

The Dark Below

The only way out is through. Can you make it through the Dark?

You were exiled from the City. Whatever you once were, whatever life you lived before, it has been forever cut off as the gates slam shut behind you. Right now, you are but one of the lost in these catacombs, desperately searching for that one, flickering light of hope:

Somewhere down here in the dark, they say there is a way out.

You are not the first nor the last to be exiled, and you are not alone down here. You can work together with your fellow exiles, or you can conspire against them, but know this - it is a long, hard road to walk alone.

Welcome to **The Dark Below**, a game about exploring dark and hidden spaces, searching for something important, and making do with what you have on hand.

It draws inspiration from such sources as Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, the dungeons of the *Legend of Zelda*-series, the nightmare city of Yharnam in From Software's *Bloodborne* and the dreamscape world of *Return to Oz*, the melancholy exploration of *Hollow Knight*, and the old Infocom game *Zork*.

Traversing the Dark Below

As you make your way through the dark, twisting paths of your exile, searching for a way out, one of you will be the **Guide**, and the rest of you will be **Exiles**. To play, you will need index cards or something like them for each Exile, a twelve-sided die to roll, and something on which to draw a map.

This is a harrowing journey through a dark and dangerous place, and you are telling a story together. The dice are merely there as a tool of resolution.

Collaborate. Challenge yourselves. Explore.

Beginning your Journey

To begin your path through the Dark, you must first decide on the tone of the game. Do you wish to test your wits with intricate puzzles? Do you want to explore a twisting dreamscape together? Do you wish to be scared, or mystified? Talk through what you want from the game, and take care to adjust the tone and content to a level all players can agree on.

Then, choose which roles you wish to play; **Guide** or **Exile**. The Guide should familiarise themselves with the contents in the section called **A Guide to the Dark**, and the Exiles should refer to the **Making an Exile**-section as they create their characters.

Playing the Guide, your task is to lay down the path and its challenges, and give the Exiles a chance to make their escape. Describe the world Below, and hide their hope of escape around the next corner. You have the final word how difficult any given challenge will be, but when the Exiles make their arguments, you should hear them out fairly.

Playing an Exile, you must make your way through the Dark, overcome the obstacles and challenges that lie between you and freedom - and make sure that you do not get lost in the

Dark. When faced with a challenge, consider if anything you know, or anything you carry, might help you overcome it. State your case to the Guide and explain how you think it helps your circumstances. If your argument holds water, it will decide how difficult the challenge is to overcome.

On your way through the Dark, try to embody the roles you have been given.

Through the Dark

On your path, you will face challenges together and attempt to overcome them. As you make your way through the Dark, take the time to explore the places you find, and learn about what lies within them. Get to know your fellow Exiles.

During play, the Exiles should keep a record of where they are and where they have been in the form of a **map**. You may choose one person to be the cartographer, or take turns drawing it as you explore. The map does not need to be tidy or neat - you are drawing this in the Dark. It is there to tell you where you have been, and might help lead you back to the path if you find yourself wandering.

The End of a Journey.

There are two ways for the game to end. The Exiles might reach that rumoured way out through the Exile's Gate, and escape the Dark - or they may burn all of their matches and, failing their final challenge, be lost and let the Dark swallow them whole.

Should an Exile be lost before they reach the Gate, their game does not have to be over: they can choose to remain at the table, and instead help the Guide elaborate on the journey through the Dark.

Once they pass through the Exile's Gate, they are free, their harrowing journey over. Work together to describe what happens to them.

[You are walking this path together, so you must take care of each other. The Dark can be frightening, and an Exile's journey might end abruptly. Be aware of where your limits are, and do not push past them recklessly. Mind how you go, take breaks when you need them, and stop before it gets too much.]

Challenges

When the Exiles find themselves facing a challenge, the Guide will tell the Exiles what it is, and set a difficulty level for the challenge. The Exile meeting the challenge then rolls their twelve-sided die, and to succeed, they must either meet or roll above the difficulty level.

How hard any given challenge will be is variable. If an Exile has a skill, a possession or some other circumstance working in their favour, the challenge will be easier. Likewise, if an Exile takes on a challenge where none of their skills apply, or where the circumstances are working against them, the difficulty increases. A locked door is a far easier challenge for a skilled thief, and an arcane riddle is far harder for someone who does not speak the language of magic.

Anything that is written on your character sheet can be used, if circumstances allow, to meet a challenge.

A challenge's difficulty can be anywhere between 1 and 12, but as a general guideline, an average challenge starts at 6, and a hard challenge at 9.

Using an object

Should the Exile choose to use the object they carry to overcome a challenge, that object is used up - emptied, broken, discarded or lost - and must be crossed off their index card. New objects may be found or acquired while journeying through the Dark, and should be added to the character sheet when you pick it up.

Aid or Hinder

Exiles may aid or hinder each other. To aid someone, say how you work together to meet a challenge, and the difficulty will decrease. To hinder someone, say how your actions hinder the efforts of the one attempting the challenge, and the difficulty will increase as a result.

Hindering someone from succeeding can happen for a number of reasons: sometimes it can be intentional sabotage, and sometimes it can be an accident brought on by your current condition. If your Exile is shaky and weak, for example, their attempt to help lift something heavy might fail.

Advantage and Disadvantage

When taking on a challenge, as long as you meet or roll above the difficulty, you succeed - and if you roll below it, you fail. However, there are two die results that have a special impact on the fiction.

Rolling a 12 means two things: you get to roll the next challenge with advantage (roll twice, take the highest result), and if you used an object to impact the difficulty-rating, that object is not used up, but remains on your sheet to be used again.

Rolling a 1 means you choose one: you roll the next challenge at a disadvantage (roll twice, take the lowest result), or you must cross out a match on your character sheet.

Lighting Matches

There is no forgiveness for the Exiled, but there is a kind of mercy. As they pass through the gates and into the Dark, they are given the last gift the chimeric city will ever grant them - three matches, and the means to light them. It's a long, dark road, but you will carry a little light with you.

The matches are your second chances. Should you face a challenge that is too much for you, you may spend the light of one match - crossing it out on your index card - to overcome it, succeeding automatically. You can do so **after** they learn the difficulty of a challenge, but **before** the roll is made. If you roll the die, you must stand by the result. Spending a match can never gain you the benefits of rolling a 12 on your die, so choose wisely when you spend your matches.

As stated, you can choose to lose a match when you roll a 1 on a challenge roll.

But be careful: once you burn the last match, you're out of second chances. Each match counts: after the **last match** has been spent, you keep playing until **the next time you fail a challenge**. At that point, your character is lost. It is up to you to describe how.

The Consequences of Your Actions

This game does not measure an Exile's condition in the number of wounds or abstract health points, but rather traces the consequences in the fiction. A failed roll results in an inability to move forward, or in a change of circumstances or condition of the world or the Exile. If you can't unlock a door, you must find another way. If you burn your hands trying to put out a fire, you will find it harder to do things that require the use of your hands - such as picking locks.

Your journey through the Dark will change you. Any such changes should be added to your character sheet, as they will impact the difficulty of the challenges ahead. The more you fail, the harder this gets - until all that lies between you and the Dark is one more mistake.

The Making of an Exile

Your home is no longer your home - you have been cast out, exiled from the city, and as the gates slam shut behind you, you are in the Dark Below - the warren of tunnels, caves and ruin that lie like rotting roots beneath the city. All you have is what you carry with you, and the City's last gift of mercy - three matches, and the means to light them.

With them, you must find your way to the promised freedom of the Exile's Gate.

On a blank index card or something similar, write the name of your Exile at the top, then go through and add one each of the following, in order.

Who you were before the Dark:

A guard of the High Houses, a baker of bread, a wise teacher, a nocturnal gravekeeper, a nimble catburglar, a merchant, a godsworn, a mage, a scholar, a weaver of scarves, a traveller, a Magisterial scribe, [a past of your own choosing].

Reasons for exile:

- ... spoke the name of the Obscured Gods (blasphemy)
- ... singing on a day of silence (breaking taboo)
- ... stole from the Chimeric Magistrates (theft)
- ... strayed outdoors on the Day of No Sun. (trespassing)
- ... committed proscribed acts of violence (violence)
- ... ended a life (murder)
- ... learned that which should not be known (espionage)
- ... circulated seditious pamphlets (inciting rebellious ideas)
- ... [a transgression of your own choosing]

A skill you possess:

Quiet feet, a persuasive voice, remarkable strength, nimble fingers, an ancient language, impressive resilience, a quick wit, the basic tenets of magic, [a skill of your own choosing].

A thing you carry:

An ancient book, a container of healing balm, a sewing kit, a small knife, a bottle of oil, a lockpick, a spool of thread, a magnetic rock, a firecracker, a warm blanket, a small length of rope, a flask with something to drink, a magic seal drawn on paper, an inkwell, the true name of something secret, [an object of your own choosing].

At the bottom of your index card, draw three lit matches.

Valdrada, the Chimeric City

*"Thus the traveler, arriving, sees two cities: one erect above the lake,
and the other reflected, upside down"
- Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities*

A place of obtuse rules and esoteric creeds, Valdrada broods over the landscape like the dream of a city. Her winding streets and serpentine walls are striking in their strangeness, her ways sometimes mysterious even to those who know her well.

This place, where what is permitted and what is true changes on the whims of the Chimeric Magistrates and the Obscured Gods, may be a peculiar place to live - but for most, she is not a nightmare. Children play in her streets; weavers and bakers and tailors make their living in the shadows of her temples. Those who break her laws may be punished severely, but for those who remain within her walls, she is a wonder.

This is the place from which you have been exiled: this is the home to where the gates are now shut.

Underneath Valdrada lies her shadowed counterpart: the vast and sprawling roots of the Dark Below - where the exiles and the nightmares go. Those who go into the Dark have only one faint hope: that they may find their way through these uncharted halls to the Exile's Gate.

A Guide to the Dark

Building the Roots of the World

Between the exiles and the final Gate lie a long, twisting path through the dark. As the Guide, it is up to you to lay down the path and its challenges, and give them a chance to make their escape. As you build the warren of paths to the final door, take into account the number of Exiles and their remaining matches, and always be ready to adjust on the fly: the road to freedom is hard, but it should not feel impossible.

They carry hope: let them feel it.

And through all of this, remember that you are their Guide, not their enemy.

Architect of the Below

As the Guide, you embody the Dark and its terrors; ; you hold the key to its doors, the answer to its riddles, and the map to its winding paths. However, you need not know every nook and cranny of the Below; your Exiles will never see it all, and their field of vision is hemmed in by the Dark. You need only map the the narrow path from the City to the Gate.

When creating the Dark Below, remember that it is not simply a web of caves: it is a catacomb, a warren, a labyrinth; and more than anything, it is a dark reflection of the City and the world above. It is locked doors to dark rooms, dead ends, stairs wrapped around crooked houses carved into the living stone, it is winding paths opening up into hidden chambers, it is buried libraries and sealed vaults.

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 the 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.

If you are struggling with constructing the Below, using a generator like watabou's **One Page Dungeon** can be helpful - and don't be afraid to look at other sources of inspiration. Borrow, reference and adapt as necessary.

Threats and Exiles Lost

The exiles are not alone down here. They share these shadowed paths with others like them, and the things that were born in this dark. Old, vicious things, with lamplight eyes and teeth like knives; whispering shades and echoes of things that never were; disembodied laughter chasing itself endlessly down empty hallways; lost saints and silenced gods; quiet creeping things that have never seen the sun.

However, not everything in the Below works against the Exiles. Not everything they meet will be a threat, and not every place is unwelcoming. There are spaces here to catch your breath, and others who have been lost before, who might offer shelter to the travellers.

When you add threats, challenges and even friendly faces to the Dark Below, consider what you know about your Exiles, and try to build off of what they have told you about themselves. You may wish to challenge a timid scholar in a different way than you would a headstrong thief.

Challenge Examples

The Exile's path is a troubled one - but it should be one with the promise of hope at the end. They may get lost, they may die before they reach their goal, but it should not feel impossible from the outset. When playing the Guide, you should set your number of challenges accordingly. The Exiles should not be able to buy their way out of every challenge with a match - but the number of challenges should not be insurmountable either. As a rule of thumb, with four Exiles, you should set at least twenty challenges.

In the world Below, a challenge is not just a locked door or a monster. It can be anything that might slow down, hinder or divert the Exile's path to freedom. A shifting illusion, a thick fog filling a room, a riddle or a door that leads nowhere - anything that might prevent the Exiles from moving forward. It is up to the Guide to choose appropriate challenges for the Exiles, and be prepared to adapt them.

An average challenge starts at 6, and a tough one at 9. Challenges may fall above, below or between these estimates; what is appropriate will flow from the fiction, and then be adjusted as the Exiles argue their case.

Average challenges (difficulty: 6)

A blocked tunnel, climbing over fallen stones, making it safely down a steep incline, choosing between two paths, lifting something heavy, valiantly running away from a monster, etc.

Tough challenges (difficulty: 9+)

deciphering ancient runes, picking locks, disarming a trap, outwitting the denizens of the tunnels, sneaking past something quietly, fighting someone or something, solving riddles, etc.

Continuous Play

The Dark Below is a dangerous place, and the Exiles are travelling light. With only three matches at hand, an Exile may very easily be permanently lost down these dark tunnels. It is very possible that only one of the Exiles reach the Gate - or that none of them do. And should they reach the Gate, they will escape and leave the Dark behind.

Should you wish to keep playing even after that, you can. Those players whose Exiles have been lost in the dark before the Gate is reached can remain at the table, and help the Guide elaborate on the journey through the Dark - and should the game end with all players lost, you may hand out a new set of index cards, create new Exiles, and start over again from the City.

Keep the map you've drawn. It's a record of where you have been, and what you know of the Dark. Give someone else a turn at playing the Guide, and let the player who was your Guide be an Exile this time. When you've done so, you start afresh from the City and venture into the Dark again. There are many paths to the Exile's Gate, and you do not have to re-tread old steps.

As you go, fill in the new path on the old map you kept. Some of it might overlap with where you've been before, but a lot of it won't. Even when it does, you might face new challenges: you are different people now.

There is no way to know all of the Dark Below, but for every match lit in that darkness, you will learn a little more.

Acknowledgements

The Dark Below was written for The End Jam, hosted by Dylan Grinder/@Anarisis. It is my very first attempt at writing a dungeon crawler, and is an experiment in a style of game I rarely play. It has been an interesting space to explore, and I will be returning both to this game and to the setting, to expand on it further.

Its tone and aesthetic is inspired by various sources, some of which are listed in the intro, and many more I'm sure I have forgotten but which still underpin my sense of aesthetics. The act of drawing the map of the Dark as you discover it is a call-back to a childhood spent meticulously mapping videogames by hand, before such resources could be found online.

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Version history:

v 1.2 (january 2020):

- restructured the PDF for clarity and ease of reference
- changed the headings of some sections
- added a separate Quick Reference Sheet for use during play
- rewrote parts of Traversing the Dark and A Guide to the Dark to add more advice on how to set up and prepare for a game.
- added a list of touchstones to use as inspiration
- first playtesters credited in acknowledgements

v 1.2.1 (february 2020):

- minor clarification of dice mechanic, clearing up a small contradiction in