

Shades and Echoes

a Dark Below supplement

by Anna Landin

The Dark Below is a vast, unknowable place. No maps of it exist, no catalogue of its mysteries has ever been made. Only those who venture through it may ever learn a fraction of its secrets. To guide anyone through that place is to build it out of scraps and fragments, hearsay cobbled together into fact, each step on the path laid down as you go.

This supplement exists to help Guides answer that important question: How do you find a path through the Dark? It will provide some guidance for which overall tone and flavour your journey through the Dark might have, as well as supply a list of places, threats and people your Exiles might encounter along the way.

Facets of the Dark

There is more than one way to build out the Dark Below, and which way suits you and the other players best will vary. Before you begin, speak to the other players about tone and atmosphere, and find out which topics and content is off the table. Consider, also, the types of Exiles they choose to play. This will help you adjust the challenges you create for them, and make something that feels more personal.

To prepare for a game, you do not need to draw out a precise and meticulous map for the Exiles to uncover. It is enough to prepare a list of possible places in Below, and decide where they are as the Exiles progress through the Dark. Rooms can have multiple exits, and it does not matter if they go left or right: you can simply slot in an appropriate space where you feel like it fits.

While you can construct the Dark however it suits you and your fellow players, it can be helpful to decide on the overall type of challenges you will put them through. Here are a few variants to consider:

The Puzzle Labyrinth

Ancient halls and locked doors, counterweights and living statues. Turning pillars and pressure plates redirecting the flow of water or air, lighting ancient braziers to illuminate a new doorway, altering the paths of light and shadow to reveal the truth. Slot the puzzle pieces of this labyrinth together, defend yourself against what threats might lurk within it, and reveal the hidden paths to the Exile's Gate.

This variant places emphasis on riddles and mysteries, on exploring the spaces the Exiles find, and traversing their strange geography, and any spookiness and horror is of lesser importance.

Points of inspiration: The Legend of Zelda, Rime, old adventure games.

The Nightmare Engine

This place is filled with twisting, choking vines, shadows that move even when you don't, creatures without faces who speak with the voices of your friends. You are haunted by strange noises, a siren's song sung from some place lost in shadow. Your own senses might fail you, and strange things tug on your soul.

This variant brings to bear the more terrifying aspects of the Dark Below, and sets out to tell the tale of the Exiles' journey as though it were a ghost story.

Points of inspiration: Hollow Knight, Return to Oz, Bloodborne.

The Dungeon Crawler

Dark rooms and bottomless pits bar the Exiles' path, and every darkened corridor might hide spring-loaded spikes, swinging axes or lumbering ogres. Every shadow might hide a treasure or a terror - and be sure to keep your matches close, or else you might be eaten by a grue.

This variant leans into the classic dungeon crawler elements, where each step is one that lands on treacherous ground, and around each corner a new trap or a new foe awaits.

Points of inspiration: Zork, AD&D, old school dungeon crawlers.

In the rest of this supplement, you will find lists divided by type, each with a name, a brief description and suggested challenges or things that can be found through them.

The challenges will be described, followed by a number in parenthesis - like so: (6). The number is the suggested difficulty level.

Places in the Dark

Strange and twisting, dreaming and half-real, the Dark Below spreads out in every direction. There are no maps but for that which your Exiles draw as they discover it, charting their course towards the Exile's Gate. Between them and the light of freedom, they will discover a wealth of shadowed rooms and passages. Below is a list of places to traverse, should you need the inspiration.

The Hall of Icons

A long, wide hall with a ceiling that arcs into shadow. The broad, open path in the center is flanked by towering statues, carved out of a pale, smooth material: ivory, perhaps, or polished marble. The figures are amazingly lifelike, and out of the corner of your eyes, you could swear you see them moving. In the distant gloom, you can see the door(s) leading away from here.

Challenges: *Be silent, they can hear you.* Make your way through the hall quietly (6), or defend yourself from the awakened statues (9).

Garden of Glass

A delicate garden of translucent flowers and curling vines. The fragile petals seem to glow from within, a shifting illumination in blue and lavender, warm orange and pale yellow - a rare light in this darkness. A faint hum fills this place, rhythmic like breathing. Don't the flowers smell sweet?

Challenges: *Some petals hide thorns.* Resist the urge to pluck a flower, or pick a flower without pricking your fingers on the thorns (6), resist the strange soporific poison flooding your system, threatening to put you to sleep (9).

The Maze of Doors

You enter a room. There are two doors ahead of you. You enter a room. There are three doors ahead of you. You enter a room. There are four doors ahead of you, and one behind. You enter a room, there are two doors - one ahead and one behind. You walk through a door. You walk through a door. You walk through a door.

... there are no doors behind you.

Challenges: *This is a house of many doors.* Standing before two doors, you must choose the correct one to finally escape (6), having gotten lost in the labyrinth, you must find your way back before it swallows you whole (9).

Wayside Shrine

A crude face carved into the wall of an alcove, its features weathered and strange. You cannot tell if it is smiling or weeping, and the hands that carved it could not have been from the City from which you came. Below it is a small ledge, covered in scattered offerings and the waxy remains of old candles.

Challenges: *Count your blessings.* Make an offering to this unnamed god, so that they might guide your way (6).

The Craftsman's Workshop

Tools lie scattered over workbenches; schematics are pinned to the wall, dog-eared and peeling; half a dozen unfinished works lie where they were abandoned. Someone of great skill once laboured in this place, and you can see the echoes of the life they left behind.

Challenges: *Some things have a life of their own.* Avoid awakening the craftsman's works (6), break free of their grasp or avoid their relentless attacks (9).

The Serpentine Pool

A set of serpentine statues surrounds a broad, circular pool, and water pours from their open jaws. A faint ripple travels across the water, as though something is moving underneath it, and the whole room is lit by a faint glow. The only exit seems to be the one through which you entered.

Challenges: *Still waters run deep.* Stop the flow of water and reveal pathway down below, hidden at the bottom of the pool (6).

Ouroborous Steps

Worn smooth by the tread of countless feet, these stairs spiral into the shadows, turning in on themselves. Moss and lichen cover this place, the glowing points of bioluminescent fungus like little stars in the dark. Carvings flow over the ancient stone walls, rising and falling like waves.

... You should have reached the end by now.

Challenges: *You have been here before.* The carvings on the wall form words; to unravel this space, you must speak them aloud (9).

Last Stop, Nowhere

Strands of tangled vines and creepers curl across the pillars of this abandoned platform, and the railway tracks run into the unseen dark, rusted and warped. The station clock creaks in the wind, forever stopped, and the ticket booth lies empty.

Challenges: *None of these places feel like home.* Follow the tracks into the dark (6), buy a ticket for the last train (9).

Threats of the Below

Not every dangerous thing in the world Below is held in its walls and chambers; some stir restless all around and roam the shadows untethered. The following is a list of threats and dangers that can be found anywhere in the Dark Below to put in the path of your Exiles.

Shadow-hounds

Shaped of living shadow, with eyes like searing lanterns, these hounds hunt as well in the Dark as their corporeal brethren do in the light above. Their ghastly howls and the skittering sound of their heavy claws will freeze the marrow of even the bravest Exile. Even the sturdiest shelter will not hide you: they can pass through walls.

Challenges: *You cannot outrun their hunger.* Throw the hounds off the scent (6), defend yourself against the pack (9).

Makeshift Automata

A strange, lopsided creature, cobbled together from pieces of old, rusted machinery. It totters on bent and bowing legs, each longer than the other, and sways like a ship in a storm. As it stumbles through the world, it is accompanied by the cacophony of metal grinding on metal, the whispering babble of shears snapping shut.

Challenges: *Who would build such a thing? Why would such a thing build itself?* Cause it to stumble and trip (6), shatter its machine-heart core (9)

Word-Eaters

Though their true form is faceless, blank like clay, they will come to you in the guise of people you know. They will smile familiar smiles, speak in voices you are fond of, and when you are well and truly tangled up, they will steal a word right out of your mouth - leaving nothing but absence in its wake. Try as you might, that word is gone and lost forever.

Challenges: *You can speak only silence.* Hold on to your words and answer no questions (6), steal your word back (9).

Host of Rooks

You hear them long before you see them, the murmur of a hundred black wings, the hungry cries of a hundred ragged beaks. Coal-black eyes glitter in the dark above you, needle-sharp talons scythe at you, and their forms blot out the world around you.

Challenges: *Their voices are calling your name.* Hide from the hungry host (6), scatter the birds (9).

Gone Astray

You turn your head to speak to your fellow Exile, only to find they are no longer there. You look around you, but they are nowhere to be seen. You reach out for one of your other companions - and where you thought to find their hand, you find nothing at all. One by one, your fellow Exiles are vanishing, scattering into the shadows.

Challenges: ... *and now, you are alone.* Find your fellow Exiles again (6), break through the illusion and confront its source (9).

Curse-Traps

Though more durable than material goods, magic, too, grows old. And when it does, it grows volatile. The world Below hides many an old curse, lingering in dusty stones or lurking in the pages of forgotten tomes. Touch one carelessly, and it will burn your fingers - or freeze them, or turn them into someone else's fingers.

Challenges: *The embers still glow.* Avoid triggering the old traps (6), shield yourself from the nastiest consequences of a triggered curse (9).

Haunt-moth Swarm

The flutter of their wings blooms like silence in the dark, great big soft things that envelop you in a cloud of hushed motion. These moths are immense, the span of their powdery wings the width of a human head - which is precisely what they resemble when spread open. Wide-eyed faces stare back at you, their mouths moving around whispered, haunting words.

Challenges: *These are faces known and lost.* Cover your eyes and ears to block out the call of the moths (6), resist the urge to answer the whispers of these faces from your past (9).

Chimeric Echo

Mask cracked like a dropped tea-cup and robes ragged and torn, this creature might once have been one of the Chimeric Magistrates. What terrible crime must have been committed for them to Exile one of their own, you dare not think about - but though they may have lost their high stature, they have lost nothing in power: their commands still twist the world around them to their liking.

Challenges: *They've got ways to move you.* Resist the changes this Magistrate in Exile would impose on you (6), rip the mask from the terrible beast (9).

Residents of the Dark

The Exiles you guide are not the first to be sent into the Dark. Many others have walked these roads before them - and some walk them still, lost and lonely, eking out survival in these twisting tunnels. Some of them offer shelter, some of them can offer knowledge of the path ahead of you, and some of them carry items that might be claimed by your Exiles. To gain these items and that knowledge, the Exiles may need to pass a challenge of a difficulty level chosen by the Guide.

Use these characters as a chance for your Exiles to rest, catch their breath in a safer space, and for the players to roleplay. Some of these characters can be turned into additional threats, if that suits your game better.

These entries are written using they/them pronouns - you may choose to give them any pronouns you wish when you use them in your game.

The Voice of Authority

Tall and bulky, this Exile wears the dark, heavy robes of a Magisterial adjutant and carries a sturdy lantern. Though their voice is quiet, it demands attention, and you can't help but listen to their stern words. Their air of authority makes you believe they might know more about what lies ahead than they are telling you.

Items/knowledge: lantern, robes of authority, knowledge of the next region of the Dark.

The Arcanist

Strange glyphs glow on the skin of this Exile, marking ancient rituals carried in their blood. They are dressed in long, rustling layers of cloth, and their neck is weighed down by amulets to ward off the ills of this harrowing place. Curiously, they seem to have little urge to escape the Dark - content to stay here, and study the strange magics that call this place home.

Items/knowledge: arcane seals and spells, can break curses (will require a challenge-roll).

The Kind Soul

This soft, round Exile has found a makeshift shelter in the Below, huddled by a comforting firelight. They are happy to welcome you into the light, and share what meagre supplies they have - but unlike you, they seem to have little urge to leave this place. It is a perilous path that lies between this little shelter and the Exile's Gate, and this kind soul might attempt to stop you from going at all - if only to keep you safe.

Items/knowledge: food, shelter for the night, a little light.

The Blade

A thin, wiry Exile, their clothing ragged and their manner skittish; their eyes wide and haunted. They are dragging behind them an ancient and ornate sword, clinging to the hilt like a drowning-victim to a piece of flotsam. Though reticent to tell you where the sword is from, to your eyes, it looks looted from one of the many tombs down here.

Items/knowledge: a sword, directions to the tombs of the ancients

The Lost Magistrate

When first you see them looming out of the Dark, Magistrate's mask and vestments fading into view, you are gripped with fear - have you been turned around, your wandering feet led back to the City somehow? But when they speak, it is with a gentle voice, and no sinister force twists the ground upon which they walk.

Items/knowledge: a writ of passage, a spell of terrifying power, a fundamental change

Symphosius

Even in the Dark Below, Symphosius cuts a strange figure. They are a towering, regal creature, like a panther carved out of polished obsidian, with curving wings on their back and a bright gold seal on their forehead. They speak in riddles, and are fond of keeping secrets for their own amusement. If they were ever an Exile, or if they were born down here, they'll never tell. To get any answer at all, you must solve their riddles.

Items/knowledge: clues to some great secret of the Below, the true name of something dangerous

The Ghost

Wispy and unravelling, like too much thread pulled from too old a tapestry, this Exile-in-spirit failed to reach the Exile's Gate. Though they failed, in death they see more clearly than in life, and can see where they went wrong.

Items/knowledge: a precious keepsake, a tinderbox, a specter's warning

The Strays

Lanky and coltish, this pair of adolescents still carry themselves like street urchins, though they are far from their old streets. They're shifty-eyed and keep their distance, their hands on their makeshift weapons, and refuse to come closer. Their trust has to be earned.

Items/knowledge: crude knives, a handful of coins, the path to a safe hideout.

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