Tulkhesh fans these flames. And if the Last War begins anew—or if a greater conflict breaks out, such as outright war between Khorvaire and Riedra—it could be the final blow that shatters the demon's chains.

Agents at Large

Though most of Rak Tulkhesh's fiendish army remains bound through the efforts of the Silver Flame, a few of his soldiers have escaped from these bonds. Over the years, they have spread across Khorvaire and beyond.

Rak Tulkhesh's chief disciple among the Lords of Dust is Mordakhesh, a rakshasa dread knight who served as his warlord in the Age of Demons. Mordakhesh is a superb combatant, but his greatest weapons are his brilliant grasp of strategy and his superhuman charisma. A gifted shapeshifter, Mordakhesh has had a hand in many of the bloodiest conflicts on Khorvaire. He helped the Dhakaani smiths forge their first swords, advised Malleon the Reaver when he was slaughtering the goblins, and watched with a smile as the towers of Dorasharn crumbled in the War of the Mark. He has followers in virtually every army in Khorvaire. Some of these cults know whom they serve. Others he manipulates by playing on patriotism, faith, or the desire for change. His agents often begin as good people, but their martial nature leaves them vulnerable to the power of Mordakhesh and his master, and they are twisted into merciless killers. Mordakhesh's overall goal is to encourage conflict, both in open warfare and in less structured strife among civilians. It is when hatred drives mortals to inhumane behavior—when war turns humans into fiends—that his master gains strength. His actions are guided by the Prophecy, as interpreted by the rakshasa seers of Ashtakala. He knows that Rak Tulkhesh can't be freed until the correct elements of the Prophecy come together, and this fact has held him in check in the past. Now, though, the signs are promising: The Next War may indeed be the last one.

It is up to you to decide how far the cult of war reaches, and who knowingly serves Mordakhesh and his master. Here are a few existing forces.

The Razor Wind: The Rage of War fuels the primal powers of the Carrion Tribe that calls itself Razor Wind. These barbarians are one of the deadliest forces in the Demon Wastes, and, in the past, the tribe's small numbers have kept them from posing a significant threat to the Ghaash'kala orcs who guard the gates of the Labyrinth. Now it seems that this has been a ruse—that the Razor Wind tribe has intentionally spread itself thin across the Wastes, and that it is pulling a great host together in the south. The barbarians have excavated one of Rak Tulkhesh's soul-shards and are carrying it with them; this object enhances their primal powers and enables them to manifest demons to aid them in battle.

The Three Faces of War: Born in ancient Karrnath, a cult that swears fealty to Dol Dorn, Dol Arrah, and the Mockery has become a recognized and accepted fraternity among the armies of the Five Nations. Although some branches of the Three Faces of War are just what they appear to be, Mordakhesh has corrupted many others among its cells. Since a large number of the members of the sect are officers, Mordakhesh relishes the opportunity to shape the overall conduct of the coming war—promoting brutality and the pursuit of vengeance.

The Five Voices: Over the last decade, a number of new chronicles have risen up across Khorvaire. None of them match the *Korranberg Chronicle* in terms of the scope or the quality of their journalism, but each is tailored to the people of a particular nation, with a tone carefully chosen to stir up the pain and resentment of the war.

For instance, those who turn to the *Voice of Karrnath* for their news are told that the Cyrans caused the Mourning as an excuse to worm their way into every other nation as so-called "refugees" and that they are preparing treachery, while Kaius is ready to sell their country to Breland and the Mror Holds in the name of peace. Meanwhile, the *Voice of Cyre* warns the refugees of the contempt that others hold for them and the plans that are in the works to exterminate them all.

On the surface most of the stories seem ridiculous, but each new issue of the *Voice* excels at telling people exactly what they want to hear . . . and in the process driving up tension between the nations, exacerbating bigotry and short-sighted nationalism. The audience for each *Voice* is growing rapidly, and those dedicated to these new chronicles often dismiss all other sources of information. A thorough investigation would support the conclusion that all five *Voices* are owned by the same person, a member of the Aurum

who is himself just one of many identities maintained by Mordakhesh. Even if this truth gets out, it sounds exactly like the sort of ludicrous theory that a follower of one of the *Voices* will dismiss out of hand.

A Shattered Soul

The dragonshard that once held Rak Tulkhesh's spirit is now broken into a dozen pieces. The fragments vary in size; Mordakhesh wears the smallest shard on his ring, while the one possessed by the Razor Wind tribe is the size of a human head. All the pieces can be recognized as Khyber dragonshards, formed of deep purple crystal threaded with glowing veins of red light.

Even while his spirit is divided, the consciousness of the Overlord remains intact, and he is aware of events that occur around all his shards. Reuniting the shards will not free Rak Tulkhesh. The division simply serves to limit his ability to influence the world while he is bound. Mordakhesh's sliver affects only people he speaks to. The chunk carried by the Razor Wind affects the tribe's army. And the seed of fury buried beneath Thaliost is influencing the entire region. Long dormant, its power was unlocked when Thrane captured the city during the war. Now its influence grows with each act of violence and retaliation. Though nominally held by the Church of the Silver Flame, Rak Tulkhesh is the true power shaping the future of Thaliost.

Because the seeds of war are suffused with the energy of the overlord, they are virtually impervious to all forms of damaging or magical effects; they are effectively artifacts, and shattering or shaping one would require an effect on par with the epic magic that was used to bind Rak Tulkhesh during the Age of Demons. If a shard is somehow destroyed, its power will be distributed among the remaining fragments.

Adventure Ideas

All forms of strife and discord serve Rak Tulkhesh's goals. His agents can be a driving force within any number of other organizations, from the Aurum to the Emerald Claw. The Lord of Blades, the Kech Shaarat—any aggressive force could have been instigated by the Rage of War, and if his agents are exposed and defeated, those conflicts might be defused.

Here are a few ideas to consider.

- The adventurers encounter a small band of Razor Wind barbarians that have made their way out of the Demon Wastes. After defeating these reavers, they come into possession of the chieftain's axe—a mighty weapon that contains a sliver of Rak Tulkhesh's prison. With each battle in which the axe is used, its power grows. Will a character try to master the axe and use its powers for good? And as its powers grow, will it actually create strife and discord wherever the heroes go?
- When the Silver Flame reveals the nature of the curse afflicting Thaliost to Jaela Daran, she is determined to cleanse the city. Before this can happen, Dariznu breaks with the church of Thrane and rallies those templars corrupted by the Rage of War to his side. Jaela knows that a full siege will only further increase Rak Tulkhesh's power. She needs a small, elite force to brave the fiend-filled layer of Khyber beneath the city and neutralize the seed of war. Are the characters up to the task? And what will it take to bring down Dariznu once the influence of the fiend is broken?
- After the adventurers catch the public eye, the five *Voices* start following their actions and produce slanted stories designed to turn the public against them. Can the heroes expose the *Voices* and shut down this tool of the Lords of Dust?
- Cannith South has produced a new floating fortress. It is the most powerful weapon the house has ever created . . . and it is powered by a shard of Rak Tulkhesh's prison. When its crew falls prey to the demon's influence and unleashes the fortress's power against Breland, the characters must make their way aboard and gain control of it. But what will they do with the cursed vessel once it is in their hands?
- The Razor Wind tribe breaks through the Labyrinth and spills into the Eldeen Reaches. Empowered by fiends, this horde could carve a bloody swath across Aundair and the Reaches. Or it could surprise everyone by swearing allegiance to the Queen of Aundair—a move that would change the balance of power and further Aurala's martial ambitions. How can the adventurers deal with an entire horde of barbarians? Can they keep Aurala from falling prey to Rak Tulkhesh's influence, or will she start the true Last War?

About the Author

Keith Baker is the creator of the Eberron® campaign setting and designer of the card game *Gloom*, and just one of the many faces of Mordakhesh the Shadowsword. You can find him on Twitter as @HellcowKeith.

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

Ed Greenwood's Eye on the Realms

The Awakener of Golems

By Ed Greenwood

Illustration by Patrick McEvoy

A mysterious man travels the Realms at the head of a gang of unusual thieves. He has the power to "awaken" and command golems nearby, making them move and attack whatever he desires. The golems batter their ways out of vaults they've stood in for centuries, or leave their guard posts and attack their owners or fellow guardians as this Awakener directs them to. Who is this man? By what means does he activate and control golems? Does he use spells, a magic item, or some hitherto unknown innate talent?

Early Outrages

In the spring of the Year of the Fifth Circle, a shop in southeastern Amn collapsed in the middle of the day, killing dozens of people who were in the shop or the two floors of living quarters above it.[1] Passersby said the collapse occurred when a corner pillar of the shop shed its coating of painted plaster and stepped out into the street, leaving the "prow" of the building above it unsupported.

The pillar was a stone golem—and when the stones had stopped tumbling, this golem turned and started digging through the ruins of the store, apparently under the silent direction of a man who appeared out of a side alley and stood watching. The golem uncovered several coin coffers and a clay jar that had been hidden inside an interior wall of the building. During the collapse, the jar shattered and spilled its gems out of the cracks. The golem carefully scooped up all the gems and placed them on the ground before the mysterious man—who took up the treasures and fled moments later when lawkeepers came rushing down the street. The golem pounced on these unfortunates, toppling as it corralled them in its arms. It then swept those arms together, to crush the lawkeepers under its falling weight and trap them there. Those who didn't die instantly either suffocated or perished of their wounds before the golem could be levered off them. By then, the man—and the wealth retrieved by the golem—were long gone.

Early in the summer of that year, a secure goods-cellar in Baldur's Gate belonging to a large trading

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coster was broken open from within.[2] Many containers and strongchests were brought out of it and hurled about by golems that had been stored there for years, enclosed in crates. This breach occurred in the small hours of the morning, in a lashing rainstorm, but a few witnesses got a good look at the golems nonetheless. They report that the constructs rampaged down a row of shops, smashing the front walls open, seemingly under the silent command of a man who strolled along in their wake. In whichever direction this man turned his head, a golem went. This happened several times, and all witnesses agreed the golems moved in accordance with the man's wants. This man entered most of the shops, and, presumably while there, removed items as he desired. He fled when a wizard who had been hastily called to the scene began destroying the golems.[3]

A tenday or so later, a luxurious private residence in Baldur's Gate was shattered by a golem that was part of the owner's collection of exotic trophies[4]—a chain golem that had never moved since its discovery and installation in the mansion, which was some thirty-one summers earlier. The golem battered open the owner's gold vaults and pulverized the merchant's private guards as they tried to stop it. Then it lumbered through the streets to a certain inn, where it gave a chest full of gems to a waiting man—and then started to demolish the inn, a task it had largely completed before it was destroyed by the combined efforts of three priests and two wizards hastily assembled by frightened neighbors. The man and the chest alike disappeared in the mayhem.

By the fall of 1477 DR, a dozen more such incidents had occurred in Amn and Tethyr, with the last five of them happening in Athkatla. The mysterious man who could activate and command golems had clearly settled in the capital of Amn.

The Awakener Gains His Title

The first Athkatlan incident was the collapse of a small fortresslike building in the southernmost streets of the city locally thought to be the abode of a Cowled Wizard. It was destroyed by multiple golems—formerly its internal door guards—that assaulted the building's pillars and beams from within. Its sleeping owner died under most of his home.

The next related incident was the destruction of the striking balcony-studded front of The Excellence luxury goods store, a glittering shop "for those of wealth and discernment," featuring huge windows that looked down two streets that met in front of the emporium. A stone golem smashed into the structure and tore it down, floor by collapsing floor, as shoppers shrieked, fled, or fell to their deaths. The golem escaped lawkeepers by striding into the Alandor[5] (and presumably walking or rolling away underwater) to depart the area—and it could not be found with nets, divers, or spells used shortly thereafter.

The third happening of interest directly linked the golems with their controller. A private mercantile dispute escalated until a merchant named Dardulph Estire (a shady goods-dealer widely believed to be deeply involved in smuggling) sent six armed "persuaders" to a particular residence in the unfashionable streets near the Grave District—persuaders who were battered to death by awakened golems there. The golems (an iron golem, a stone golem, and two flesh golems) then marched across the southern half of the city to Estire's home and ravaged it. As Estire tried to flee, a man standing nearby was seen to give orders to the golems to pursue him. When lawkeepers tried to interrupt the chase, the commander of the golems slipped away as the golems again headed for the river and escaped. A terrified Estire departed the city for elsewhere with just the clothes on his back, and he hasn't been seen since.

The next morning, all of Athkatla's dailies[6] were full of embroidered accounts of "The Great Golem Battle." One of them, the widely read *Andrelm's*, dubbed the mysterious golem-controller "the Awakener." The strife with Estire touched off a string of "settling-scores skirmishes," as another daily called them, speculating that the Awakener of Golems was enforcing his will in various formerly covert mercantile disputes by using golems as weapons. All Amn was soon afire with questions. Who was this Awakener? Where was he getting all these varying golems? Was he an agent of the Cowled Wizards? If not, why weren't they putting a stop to him?

Then, just as suddenly, the golem sightings stopped. Folk assumed that the Cowled Wizards had taken care of the golem problem.

Or perhaps they simply persuaded the problem to relocate. Since the golem troubles in Athkatla ceased, a man walking with golems and silently directing them to all manner of menacing and destructive deeds has been sighted across the Realms. A wizard, surely, for who else could whisk himself and his golems from Mirabar one evening to Saerloon the next, only to appear in Ormpur the next morning and Elversult as sunset approached?

What Elminster Knows

The Awakener is not unknown to Elminster. Up until the summer of 1464 DR, the Awakener was simply Morlyn Warrynd, a wizard of small accomplishments who made a living in Saradush as a locksmith, hardly daring to use or try to study the Art for fear of what the Spellplague might do to him. A soft-spoken, obsequiously smiling man with jet-black hair and a goatee, Warrynd craved wealth and power, but saw no path to reaching his goals—though he lacked all scruples,

and happily sold thieves "master" keys for locks he'd already sold to others.

Then came a summer day in the Year of the Six-Armed Elf when a client brought a locked coffer to Warrynd to be opened. (That is, the man lacked the ornately carved ivory coffer's key, and wanted it opened without damage—and without the opener saying a word to anyone.) Warrynd accepted the commission, but the client was run down and killed by a cart (in what seems truly to have been an accident) moments after departing Warrynd's shop, leaving the locksmith with a now-unclaimed coffer. Dared he try to open it? But of course! Warrynd picked its lock without much trouble, but when he opened the box, he triggered an undetected trap. The coffer exploded, and the small, localized blast thrust the magic ring it contained deep into the base of Warrynd's neck amid a flood of wild magic that seared him, left his chest blue, and sealed up the wound again behind a grisly twisted scar. It also awakened the magic of the ring and linked it to Warrynd's mind—and so the Awakener was born.

The ring now riding the mind of the sly locksmith was a *ring of golem command*, which Elminster believes to be an ancient and powerful item made by the Netherese artificer Aroond Thlar. It not only enables Warrynd to control any golem he encounters absolutely—overriding all other means of golem control, and any commands built into a golem—but it has twisted his mind to make him hunger to command golems and to direct them to violence or other bold deeds.

Warrynd's furtive manner puts him at odds with the overt public actions that the ring demands, but the ring overcomes him if he resists it long enough. Thus far, he's kept his open confrontations short and seems to be growing stronger as time passes, exerting more power over the ring and being mastered by it less and less.

Yet Warrynd's ongoing battle with the ring has made his concentration toward learning and memorizing spells difficult, and devising new ones impossible. His Art has grown in recent years purely by means of the items he's had golems seize for him, not by study. One of his most important items is a *wizardfaring ring*, an item he now never takes off. It glows when near any portal (and causes known or hidden portals to glow), and it can make most portals work if its wearer desires them to activate.[7] The Awakener hasn't the spellcraft to teleport himself and his golems around the Realms, and so he relies on his *wizardfaring ring* to discover and operate portals to travel around Faerûn.

What Haerikoat Knows

In recent years an agent of the Cowled Wizards named Daraskur Haerikoat, a wizard of middling Art but a great deal of experience in covert deeds and personal concealment, has been skulking after Warrynd. His orders are not to kill the Awakener, but rather to learn all he can about the man and his magic. The Cowled Wizards have no desire to destroy someone who could be a formidable weapon—if, in time, they can learn to control him absolutely.

Haerikoat's masters armed him with an arsenal of useful magic items and ordered him to take all the time he needs for his investigation and place discretion over swift results—so he has been doing just that, making sure not to be spotted by the Awakener. (Elminster noticed Haerikoat, but doubts anyone else has. The Old Mage regards him as possibly the best spy among wizards active today.) Elminster intends to await the best future opportunity to detain Warrynd and learn all he can from the man's mind, when he can do so without harming Warrynd or revealing his own identity and interest to the Cowled Wizards' agent—and when he deems Haerikoat has learned "enough" about the Awakener.

Haerikoat has learned that the Awakener's paramount aim is his own personal safety. Warrynd greatly fears being hunted by those who might capture him and make him their "pet caged weapon" (as Warrynd puts it). The lonely man who mentally struggles against the golem ring has developed a habit of murmuring an ongoing sardonic conversation aloud with himself, as many a mage has done down the centuries.

The Athkatlan dailies hit on the truth, however accidentally: Warrynd was indeed settling scores throughout Amn with individuals (including Estire) who had swindled him or otherwise caused him some kind of hardship—real or imagined. The ring's effect on his mind has inflamed his tendencies toward paranoia, and he can no longer distinguish between those who have legitimately done him wrong and those he merely envies or fears.

Warrynd is hard at work establishing "hideholds," caches of magic and wealth, and a number of everyday identities for himself across the Heartlands. Thus far, he's acquired buildings in Athkatla, Saradush, Marsember, Saerloon, and Scornubel, and a ruined keep in Tethyr. The last is the only property of his holdings useful for hiding golems, though he intends to acquire a suitable Athkatlan warehouse and modify it as soon as he can.[8] In the meantime, he explores portals cautiously, uses those gates with wilderness or ruin destinations to travel with a small group of stone and flesh golems, and fashions these "faithful fists" (as he mutteringly calls them) into a small, crude mobile guard-fortress around himself when he needs to sleep.

No matter how deeply disguised, the Awakener is loath to approach or to use any human allies, even unwitting ones, yet he must do so to pursue his goals. His prudent lack of trust in anyone has made his progress slow as he arranges safeguards, hires

adventurers to spy on the few allies he has hired, and hires still more adventurers to spy on his hired adventurers.

Elminster admires the patience, caution, and tenacity of the Awakener's Cowled Wizard shadow, and he has thus far left both men alone to see what they'll do. As the Sage of Shadowdale put it recently, "Even jaded old Chosen enjoy suitable ongoing entertainment—and this Awakener and his spy have numbered themselves among my favorites."

Notes

1. The shop was Salabrar's Manytrades Flourish, a well-regarded emporium that also offered small loans, swaps of interesting wares, and rentals of warehouse space elsewhere in the city. It was run by the descendants of the successful and much-beloved Rarnast Salabrar (a jovial importer "from distant lands").

2. The goods-cellar is owned by the Five Firewinds Trading Coster, an amalgamation of five smaller costers operating through Baldur's Gate, Amn, Tethyr, and the Vilhon Reach, with its main offices in Saradush. The coster's banner is five golden fireballs racing in a line down a maroon field. Its head is Endremmus Orlbahar, a large and impressive bald-headed man of shrewd judgment, flourishing mustaches, and iron-hard, ruthless calm. Orlbahar, who seldom leaves Saradush, can be outvoted in Firewinds business decisions by the other four senior partners—and one of them, the hot-tempered and aggressive-in-trade dandy Iliskur Daeremund of Athkatla, is increasingly becoming Orlbahar's firm foe and rival.

3. This mage was a near neighbor of the damaged shops, one Burdeemus Harand, known as "the Quill" for the exacting language in the contracts he presents to all who desire to engage his services. Harand is a smart, formidable man not unused to battle, and he is a veteran of sly mercantile tricks and Athkatlan politics. Although he lives simply, he's widely believed to be a Cowled Wizard. He pretends to dwell in Athkatla as an "independent mage of social responsibility and unassailable respectability" (in the words of a handbill widely distributed in Athkatla, believed to have been sponsored by Harand himself).

4. The collection and the many-towered mansion that housed it were the property of Yarlburl Berethcloak, an effete and jovial—but shrewd, beneath his carefree manner—very wealthy wine merchant who blends and ships sturdy everyday vintages to inns, taverns, and guildhalls up and down the Sword Coast. Berethcloak's hobby is hiring adventurers to explore ruins for him, his terms being that his "adventuresome agents" (as he likes to call them) must bring him back the most eye-catching trophies they uncover, but can keep all else they find.

5. This broad, muddy river runs through the heart of Athkatla and empties into the sea, providing the city with the central artery for shipping that has made it a busy port for centuries.

6. Amn has "dailies" (daily chapbooks) as its newspapers, the local equivalents of Waterdeep's broadsheets. These small pamphlets begin with "the high clack" (headline news), followed by "screeds" (opinion columns, often dueling with columns printed in earlier issues), then "altara" (highlights of local temple sermons and decrees), followed by some pages of ongoing serials (all fiction; usually an action saga, a farce, and a romantic feuding families epic). After this, in a typical issue, comes a page of "thoughtfuls": the Realmsian equivalent of crosswords, except answers to the clues are to be written in a list of "blanks," which have circled letters here and there, which must then be unscrambled into the word or phrase that is sought. The chapbook ends with a back page of bawdy riddles and jests.

7. Just how close a *wizardfaring ring* needs to be to detect a portal, and how much control it asserts over any such gate, varies from portal to portal. No such ring tells a user anything about the destination (or possible multiple destinations) reached by a portal. Although such rings have been observed to have less influence over more powerful (longer distance traversed from one terminus to the other) and complicated portals (in terms of activation conditions, safeguards, exceptions, and concealment), the precise origins and details of wizardfaring magic have been lost. According to Elminster, even the process of creating such rings (known in ancient Imaskar) has been forgotten, and during the last three centuries, no one—to his knowledge—has learned all that much about them. They are rare and precious things, and Mystra has instructed her Chosen not to distribute the few that have been found in tombs and ruins for arcane spellcasters to find.

8. The city's high water table (nearness of groundwater—and tidal influx—to the surface) makes construction of cellars difficult, and keeping them dry accordingly harder. Modifying an Athkatlan warehouse to properly hide golems will consist of making a labyrinth of interior walls arranged so the extreme thickness of one or more of them won't be obvious, or easily found by measuring, to a suspicious lawkeeper or Cowled Wizard agent. To gain the necessary height for larger golems, adding upper lofts to a warehouse will be necessary—and therefore elevators will be required as well. In bustling Athkatla, leaving such a structure largely unused will swiftly attract unwanted attention, so Warrynd is planning very carefully before he begins this project.

About the Author

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

DARK·SUN
CAMPAIGN SETTING

Eye on Dark Sun

The Withering Ones

By Rodney Thompson

Illustration by Steve Ellis

The city of Tyr sits atop a series of caves, tunnels, and caverns that are so labyrinthine that to explore them is to risk becoming lost forever. Yet more than just a maze, the undercity of Tyr is also a refuge for some of the most vile undead creatures anywhere on Athas. In the days of Kalak's reign, the vast majority of these undead were mindless hordes of rotting zombies, the victims of Kalak's tyranny who were carelessly tossed into these catacombs to dispose of them. Since the sorcerer-king's death, the undead in those subterranean depths have begun to stir and emerge. With Kalak now dead, the templars vying for scraps of the sorcerer-king's power, and the city in a state of barely policed anarchy, the threat from beneath has gone largely unnoticed by anyone but its victims.

Of the undead that shamble through the undercity of Tyr, perhaps the most bizarre are the zombies that some have come to call the withering ones. They were born (if such a term is appropriate) at the time when the city of Tyr was dying.

Back when Kalak was still alive and was preparing for his draconic apotheosis, the city of Tyr was awash in defiling magic. Whether the people knew it or not, their sorcerer-king was burning the life force out of the entire city. The living citizens above the ground in Tyr weren't the only ones who suffered under the sorcerer-king's greed. In the undercity, the still-rotting flesh of the undead creatures that roamed those catacombs was being affected as well.

Many of the zombies were ultimately destroyed by this prolonged exposure to Kalak's defiling magic. A special few, however, reacted to the magic by seemingly absorbing it. Those that continued to shamble on after the sorcerer-king's death had been transformed into zombies that now had defiling magic built into the very fabric of their being.

Lore

Arcana (DC 15): The withering ones are zombies that have been suffused with defiling magic. As such, they react violently when they are subjected to arcane magic. When a withering one is affected by a spell or some other expression of arcane power, it unleashes a burst of defiling magic from within it that washes over everything nearby. Though this wave of enervating magic can be dangerous on its own, the real peril comes when a large group of withering ones

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converges to surround a target. In such a case, the consequence of destroying one can be just as dangerous as the attacks the creatures make themselves. As a withering one succumbs, the explosion of magic that it gives off might precipitate the destruction of others nearby, which in turn give off their own death-dealing bursts of magic.

Streetwise (DC 15): While withering ones, like other zombies, emerge from the undercity of Tyr in search of flesh, these creatures share an unending hunger for the flesh of arcane spellcasters. Despite the fact that these creatures react so badly to arcane magic, they have a ravenous hunger for wizards, bards, sorcerers, and others who have mastered the ability to manipulate arcane power. Worse, these creatures seem to be able to sense the presence of arcane aptitude within a person, driving them to pursue spellcasters over long distances.

Streetwise (DC 23): Since the death of Kalak, the withering ones have been an increasing problem for the Veiled Alliance in Tyr. In the early days after Kalak's demise, packs of slavering zombies broke up several gatherings of Veiled Alliance members, sending the spellcasters scrambling into the night. Spellcasting members of this arcane order have learned not to travel alone through the more isolated alleys and streets of the city, particularly at nighttime.

Encounters

Withering ones appear nowhere except in the city of Tyr. Most packs of these zombies are encountered in the undercity, but at night small groups roam the darkened corners of the city, hunting for spellcasters they can consume. Withering ones usually travel in groups of five or more. When they appear in such numbers, many spellcasters fear to confront them at the risk of triggering the release of their defiling magic, offering packs of these zombies a modicum of protection from the people who would normally be the greatest threat to such undead.

Withering One	**Level 6 Brute**
Medium shadow animate (undead)	XP 250
HP 86; **Bloodied** 43	**Initiative** +1
AC 18, **Fortitude** 20, **Reflex** 16, **Will** 17	**Perception** +3
Speed 5	Darkvision
Immune disease, poison	
Traits	
Defiling Backlash (necrotic)	
If a withering one takes damage from an arcane attack, each creature within 2 squares of the withering one takes 5 necrotic damage.	
Zombie Weakness	
A critical hit automatically reduces the withering one to 0 hit points.	
Standard Actions	
Slam ✦ At-Will	
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +11 vs. AC	
Hit: 2d10 + 7 damage, or 3d10 + 7 if the target is grabbed by a withering one.	
Grasp of the Dead ✦ Encounter	
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +11 vs. AC	
Hit: 2d10 + 7 damage, and the withering one grabs the target (escape DC 23).	
Triggered Actions	
Deathless Hunger ✦ Encounter	
Trigger: The withering one is reduced to 0 hit points, but not by a critical hit.	
Effect (No Action): Roll a d20. On a 15 or higher, the withering one is instead reduced to 1 hit point.	
Defiling Explosion (arcane, necrotic) **✦ Encounter**	
Trigger: The withering one is killed by an arcane attack.	
Attack (No Action): Close burst 1 (creatures in the burst); +9 vs. Fortitude	
Hit: 2d10 + 6 necrotic damage.	
Str 18 (+7) **Dex** 7 (+1) **Wis** 10 (+3)	
Con 16 (+6) **Int** 1 (-2) **Cha** 4 (+0)	
Alignment unaligned **Languages** –	

Withering Ones in Combat

Withering ones, like most zombies, are mindless and driven only by a hunger for the flesh of the living. In the case of these creatures, their hunger for arcane characters overrides all else. If an arcane spellcaster is in the battle, the withering ones will pursue and focus their attention almost exclusively on that character, even at their own peril. They swarm toward and around their prey, bunching up as each one tries to get its grasping hands on the target, heedless of what might happen to all of them if one is destroyed. All withering ones are exceptionally strong for zombies, and once they grab someone it is difficult to get them to let go.

About the Author

Rodney Thompson is an advanced designer for Dungeons & Dragons® R&D at Wizards of the Coast, originally from Chattanooga, Tennessee. His credits for the Dungeons & Dragons game include the *Dark Sun® Campaign Setting* and the *Dark Sun® Creature Catalog*™, *Monster Vault*™, *Player's Option: Heroes of the Feywild*™, and *Lords of Waterdeep*™.