

Yornhaven Dungeon

4TH LEVEL EXPLORATION CHALLENGE

Will the PCs reach the vampire necromancer in his ritual chamber before he amasses an army of bone juice zombies made from the very townsfolk the PCs have been striving to save?

STRUCTURING THE CHALLENGE

PCs trained in Arcana readily recognize signs of a necromantic ritual and can tell that it will be complete in roughly 30 minutes (or a vague undisclosed amount of time if you prefer). This challenge is divided into three segments. How long each segment takes is largely up to the PCs. During each segment, the PCs face encounters which provide them with an opportunity to weaken the necromantic ritual, but also present a choice between accruing Victory Points versus rationing their remaining time before the ritual finishes.

None of the opposition they face from scattered goblins or zombies in Yornhaven is particularly dangerous. You can tell the players this outright. You can illustrate it with a fight against minions the PCs can lay waste to. You can have goblins toady up to them.

The PCs face the following encounters during each segment (feel free to mix-and-match as you like, but the Ghost Lantern should be first):

1st Segment: Ghost Lantern, Goblin Stonefall, Skull Watchers

2nd Segment: Bone Juice Spill, Bloodstone Altar, Colorless Ghost

3rd Segment: _____, _____, _____

Each encounter they resolve in a timely manner counts as 1 Victory Point. The number of zombies the necromancer is able to raise (and how well known to the PCs the victims are) is dependent on the PCs' Victory Point total.

VICTORY POINTS

0. 36 zombie minions*, zombie identities are very personal
1. 32 zombie minions*, *ghost lantern* gives off dim light 30'
2. 28 zombie minions*, zombie identities are personal
3. 24 zombie minions*, *ghost lantern* gives off dim light 60'
4. 20 zombie minions*, zombies familiar but not personal
5. 16 zombie minions*, *ghost lantern* boosts Turn Undead range by 2
6. 12 zombie minions*, *ghost lantern* boosts Turn Undead by 1d8
7. 8 zombie minions*, zombies are mostly unrecognizable
8. 4 zombie minions*, *ghost lantern* removes undead resistances
9. No zombie minions, *ghost lantern* imposes vulnerable 2 all on undead within its light

**Zombie Rotters* (MM) are level 3 minions.

TIME

Keep track of in-game time. Each encounter also has pointers about how much time it takes. If the PCs reach the vampire necromancer before the ritual is finished (i.e. before 30 minutes), then deny him a major advantage (e.g. zombies are not empowered by the bone juice granting them regeneration or undead fortitude or non-minion status). If the PCs reach the necromancer after it finishes, then he some major advantage (e.g. zombies are empowered by the bone juice, granting them regeneration or undead fortitude or non-minion status). The particulars depend on the adventure and your goals.

RANDOM ENCOUNTERS (1D8)

Yornhaven is a dark, claustrophobic dungeon filled with blind corners, dead end passages, secret passages, traps, and eerie sounds. You can roll on the following table in between the various planned encounters, use as desired to emphasize the dungeon's flavor, if the PCs take a short rest, or if the PCs go off the beaten path.

1. Enervating Winds

Fell ghostly winds rush thru the halls of Yornhaven. The PCs have one round to devise any defenses before the winds hit them. *Attack*: +7 vs. Fortitude. *Hit*: lose 1 healing surge and gain vulnerability (5) to necrotic damage until taking a short rest. A PC with immunity to necrotic damage is immune to the winds, while resistance to necrotic damage imposes disadvantage on the attack roll.

2. Traps

Pick or roll from the following (1d6):

- 1-False Floor Pit (DMG, level 1)
- 2-Spear Gauntlet (DMG, level 2)
- 3-Doomspore (DMG, level 3)
- 4-Kissing Maiden (DMG, level 4)
- 5-Whirling Blades (DMG, level 5)
- 6-Poisoned Dart Wall (DMG, level 6)

3. Convoluted Passages

A group Dungeoneering check DC 20 (or *find the path* type magic) navigates the twists, turns, and dead-ends, where failure indicates the PCs lose an extra **5 minutes** and come to some kind of hazard (e.g. a chasm, pit of acid, pool of green slime). Crossing the hazard allows them to proceed, but backtracking costs another **5 minutes**.

4. Tempting Treasure

Off a crumbling out of the way section of the dungeon, the PCs spot a small chest weighing 40 pounds that faintly glows (or some similarly enticing description). Acquiring the chest simply requires an investiture of **5 minutes** (or less with clever thinking)...precious time that the PCs may not have. To emphasize the tension, you might describe cues that the chest is precarious balanced above a chasm, the ceiling is crumbling above it, or some other cue implying it may not be there for them to return to later. There is a 50% chance the

chest is trapped with a *glyph of warding* or an *alarm* spell (which triggers one of the wandering encounters below).

5. Wandering Goblins

A small group of sneaking goblin minions (Perception DC 16) draw near. Their motivation may be to (1d6):

- 1-ambush a spellcaster PC with poisoned daggers
- 2-delay the PCs with cunning deceit
- 3-serve as false guides leading PCs into danger
- 4-escape Yornhaven and not be turned into zombies
- 5-unearth a treasure stash
- 6-seeking a new master who can provide them with ale

6. Wandering Zombies

A small group of zombie minions begin pursuing the PCs, though the slow shambling zombies are easily outpaced so long as the PCs don't stop (e.g. to face an encounter, to take a short rest, or to puzzle out something). The zombies begin at 4, and increase by 1 for every 5 minutes thereafter. If the PCs don't find a way to shake them (or destroy them), then the zombies join the final fight.

7. Secret Passage

The PCs find a secret passage allowing them to circumvent the next encounter they would face, allowing them to save time. Of course, this prevents them from accruing Victory Points against the necromantic ritual, so it's a dilemma they'll have to figure out.

8. Unquiet Spirit Guide

A silent grey spirit flickers momentarily, revealing a scene of its death at the hands of the necromancer in the light of the *ghost lantern*. If put to rest (**5 minutes**), the spirit provides whatever clue would be most helpful to the PCs or removes a condition/curse from a PC. If banished or turned, the spirit drains a healing surge from that PC.

DIFFICULTY

Easy **10** / Medium **14** / Hard **21**

GHOST LANTERN

This black iron hooded lantern hangs from a spike near the entrance to Yornhaven; a spellcaster can light it with a suitable cantrip, causing a blue candle flame to glow within. The intensity of the flame's light indicates the extent to which they've disrupted the ritual (according to Victory Points). PCs knowledgeable about such things recognize it as a *ghost lantern* which can be used to reveal psychic echoes of recently dead spirits. If the *ghost lantern* is used to help an Unquiet Spirit Guide (see above) to their rest, or to put the spirit in the "Colorless Ghost" encounter to rest, the PCs gain 1 Victory Point.

GOBLIN STONEFALL

A group of goblin minions attempt to trigger a stonefall before the PCs can take them out or otherwise prevent them from doing so. If the stonefall is triggered, it's a 500 pound granite block that prevents the PCs from taking the most direct route thru Yornhaven, adding **5 minutes** to the clock as they navigate an alternate route. If the PCs succeed, they discover the bottom of the stoneblock is engraved with necromantic runes; defacing these runes accrues 1 Victory Point.

SKULL WATCHERS

A hallway is lined with 6 skulls on pikes, with hissing blue magic in their eye sockets. PCs knowledgeable about such things realize this is the *Skull Watch (Open Grave)* divination ritual allowing the caster to see thru the skulls. Each skull is marked with a word and a number; this number corresponds to a number of letters in a word. When turned (e.g. by *mage hand*) to face the next skull in the sequence, the skull's eyes glow yellow instead and a whisper is heard as follows:

BLOOD (6) "...my BLOOD without which the LIVING..."
DARKNESS (6) "...in DARKNESS once within their GRAVES..."
GRAVES (5) "...their GRAVES not beyond my REACH..."
LIVING (8) "...the LIVING dwell in DARKNESS..."
REACH (4) "...my REACH expands thru TIME..."
TIME (7) "...thru TIME to the shores of UNDEATH..."
UNDEATH (5) "...UNDEATH born of my BLOOD"

Once the sequence is complete (LIVING > DARKNESS > GRAVES > REACH > TIME > UNDEATH > BLOOD, BLOOD > LIVING), the skulls deactivate. **To increase the pressure of the scenario you can make in-game time equal actual time once the players start trying to solve the puzzle (though make it explicit you're doing so with a stopwatch or egg timer everyone can see). A prop would be handy for this puzzle.** Disabling the skulls by whatever method without being seen (and thus alerting the necromancer to their presence) counts as 1 Victory Point.

BONE JUICE SPILL

Vats filled with corpses suspended in green gel line this room, and leaking pipes pump bone juice. Puddles of bone juice are scattered about the floor, pipes drip, and sprays of bone juice mist hiss. Navigating the room to avoid contact with bone juice can be accomplished with a medium Acrobatics check (DC 14), though doing so requires spending **5 minutes** navigating the room slowly. A hard Acrobatics check (DC 21) navigates the room in just **1 minute**. Reaching the shut off valve to stop the sprays requires a hard Acrobatics check (DC 21), but reduces the difficulty for everyone else to easy (DC 10). If a PC has contact with bone juice they suffer 1d6 necrotic damage and feel the necromancer's call; in the final encounter the PC is subject to an attack on the first round: *Attack*: +7 vs. Will, *Hit*: PC is stunned until the start of their next turn as they struggle against the dark call of the necromancer's magic.

BLOODSTONE ALTAR

This altar oozes foul blood, and a living NPC seems to be halfway merged with it, pleading for the PCs to give him/her a swift death. Killing the NPC is the quickest solution, though it doesn't count toward Victory Points. Channel Divinity used in a **5 minute** ritual or a restoration ritual like *Delay Affliction* (DRAGON 366) frees the NPC and accrues 1 Victory Point. Alternately, a PC can offer up their own blood to free the NPC in about **1 minute**, though this doesn't accrue Victory Points, the PC loses a healing surge, and the necromancer gains 10 temporary hit points. Destroying the altar (100 hit points, immune to poison and psychic damage, resistant to slashing and piercing damage, vulnerable to radiant or thunder damage) once the NPC is saved, however, does accrue 1 Victory Point.

COLORLESS GHOST

A forlorn ghost of a girl sits at the base of a staircase leading up to a massive iron door engraved with a star sealed by magic. A large stack of smooth flat stones rests in a pile beside her, apparently of differing hues - though it's impossible to tell the actual colors with the grey curse over the region. A simple inscription at the base of the first stair reads: *"Tracing the star: red, black, purple, blue, white."*

The ghost reenacts her sad story in the light of the *ghost lantern* - her mummy always told her that if she got lost in the woods she should look for the brightest green moss she could find on a tree or a rock and follow that north back to their cottage. However, when the grey veil fell while the girl was playing in the woods she couldn't find her way home and ended up seeking shelter in the foul tunnels of Yornhaven accidentally. Convincing the ghost to go to her rest, to haunt her mother out of spite, or tricking her into the force field might release her from undeath (and gain 1 Victory Point). When she departs, the ghost momentarily restores a bit of color to the room. placing the colored stones in the star design on the door in order (starting at the top point of the star) causes it to open.

DESIGN NOTES

This is unfinished, but it should give you a framework to work off of.

First off, you'll notice that I left out the "skill" in "skill challenge" and also that the various encounters are left open-ended for the players to resolve as they choose. Certain skills are just going to naturally make sense, so don't feel you need to define exactly which skill is required.

Instead, I describe it as an "Exploration Challenge." The point of the challenge is about pathfinding a route thru the dungeon to reach the necromancer before his ritual is completed. The consequences of the ritual can be whatever you want them to be.

Time is the key resource the PCs are racing against in this challenge. Along their way thru the dungeon they face opportunities to weaken the ritual; while this has an observable impact on the number of zombies in the final encounter, it also has an emotional impact in terms of how well known the zombie victims are to the PCs (sure it's a little *gamist*, but it helps emphasize that their efforts in the dungeon to oppose the ritual have paid off).

Every opportunity to weaken the ritual (gaining Victory Points) also requires a certain amount of time to deal with it. Balancing these opportunities against their time window - and finding creative ways to do things in less time - is the main challenge Yornhaven Dungeon presents to the players.

It's important to let the players know the time window they are operating under at the very beginning. Likewise, it's important to give them an idea of how weakened the ritual is according to the number of Victory Points they've accrued. That's one of the reasons I included the Ghost Lantern - the brightness of its flame serves as a visual cue to how much the PCs have disrupted the necromancer's ritual.