



dead by dawn

A Starting Adventure for Shadow of the Demon Lord

Even as the darkness from the Void casts its shadow across Urth, there are other dangers found lurking in the gloamings of the world. Some perils seek to entrap the innocent. Some are never defeated, their evils only delayed for a time. And at least one hungers for blood and meat to sustain its immortality. Tonight, this horror sets out to feed its vile hunger with fresh flesh.

A love letter to every story about holding down a bad position against even worse people, whether the attackers are human or not quite, *Dead by Dawn* is an adventure written for a group of three to five starting characters. In it, the player characters must find a way to survive an onslaught of undead, driven by a malevolent nature spirit to attack a nearby inn. The characters just have to survive until sunrise.

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ADVENTURE BACKGROUND

In the heart of a particularly old and hoary forest grows Old Nock, a tree that has lived for hundreds, if not thousands of years. All the other trees in the forest owe their existence to this one. It was the first to find purchase in the hard earth and strike deep roots, and from its seeds the forest sprang. Its bark is a grotesque tableau of tormented faces howling in pain, and from its gnarled trunk spread a profusion of twisted and sharp branches.

Old Nock is no ordinary tree, for in it lives a foul and evil creature, a dryad corrupted by centuries of spite and bitterness. The darkness growing in her heart transformed the tree into a hateful thing, one that sustains itself by feeding on blood and flesh. And over the long years of its existence, it has claimed the lives of countless unlucky souls who have stumbled too deep into the dark and foreboding forest.

Luckily, devotees of the Old Faith, who had long tended this forest, discovered a way to curb the worst of the tree's appetites. These priests performed a bloody ritual, in which they gave a measure of their blood to the tree and, through their magic, made dormant the spirit. Each year, a priest must make the journey into the woods and repeat the ritual. If they fail to do so, the tree will awaken and evil will stalk the land once more.

The time to renew the magic is at hand, and the knowledge of the ritual resides with one final priest, the last of his ancient society. The night before the adventure begins, the priest arrived at the Goathorne inn, ate a small meal, and retired early. He never woke up, having died in his sleep.

And so, Old Nock has begun to stir, throwing off the ancient enchantments that had quelled its obscene hunger. When the sun sets, the tree will awaken and send its minions to bring its sacrifices to devour, as the occupants of the Goathorne will soon discover. Unless they come together, they might all be dead by dawn.

SECONDARY CHARACTERS

Aside from the player characters, there are at least four other characters present at the inn, each of which is described below. You can add additional secondary characters as you like; the more victims, the better the story.

ANANDA

Before becoming an innkeeper, Ananda and her partner Gelda, enjoyed much success as mercenaries. After many years and much gold, Ananda convinced Gelda to retire from a life of danger and spend their

remaining years running an inn. Ananda is a middle-aged female dwarf (with Insanity 3) with blonde hair and a long, thin blonde beard. She handles the guests. She pronounces the name of the inn "Go-thorn" and corrects anyone who says otherwise.

GELDA

Co-owner of the Goathorne, Gelda had an illustrious career as a mercenary and adventurer with her partner Ananda, but she saw the strain that lifestyle had put on her lover. Too many brushes with death, too many horrible monsters, had left Ananda unsettled and beset with nightmares. So, when Ananda suggested they retire, Gelda agreed, but with some reluctance, for she loved her old life. Gelda spends most of her time in the kitchen and doing the odd jobs necessary to maintain the inn. Gelda is a middle-aged female dwarf with short black hair and thick black muttonchops. She pronounces the name of the inn "Goat-horn" and corrects anyone who says otherwise.

BESTER

Bester (as a commoner) took a job at the Goathorne a few years back. An attractive and charming young man, with a mop of blonde hair and an easy smile, he entertains the guests with music and jests, serves the meals, and helps maintain the inn.

HORVATH

An ancient priest of the Old Faith, Horvath stopped at the inn to rest before making the journey into the forest and promptly died in his sleep. His corpse remains in his rented room.

THE GOATHORNE

The Goathorne, a modest inn, stands on the edge of a dark and foreboding forest, alongside a neglected road that travels around the wood. Aside from it and a couple of outbuildings, there are no other structures nearby. The inn can be placed near any large forest. Balgrendia, with its dark, haunted woods, makes an ideal location, though any place where an inn might stand at the edges can serve for this story.

MAIN HALL

The inn's front door opens into a large hall occupied with tables and chairs in the center, a few booths along the far wall, a large fireplace, a buffet table, and a well-kept bar. A door behind the bar leads to the kitchen. A short corridor in the center of the eastern wall, next to the fireplace, leads to the common room. Opposite the corridor, a staircase climbs up to the noble suites on the second floor.

COMMON ROOM

The corridor leading out from the main hall ends at a doorway obscured by a heavy curtain. The large room on the other side of the curtain holds eight cots with hay-stuffed mattresses, each with fresh bedding. A few spare tables and chairs have been pushed up against the wall. A door on the opposite wall from the entrance leads out to a deck that overlooks the forest. A cot costs 1 cp a night.

THE NOBLE SUITES

Up the stairs is another hall that ends at a small window. On each side stand two doors, each bearing a number from one to four. These doors lead to private rooms that hold two bunks, a chest of drawers, and a writing desk, oil lamp, and tinderbox. The third room holds Horvath's corpse. A noble suite costs 5 cp a night.

KITCHEN

The door behind the bar leads to the back of the house, where one finds a well-provisioned kitchen, a couple of closets, and a trapdoor leading down to a root cellar. A ladder leans up against the wall and leads up to a pair of small rooms positioned behind the noble suites. Gelda and Ananda share one room, while Bester takes the other.

THE STABLES

Off to the side of the inn is a small barn with stalls enough to accommodate six horses. Hay bales have been piled up in the loft, which can be reached by way of a ladder. Currently, the stables hold a horse and a donkey.

THE WOODSHED

About 50 yards behind the inn, where the ground slopes down to the forest floor, stands a small woodshed used for storing logs and other maintenance supplies. The shed has no door and the interior is somewhat neat and organized. A woodcutter's axe (as a battleaxe) sticks out from a nearby stump.



GETTING STARTED

Each player needs a starting character to play through this adventure. While you can adapt it for use with novice characters, the horror of the situation is better felt with characters just starting out. Since the characters are expected to be guests, have the players come up with the reasons their characters are here. Look to professions for inspiration. For example, a soldier might be en route to a battlefield or have come back from one. A scholar might be in the area to conduct research in the field. A criminal might be on the run.

It's not necessary for the characters to know one another when the adventure begins. In fact, it's better if they don't, as it gives the players an opportunity to build their relationships organically. If the characters do not know each other, be sure to give the players time to introduce their characters and roleplay them.

MULTIPLE CHARACTERS

If you'd like, you can have each player run two or more characters at the same time. Doing so means you don't have to pull as many punches and can destroy them without fear of alienating the players too much. This said, keep the number of starting characters to ten or less.

DEATH FOR DINNER

The adventure begins after sunset, around 7:30 PM, when Bester announces that dinner is served. Heaped in a buffet on the main table are a variety of meats, cheeses, and breads. Guests who have paid for a noble room have their meals included in their fee, while other guests can get a plate and a cup for 1 cp. Use this scene to let players introduce their characters and establish relationships between everyone.

A few minutes later, Ananda notices Horvath has not yet come down from his room. Concerned, she asks one of the player characters to go upstairs to rouse Horvath. There's no answer to knocks or shouting. Bashing down the door requires a success on a Strength challenge roll. A character with lock picks can unlock the door automatically.

Opening the door reveals a naked Horvath lying on the bed with his eyes closed. Examining the body reveals he's dead, and anyone with a profession related to medicine or healing can tell he's been dead for nearly 24 hours.

Examining the contents of the room reveals personal effects placed on the table. Outside of 1d6 cp, the only thing of note or value is a rough-hewn, bear-pelt satchel covered in strange mystic markings. Any character that can read can make out the words as being some sort of incantation. A character with a profession related to magic can tell that the incantation requires a blood sacrifice.

After the characters have had a chance to look around, Horvath's body sits up and his eyes snap open, shining with green light. The corpse then speaks, saying "I... hunger."

"I smell your blood, taste your flesh. Death comes for you, carried by my children that I have sent to end you. They come for you, come to end your miserable mortal lives."

Horvath's corpse, now a **zombie** (without Zombie Infection), stands up and attacks the nearest living creature. Be sure to describe any successes the zombie gets on its attack rolls as bites. Once he is dispatched, have bitten characters make Strength challenge rolls with 1 bane. There's no effect on a failure or a success, other than to raise the tension.

THE SIEGE

Moments after Horvath's corpse becomes a zombie, all characters downstairs hear noises coming from outside. Characters can see through the windows dozens of human-shaped shadows shambling out from the trees and gathering on the road to block it, while even more mill about outside the building.

Horvath attacks around 8 o'clock and the sun rises around 6 o'clock the next morning. The siege is broken down into five 2-hour blocks called "siege rounds." These turns abstract the adventure to keep the game moving forward. Assume that during these periods there's small breaches and repairs, along with other minor activities going on during the siege.

Each siege round has three phases:

- Siege activities
- Unexpected events
- Encounter resolution

FATIGUE

At the end of each siege round, each character must make a Strength challenge roll. On a failure, the character becomes fatigued until he or she uses the rest activity (see below) or completes a rest.

SIEGE ACTIVITIES

Each player character can take one siege action during the siege activities phase. Secondary characters don't take siege actions; instead, they help the player characters by granting boons to rolls. A secondary character can grant 1 boon per siege round on any rolls made on a siege activity. The most likely activities are described below, but can vary depending on a player's creativity.

BOLSTER DEFENSES

The characters attempt to fortify the inn. Have the players describe what their characters are doing to bolster the defenses and then call for a challenge roll using the most likely attribute. Grant boons or impose banes as you see fit based on the activity attempted. Note the number of successes and failures. For each success, reduce the threat rating during the encounter resolution phase by 1 (minimum 0). For each failure, increase the threat rating by 1 (maximum 4). The effects of bolstering defenses last for 1 siege round.

IMPROVISE THE RITUAL

If the characters search Horvath's belongings, they find a ritual and the materials needed to perform it. While the full ritual died with him, the characters have enough information to perform a lesser version to protect the inn's inhabitants.

Anyone can attempt to perform the ritual, but the ritual cannot be performed more than once per siege round.

Blood Sacrifice: To perform the ritual, the caster must make an offering of blood. The caster can take the blood from herself or from another creature. A creature that takes 1 damage or more for the blood sacrifice provides enough blood to perform the ritual.

Time: It takes the entire siege round for a character to perform the ritual.

Challenge Roll: At the end of the siege round, the performer must make a Will challenge roll. The character makes the roll with 1 boon if he or she has a profession related to the Old Faith. If the performer took the blood sacrifice from a different character, the performer makes the roll with 2 bane. Secondary characters cannot assist on this roll.

On a success, the characters remove one or more creatures from those attacking during the encounter resolution phase. Remove one creature of your choice plus an additional creature for each 1 damage sacrificed in blood.

REST

Any character can spend the siege round resting and recuperating. If a resting character is fatigued, he or she removes the affliction at the end of the siege round.

RECOVER

Any character can spend a siege round recovering. A character must have help from a secondary character to do so, but a character can only benefit from one secondary character per turn. At the end of the siege round, the recovering character heals 1d3 damage.

SUPPLY RUN

Certain activities might be rendered impossible by the results of rolling on the Unexpected Events table. A character can make these activities available again by going on a supply run, which is described in the event. Success allows the activity to be chosen again and each additional success grants 1 boon to a roll to perform that activity during the next siege round.

UNEXPECTED EVENTS PHASE

After the siege activities, roll a d20 and find the result on the following table. Alternatively, you can choose a result from this table that fits with what happened during the previous phase.

UNEXPECTED EVENTS

d20	Event
1	The Demon Lord Laughs. Roll on this table twice and use both results. If you roll a 1 again, reroll until you get a number other than 1.
2	A Surge of Death. Increase the threat rating during the encounter resolution phase by 2 (maximum 4).
3	Everything's Nailed to the Wall. Characters cannot perform the bolster defenses activity. A character can regain this activity by making a supply run. A character must run outside to the woodshed to gather wood and bring it back. The character must make a Strength challenge roll. On a success, the group regains the bolster defenses activity. On a failure, the character takes 1d6 damage and comes back empty-handed.
4	The Bag Is Empty. Characters cannot perform the improvise the ritual activity. A character can regain this activity by making a supply run. A character must sneak outside to gather special herbs growing near the inn. The character must make an Agility challenge roll. On a success, the group regains the improvise the ritual activity. On a failure, the character takes 1d6 damage and comes back empty-handed.
5	The Hearth Dies. The fire in the fireplace sputters and dies. The cold of night settling into the inn imposes 1 bane on all challenge rolls made to perform siege activities. A character can end this effect by making a supply run, slipping outside to the woodshed to gather wood and bring it back. The character must make a Strength challenge roll. On a success, this effect ends. On a failure, the character takes 1d6 damage and comes back empty-handed.
6	Banging on the Walls. The din of the zombie horde makes it impossible for anyone to rest. The effects of any rest activity are negated for this siege round.
7	An Undead Ebb. Decrease the threat rating during the encounter resolution phase by 1 (minimum 0).
8	You've Got Red on You. Ananda reveals she was bitten. A success on an Intellect challenge roll with 1 bane reveals that no plague was spread through the bite.
9	Where Has the Rum Gone? The main hall runs out of beer and spirits. Characters can no longer choose the recover activity. A character can regain this activity by making a supply run. A character must sneak outside to get more booze from the woodshed. The character must make an Agility challenge roll. On a success, the group regains the recover activity. On a failure, the character takes 1d6 damage and comes back empty-handed.
10	That Looked Like It Was Secure. Increase the threat rating during the next encounter resolution phase by 1 (maximum 4).
11	Echoes of Glory. Gelda gets caught up in visions of her glory years as a mercenary. She fetches her warhammer and charges for the front door to take the fight to the undead. The characters can talk her out of it with a success on an Intellect challenge roll made with 1 bane, or knock her out until the end of the siege round with a success on a Strength challenge roll. If she is not stopped, she dies in a spectacularly messy fashion, but reduces the threat rating during the encounter resolution phase by 2 (minimum 0). If this event has happened already, treat it as if you rolled a 7.
12	The Old Gods Intervene. The character with the highest Will score gains one casting of a rank 0 Nature or Primal spell of your choice.

13 **And Then the Rains Came.** A storm kicks up as the undead make their next push. All attack rolls during the next encounter resolution phase are made with 1 bane.

14 **It's Just the Gas.** A strange green gas, released from one of the undead, wafts into the inn, filling everyone's minds with visions of Old Nock. Each character in the inn must get a success on a Will challenge roll or gain 1 Insanity.

15 **The Spirit of Horvath Returns.** Horvath's spirit returns from the grave to assist the characters. He becomes another NPC that can aid in bolstering defenses and recovering. He grants 2 two boons to rolls made to take the improvise the ritual activity, though he cannot recall the full ritual in his spirit state.

16 **Bester Runs Down.** Bester was caught while making a run to the woodshed for supplies. He's unavailable to assist until he's recovered. A character can make a supply run to fetch him by making an Agility challenge roll with 1 bane. On a success, Bester is brought back to the inn. On a failure, or if no one makes a supply run during the next turn, Bester is torn to pieces. If this event has happened already, treat it as if you rolled a 2.

17 **Thunder Shakes the Foundation.** The inn shakes. Each character must get a success on an Agility challenge roll or take 1 damage from being struck by falling debris. No secondary characters can provide aid during the next siege round.

18 **A Dramatic Exit.** One of the secondary characters you choose is pulled through a window and killed in a horrible, graphic fashion. If no secondary characters remain, treat this result as if you rolled a 2.

19 **I Said the Damn Words!** The next time a character attempts the improvise the ritual activity, the character makes the roll with 3 banes.

20 **All's Quiet.** Nothing happens.

ENCOUNTER RESOLUTION PHASE

The final phase of the siege round reveals what, if anything, manages to slip past the characters' defenses. Each encounter has a threat rating, which is a number between 0 and 4. Each encounter starts at threat rating 2 and might increase or decrease depending on the choices the characters make and unexpected events. Use the following chart to determine what slips into the inn and attacks. Then, resolve the combat against the intruders as normal. Once the characters defeat the creatures in the encounter, proceed with the next siege round. If the characters are killed or flee the inn, the adventure either ends or you can resolve the fleeing characters' attempts to escape as you choose.

SIEGE ENCOUNTERS

Threat Rating	Creatures
0	None
1	1d3 animated corpses
2	1d6 animated corpses and 1 zombie
3	1d6 + 3 animated corpses and 1d3 zombies
4	1d6 zombies and 1 corpse flower (see right)

CORPSE FLOWER

Corpses, black and bloated, lurch across the ground, their foul bodies leaking putrid slime from festering craters and fissures in their flesh. Green mist wafts from their rotten meat, choking the air with their poisonous filth.

CORPSE FLOWER

DIFFICULTY 5

Size 1 horrifying undead

Perception 5 (-5); sightless

Defense 8; **Health** 10; **Insanity** —; **Corruption** 4

Strength 10 (+0), **Agility** 8 (-2), **Intellect** —, **Will** 15 (+5)

Speed 6

Immune damage from cold, disease, and poison; gaining Insanity; asleep, blinded, charmed, dazed, deafened, diseased, fatigued, frightened, poisoned, stunned

Putrid Explosion When a corpse flower becomes incapacitated, it explodes, releasing a cloud of foul gas that spreads through a sphere with a 2-yard radius centered on a point in its space and dissipates at the end of the round. The gas partially obscures the area. Each living, breathing creature in the area when the gas appears or that enters it must make a Strength challenge roll with 1 bane. On a failure, the creature takes 1d6 damage and becomes poisoned for 1 minute. In addition, a creature that takes this damage must get a success on a Will challenge roll or gain 1 Insanity.

ATTACK OPTIONS

Fist (melee) +0 (1d6 + 1)

CONCLUSION

Any characters who survive the fifth siege round peek through the barricades to see the undead withdrawing into the woods, their rotting backs awash in the orange pink of the day's first light. The surviving characters have formed into a level 1 group.

If the new group ventures into the forest after the undead, they eventually find a clearing littered with insensate corpses and empty pits from which they dug themselves free. In the center stands Old Nock, who is dormant until nightfall. If the characters do anything to the tree, however, Old Nock awakens, and a horrifying dryad comes forth to attack. More than capable of killing the characters herself, she calls upon the undead to aid her, most likely making short work of the would-be heroes.

Of course, the characters might think better of heading into an undead-infested forest and set out for a safer harbor instead. The characters could return to the inn at some future point, better equipped, and hardened by adventure and experience, to put an end to Old Nock, or not, as you decide.

