

ACCURSED ARCANUM

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO HEXES AND CURSES




THE DM LAIR

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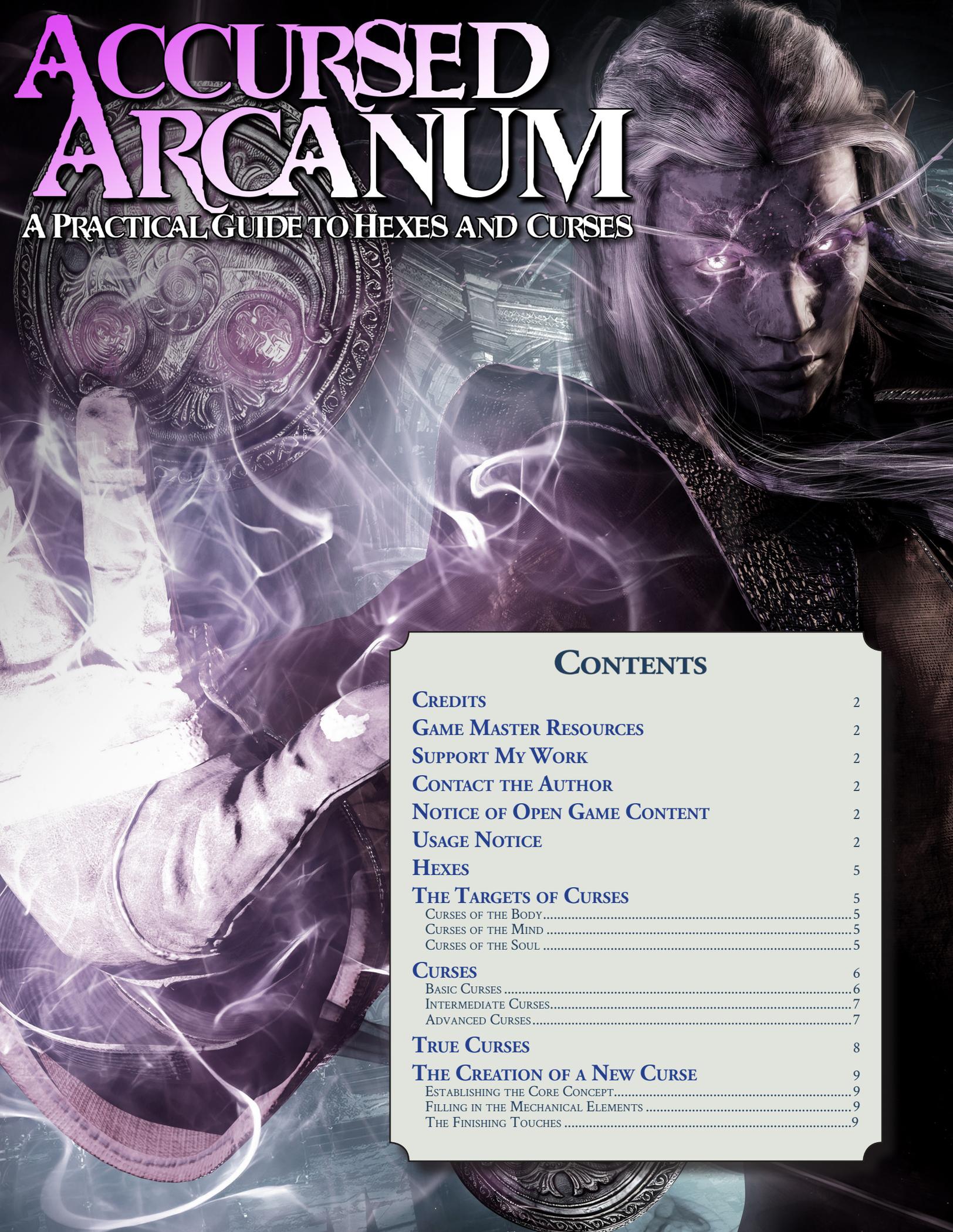
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ACCURSED ARCANUM

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO HEXES AND CURSES



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Greetings, I am Velis Ahennig, royal arcanist and recorder of magics. Here today, we will be discussing the practical applications of hexes and curses in the world. Both mysterious and powerful, these bewitching magics are oft poorly understood, with nary a soul willing to study them... at least not publicly. But no matter, feel free to simply rest your eyes and allow me a brief moment of your time to explain the findings of my many years of research.

I think today's recitement will start with clarifying common misconceptions, errors, and other follies that most practitioners of the arts fall into. Yes, yes, there are many ways in which they get their information right, or at least get it close enough for mundane purposes, but it is still crucial that we clarify matters before diving into a deeper discussion.

Let us start first with some definitions that will be considered axiomatic for the rest of our conversation:

Hexes. Hexes are the lowest form of all the curses. Often, they are created through the casting of a single spell and only cause minimal damage to another being. This isn't to say that they are weak – no, by many accounts, these spells are quite strong – merely that they are the simplest to remove from oneself. We'll get more into that shortly, but for the time being, suffice it to say that if the curse can be removed by no more than a simple incantation, it is likely a hex.

Curse. The standard category of curses is, conveniently, the most commonly understood to be a curse. You'll find these in various tombs and dungeons across the world, enchanted onto a magical item that you simply can't resist thrusting onto your finger, or perhaps you indeed drew someone's ire, and they cast one of these curses directly onto you. Regardless of the source, these curses are significantly more challenging to remove than a basic hex – but fortunately, not all curses are created the same.

True Curse. True curses are exceptionally rare. Even in all my years of study, I have only encountered a handful of incidents where a true curse has been created. True curses contain the power of a warped reality condensed into a fixed point which then radiates its vile energies into the world around it, causing untold chaos. Most of the incidents of these curses I have found have placed them over cities or kingdoms, affecting everyone within. Only once have I even heard of a true curse placed on an individual – though I have doubts about the veracity of such an incident.

I will now begin discussing each of these in turn, starting with hexes.



HEXES

As I previously stated, these are the lowest form of all curses. Many practitioners of magic from all walks of life are capable of casting at least one of these spells. While these spells are the lowest form, one would be foolish to discount their existence entirely. Many an adventurer, particularly those who specialize in pact magic, have found these spells to be quite baneful to their enemies.

Of course, it is worth noting that many spells which may not be considered traditional curses fall into this category. A spell such as *feblemind*, a remarkably powerful spell in its own right, is one of these spells that is often not considered a traditional curse. Why does such a distinction matter in this case?

Well, simply put, not all curses can be defeated merely by casting *remove curse*. While many hexes can be removed with such a triviality, even amongst these lowest of curses, there are many which cannot be defeated in such a manner. Indeed, when one is subjected to *feblemind*, one needs much more powerful magic to recover.

I won't bore you further by rambling on about hexes; nay, let us move on to the far more exciting curses, the ones that you actually came here to learn about.

THE TARGETS OF CURSES

Naturally, not all curses affect the same parts of their target. To keep things simple enough, I have taken the liberty of broadly categorizing all curses into three categories, which I'll briefly define for you now.

CURSES OF THE BODY

These are curses that purely affect the physical being of an individual. They make them physically weaker, slower, or feebler. Typically, these curses are not going to have effects on the mind – in fact, many who create such curses want their victims to fully understand what is happening to them.

CURSES OF THE MIND

The opposite of a curse of the body, these curses purely affect someone's mind. Addled thoughts, befuddled decision-making, and the like are the common goals of a curse of the mind. Fortunately, these curses rarely affect one's body as well, making particular... less brilliant... adventurers as the ideal patsy for such a curse, leaving the rest of the party all the better for it.

CURSES OF THE SOUL

These are the vilest of all curses, at least in my humble opinion. When they are placed upon a living being, it corrupts and harms their very soul – the literal essence of what makes them who they are. The cruelty and malice that must be poured into such a curse are incomprehensible, and the ultimate effect of such a curse is often damnation for its unfortunate victim.



CURSES

These are the bread and butter of our study of curses today. After all, it is the namesake category of this form of magic and thus is the most broadly applicable and most widely seen. These curses are typically set as traps, occur naturally, or result from a vindictive or malicious force seeking to destroy an enemy. They fall into three categories, each worse than the last – but take comfort in knowing that the worst of these curses are exceptionally rare, second only to true curses.

The critical difference between these curses and mere hexes is how they are removed. While some curses can be suppressed by casting *remove curse*, they can never be entirely removed in that manner. Instead, when cast on a creature cursed in this way, it reveals the method by which the curse may be removed.

GM Note. After describing how a curse may be removed, there is an italicized example of how such an action may be performed. This italicized portion is not intended to be shared with the players but rather to provide a guide for game masters to adjudicate attempts to break the curse.

BASIC CURSES

We shall start by discussing the basic curses, which nearly anyone who dedicates a brief period of study to is capable of learning how to create. The effects that these curses have upon someone are relatively muted, only serving as a way to disadvantage them or make them consider turning back. In a sense, they act similarly to a well-designed trap: they keep people who do not belong away while not affecting those who do.

In terms of practicality, let's look at a basic curse and break down exactly why it is merely a basic curse:

THE TONGUE OF THE SNAKE

Basic curse of the body, any vessel

While affected by this curse, you have a snake-like tongue. This causes everything you say, in any language, to sound like you are hissing, with particular emphasis on the letter 's' whenever it appears in your speech. If you are talking to a creature that is not evil-aligned, you have disadvantage on Charisma (Persuasion and Intimidation) checks to influence that creature. However, you have advantage on all Charisma (Deception) checks when trying to influence the same creatures.

New Flaw. I find my new pattern of speech to be quite amusing and try to show it off whenever possible.

Removal of the Curse. This curse can only be removed by drinking the blood of a great serpent. A great serpent can be interpreted many ways. Ultimately, any snake-like creature, such as a sea serpent or medusa, that is at least CR 3, is an appropriate choice for a great serpent.

ANALYSIS

We can see that the tongue of the snake is a basic curse of the body, which, to reiterate, simply means that it affects the physical body of its target. Next, we see that it can be found in any vessel; this curse is not limited to being applied to weapons or rings but rather anything the creator so desires. Now, that is all well and good, but those are merely definitions.

When evaluating whether or not a curse is a basic curse or something more powerful, we must look at the particular effects and the difficulty involved in overcoming them. In the case of this curse, we can see that there is nothing that will make the cursed creature less likely to survive in its day-to-day life. Sure, they have a harder time dealing with many creatures when they're not lying, but the curse gives them the upside of making them better liars!

This is ultimately the question that should be asked in the case of a basic curse: is this curse equal to the inverse of an uncommon magic item? In the case of the tongue of the snake, the answer is naturally yes. Providing advantage on two checks but disadvantage on one, particularly since they are common checks, is quite reasonable for a beneficial uncommon magic item. Thus, its exact inverse is also basic.

Finally, let us look at the removal method for the curse. In this case, it is a reasonably ambiguous solution that can be accomplished in a great many ways. This is more indication that this is a basic curse, as most adventuring parties will be able to achieve it. It is even possible that the adventurers will be able to find a merchant who can supply what they need... though it will likely come with a steep premium.



INTERMEDIATE CURSES

Intermediate curses are the natural next step in our discussion. These advance beyond merely being an inconvenience, as is the case with basic curses, and turn into something a little more dangerous. Often these curses have the potential to indirectly threaten the life of the person who is affected by it, though it is rare that the curse itself would directly threaten one's life. These curses can often be found protecting important places, especially if there are guards who could use the advantage they would be given.

For our practical analysis, we shall look at the curse of repetition now:

THE CURSE OF REPETITION

Intermediate curse of the mind, any vessel

Whenever the affected creature attempts to use an action or bonus action, it must succeed on a DC 14 Wisdom saving throw. On a failure, the creature is unable to take a new action and must repeat the last action it performed. If it is not possible for the creature to repeat its previous action, it simply does nothing. Once the creature has succeeded on the saving throw, it does not need to make another one for one hour.

New Flaw. Whenever I am writing or speaking, people tell me that I am repeating sentences on a regular basis, even if I don't notice it myself.

Removal of the Curse. The curse can only be removed by forging a contract of absolute order. *Such a contract can be made by beings native to Mechanus, the Hells, or the Celestial Mountain. An appropriately powerful being should be contacted to make this contract with, though it needn't be as powerful as a deva or a pit fiend.*

ANALYSIS

We shall begin our analysis of this curse in the same manner as we did with our basic curse. First, we note that this is an intermediate curse – meaning there is actual, potentially mortal, danger for the one affected by it – and that this curse affects the mind somehow. Like the previous curse, we can take further note that this can be applied to any vessel we desire.

Now, moving on to how we arrive at the conclusion that this is an intermediate curse, let us look at how this curse will actually affect one whom it is thrust upon. First, we note that this affects actions and bonus actions, affecting the entire toolkit of an adventurer in combat. Regardless of anything else, that alone would immediately elevate this curse past a basic curse and make it intermediate.

Next, note the saving throw required. It is not a particularly difficult save to make, but given the frequency at which it will be necessary, it is nearly guaranteed to have an effect. The saving grace is that once the creature succeeds, it doesn't need to make another one for an hour. This is pretty typical – even for advanced curses – though the time for which the curse is suppressed varies from curse to curse. If the curse is

never suppressed by succeeding on a saving throw, you're likely dealing with a true curse and should rightfully feel afraid indeed.

GM Note. Generally, the DC required to succeed on a saving throw against an intermediate curse should be 15 or lower. A saving throw of 16 or greater will almost always be indicative of an advanced curse unless the effect of the curse is extremely weak.

Finally, we shall look at the method of removing this curse. Unlike the basic curse, this one is both better defined and more impossible. Adventurers who are stricken with such a curse will likely find themselves in need of time to ponder and research possible options – time during which they will remain affected by the curse. That said, the ability to remove the curse still falls within the realm of most experienced adventuring parties.

ADVANCED CURSES

Finally, we reach advanced curses. These are extraordinarily dangerous to be afflicted with and always present mortal danger for those unfortunate enough to be afflicted. In fact, those curses at the upper echelons of this tier of power may even cause death due to the curse. Typically, these curses attempt to compel some behavior from those afflicted, and attempts to disobey result in extreme punishment by the curse. This isn't to say that the compulsion is absolute, merely that the curse will seek retribution for disobedience.

Let's look at one now to see how these curses work:

ACCURSED CASTING

Advanced curse of the mind, spell scroll or a spellcasting focus

The affected creature is compelled to collect and hoard all things related to spells, be it spell scrolls, spellcasting components, or even magic items containing spells. They are not entirely unlike a dragon in that they attempt to amass the greatest hoard possible and refuse to share or utilize any of it. Each time the cursed creature casts a spell of first level or greater – even when using a spell scroll – there is a 50% chance that the creature will lose one spell slot of that level permanently until the curse is broken.

New Flaw. My greed is immediately obvious to anyone who watches me around anything magical. Not only am I unable to hide it, but I also don't want to hide it.

Removal of the Curse. The curse must be broken by setting free the compulsion and descending into the heart of magic. *This is intended to be interpreted as the character needing to intentionally lose all of their spell slots permanently and to give away or completely use all spell scrolls and other magic items that contain spells. Once in such a state, they must journey into a font of magic, such as a plane ruled by a god of magic, to regain their power.*

ANALYSIS

Starting in the same place as our other analyses, we take note that this is an advanced curse of the mind. That means the curse will affect someone's mind in a way that puts them in mortal danger. Unlike the other curses we have analyzed thus far, we can see that this curse must be placed on specific objects – in this case, spell scrolls or a spellcasting focus.

However, now we look at what makes this a genuinely advanced curse: the effects and the compulsion. The first thing this curse does is compels the affected creature to behave in a particular fashion, hoarding things related to spells. This in itself isn't a hazardous behavior; after all, many wizards do this anyway. That said, disobedience is extremely dangerous for any spellcaster.

The reason this curse is advanced is because of the cost of disobedience. Spell slots are a precious resource for any spellcaster – after all, that is where they derive their ability to cast spells. Having a 50% chance of permanently losing one is a major risk and a potentially steep price to pay. As such, classifying this curse anywhere below advanced would be a fool's endeavor.

Finally, the removal of the curse is no mean feat either. It requires the creature that has been affected to willingly give up their most valuable resource, and only after that can they go on the journey to break it. That is a deadly mission, if I have ever heard of one, which is appropriate for an advanced curse.

GM Note. Advanced curses can have some of the most difficult methods of removal. However, the removal method should never be such that it is impossible or nearly impossible to accomplish. While the method can be deadly and challenging, a character with one of these curses should always know there is hope if they should seek it out.

TRUE CURSES

Now, let us begin a far more theoretical discussion than we have thus far. True curses are a rarity in the world; only a tiny handful of them have ever appeared throughout the annals of history. These curses can only be created by beings of nearly incomprehensible might. In fact, the *weakest* such being that I have ever heard be capable of casting a true curse was an ancient lich. Notably, the lich cursed an entire continent in an effort to take their souls into his phylactery. It was a truly horrendous event that required incredibly powerful adventurers to put an end to it.

That should give you an idea of the scope of what we are referring to with true curses. These are cataclysmic events when they appear, and legendary heroes make entire careers out of defeating them. The exact nature of a true curse varies from casting to casting, but they all share one common feature: the very existence of those affected by them is at risk when cast. As in the case of the lich noted above, the souls of everyone on the continent were the target of the curse.

GM Note. True curses are only intended to be used as a campaign-defining event or possibly even the basis for an entire campaign. They should have wide-reaching implications for the world as a whole and cannot be used in combat or by accidentally equipping a random magic item. The mechanics behind a true curse will be used as a part of the setting rather than something that affects the gameplay itself.



THE CREATION OF A NEW CURSE

ESTABLISHING THE CORE CONCEPT

Now that we understand the theory behind curses and have analyzed several types of standard curses, let's create a new one that can be implemented if a dungeon or villain calls for it. The natural starting point is to consider what we want the curse to target; in this case, I think targeting someone's soul itself will be a good fit. Now, most soul-targeting curses, even those that lack active mechanical pressures, are beyond a basic curse. The power involved exceeds what those curses should reasonably be capable of and, frankly, typically exceed intermediate curses as well.

Thus, it seems reasonable that this will be an advanced curse of the soul. Next, we need to determine how quickly or how often it will take effect. There are a couple of options we have to avail ourselves within the case of a curse of the soul: we can either have it directly corrupt the target until the curse is removed, or we can have it slowly corrupt the target. This is a matter purely of personal preference, but I am somewhat beholden to the idea of the curse slowly bringing its target into the depths of depravity.

We should next be asking ourselves what we mean by depravity in this case. Are we trying to elicit a particular type of corruption from the target, or is the goal to shift their alignment in a more general way? Again, there is no correct answer to this question, but for the purposes of this curse, let's shift their alignment as a whole. Somewhat arbitrarily, I'll set the target alignment as lawful evil.

Let's take a moment to see where the curse is at in an organized way:

CURSE OF THE SOUL

Advanced curse of the soul, unknown vessel

The target of the curse will slowly descend into evil, gradually shifting their alignment to lawful evil.

FILLING IN THE MECHANICAL ELEMENTS

Now that we have created the core concept of the curse, let's start filling in the details. The next step is going to be to determine what the mechanical elements are going to be. In this case, since we are creating an advanced curse, there should be a compulsion, and there should be a punishment. Let's start with the compulsion.

The goal of shifting the alignment is ultimately to turn the affected creature into an evil being, which is generally done by compelling them to commit evil acts. To keep things simple, let us go with a classic: the target must harvest the people's souls to feed the curse. This seems a bit mundane and almost cliché, so we'll add a little flavor to it to make it more interesting. In this case, the target will harvest people's souls by engulfing them in hellfire which condemns the target to an eternity in the Hells if they should be killed by it. Now that is much more interesting.

Next, let's consider the punishment that comes from defying the curse. In this case, it seems pretty straightforward. If the target fails to harvest souls for too long – let's say, fails to harvest at least three souls per week – then they are punished by having the hellfire they control burn them from within, which reduces their Constitution score by 2 until they harvest at least one soul. If they are punished three times in a row or five times total before the curse is broken, the cursed creature itself is engulfed in hellfire, condemning its soul to an eternity in the Hells.

Finally, we need to give the creature some way of controlling the hellfire. This is relatively simple; we will state that if the creature does not already know the *produce flame* cantrip, they know it for as long as they are cursed. When the cursed creature casts *produce flame*, it creates hellfire instead of normal flames.

Now we can see the curse starting to come together into a final element to be set loose on the world:

CURSE OF THE SOUL

Advanced curse of the soul, unknown vessel

The cursed creature feels a compulsion within them to harvest souls and condemn them to an eternity in the Hells. This compulsion emanates from a flame that now burns within the creature's blackening heart: a hellfire that only they can control. If the creature did not already know the *produce flame* cantrip, they know it for as long as they are cursed. When the creature casts *produce flame*, it creates hellfire instead of regular flames.

Should the cursed creature fail to harvest at least three souls every week in this way, they must succeed on a DC 20 Wisdom saving throw or have their Constitution score reduced by 2 until they harvest at least one soul. Should the creature fail this saving throw three weeks in a row or five times total, they are instantly engulfed in hellfire and have their soul condemned to the same fate as their victims.

THE FINISHING TOUCHES

Now that we have the meat of the curse established, all that remains are the finishing touches: we need to know what kind of vessel this curse needs, we need to know a flaw that the curse will create, and we need to understand how the curse will be broken. The most straightforward place to start is the vessel. In the case of this curse, it seems reasonable that it can be applied to a weapon; it is, at the end of the day, a curse about killing people, so an implement of killing seems to be the right choice.

Next, the flaw. The flaw can be nearly anything we desire it to be, so long as it corresponds to the curse in some manner. In this case, let's keep it simple and straightforward: I want to lash out in rage whenever I see someone act happy or pleased with themselves; if I cannot be happy, they cannot, and they should die for it.

Finally, we need a way to break this curse. Because it is an advanced curse and directly affects the target's soul, the method cannot be a trivial matter. The simplest solution requires the creature to go on an adventure to break the curse. In this case, an interesting idea comes to mind: the cursed creature must venture into their own soul to relieve the blackness on it. When we put together the finished curse block, we will make sure to create a cryptic clue for the creature to ponder if they wish to break the curse.

Thus, we now have the complete curse, and all we need to do is assign an exciting name to it:

DESIRE OF THE HELLS

Advanced curse of the soul, unknown vessel

The cursed creature feels a compulsion within them to harvest souls and condemn them to an eternity in the Hells. This compulsion emanates from a flame that now burns within the creature's blackening heart: a hellfire that only they can control. If the creature did not already know the produce flame cantrip, they know it for as long as they are cursed. When the creature casts produce flame, it creates hellfire instead of regular flames.

Should the cursed creature fail to harvest at least three souls every week in this way, they must succeed on a DC 20 Wisdom saving throw or have their Constitution score reduced by 2 until they harvest at least one soul. Should the creature fail this saving throw three weeks in a row or five times total, they are instantly engulfed in hellfire and have their soul condemned to the same fate as their victims.

New Flaw. I want to lash out in rage whenever I see someone act happy or pleased with themselves; if I cannot be happy, they cannot, and they should die for it.

Removal of the Curse. Removing the curse can only be done by one who ventures within themselves. *This is intended to be an adventure that sees the creature and any companions they wish to bring enter the cursed creature's soul. They will need to discover a way to do this, typically either a rare magic item or a powerful mage, and then defeat the blackness that now exists within the creature's soul.*

CLOSING

And so ends our discussion of these most accursed of arcanum. Please, do use this information with only the most extreme caution as it is possible – nay even likely, from time to time – that such nefarious magic has a significant rebound effect. Typically, that ends up being in the form of an adventuring party with a grudge hunting down the creator of the curse... though sometimes it is simply that the creator ends up accidentally cursing themselves. Either way, it is best to have knowledge of this type of magic but practice the prudent and wise thing to do and leave it as knowledge and not practice.



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