

TRICK OR TREAT



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ARCANA

1 LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Hannah Rose

MONSTERS

2 HUNTING A MYTH

Celeste Conowitch
Cryptids in your campaign

MONSTERS NPCs

10 THE FIENDISH REGULARS

Banana Chan
What do they do in the shadows? Stuff no one else wants to do.

ADVENTURES PUZZLES

17 PUZZLING OUT THE DEVIL

Sharang Biswas
A diabolical puzzle-based adventure for characters of any level

42 RESOURCES

ISSUE 21  OCTOBER 2022

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

This month's issue of *ARCADIA* is accompanied by a new resource: [a guide to using safety tools in your games](#). Some individual *ARCADIA* articles already include links to safety tools—systems to help everyone at the table have a good time and handle potentially disturbing or upsetting themes with care—but James and I thought it'd be nice to have a resource of our own for the MCDM community.

We reached out to *ARCADIA* consultant and author [Sally Tamarkin](#), as well as gaming and psychology experts [Colette Brown, LMSW](#) and [Sarah Hayes, PsyD](#), to create a “toolkit” of TTRPG safety tools, with guidance for using them with your group. One of my favorite tools is a checklist with topics for everyone to mark with their comfort level, so we made one of those, too! You can find both in the Resources section at the end of this issue (and future issues, too).

Like everything else we make, we want the options and suggestions in this safety toolkit to be easy to add to your game, whether you're playing with friends of two decades or people who have only just met each other. And, like everything else we make, you don't have to use them, but we hope you'll check them out and see if there's something you want to try out.

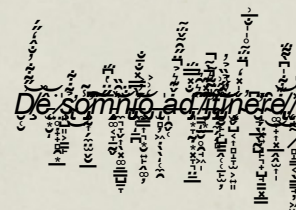
Honestly, I was hesitant when I first considered using safety tools for a casual one-shot. “Do I *have* to go to the trouble?” I thought to myself. “Will the players be freaked out by this or mind that I'm asking them to fill this checklist out before our single game session?” In the end, I approached it as casually as I could: “Hey, I'm not planning on any super scary themes or mentions of [particularly heavy topic], but it's a good idea for us to do this anyway.” And it was fine. In fact, it made me

feel more confident about GMing for people I didn't know very well!

Moreover, if you *are* planning on spooky themes, horror elements, or particularly heavy topics, these tools are incredibly useful for making your game scary in all the *right* ways. It's easy to think of safety tools as restrictions—don't mention this, don't touch that—but like any good framework, establishing boundaries creates empowerment and the confidence to explore. And *that* power, that freedom, that trust is what lets us tell the most intense, creepy, and heartrending stories.

This October's *ARCADIA* articles are all delightfully **spooopy** spooky in their own ways. “Hunting a Myth” by [Celeste Conowitch](#) presents four cryptids, along with guidance for weaving cryptids into your stories. Death Worm, yes please (but also oh no). “The Fiendish Regulars” by [Banana Chan](#) brings comedic horror to your game with three “normal” NPCs who each have a unique relationship with the local ruler, despot, or BBEG. And last but not least, “Puzzling Out the Devil” by [Sharang Biswas](#) is a love story wrapped in a curse wrapped in four enigmas—that is, puzzles!

So go forth and dive into the words within these pages. They beckon you—join us in this lush, shadowed, wicked corner of *ARCADIA*.



Hannah Rose
Managing Editor



HUNTING AMYTH

CRYPTIDS IN YOUR CAMPAIGN

by Celeste Conowitch

Content Warning: This article contains mentions of self-harm, gaslighting, abduction, and body horror. We suggest using the [MCDM Tabletop Safety Toolkit](#) with this article to ensure everyone has a good time!

The loose definition of a cryptid is a creature some claim exists but is never proven to exist. Cryptids are creatures of legend, but they aren't part of established mythologies and they don't follow archetypes the way other fantastic critters do. Fantasy creatures like dragons and unicorns feature in stories across the globe, and each culture's version of these creatures shares traits with the others. Conversely, stories about encounters with a cryptid vary from telling to telling, with witnesses attributing different sizes, behaviors, and characteristics to the same creature. In addition, a cryptid is tied to a single people and place. You can point on a map to places where cryptids have been seen, such as Loch Ness, the Pine Barrens of New Jersey, and the woods of the Pacific Northwest, but you can't point to the reported source of unicorns.

In the game, cryptids are specific and rare enough (or cunning enough) to baffle scientists, clerics, or mages who wish to catalog them. Commoners in game worlds know dragons exist, but they might question the existence of Mothman, which makes hunting such a creature even more exciting. A cryptid's very existence defies explanation and forces folks to examine the trust they place in societal institutions, because governments, scholars, and other authorities repudiate that such creatures are real. And questions centered on truth, doubt, faith, and societal norms have a role in every genre.

BUILDING CRYPTID STORIES

You might still be wondering exactly how to make a cryptid feel like a meaningful part of a standard fantasy world. To make these curious creatures work, keep these principles in mind.

MAKE A MYSTERY

Humans find cryptids interesting because they are mysterious. When building a story around a cryptid, create a sense of mystery and **avoid confrontation with the creature for as long as possible**. Discovering the influence of the cryptid on the environment, hearing its victims' stories, and uncovering evidence of its existence should constitute the bulk of a cryptid-themed adventure.

INTRODUCE DOUBT

In paranormal stories, we root for the investigators who continue to search for the truth in the face of naysayers and nonbelievers. Introducing NPCs who refute the existence of cryptids and show proof that such beings can't possibly exist can **sow doubt amongst the characters**. Providing evidence that a cryptid can't exist makes it more remarkable when one is standing right in front of you.

GET PERSONAL

Cryptids are compelling because we understand so little about them. In our world, people report sightings and experiences with bizarre creatures across the globe every year. While these stories persist and share eerie similarities, mainstream science rejects these accounts as fiction, discrediting witnesses as overimaginative or unhinged. Tales of cryptids from trusted friends or family members are not so easily dismissed. Work to create the same atmosphere of doubt for your characters! When a cryptid targets someone close to the adventurers, you create a **personal stake in unraveling the mystery.**

KNOW YOUR MOTIVATION

Creating a strong motive lays a compelling groundwork for the mystery. From the start, **decide what your cryptid wants, then construct encounters that allow your characters to unravel the creature's agenda** bit by bit.

SHOW, DON'T TELL

Cryptids are frightening because they are always concealed, whether cast in shadow or seen in dreams. Keeping something partially hidden allows the mind to amplify its own fears, as imagination works tirelessly to fill in the gaps. **Cast everything in a layer of secrecy.** If you outright tell your players they're dealing with Bigfoot, you've ruined the thrill of uncovering the truth.

READY-MADE CRYPTIDS

This section provides all the stats and info needed to run four remarkable cryptids.

GREY ALIENS

AKA Zeta Reticulans, Roswell Greys, Grays

Meeting extraterrestrial beings is one of the most common cryptid encounters. Descriptions of these visitors from outer space vary widely enough to be categorized into a few different types. Pop culture has made the grey aliens the most well known: small grey beings with large heads, black eyes, and hairless bipedal bodies.

Aliens might seem like an odd fit for a fantasy game. But then again, wouldn't the concept of technologically advanced beings from outer space be just as terrifying (if not more so) to a magical society? Introducing aliens to your campaign allows you to build stories that examine the role of science in fantasy and expands the scope of your adventure to a universal scale.

PLOT HOOKS

Since grey aliens are primarily concerned with observation and gathering scientific data, they take great efforts

to conceal their presence. An adventure featuring grey aliens typically begins with a mysterious incident that reveals something is wrong, with no obvious cause. Here are some plot ideas to point the characters toward a close encounter.

Out of Mind. The characters encounter an entire village of people that have had their memories wiped. Strange burn marks scorch the ground around the settlement, an odd metal machine is discovered, and other bizarre tools have been left behind. The villagers need help trying to piece together what happened.

Shipwreck. A bizarre metal ship crashes to the ground during a storm. The ship is like nothing ever seen before, and the characters are called to discover a way inside.

UFO. Farmers report seeing an unidentified flying object soar through the sky, and a local government official is discovered missing the following day. The terrified population needs adventurers to investigate what happened.

TACTICS

Grey aliens are hyper-intelligent and never (voluntarily) enter a fight unless they have the upper hand. If the characters go looking for a brawl, make sure there are multiple grey aliens and pair them with defensible terrain or a souped-up siege weapon. If a fight goes poorly for the adventurers, keep in mind that grey aliens seek knowledge. Abducting attackers is better than killing them.

When running grey aliens in combat, prioritize survival over dealing damage. An alien relies on their Kinesis reaction to gain swift immunity to damage dealt by close-range enemies and prioritizes using Gamma Ray to take down spellcasters who can cycle through different damage types. The aliens reserve Thought Extraction until they have a poisoned or otherwise incapacitated target.

REWARDS

Introducing aliens into your game allows you to create a bevy of technological rewards. Gifting the party with a remarkable piece of space weaponry or science fantasy-themed gadget for dealing with the greys is a great way to leave a lasting impression. To create this reward without starting from scratch, find a magic item you like, change some descriptive details to make it seem futuristic, then give it a new property like the following:

Alien Tech. This item and its properties are not considered magical for the purposes of spells such as *antimagic field*, *dispel magic*, *counterspell*, or similar magical effects.

GREY ALIEN

Small Aberration, Typically Lawful Neutral

Armor Class 13 (natural armor)

Hit Points 31 (7d6 + 7)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
10 (+0)	11 (+0)	12 (+1)	18 (+4)	12 (+1)	8 (-1)

Skills Investigation +6, Perception +3

Condition Immunities charmed, frightened

Senses darkvision 120 ft., passive Perception 13

Languages telepathy 120 ft.

Challenge 2 (450 XP) **Proficiency Bonus** +2

Alien Mind. The alien automatically succeeds on Intelligence or Wisdom saving throws against spells and other magical effects.

Genius. The alien uses their Intelligence modifier instead of Strength or Dexterity for weapon attack and damage rolls.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The grey alien makes two Gamma Ray attacks.

Gamma Ray. *Melee or Ranged Weapon Attack:* +6 to hit,

reach 5 ft. or range 20/60 ft., one target. *Hit:* 7 (1d6 + 4) radiant damage, and the target must succeed on a DC 14 Constitution saving throw or be poisoned until the end of their next turn.

Thought Extraction (Recharge 5–6). *Melee Weapon Attack:* +6 to hit, reach 5 ft., one creature. *Hit:* 22 (4d10) psychic damage, and the alien learns the creature's current surface thoughts or extracts a memory with a length no greater than 10 minutes from the creature's mind. The alien can choose for this attack to deal no damage. Creatures under the effects of the *mind blank* spell or a similar effect take no damage from and can't have information learned or extracted by this attack.

REACTIONS

Kinesis. In response to taking damage, the alien becomes immune to the triggering damage type until they use this reaction again. If the alien takes multiple types of damage simultaneously, they choose which of the taken damage types they become immune to.

SHUCK

AKA: *Black Dog*, *Black Shuck*, *Old Shuck*, *Old Shock*

Shuck is the common name given to the ghostly black dogs sighted in the British Isles across the centuries. These creatures vary in size from report to report, but all descriptions note the shuck's shadowy black body and eyes alight with flame. In some legends, the shuck appears and rips victims to shreds. In others, these dogs stalk prey for weeks until the victim's growing fear drives them to harm themselves. Seeing the hound is an omen of certain death, whatever the individual circumstance.

Stories featuring the shuck center around fear of death. Once a shuck chooses a victim, few things can save the unfortunate target from the hound (or from themselves). Deciding what (or who) conjured and set the cryptid upon its victims and unraveling the reason behind its predation allows you to explore themes of guilt, retribution, and justice.

PLOT HOOKS

Shucks are creatures of vengeance, compelled to track, harass, and ultimately kill their victims. Deciding the shuck's target and linking that victim to the adventurers is the first step to drawing them into this cryptid's tale. Here are some plot ideas to get the characters caught up in the shuck's cycle of vengeance:



Dying Breed. The last surviving member of an ancient noble bloodline hires the characters as bodyguards to protect them from a shadowy beast that has slain every other relative.

Last Words. A remote town suffers a vicious series of dog attacks in the weeks following the burning of an accused witch. As the death toll rises, the panicked townsfolk are desperate to find someone to stop whatever is hunting them.

Territory. A pack of non-hostile winter wolves (or other intelligent beasts) cautiously approaches the characters with a request. The wolves need help killing a black hound that has been attacking humanoids in the area, driving townsfolk to slaughter wolves en masse.

TACTICS

A shuck is driven to hunt particular victims; otherwise, they only kill other creatures foolish enough to interfere with this goal. Directly confronting the shuck results in a fight to the death, where the hound fights to slay attackers as efficiently as possible. If a shuck suspects interference, they use stealth to observe the interlopers, then attempt to scare them off before resorting to direct violence.

In combat, a shuck's first goal is to generate as many shadow copies as possible using their Shadow Pack

reaction. The shuck uses their Bite attack on one character at a time to maximize effectiveness, prioritizing heavy-hitting damage dealers before going after support characters. The dog uses Death Rattle only after multiple targets have taken damage.

REWARDS

Slaying a shuck means freeing their victims from a grisly fate, which is likely to earn goodwill and monetary rewards. However, an enterprising character could fashion a magic item from their shadowy hide.

BLACK CLOAK

Wondrous Item, Rare (Requires Attunement)

Curling wisps of shadow cling to the black fur of this cloak. While wearing this cloak in dim light or darkness, you have advantage on Dexterity (Stealth) checks.

Shadow Pack. When you take damage, you can use your reaction to create a shadow copy of yourself. The copy appears in an unoccupied space within 5 feet of you and remains for 1 minute or until you move. You have advantage on attack rolls against a creature while your shadow copy is within 5 feet of the creature. Once the cloak has been used to create a shadow copy, it can't create another shadow copy until the next midnight.

SHUCK

Medium Monstrosity, Typically Lawful Evil

Armor Class 15 (natural armor)

Hit Points 132 (24d8 + 24)

Speed 60 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
18 (+4)	12 (+1)	12 (+1)	10 (+0)	16 (+3)	8 (-1)

Skills Perception +6, Stealth +7

Damage Resistances bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing from nonmagical attacks

Condition Immunities charmed, exhaustion, frightened

Senses darkvision 120 ft., passive Perception 16

Languages —

Challenge 7 (2,900 XP) **Proficiency Bonus** +3

Relentless Pursuit. When the shuck is created, they choose one creature in existence as their target. The shuck knows the distance to and direction of their target, as long as they are on the same plane of existence as the target. If the target is on a different plane, the shuck knows which one, but not the target's exact location. When the target dies, the shuck knows and can choose a new target.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The shuck makes two Bite attacks, plus one additional Bite attack for each copy it has.

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 13 (2d8 + 4) piercing damage plus 4 (1d8) necrotic damage.

Death Rattle (Recharge 5–6). The shuck emits an otherworldly howl that pulls souls into death. Each creature of the shuck's choice within 90 feet of the shuck that can hear them must make a DC 15 Wisdom saving throw, taking 36 (8d8) necrotic damage if the creature has all their hit points or 45 (10d8) necrotic damage if the creature is missing any of their hit points on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

REACTIONS

Shadow Pack. When the shuck takes damage, they can create a copy of themselves. The copy appears in an unoccupied space within 5 feet of the shuck or another copy and remains for 1 minute or until the shuck is killed. A copy's AC equals 15. If an attack hits a copy, the copy is destroyed. A copy can be destroyed only by an attack that targets it. It ignores all other damage and effects.

On the shuck's turn, each copy can move up to 60 feet (no action required). The shuck has advantage on attack rolls against creatures within 5 feet of a copy. The shuck can target creatures and objects within 5 feet of a copy with their Bite attack.

DEATH WORM

Olgoi-Khorkhoi, Mongolian Death Worm

For generations, legends of giant sandworms that spray deadly acid and control electricity have plagued the Gobi Desert. Reports of these death worms have spawned imaginary replicas across pop culture, from the sandworms of Frank Herbert's *Dune* to the cult classic film *Tremors*. While their exact nature is unknown, it's clear that those who see a worm emerge from the earth rarely live to tell the tale.

Death worms are elusive and terrifying foes who dwell in the most inhospitable stretches of the world. Despite their tremendous power, the worm is still a Beast, and the stories that grow around it often delve into the continual struggle between nature and civilization.

PLOT HOOKS

Death worms prefer to stay as far from civilization as possible, so adventures surrounding them seek to determine the cause of their behavioral changes. Here are some plot ideas to lead your party to the writhing worms:

Bad Weather. An unknown arcane source has thrown local weather patterns into chaos. Whenever lightning strikes the ground, a surge of hideous monsters erupts from below ground to destroy everything around them. The locals are desperate for adventurers to find the connection between the storm and the creatures before they destroy everything in the area.

Border Dispute. A newly established frontier town abandons construction when the remains of several miners are discovered, their corpses half-melted by some kind of acid. The townspeople are terrified of whatever creature is capable of such ghastly murder, and they need it driven off to resume work as soon as possible.

Dirty Deal. A wealthy merchant calls in help when their transport wagons go missing. For several weeks, caravans have disappeared mid-journey, but no bodies or wagon pieces have been found—just bizarre mounds of earth, like recently dug holes.

TACTICS

A death worm's greatest asset is mobility, which allows them to pursue and stalk prey over vast distances. A threatened worm strikes their target from below the sands, retreats to safety, then repeats until their prey is dead. Death worms are most frequently encountered by unfortunate groups who attract the attention of a single beast, but some hunt in pairs. If the characters hope to eliminate all the worms in a particular region, they must bring the fight to the subterranean nest where dozens of the cryptids brood.

Death worms use their Shockwave action and Sand Scout trait to set up attacks with advantage. They

prioritize eliminating characters who can fly or have long-range capabilities whenever it's safe to do so, saving Caustic Burst for the most advantageous moment. If the worm is near death, it retreats beneath the sand to regenerate.

REWARDS

Death worms possess remarkable biological capabilities, and creative adventurers who harvest their flesh can reap the benefits of their corrosive ichor.

CAN OF WORMS

Wondrous Item, Uncommon

This vessel contains a sliver of flesh harvested from a living death worm or one that died in the last hour. If you place water and decaying organic matter inside the vessel, the flesh generates enough acid to fill the container. Once the container is filled, the flesh can't generate more acid until the next dawn.

If the container is full, you can use an action to splash the contents of the vessel onto a creature or object within 5 feet of you. Make a melee attack against the target, treating the acid as an improvised weapon. On a hit, the target takes 6d6 acid damage.

If seven days pass without refilling the vessel with fresh water and organic matter, the flesh shrivels to dust, and the vessel loses its magic.



DEATH WORM

Large Beast, Unaligned

Armor Class 15 (natural armor)

Hit Points 157 (15d10 + 75)

Speed 30 ft., burrow 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
22 (+6)	14 (+2)	20 (+5)	7 (-2)	14 (+2)	8 (-1)

Saving Throws Con +9, Wis +6

Skills Perception +6, Stealth +6

Damage Immunities acid; bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing from nonmagical attacks

Condition Immunities blinded, prone

Senses blindsight 30 ft., tremorsense 120 ft., passive Perception 16

Languages —

Challenge 10 (5,900 XP) **Proficiency Bonus** +4

Corrosive Secretion. A creature that touches the worm or hits them with a melee attack while within 5 feet of the worm takes 9 (2d8) acid damage.

Regeneration. The worm regains 10 hit points at the start of each of their turns if they have at least 1 hit point.

Sand Scout. While touching sandy terrain, the worm doesn't provoke opportunity attacks while burrowing.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The worm makes two Bite attacks. They can replace one attack with a use of Shockwave.

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +10 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. *Hit:* 17 (2d10 + 6) piercing damage plus 9 (2d8) acid damage. If the target is a Large or smaller creature, they are grappled (escape DC 16). Until this grapple ends, the worm can only use their Bite attack on the grappled creature and has advantage on attack rolls to do so.

Shockwave. The worm emits a wave of static charge. Each creature within 30 feet of the worm must make a DC 17 Constitution saving throw. On a failed save, a creature takes 18 (4d8) lightning damage and is knocked prone. On a successful save, the creature takes half as much damage and isn't knocked prone. Creatures standing on the ground make this save with disadvantage.

Caustic Burst (Recharge 5–6). The worm secretes a spray of acid in a 60-foot line that is 5 feet wide. Each creature in that line must make a DC 17 Dexterity saving throw, taking 45 (10d8) acid damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

MOTHMAN

From the first reported sighting in the woods of West Virginia in the 1960s, the cryptid dubbed the Mothman has captured cultural interest across an array of [films](#) and [games](#). This creature is described as a 7-foot-tall bipedal winged humanoid covered in dark fur. Witnesses rarely agree on the exact details of Mothman's face or body, but all report seeing a pair of large, red, insectoid eyes. However, the most disturbing detail is that encounters with Mothman always end in tragedy. Wherever the cryptid is sighted, great disaster follows. A single witness might be gruesomely murdered the next day, or a locale that experiences multiple sightings may be decimated by a natural disaster the following week.

Adventures featuring Mothman have one core commonality: a countdown to disaster. When you introduce Mothman, determine what terrible event their presence heralds. Then provide the party with the tools they need to stop this event (or maybe ensure it happens).

PLOT HOOKS

Since Mothman's mere presence pushes the tides of chaos, an adventure featuring Mothman rarely begins with an encounter with the cryptid. Instead, consider

pointing the characters toward the site of impending calamity and showing them the signs that something unnatural is altering the region's fate. Here are some seed ideas to get the characters on Mothman's trail:

Mixed Messages. Wizards, priests, fortune-tellers, and seers across the area experience widespread oddities when they attempt to use divination magic. Spells either fail entirely or repeatedly point to the site of the impending tragedy. They call in the characters to investigate these occurrences.

String of Misfortune. Several bizarre natural disasters have laid waste to towns across the land. After the latest tragedy, it is clear that the events are happening in a pattern as if following a trail. If the pattern holds, a thriving city will be the next ruined site in just three days.

What Comes Around. The characters encounter a veteran monster hunter tracking a mysterious creature with red eyes. Decades ago, a creature of the same description appeared just before the hunter's hometown, friends, and family were destroyed by an arcane storm. After years of searching, the hunter has finally heard reports of the same creature stalking a nearby town.



SPIRAL OF DOOM

Mothman inflicts other creatures with a new condition called doomed. As the dramatic condition name implies, penalties brought on by the doomed condition quickly escalate, potentially trapping a creature in a death spiral. This intentional design defines why Mothman is a force to be reckoned with. With that in mind, a fair GM should restrain themselves from bringing down the full wrath of Mothman until the characters have a chance to learn what they are dealing with. Perhaps the party gets a taste of the doomed condition in a brief encounter before Mothman flees, or an NPC clues them in to pack lots of restoration magic before facing the cryptid. Allowing your players to understand the full ramifications of the doomed condition before you wield it won't make the ultimate confrontation with Mothman any less surprising. In fact, it's likely to underscore just how much they could lose.

TACTICS

Mothman's mere presence causes intense psychological distress and warps fate towards the worst outcome, so a fight typically isn't necessary for the cryptid to bring about harm. If adventurers attempt to confront or drive off Mothman before calamity strikes, Mothman prioritizes eliminating the interlopers before pursuing their larger goal.

Mothman's goal is to dish out as many doom tokens as possible while ensuring they survive long enough to use all three of their villain actions. Mothman uses Twist Fate as soon as they can hit multiple creatures. Mothman uses their Penance Gaze bonus action to target creatures capable of flight, then prioritizes doomed creatures that are likely to fail the save.

REWARDS

Defeating Mothman prevents tragedy from striking, but flirting with doom can leave a mark on your adventurers if they so choose.

MARK OF THE DAMNED

Blessing, Rare

This small mark manifests on creatures whose future has been irrevocably changed. The mark can be visible or invisible (your choice) and is shaped like an hourglass.

Destiny Bond. Once per day, you can use a bonus action to invoke the mark's power. Choose one creature you can see and roll a d4. You and the target each gain the doomed condition and doom tokens equal to the number rolled. Once a creature has been the target of this feature, they can't be affected by another *mark of the damned* while they remain doomed.

REGIONAL EFFECTS

While Mothman doesn't possess a standard lair, their mere presence warps the destiny of creatures close to them. All creatures within 10 miles of Mothman experience the following effects:

- Creatures that sleep are haunted by nightmares of impending disaster. Creatures that attempt to sleep while within 10 miles of Mothman can't reduce levels of exhaustion by taking a long rest.
- Any time a creature other than Mothman rolls a 19 on a d20, it is instead treated as a 20. Additionally, any time a creature other than Mothman rolls a 2 on a d20, it is instead treated as a 1.
- If a creature spends 24 consecutive hours within 10 miles of Mothman, they gain a special condition called doomed. A doomed creature gains 1 doom token for each additional 24 hours they spend within 10 miles of Mothman.

NEW CONDITION: DOOMED

When a creature is subjected to the doomed condition, they experience the following effects:

- If the creature doesn't have any doom tokens when they are subjected to this condition, they receive 1 doom token. As long as the creature is doomed, they can't have less than 1 doom token.
- Whenever the creature makes a saving throw (including death saving throws) they reduce the result by the number of doom tokens they currently have.
- If a doomed creature goes 24 consecutive hours without gaining a new doom token, they are no longer doomed and lose all their doom tokens.
- The *remove curse* and *greater restoration* spells reduce a creature's total number of doom tokens by one, and the condition ends if the creature has no doom tokens. Alternatively, the condition can be ended and all doom tokens removed from the creature with a *wish* spell.

MOTHMAN

Medium Monstrosity, Neutral

Armor Class 21 (natural armor)

Hit Points 212 (25d8 + 100)

Speed 30 ft., fly 60 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
22 (+6)	16 (+3)	18 (+4)	15 (+2)	14 (+2)	16 (+3)

Saving Throws Con +9, Wis +7

Skills Insight +7, Perception +7

Damage Immunities bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing from nonmagical attacks

Condition Immunities blinded, charmed, frightened

Senses darkvision 120 ft., truesight 60 ft., passive Perception 17

Languages telepathy 120 ft.

Challenge 15 (13,000 XP) **Proficiency Bonus** +5

Doom's Herald (3/Day). If Mothman fails a saving throw, they can succeed instead by removing one doom token from a creature they can see within 120 feet of them. If removing this doom token would reduce the creature's total doom tokens to 0, the creature is no longer doomed.

Future Sight. Mothman possesses supernatural awareness of future events and can't be surprised.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. Mothman makes two Unlucky Strike attacks. They can replace one of these attacks with a use of Twist Fate, if available.

Unlucky Strike. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +11 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. *Hit:* 24 (4d8 + 6) bludgeoning damage, and the target must succeed on a DC 17 Charisma saving throw or gain 1 doom token. If the creature is not already doomed, they become doomed.

Twist Fate (Recharge 5–6). Mothman twists the destiny of nearby creatures, pushing them toward inevitable disaster. Each creature within 60 feet of Mothman must succeed on a DC 17 saving throw, using their lowest ability score (if two or more ability scores are tied, the creature chooses which to use), or gain 1 doom token. If the creature is not already doomed, they become doomed.

BONUS ACTIONS

Penance Gaze. Mothman fixates on one creature they can see within 60 feet of them, and the target's mind fills with intense guilty memories. The target must choose to resist the effect or to accept the barrage of painful memories. A target that attempts to resist the effect must succeed on a DC 17 Charisma saving throw or take 33 (6d10) psychic damage. A target that accepts the memories falls prone and is incapacitated until the end of their next turn. If a target chooses to accept the memories, the target is immune to Mothman's Penance Gaze for the next year.

VILLAIN ACTIONS

Mothman has three villain actions. They can take each action once during an encounter after an enemy creature's turn. They can take these actions in any order, but can only use one per round.

- 1. Bad Omen.** A nexus of ill-tidings forms around Mothman. Place a number of doom tokens equal to twice the number of characters on the table and declare that any assigned tokens will be used by the GM. The characters can divvy up the doom tokens between themselves and leave any tokens unassigned. Any doomed character that accepts tokens increases their total doom tokens by the amount accepted. Any character that isn't doomed becomes doomed when they accept one or more tokens.
- 2. Creeping Doom.** Mothman becomes invisible to each doomed creature until the end of Mothman's next turn and magically teleports to an unoccupied space they can see within 60 feet of them.
- 3. Induce Disaster.** Disaster comes calling. Each doomed creature takes 11 (2d10) damage for each doom token they have. If there are any unassigned doom tokens in play, each creature within 300 feet of Mothman takes 11 (2d10) damage for each unassigned doom token. The damage type for these effects is unique to each affected creature and is always of a damage type that the creature can't resist or avoid. For example, a random lightning strike might deal lightning damage to one creature while arcane energy simultaneously rips through reality, dealing force damage to a different creature.

THE FIENDISH REGULARS

WHAT DO THEY DO IN THE SHADOWS? STUFF NO ONE ELSE WANTS TO DO.

by Banana Chan

IN THE DEPTHS OF THE SCARIEST, MOST TERRIFYING, MOST HORRIFIC TOWNS LIVE SOME OF THE MOST FIENDISH FOLKS. I'M NOT TALKING ABOUT DEMON LORDS OR MONSTERS. I'M TALKING ABOUT THE PEOPLE WHO MIGHT SCREW YOU OVER FOR A QUICK BUCK. OR THE PEOPLE WHO WON'T SHUT UP ABOUT HOW GREAT THE TOWN'S LEADER IS. UGH, NOW THOSE ARE THE RESIDENTS YOU SHOULD BE WARY OF.

—JENNA F., WORST TRAVEL SITES MAGAZINE EDITOR

Ever wonder what regular citizens of spooky realms are like when they're not threatened with the terrors of their world? This article explores a few drop-in NPCs for games geared toward comedy in a horror-filled setting, or that just need a little lightheartedness to break up the terror. Meet the **fanlord** and their wide collection of antagonist fan fiction; the **doomsday salesperson**, who collects gold in exchange for survival gear (and since every day is doomsday in a horror realm, their business is doing quite well!); and the evil antagonists' **personal assistants**, who are at the antagonists' beck and call.

These NPCs pop up throughout evil campaign settings like groundhogs on the first day of spring. Unlike groundhogs, they aren't adorable, and they may follow the characters on their adventure, pestering them. This badgering may be out of the heroes' control (particularly in the case of the fanlord and the personal assistant), but there may also be a benefit to having these NPCs around—using them as distractions, guides, or allies in fights, for example. But what are these NPCs' goals in the first place?

WHY WON'T THEY LEAVE ME ALONE?

These NPCs hound the party for a variety of reasons. They're all trying to survive in a strange, hostile world, but here are a few other motivations:

- A fanlord wants to spread the word of how great the horror realm's Ruler is. They also want the Ruler to notice them, but that will probably never happen. They are desperate to outshine other fanlords in their community, whether through sharing facts or showing off signed, exclusive memorabilia.
- The doomsday salesperson's objective is gaining financial independence through sweet, sweet gold. Their end goal is probably to retire early, move to a sunnier destination (or literally any location with at least a little bit of sun), and sip cocktails for the rest of their life.
- The personal assistant wants recognition for a job well done. This could change when they meet the characters—over time, especially with the characters' encouragement, they may want to escape their evil

home and tread a more entrepreneurial path. Perhaps they could even become a companion NPC for future adventures.

These motivations determine how the NPCs end up with the party and why they stay with them instead of doing ... whatever they were doing. The following questions contain ideas for introducing one of these NPCs to the characters:

- Does the NPC need to impress (or badger) a certain character to be accepted as one of the party?
- Is there a character who has something that the NPC needs, whether that's a physical item, gold, or some other attribute, information, or talent that could help the NPC achieve their goals?
- Does the NPC have a reason to believe the party could change the fate of this realm (for better or for worse)?
- Did the Ruler of the realm ask the NPC to join the party for some reason? If so, why are they doing the Ruler's bidding (aside from potentially being jailed for not following orders)?

THE RULER

These NPCs are influenced by another NPC called the Ruler. Every evil or forsaken realm has one. Murderous, brooding, obsessed with something unhealthy—you know the type. For some places, it might be a vampire. Others might have a corrupt monarch or a fallen angel. Each NPC has a unique relationship with the Ruler that impacts the finer details of their personality.

THE FANLORD

Well, actually, you're wrong about them, because they're obviously the best person and you wouldn't know, because you're a fake fan.

Out of the crevices of a mist-layered town, outstretched fingers slowly reach out like spiders finding a stable spot for their legs to land on. Wide eyes glow green, searching for the next passerby to torment with facts about the Ruler of this cursed nightmarescape. The fanlord not only knows everything there is to know about their realm's autocrat, they are also a *very* zealous follower, with stacks of signed memorabilia at home. It doesn't matter if the subject of their worship is a horrible leader who spreads lies and misfortune across the land, crushing the impoverished under the heel of their shoe (if they wear shoes). They can do no wrong in the eyes of the fanlord.



Like a cult follower, the fanlord stops at nothing to spread the gospel of the Ruler. They're just a bit more irritating, because they also want to show off all their cool autographed collectible cards, or the fancy bobbleheads they purchased from a peddler taking advantage of their unwavering devotion to the Ruler.

Let's be real, it's almost impossible to get the fanlord to leave you alone. Unless you finally accept the lord and savior, [insert name of Ruler here], you're ill-fated to have this NPC follow you around until the end of time. Or at least until they find another poor soul ... or another fanlord. Better yet, if you find a group of fanlords, you can drop yours off.

PLOT HOOKS

Roll on or choose from the Fanlord Plot Hooks table to determine how the fanlord is introduced to the party.

FANLORD

Medium Humanoid, Any Alignment

Armor Class 13 (light armor made of magazines and flyers that feature the Ruler)

Hit Points 39 (6d8 + 12)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
10 (+0)	14 (+2)	14 (+2)	12 (+1)	12 (+1)	8 (-1)

Skills History +5, Investigation +3

Senses passive Perception 11

Languages Common plus any languages their Ruler knows (but not very well)

Challenge 2 (450 XP) **Proficiency Bonus** +2

Emotional Labor. Any other creature within 30 feet of the fanlord that can hear and understand the fanlord gains 1 level of exhaustion, unless the fanlord is incapacitated or the creature already has levels of exhaustion. Moving more than 30 feet from the fanlord removes any levels of exhaustion caused by this trait. In addition, a creature who kills the fanlord must succeed on a DC 12 Wisdom saving throw or take 7 (2d6) psychic damage (mostly from the crushing guilt).

Groupthink. At the start of the fanlord's turn, if they can see one or more other fanlords but aren't already within 5 feet of one of them, the fanlord must succeed on a DC 10 Wisdom saving throw or immediately use as much of their movement as possible to move toward one of these fanlords of their choice. The fanlord isn't compelled to move into an obviously deadly hazard, such as a fire or pit, but they provoke opportunity attacks to move in the designated direction.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The fanlord makes one Shove or Stick attack, and they use Vicious Mockery.

Shove. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one Medium or smaller creature. *Hit:* The target is pushed 5 feet away from the fanlord.

Stick. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 4 (1d4 + 2) bludgeoning damage plus 3 (1d6) psychic damage, because there's no better way to exasperate an opponent than with a stick.

Vicious Mockery (Cantrip). The fanlord unleashes a string of insults laced with subtle enchantments at one creature they can see within 60 feet of them. If the target can hear the fanlord, the target must succeed on a DC 12 Wisdom saving throw or take 7 (3d4) psychic damage and have disadvantage on the next attack roll they make before the end of their next turn.

REACTIONS

Projection. When a creature makes a Charisma check to attempt to influence the fanlord to pursue an obvious course of action against their Ruler, the check automatically fails and the creature takes 2 (1d4) psychic damage as the fanlord rebukes them with a magical insult.

FANLORD PLOT HOOKS

d6	PLOT HOOK
1	The great annual Rulercon is happening in town, but the guest of honor (ahem, the Ruler) still hasn't arrived! Wherever could they be (perhaps hiding from the pressure put on them by their adoring fans)? A fanlord asks the characters for help finding the Ruler.
2	There is a feud between this realm and a neighboring one over something that someone said about the other person's Ruler. Is this just the rumor mill churning, or is there enough evidence to lead to a war between realms? To stop the conflict, the characters must chase down leads with a fanlord as their guide.
3	The Ruler wants to go on vacation, but they can't do that without getting recognized and bombarded for autographs in their own town. They need the characters' help to sneak out to a scenic location and avoid the nosy fanlords.
4	A fanlord will do anything to meet the Ruler, including hiring a band of misfits to guide them into the Ruler's heavily guarded abode. This will be a dangerous task, but how tempting is that payout?
5	A lost fanlord stumbles across the characters in a huge metropolis and begs for their help. They must find their way home so they can be among others who love their town's Ruler as much as they do!
6	The Ruler has died and their immediate circle is in a panic, trying to make sure that word of this doesn't get out. Worried that the fanlords might revolt, the Ruler's aids ask the characters to prop the Ruler up and puppeteer the corpse at public appearances. This won't work for long, though—what permanent solution will they come up with?

DOOMSDAY SALESPERSON

You never know when the world's gonna end, so you might as well start stocking up on supplies now. We're all gonna die eventually—no point in hoarding all that gold, right?

Every day in this place is another potential doomsday. The Ruler is constantly wreaking havoc, waging war against a nearby village or opening a can of magical evil worms or just being a plain old vampire. A common saying around these parts is “live each day like it's your last ... because the chances of it being your last are very high.” This proverb is especially popular among doomsday salespeople, who use it to motivate potential customers into spending their hard-earned coin on fancy anti-doomsday bobbleheads.

These sellers are particularly keen when it comes to preying on the insecurities of village folk. Why take a chance against the oncoming apocalypse? Instead, buy all seventy-four pairs of these survival boots, just in case the first seventy-three are damaged in the cataclysm. However, whether they're swindling susceptible souls or they truly believe in the healing properties of the

anti-doomsday leggings, most doomsday salespeople don't want to hawk their goods forever. What they truly want is to retire early, save enough to move to another town, or finally settle their debts.

The heroes can find these vendors selling at the local marketplace or wandering the streets in large trench coats full of useless gadgets. If you happen to come across this NPC and they decide that it's somehow a good idea to follow you on your journey, be prepared for very loud rattling from all their wares.

PLOT HOOKS

Roll on or choose from the Doomsday Salesperson Plot Hooks table to determine how the doomsday salesperson is introduced to the party.

LOOT

The doomsday salesperson carries unique supplies that adventurers can purchase or steal. The Doomsday Salesperson Loot table contains items a doomsday salesperson might have in stock when they meet the characters. You can use these items as inspiration to create additional stock.

DOOMSDAY SALESPERSON

Medium Humanoid, Any Alignment

Armor Class 14 (breastplate made of scrap metal)

Hit Points 27 (5d8 + 5)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
14 (+2)	10 (+0)	13 (+1)	15 (+2)	13 (+1)	16 (+3)

Skills Deception +7, Performance +5, Persuasion +7, Stealth -10 (see The Opposite of Invisible below)

Condition Immunities charmed, invisible

Senses passive Perception 11

Languages Common, Giant, Goblin, Halfling, Orc, Sylvan

Challenge 1 (200 XP) **Proficiency Bonus** +2

The Opposite of Invisible. The doomsday salesperson can be spotted easily and is very, very loud, either from yelling about their wares or those wares clanking around. They have a -10 penalty to Dexterity (Stealth) checks.

Tool Proficiency. The doomsday salesperson is proficient with two sets of artisan's tools of the GM's choice. The doomsday salesperson can only use these tools to make anti-doomsday merchandise.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The doomsday salesperson makes two Overloaded Pack or Bobblehead Blast attacks. One attack can be replaced by a use of Poisoned Creamed Beef.

Overloaded Pack. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 6 (1d8 + 2) bludgeoning damage. If the target is a creature, they must succeed on a DC 12 Strength saving throw or be knocked prone.

Bobblehead Blast. *Ranged Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, range 15/30 ft., one target. *Hit:* 7 (2d4 + 2) bludgeoning damage. Where are they hiding all these bobbleheads? Who carries this many bobbleheads at once? Why do they hurt so much?

Poisoned Creamed Beef. Don't knock this creamed beef until you've tried it. But then you can't really knock it, because you'd be in pain. The doomsday salesperson splashes the creamed beef on a creature within 5 feet of them. The target must succeed on a DC 13 Constitution saving throw or be poisoned for 1 hour. While poisoned in this way, a creature can use an action to induce vomiting, ending the effect on themselves.

Offer You Can't Refuse. The doomsday salesperson makes a sales pitch to a creature within 5 feet of them. If the target can hear and understand the doomsday salesperson, they must succeed on a DC 13 Charisma saving throw or be charmed by the doomsday salesperson until the end of their next turn. While charmed in this way, the target must use their action on their turn to give the doomsday salesperson one object of the target's choice they wear or carry in exchange for a sack full of hats and merchandise from the doomsday salesperson.

DOOMSDAY SALESPERSON PLOT HOOKS

d6	PLOT HOOK
1	A villager begs the party to help them sell an entire box of anti-doomsday leggings that they foolishly procured from a doomsday salesperson. As it turns out, several other people in town are having the same issue. The doomsday salesperson must be confronted to end this pyramid scheme.
2	An illusory advertisement spams a village, promoting an anti-doomsday potion. The villagers beg the characters to find the doomsday salesperson responsible and make them stop.
3	The end of the world is actually happening this time, and it's all thanks to a bunch of crystals being sold around town. These so-called "protection" crystals summon demons—the scary kind. It's not great for business if everyone's possessed or dead, right? So who is the doomsday salesperson responsible, and what's their grift?
4	A new business owner is tired of having their store destroyed every day by mysterious vandals. They need the party's help identifying the vandals so they don't need to keep buying anti-doomsday equipment from a shady doomsday salesperson. The doomsday salesperson might be behind the chaos, or simply content to benefit from it.
5	A traveling doomsday salesperson sells a new anti-doomsday body cream that turns customers in town into Aberrations. The transformations start slow, but eventually the customers grow eye stalks and tentacles and everything. To make it right and stop similar catastrophes, the characters must find the doomsday salesperson and their supplier.
6	There's a new trend in town—candles with various rings and crystals in them that can protect the wearer. Some are even worth several pieces of gold! However, the doomsday salesperson behind these candles accidentally placed a ring belonging to an archdevil in one of the candles. They hire the characters to help find the candle before all hell literally breaks loose.

DOOMSDAY SALESPERSON LOOT

d6	LOOT
1	Self-Help Book by Brad Bon Barorich. This tome is filled with nonsense and cliches, but it does make you look more enlightened than you really are. You have advantage on Charisma checks made to influence Humanoids who haven't read this book and can see the cover while you hold it. <i>Cost: 150 gp</i>
2	Instant Creamed Beef. It's not real meat, but it is instant. If you consume this meal during a short rest, you regain 2d4 hit points and must succeed on a DC 13 Constitution saving throw or be poisoned for 1 hour at the end of that short rest. This stuff is pretty old. <i>Cost: 25 gp</i>
3	Suction Cup Crossbow. It's just a light crossbow with ten suction-cup-tipped bolts. A creature hit by one of the bolts takes no damage, but the next attack roll made against the target made before the end of the target's next turn has advantage. <i>Cost: 50 gp for the crossbow and ten bolts or 25 gp for just ten bolts</i>
4	Magical Bobblehead. When a creature with a face holds this bobblehead, the bobblehead's face becomes the creature's face. It's otherwise useless. <i>Cost: 50 gp</i>
5	Doomsday Insurance Paperwork. This paperwork says something about saving money by spending more for a lower deductible here. The paperwork functions as a <i>spell scroll</i> of <i>mass suggestion</i> (spell save DC 17) that any creature that can speak and read a language can use. <i>Cost: 10,000 gp</i>
6	Anti-Doomsday Toaster from Barorich Industries. It's just a campfire griddle that makes great toast. It comes with a sticker on it that reads "100% Doomsday-Proof." Bread not included. <i>Cost: 15 gp</i>

PERSONAL ASSISTANT

They don't pay me much ... well, they don't pay me at all, but I do get a lot of perks. Like exposure! Which I hear you can die from if you get too much of it.

Being the personal assistant of the one and only Ruler is a coveted and prestigious position, but the assistant's exhausted face is a depressing look at "success." They're constantly at the Ruler's beck and call. This is the miserable peak of their career, and they know it.

The personal assistant tries to hide the years of hard work and abusive office politics they endured to get here behind a smile that can easily be broken by just one unkind comment. They are always in communication with the Ruler—as a result, they've either adapted to physical exhaustion or been magically imbued by the Ruler to never feel it.

The personal assistant might interact with the characters frequently because the Ruler asked them to "make the guests feel welcome," meaning their services are being temporarily loaned out to the party.

PERSONAL ASSISTANT

Medium Humanoid, Any Alignment

Armor Class 15 (studded leather)

Hit Points 65 (10d8 + 20)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
12 (+1)	16 (+3)	15 (+2)	12 (+1)	12 (+1)	15 (+2)

Skills Insight +5, Perception +5, Stealth +5, Survival +3

Condition Immunities exhaustion

Senses passive Perception 15

Languages Common plus any languages their Ruler knows

Challenge 3 (700 XP) **Proficiency Bonus** +2

Organized to a Tee. The personal assistant has access to a magical storage space they have paid a monthly fee for. As a bonus action, the personal assistant can create a 10-foot-square entrance to the space, which has a volume of 100 cubic feet. They gladly hold onto any of their allies' supplies. They can figure out where to keep your stuff. It's no trouble.

Unusual Nature. The personal assistant doesn't require sleep, but they always look exhausted. They occasionally repeat under their breath, "It's just a part of the job. It's just a part of the job."

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The personal assistant makes three Dagger attacks.

Dagger. *Melee or Ranged Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 5 ft. or range 20/60 ft., one target. *Hit:* 5 (1d4 + 3) piercing damage. The personal assistant learned how to wield knives from the Ruler, and if they don't keep up their skills, they might die during sparring practice!

Read Thoughts. The personal assistant magically reads the surface thoughts of one creature within 60 feet of them. The effect can penetrate barriers, but 3 feet of wood or dirt, 2 feet of stone, 2 inches of metal, or a thin sheet of lead

blocks it. While the target is in range, the personal assistant can continue reading its thoughts, as long as the personal assistant's concentration isn't broken (as if concentrating on a spell). While reading the target's mind, the personal assistant has advantage on Wisdom (Insight) and Charisma (Deception, Intimidation, and Persuasion) checks against the target.

Calm Emotions (3/Day; 2nd-Level Spell; Concentration).

The personal assistant attempts to suppress strong emotions in each humanoid in a 20-foot-radius sphere centered on a point they choose within 60 feet. Each creature in that area must make a DC 12 Charisma saving throw; a creature can choose to fail this saving throw if they wish. If a creature fails its saving throw, the personal assistant chooses one of the following two effects.

They can suppress any effect causing a target to be charmed or frightened for 1 minute. When this effect ends, any suppressed effect resumes, provided that its duration has not expired in the meantime.

Alternatively, the target is indifferent about creatures the personal assistant chooses that they were hostile toward for 1 minute. This indifference ends if the target is attacked or harmed by a spell or if they witness any of their friends being harmed. When the effect ends, the creature becomes hostile again, unless the GM rules otherwise.

Locate Object (3/Day; 2nd-Level Spell; Concentration). The personal assistant describes or names an object that is familiar to them. They sense the direction to the object's location, as long as that object is within 1,000 feet of them. If the object is in motion, they know the direction of its movement.

The spell can locate a specific object known to the personal assistant, as long as they have seen it up close—within 30 feet—at least once. Alternatively, the spell can locate the nearest object of a particular kind, such as a certain kind of apparel, jewelry, furniture, tool, or weapon.

This spell can't locate an object if any thickness of lead, even a thin sheet, blocks a direct path between the personal assistant and the object.

(The characters can expect a bill at the end of the adventure.) Depending on the Ruler's leadership style, they may instead attempt to micromanage everything the party does through the assistant, who keeps tabs and barks orders on their boss's behalf like a disastrous game of telephone. Either way, the timid personal assistant is excited to be away from their horrible boss for a time and eager to help the characters with whatever they need.

Maybe one day, hopefully, they can escape this job and go on an adventure of their own. But they'll need the help of some kind travelers to realize that. They could become an artisan or a bard or even a soldier—if they can ever get over their fear of conflict. Whatever they put their mind to, they will surely get there.

PLOT HOOKS

Roll on or choose from the Personal Assistant Plot Hooks table to determine how the personal assistant is introduced to the party.



PERSONAL ASSISTANT PLOT HOOKS

d6	PLOT HOOK
1	The Ruler sends their personal assistant to follow the party to make sure the characters don't find the zombie army hiding in the catacombs. But what is that groaning sound, and why do folks keep disappearing?
2	The personal assistant desperately needs someone to convince the Ruler that they're dead so they can escape this realm. They used their 10-minute lunch break just to ask the party for help. How will they fake their death?
3	The personal assistant needs to organize a birthday party for the Ruler, but they don't know where to start. Will someone help them with a very special day?
4	The Ruler wants—nay—needs a very specific dish made from some very rare ingredients from a very dangerous location. A mere personal assistant can't handle this themselves, and they desperately need kind adventurers' aid. Who will step up to the plate?
5	The neighboring realm's Ruler has a crown that makes them look glorious ... so glorious that the Ruler of this realm has grown quite envious. They want the personal assistant to steal the crown so they can have it for themselves. The personal assistant hires the characters to help with the heist, and really hopes they have a good plan!
6	The personal assistant wants to unionize, but they're terrified of the Ruler. (Rightfully so.) The personal assistant asks for the characters' help organizing their coworkers, but soon after the Ruler asks the party to report any whispers of unions to them. Who will the party side with, and if it's the Ruler, how will this betrayal play out?

PUZZLING OUT THE DEVIL

A DIABOLICAL PUZZLE-BASED ADVENTURE FOR CHARACTERS OF ANY LEVEL

by Sharang Biswas

Content Note: This adventure contains scenes of body horror and devil possession. Additionally, the main plot includes a woman who dies in childbirth, and closeted queer identities. Advice for modifying these two plot points is provided if you so desire. See “[Modifying the Adventure](#)” and “[Author’s Note](#)” at the end of the adventure for more details. We suggest using the [MCDM Tabletop Safety Toolkit](#) with this adventure to ensure everyone has a good time!

THE STORY SO FAR

Nineteen years ago, Birgitte Skorman lay dying after giving birth in her family home. Eirik Skorman, Birgitte’s husband, had long held a fascination for tales of the occult, hauntings, and fiendish covenants, and used his faint knowledge of such things to call upon and make a bargain with a devil named Nimuchnimurpal. “My new child and I cannot live without my wife at my side,” the helpless man begged. The devil agreed to help, but demanded the Skormans’ new baby, Johann, when he “ripened.” Eirik, expecting ample time to find a way out of the deal, agreed.

Against Eirik’s expectations, though, Birgitte died, even as Nimuchnimurpal bound a piece of her confused spirit in her old bedroom—keeping to the letter, though not the spirit, of the bargain. Every few days, Birgitte becomes lucid, allowing Eirik to speak to her. The widower sleeps in the guest bedroom, and no one except Johann and the family’s housekeeper, Leia, know about Birgitte’s spirit.

JOHANN’S DEVOTION

Two years ago, seventeen-year-old Johann fell in love with a young man named Laxman, an apprentice to famed exorcist Rukhmani the Illuminated. The two began a secret relationship, but their time together was short-lived when Rukhmani set out on a journey of unknown duration with her apprentice at her side.

Just yesterday, Rukhmani and Laxman returned after nearly a year’s absence. Johann, thrilled to once again see his secret lover, convinced his father to invite the young apprentice over for dinner, intending to reveal the relationship for the first time. But when Johann uttered the words “I love you” to Laxman before his father, Nimuchnimurpal was also there as an unseen witness.

Having long haunted the Skorman house to wait for the moment when he might claim Johann’s soul, the devil saw their opportunity when they recognized that Johann’s emotionally vulnerable state left him open to possession. The fiend quickly possessed Johann and attacked Laxman, but the apprentice was able to use knowledge gained from studying under Rukhmani to temporarily incapacitate the devil. He then rushed out to fetch the master exorcist.

FIENDISH REVENGE

Rukhmani and Laxman worked all night to dislodge the fiend from Johann. First, they drew a runic prison circle in the basement of the house, which contained the possessed Johann inside it. The pair then began to draw a runic spell diagram connecting to the prison circle, whose completion would drive Nimuchnimurpal out of Johann’s body.

But with weariness overtaking him, Laxman tripped over a ceremonial knife he’d mislaid, careened into Rukhmani, and propelled her into the circle with the devil. Nimuchnimurpal pounced on the exorcist and

snapped her neck. The distraught Laxman pulled Rukhmani's body out of the circle, thankfully without disturbing the runes inked onto the floor. He now stands in shock, his gaze drifting between the corpse of his mentor and the distended grimace painted by the possessing devil onto the visage of his lover.

The bindings placed on Nimuchnimurpal give out at dawn.

FATHER-SON SECRETS

Is Eirik Skorman homophobic? Not at all. Does Johann worry about coming out to his father? Absolutely!

It's not uncommon for children of heterosexual parents to be worried about judgment from their families regarding their sexuality, even if loving parents have never shown signs of caring about that issue. It's a complicated tangle of societal expectations involving families, patriarchy, the roles men are placed into, internalized homophobia, and many other factors.

In this story, Johann wants to keep his secrets, and has waited until it feels right for him to come out to his father. See "Author's Note" at the end of the adventure for more discussion and guidance on roleplaying this theme.

ADVENTURE SUMMARY

With the use of one of the setups in the "Story Hooks" section below, the characters arrive in the basement of the Skorman home. To save Johann, they must complete the hexagonal spell diagram tied to the runic prison circle and finish the exorcism ritual. They are aided in this task by Rukhmani's notes, Laxman's help, clues about Johann's life and personality found in the house, and interviews with others. After the characters perform the ritual, Nimuchnimurpal's corporeal form manifests before them, ready for battle.

SETTING

This adventure takes place at the Skorman family home, a two-story, ivy-covered brick house with a basement that might be found in any reasonably prosperous town. Because the adventure isn't a room-by-room exploration, the specific layout is unimportant. The only important details you should maintain are the clues found in specific locations (see "Clues and Information" later in the adventure).

GUIDANCE

This adventure appeals to players who enjoy reading, deductive reasoning, and logical thinking. The puzzles require a strong grasp of written English. However,

the adventure also features a fair amount of social interaction.

This isn't designed to be an action-packed adventure, barring the fight at the end and some ability checks here and there. Expect the players to spend time with the handouts while they discuss possible solutions with each other. Encourage them to take notes and to ask you to repeat information as needed.

Familiarize yourself with the puzzle solutions and the logic needed to get to them. This isn't an adventure you can easily run on the fly! It also helps if you print out a copy of the player handouts for yourself, so you don't need to constantly flip back and forth through the text while running the adventure. These player handouts, as well as a "GM Cheat Sheet" for keeping track of the puzzles, are provided in the "Handouts" section at the end of this article.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The following NPCs play important roles in the adventure. See the "Clues and Information" section for details on what information each NPC can share to help the characters solve the puzzles in the adventure.

EIRIK SKORMAN

(*EYE-rick, hel/him, chaotic good half-orc*)

"There's always a way. It might not be what you expect, but it's there!"

A fit, middle-aged textile merchant whose work keeps him busy, Eirik is torn between the love he holds for his son and the shame he holds for having made a deal with a devil. He visits his dead wife's ghost for comfort, though he can't ignore the horror he feels for what she has become.

Signature Look. Eirik has multiple piercings in each ear, through which he twines braids of his hair.

Personality. Eirik is gruff and practical. He's very intelligent, and speaks in short, sharp sentences.

Game Statistics. Eirik uses the noble stat block.

JOHANN SKORMAN

(*YO-haan, hel/him, lawful good half-orc*)

"Hey there! Tell me what's been exciting you lately!"

A handsome young half-orc, Johann has his life figured out. He wants to study to be a healer or surgeon, and travel with his exorcist-in-training boyfriend Laxman. Only two insecurities stand in his way: he's worried that his father won't accept his queerness, and he constantly wonders what his late mother was like before she became a shade.

Signature Look. The two small tusks emerging from Johann's lower lip are tattooed in vivid blue.

Personality. Johann is normally confident, creative, and enthusiastic about life. In the immediate aftermath of being possessed, he's groggy and confused.

Game Statistics. Johann uses the **commoner** stat block.

LAXMAN

(LUKSH-mun, he/him, lawful good tiefling)

"It's all my fault! I'm so sorry! Mistress, forgive me!"

Laxman is the diligent apprentice to famed exorcist Rukhmani the Illuminated, and thinks the world of his mentor. He's deeply in love with Johann Skorman, but has kept their relationship secret for Johann's sake. He's capable, but unused to working on his own.

Signature Look. Laxman's horns are webbed with silver chains and other dangling jewelry.

Personality. Normally studious and excited about his studies, Laxman has been thrown into shock by Johann's possession, and doubts his own capabilities.

Game Statistics. Laxman uses the **acolyte** stat block.

LEIA

(LAY-ah, she/her, lawful neutral dwarf)

"The Skormans are a good family! They've done nothing wrong!"

Leia has been the Skorman family's fiercely loyal housekeeper for decades. Her usual discretion has been put to the test by the events surrounding Johann's possession.

Signature Look. Leia is fascinated with non-gemstone rocks and wears a lot of rock jewelry.

Personality. Leia is normally shy and reserved, speaking softly without looking at people directly. When it comes to defending the Skormans, however, she grows fierce and confrontational.

Game Statistics. Leia uses the **commoner** stat block.

BIRGITTE SKORMAN

(ber-GEET-uh, she/her, unaligned human spirit)

"How lovely to have guests. Leia, bring the baby! The guests want to see him!"

This spirit is neither a true ghost nor a true remnant of Birgitte. She possesses some of Birgitte's intellect and memories, but can't hold full conversations or have original thoughts. She was created by Nimuchnimurpal with the express purpose of causing emotional pain.

Signature Look. Birgitte takes the form of a bloodred translucent image of a strong, stout human woman.

Personality. Birgitte's spirit gets distracted easily and jumps from topic to topic. She might answer questions ... sometimes.

Game Statistics. Birgitte uses the **specter** stat block.

NIMUCHNIMURPAL

(nim-UK-nim-UR-paal, they/them [unknown gender], lawful evil fiend)

"Drown your sorrows in me."

Also known as the Lord of the Tainted Seas, Nimuchnimurpal is a devil attuned to stinking and poisonous waters. Their powers are far-reaching, and the fiend loves to make deals that end with promising young souls trapped in a waterlogged layer of Hell.

Signature Look. Nimuchnimurpal takes the form of a skinny humanoid covered in fish scales, with long hair made of seaweed. Dirty water constantly drips off their body.

Personality. Nimuchnimurpal is as inscrutable to mortals as most other fiends. When speaking, they shift from vicious to incoherent to sweetly seductive without warning.

Game Statistics. This adventure is meant for all levels of play, and the combat encounter at the end is not meant to be the main focus. As such, you can pick any devil stat block with a challenge rating appropriate for Nimuchnimurpal. Then make the following changes to the stat block as you wish:

- The devil is immune to the charmed, frightened, and paralyzed conditions.
- The devil's attacks deal cold or poison damage instead of their normal damage type.
- The devil can breathe air and water and has a swimming speed equal to their walking speed.

RUKHMANI THE ILLUMINATED

(ROOKH-mun-ee, she/her, half-elf)

A tall, striking half-elf, Rukhmani was a famed exorcist who traveled far and wide to help those in need, and to further her research into demons and devils. Laxman's former mentor is now deceased, but her notes and influence play an important part in the adventure.

Signature Look. Rukhmani wore robes that resemble the multicolored marginalia of an illuminated manuscript.

STORY HOOKS

You can use the following hooks to draw the characters into the adventure, or as inspiration for hooks of your own:

- With Rukhmani and Laxman still working to save his son and dawn fast approaching, Eirik sends Leia out to fetch additional help. The old dwarf can contact the characters directly, or might have an NPC acquaintance who knows the characters and reaches out on the family's behalf.
- A priest, wizard, or other spellcaster senses the manifestation of a potent fiend in the Skorman home and asks the characters to investigate.
- Passing by the Skorman house, the characters smell incense and sulfur, and can hear screams, wild laughter, choking noises, and the sound of someone chanting coming from within. The voice is that of Rukhmani attempting to exorcise the devil just before her death.

STARTING THE ADVENTURE

However they arrive at the Skorman house, the adventure begins with the characters entering the basement, where they see Laxman standing over Rukhmani's recently murdered body and staring in shock at the possessed Johann. The apprentice exorcist doesn't notice the characters until they speak to him or otherwise grab his attention. If they offer help or ask what happened, Laxman fearfully introduces himself and reveals the following information:

- The Skormans were friends of Laxman and his mentor, Mistress Rukhmani the Illuminated. Last night, Laxman came to pay the family a visit, and Johann became possessed by a devil.

- Laxman was able to temporarily incapacitate the devil, then fetch Rukhmani.
- The two exorcists worked all night to help Johann. Rukhmani was in charge of the exorcism, and drew all the runes that are part of the prison circle. Laxman was simply doing as he was told.
- An accident occurred while Rukhmani was drawing a spell diagram connected to the runic prison circle, and the devil killed her.
- Harming Johann won't hurt the devil. Killing Johann will allow the fiend to enter the Material Plane in the flesh.

Laxman doesn't know about Eirik's devil pact or Birgitte's spirit. Additionally, he is loath to reveal the nature of his romantic relationship with Johann, because Johann asked him to keep it a secret until he was ready to tell his father.

TALKING WITH LAXMAN

Laxman feels that Rukhmani's death was his fault, and this guilt has convinced him that he can't contribute to saving Johann without making things worse. He can provide distracted suggestions or hints about the puzzles as you see fit, but won't volunteer whole answers or take other action for fear of "making another mistake and getting someone killed."

Laxman warns the characters if they're about to do something obviously foolish, such as entering or disturbing the runic prison circle, attacking Johann, or speaking to the dead Rukhmani (see the "Necromancy?" sidebar). And as the characters engage in appropriate roleplaying with the apprentice, he has more to share. See "What Laxman Knows" in the "Clues and Information" section later in the adventure.

NECROMANCY?

Rukhmani the Illuminated has many enemies, any number of which would have no qualms or difficulty with trapping her soul or reanimating her body. To prevent such occurrences, the master exorcist has undergone many magical procedures and rituals to protect her. Unfortunately, that protective magic can't distinguish between helpful or harmful attempts to revive or contact her soul.

If the characters talk about raising Rukhmani or contacting her spirit, Laxman tells them she is protected against such magic, and that attempting such tasks might have lethal consequences. A character who succeeds on a DC 17 Intelligence (Arcana) check or uses the *detect magic* spell while inspecting Rukhmani's body learns the following:

- Excluding the *wish* spell, any magic used to communicate with Rukhmani's soul or raise her body from the dead automatically fails.
- A creature that makes use of the *raise dead* spell, the *speak with dead* spell, or similar magic to target Rukhmani's body or soul takes 55 (10d10) psychic damage, gains three levels of exhaustion, and must make a DC 20 Charisma saving throw. On a failed save, the caster's soul is ripped out of their body and trapped in a secret location known only to Rukhmani (and Laxman, at your discretion).

INTERACTING WITH NIMUCHNIMURPAL

If the characters attempt to engage Nimuchnimurpal in Johann's body, the fiend laughs, hisses, and bares their teeth as they strain the young man's body into horrid contortions. These poses don't harm Johann, but are disturbing. Nimuchnimurpal might choose to speak at different points during the characters' attempts to exorcise them, as noted in "Clues and Information."

Nimuchnimurpal can't leave the runic prison circle. While bound within the circle, the fiend uses the **berserker** stat block to represent their control of Johann's body. Though unarmed, Johann is fiendishly empowered, giving him an unarmed strike attack that has a +5 bonus to hit and deals 9 (1d12 + 3) bludgeoning damage.

INTRODUCING THE PUZZLES

Following the initial conversation with Laxman, the young apprentice directs the characters to the hexagonal spell diagram painted on the floor, attached to the runic prison circle with inked lines. Laxman explains that the prison circle binds Nimuchnimurpal. Rukhmani had started to draw the runes for the spell diagram, which would power a ritual to drive Nimuchnimurpal from Johann's body and prevent the fiend from possessing anyone else for a time. During that time, Rukhmani planned to battle and destroy the devil.

Laxman shakily explains that the spell diagram contains four elements that must be completed to calibrate it for the exorcism. He says that the exorcism will expel the devil, which must then be fought no matter what, but that each section of the circle completed correctly will reduce the devil's power. Laxman knows the four elements, but doesn't know how to complete them:

- A triangle of **ejection runes** has one rune missing and must be completed in order to expel the devil from Johann's body. The runes are selected based on fundamental magical principles.
- A circle of **stabilization runes** has four key runes missing. These runes channel and direct the magic that uncouples the devil from their host. The choice of runes is determined based on situational and environmental factors.
- A formation of **anchor runes** has yet to be started. This helps hold the victim's mind in place when the fiend is

expelled from their body. The selection of these runes depends entirely on the personality, hopes, and dreams of the victim, and Rukhmani was undertaking research into Johann to select the correct runes before her demise.

- A ring of **potency runes** has been placed, but needs to be elementally balanced in order to work effectively. These runes bolster the power of the magic in the spell diagram to overcome the fiend.

The characters can work on different parts of the spell diagram puzzle in any order, simultaneously or sequentially. Once the spell diagram is complete, they need to perform an exorcism ritual. If the ritual is successful, Nimuchnimurpal appears in their true fiendish form and must be fought.

GETTING THE DOCUMENTS

After setting out the scope of the puzzles, Laxman passes the characters four documents, saying, "These are some of mine and Rukhmani's notes ... but I don't think I can finish the runes on my own ..." The documents are included at the end of this adventure as handouts that should be distributed to the players:

- Laxman's notes on ejection, used in "Puzzle 1: Ejection Runes"
- A page from a treatise on stabilization runes, used in "Puzzle 2: Stabilization Runes"
- A portion of Rukhmani's journal, used in "Puzzle 3: Anchor Runes"
- A page of Laxman's annotated homework, used in "Puzzle 4: Potency Runes"

Each of the puzzle sections provides full details on the notes given to the characters.

The diagram from the "Incomplete Runic Spell Diagram" handout should also be given to the players, though it is not a document the characters receive. Rather, the image represents the state of the incomplete spell diagram as it appears when the characters arrive in the basement. The players should write their puzzle solutions on this document.

(The diagrams in the "GM Cheat Sheet" section aren't for the players. It's a handy puzzle cheat sheet and a place for you to take notes!)

If the players are overwhelmed and don't know where to start, Laxman suggests to the characters that they begin with the ejection runes, since that section is almost complete and requires only his notes to figure out.

DOCUMENTS IN THE FICTION

When distributing the handouts, tell the players that their characters are actually handed a larger collection of papers, but that a little bit of study reveals the most relevant materials, which the handouts represent.

Additionally, the characters can be confident that the documents and the spell diagram are as correct as Laxman and Rukhmani could make them. None of the documents feature intentional errors except for the omissions that the characters and players must fill in. Laxman reaffirms that Rukhmani is—was—a celebrated exorcist not known for making mistakes.

PUZZLE 1: EJECTION RUNES

To complete the ejection runes, the characters must add a single rune to the bottom-right corner of the triangle in the spell diagram. Laxman’s notes can guide the characters toward the solution. Review the “Laxman’s Notes” handout along with the information in this section.

Though these are Laxman’s own notes, he is in a state of shock and is terrified about making another mistake. He might offer partial insights, but he can’t solve the problem for the characters.

PUZZLE 1 SOLUTION

The bhansari rune must be drawn on the bottom-right corner of the triangle.

Hints to this puzzle can be found in the basement and study, and through conversations with Laxman (see “Clues and Information”).

𐌆 Bhansari “unplug” → Mid types, psychic

Puzzle 1 solution

REASONING

Using the information in Laxman’s notes, the characters can use the following reasoning to determine the solution to the puzzle:

- The runes must always go on the vertices of the shapes. Two of the corners of the triangle already have a rune, meaning the new rune must go on the only available corner.
- The strigma rune is visible on one corner, so Nimuchnimurpal must be a “Type 4–5 Entity.”
- The riktin rune is visible, meaning the devil’s hold on Johann is entirely psychic in nature, with no physical transformation present.

As such, the bhansari rune, for mid-type entities and psychic-only infections, is the solution.

SECRET HINT

The initials “JS” appear at the bottom right of the document. This is Laxman’s idle doodling while daydreaming about his boyfriend, and serves as a clue regarding the nature of the young men’s relationship.

PENALTY FOR FAILURE

If the characters fail to place the correct ejection rune in the proper location when Nimuchnimurpal is expelled from Johann’s body (see “Battling the Devil” later in the adventure), the fiend’s power is bound imperfectly:

- If the rune was placed in the wrong location, the “Bidirectional Energetic Clash” event occurs (part of “Puzzle-Specific Events”).
- If the incorrect rune is used, Nimuchnimurpal gains the Burrowing Words action (detailed at “Puzzle-Specific Features”).

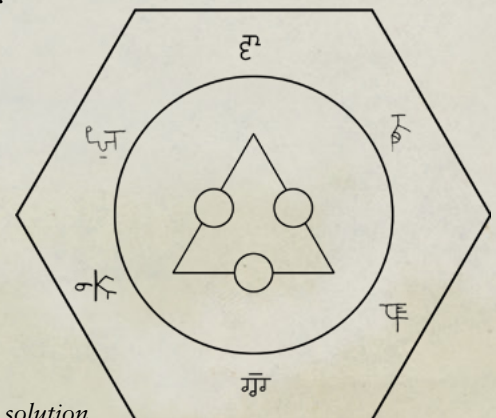
PUZZLE 2: STABILIZATION RUNES

The treatise on stabilization runes given to the characters was written by members of the Cabal of the Fragrant Truth, an order of exorcists. The characters must use the information in the treatise to place four missing stabilization runes in the spell diagram in their correct order, forming a complete circle of six runes. Review the “Treatise on Stabilization Runes” handout along with the information in this section.

PUZZLE 2 SOLUTION

The following runes should be placed outside the inner circle, starting at the top right and going clockwise:

- The stars are in liminal conjunction with the sun: thrimsan is the top right rune.
- The planes are in Roshni alignment: kauravi is the bottom right rune.
- The energetic birds are dominant over reptiles: thilmtha is the bottom left rune.
- Johann has a stigmoid constitution: vavupatna is the top left rune.



Puzzle 2 regular solution

REASONING

The treatise calls for four runes, and the only place four runes can be drawn are along the circumference of the circle. The runes must be written in clockwise order from I to IV and evenly spaced along the circumference of the circle, as described in the treatise.

The characters can determine the proper runes by making a series of ability checks, corresponding to each of the four missing runes. When a character succeeds on a check, give them the associated narrative information and let them work out the rune from there. For example, tell the players that studying the heavens shows them that the stars are in liminal conjunction with the sun, but don't directly specify that the correct rune is thrimsan.

RUNE I

A character who succeeds on a DC 15 Intelligence (Nature) or Wisdom (Survival) check knows that the stars are in liminal conjunction (an archaic astronomical pattern) with the sun.

RUNE II

A character who succeeds on a DC 15 Intelligence (Arcana) or Wisdom (Religion) check recalls lore about the Upper Planes and confirms that the planes' present alignment corresponds to what the treatise refers to as the Roshni alignment.

RUNE III

A character who succeeds on a DC 15 Intelligence (Nature) or Wisdom (Animal Handling) check knows enough about the flora in the local area to determine that energetic birds are more prevalent than reptiles.

RUNE IV

A character who succeeds on a DC 15 Intelligence (Medicine) or DC 18 Wisdom (Survival) check knows that stigmoid is an old way of classifying the particular body shape and complexion that Johann possesses.

ABILITIES AND SKILLS

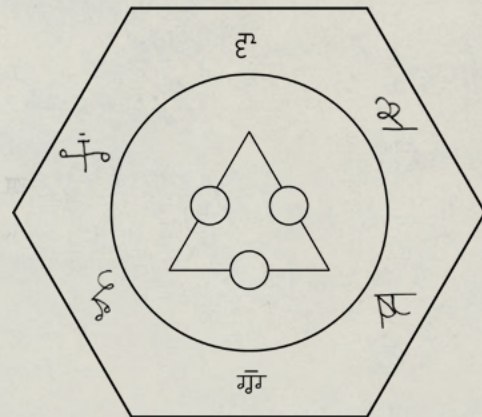
In a few places, the adventure makes use of less common combinations of abilities and skills, such as calling for Intelligence (Medicine) checks rather than the usual Wisdom (Medicine) check. This represents the unusual nature of the information tied up in different puzzles, and the different modes of thinking and observation characters might engage in to help them solve those puzzles.

ALTERNATIVE SOLUTION

If the characters don't succeed on one or more ability checks, they can guess which rune to use, or can use the table of simpler runes in the treatise. If the characters don't realize this on their own, point it out to a character of your choice with a suitable academic or magical background. Using the simpler glyphs is less risky than getting the rune wrong, but less potent than getting the rune correct.

Use the following guidelines if the characters make use of the simpler runes:

- In clockwise order, the solution using only the simpler glyphs is I: atyavasam, II: bhilma, III: riptu, and IV: svangetharumna.
- The characters can mix and match the regular and simpler runes.
- For each simpler rune used, Nimuchnimurpal gains one use of the Novice Errors bonus action (see "Puzzle-Specific Features" in "Battling the Devil").



Puzzle 2 alternative solution

PENALTY FOR FAILURE

Making any mistakes in the placement of the stabilization runes means the energy of the final ritual flares out of control at the end of the exorcism, granting Nimuchnimurpal an edge in the "Battling the Devil" section:

- If an incorrect stabilization rune is placed, the "Unstable Magic" event occurs (part of "Puzzle-Specific Events").
- If any rune is drawn in the wrong order or in the wrong place, Nimuchnimurpal gains the Explosive Arcana trait (detailed at "Puzzle-Specific Features").

RECONFIGURING PUZZLE 2

The information the characters gain from the ability checks in puzzle 2 is arbitrary, and you can swap the runes as you see fit. For instance, if your campaign takes place in a swampy environment where reptiles are dominant, you can decide that the correct placement for rune III is actually the shamrani rune.

PUZZLE 3: ANCHOR RUNES

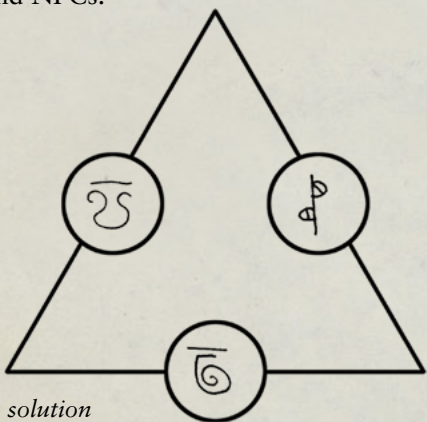
The characters must use Rukhmani's journal to fill in all three missing anchor runes in the spell diagram. Those anchor runes prevent psychic harm to Johann when Nimuchnimurpal is expelled from his body. Review "Rukhmani's Journal" handout along with the information in this section.

In addition to the journal, the characters need to determine three of Johann's main hopes, dreams, or desires in life to complete this puzzle. They can do so by searching Johann's room or talking to his family (see the "Clues and Information" section).

PUZZLE 3 SOLUTION

The solution to puzzle 3 is the "warmth of companionship" rune, the "reconnect with one's family or history" rune, and the "ease the suffering of others" rune. These three runes can be placed in the empty circles along the sides of the inner triangle in any order.

Hints to this puzzle can be found in the basement, Johann's bedroom, and the master bedroom, and through conversations with Leia, Laxman, and Eirik. See the "Clues and Information" section for details on those areas and NPCs.



Puzzle 3 solution

REASONING

From what they learn in the "Clues and Information" section and by using the "Rukhmani's Journal" handout, the players and characters can make the following deductions:

- According to Rukhmani's journal, the anchor runes must be placed in the small circles along the edges of the triangle. They can be placed in any order.
- Johann's relationship with Laxman is important to him, and he keeps it secret from his father. Learning this from Laxman should lead characters to the rune representing warmth of companionship.
- Johann misses and wants to know more about his mother. Searching Johann's bedroom or speaking with Eirik or Leia should lead the characters to the rune representing reconnecting with one's family or history.
- Johann has a passion for medicine and wishes to become a healer or surgeon. Searching Johann's bedroom or speaking with Leia should lead the characters to the rune representing the easing of others' suffering.
- Johann is bad with money and there's no sense that wealth is important to him, pointing away from the rune representing the power of wealth. The characters can learn this by speaking with Eirik.
- The characters find no indication that Johann seeks solitude, and can learn by speaking with Leia that he has known much loneliness in his life. This points away from the rune representing solitude.
- The characters' investigations reveal no indication that pain (either receiving or inflicting it) is a part of Johann's goals, pointing away from the rune representing the sting of pain.

PENALTY FOR FAILURE

Failing to place the three correct runes in any order gives Nimuchnimurpal an edge in the "Battling the Devil" section. The devil gains one use of the Echoes of Johann bonus action (see "Puzzle-Specific Features" later in the adventure), and increases the potency of that action for each incorrect or missing rune.

PUZZLE 4: POTENCY RUNES

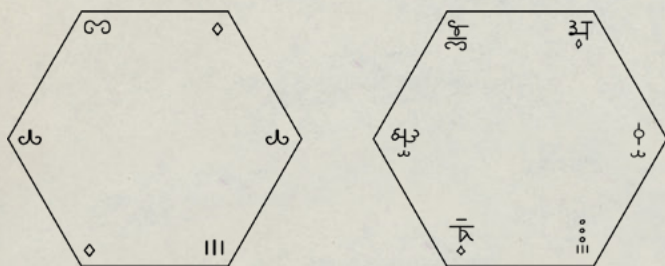
The characters must use Laxman’s annotated homework to add three diacritic (accent) glyphs to the existing runes in the hexagon of the spell diagram. The diacritics elementally balance the potency runes, which are used to bolster the spell diagram’s magic. Review the “Laxman’s Annotated Homework” handout along with the information in this section.

You can have Laxman offer the characters vague clues in this section, but he’s too distressed to lend real assistance.

PUZZLE 4 SOLUTION

The characters need to add specific diacritics below runes that have none by referencing Laxman’s annotated homework. The solution is depicted below, with the left side showing just the diacritics (including the ones that already exist on the diagram), while the right shows the complete solution.

Hints to this puzzle can be found by exploring the basement, the study, and the master bedroom (see “Clues and Information”).



Puzzle 4 solution; diacritics only on the left, full solution on the right

REASONING

From what they learn in the “Clues and Information” section and in the “Laxman’s Annotated Homework” handout, the players and characters can gain the following information:

- The potency runes correspond to the outer hexagon of the spell diagram.
- Each rune must have a diacritic—an accent mark that helps balance the rune. Normally, diacritics opposite each other must have opposite elemental values. Laxman’s solution shows that earth opposes air, fire opposes water, and void opposes itself.
- An exception arises when the entity being exorcised is elementally attuned. By speaking with Nimuchnimurpal in the basement, noting the presence of poison-tainted water in the runic prison circle,

reading the pamphlet in the study, or conversing with Birgitte’s spirit in the master bedroom, the characters can deduce that the fiend is attuned to water.

- Because Nimuchnimurpal is elementally attuned to water, the diagram must have a dominant fire charge. As such, instead of opposing the existing fire diacritic on the left side of the hexagon with a water diacritic, the right side of the diagram must take a second fire diacritic.



To maintain an overall fire charge, use a fire diacritic instead of water.

PENALTY FOR FAILURE

Any incorrect or missing diacritic leaves the potency runes unbalanced. During the “Battling the Devil” section, the “Fury of the Tainted Seas” event occurs (part of “Puzzle-Specific Events”).

CLUES AND INFORMATION

The characters can obtain clues to help them solve the puzzles from the NPCs in the house, and by investigating certain rooms. If the characters want to explore rooms not described here, make it clear that a thorough search of other areas reveals nothing useful.

BASEMENT

The normal clutter of this dingy basement has been pushed to the walls to leave the floor clear. The runic prison circle and the runic spell diagram have been drawn at the center of the floor, with Nimuchnimurpal trapped within the circle.

Water in the Circle. The runic prison circle contains a puddle of liquid that laps against the edges of the circle but can’t escape. With a successful DC 10 Wisdom (Nature) check, a character knows this is water tainted with poison (see puzzle 4).

Johann’s Contortions. A character who succeeds on a DC 10 Intelligence (Medicine) check or a DC 12 Wisdom (Perception) check while watching Johann’s body writhing and twisting under the devil’s control confirms that even as his muscles, ligaments, and tendons are strained to their limits, there are no signs that he’s been physically transformed by fiendish magic (see puzzle 1).

Fiendish Challenge. A character who succeeds on a DC 15 Intelligence (Arcana) check or a DC 18 Intelligence (Investigation) check can tell that the devil is

elementally attuned in some way, and that any mistakes in the spell diagram might give the fiend access to potent elemental magic after it is exorcised (see puzzle 4).

Once the characters start adding any runes to the spell diagram, Nimuchnimurpal threatens the characters and the Skorman family, with all those threats tied to the theme of water (see puzzle 4). You can use the following threats or create your own:

- “I will drown you in the infernal rivers!”
- “The boy will sink to the depths and forever be mine!”
- “Like the tides and the currents, I am inexorable!”
- “You think you can dampen my power?”
- “I will drain every last drop of your sweet mortal blood, then swim in it!”

Once Nimuchnimurpal starts speaking, if asked anything about Johann or their own motivations, the devil talks of the young man’s vulnerable emotional state (see puzzle 3). “The boy is so ripe, so delicious! Already I can feed on his emotions. His secret longings, his yearning to connect with his poor dead mother ... scrumptious!” If any character talks about the Skorman family after Nimuchnimurpal starts speaking, the devil cackles and says, “Why don’t you ask the mother upstairs?”

STUDY

The study is a neat room containing a large bookshelf, a desk, and a wall hanging made of numerous patches of different textile materials sewn together (a sampling of some of Eirik’s wares).

Notable Works. Characters who search the bookshelf find a small collection of scrolls collecting ghost stories and hauntings, including an eyewitness account by a man who lost his wife and was soon haunted by her.

The Devil’s Work. Also on the bookshelf is an old handwritten pamphlet titled *The Calling of a Great Duke of Helle*. This is the text Eirik first used nearly two decades ago to make his pact with Nimuchnimurpal. (The work is normally hidden away, but Eirik has been going through it in a futile attempt to find information that might help save his son.)

While the writing is in an archaic style, the pamphlet’s purpose is clear. It contains general but highly inaccurate information about devils, along with a very functional ritual to summon Nimuchnimurpal (though the devil is certainly no duke of Hell). The ritual makes frequent references to “Tainted Waters,” offering a useful clue in solving puzzle 4.

A character who studies the pamphlet can attempt a DC 12 Intelligence (Arcana or Religion) check. On a success, by using the information in the pamphlet and that found in the “Laxman’s Notes” handout, the

character knows that Nimuchnimurpal is likely an entity of middling power according to Rukhmani’s classification scheme (see puzzle 1).

If the check is 18 or higher, the character can modify the exorcism ritual to limit Nimuchnimurpal’s power in the “Battling the Devil” section later in the adventure, removing one use of a random benefit the devil gains from the “Puzzle-Specific Power” section as a result of a mistake in one of the puzzles.

JOHANN’S BEDROOM

Johann’s messy bedroom features a plain bed and writing desk, and has books, clothes, and other objects strewn everywhere.

Art Appreciation. A framed sketch of a mountain landscape hangs on one wall. Anyone inspecting the sketch sees that the back of the frame features another piece of art—a detailed woodcut of a nude male humanoid. (This is a hint about Johann’s queerness, for puzzle 3.)

On another wall is a small, framed portrait of a smiling young woman—Birgitte, Johann’s mother. The glass protecting the portrait is covered in fingerprints, as though handled often (see puzzle 3).

Missing Mother. A character who searches Johann’s clothes discovers a child’s drawing of two adults and a child. One of the adults, a woman with a lily drawn over her head, is drawn apart from the other two figures. The child wears a sad expression. Through guesswork or a successful DC 10 Wisdom (Insight) check, a character discerns that the drawing is an expression of the artist’s sadness about a mother figure (see puzzle 3).

Reading Material. Searching through the books scattered across the room turns up a volume on medicine titled *White’s Anatomy*, into which is tucked a handwritten list of local herbs and their healing properties (see puzzle 3).

MASTER BEDROOM

The master bedroom door is locked, and can be opened only with the key held by Eirik or a successful DC 10 Dexterity check using thieves’ tools. On a failed check, the lock opens but its mechanism irreparably breaks with a clank loud enough to draw Leia from elsewhere in the house.

As soon as any character enters the room, Birgitte’s spirit manifests as a bloodred ghostly apparition and introduces herself as the lady of the house. Most of what the spirit has to offer are fragmented memories that make no sense, and she ignores most questions as the characters interact with her.

The Spirit Speaks. Asking Birgitte about Nimuchnimurpal prompts the following response: “I can’t speak of the Lord of the Tainted Seas, for their grip on me is as strong as the deepest currents!” (See puzzle 4.)

Asking Birgitte anything about her son causes her to say, “Johann has grown into such a self-assured young man! So much like his father ... but he is no merchant. He has different ambitions ... ” (See puzzle 3.)

Corrupted Entity. Observing Birgitte’s spirit allows any character to make a DC 10 Intelligence (Arcana) check. On a success, a character gleans that the apparition is a strange, corrupt entity holding only a piece of Birgitte’s soul.

If the characters know of Eirik’s deal with Nimuchnimurpal, a successful DC 15 Wisdom (Religion) check suggests that banishing Birgitte’s spirit by defeating that spirit in combat would weaken Nimuchnimurpal. If the spirit (which uses the **specter** stat block) is defeated, Nimuchnimurpal loses one-quarter of their hit points upon being exorcised (see “Battling the Devil” later in the adventure).

QUEST BEDROOM

The guest bedroom is clean and sparse, but any quick inspection reveals that someone sleeps here regularly. The sheets are well used, and a cuddly stuffed toy in the shape of an orc warrior is hidden under the pillow. Beneath the bed, a few scattered folders hold documents relating to textile trading. Through guesswork or a successful DC 10 Intelligence (Insight) check, a character knows that Eirik has been sleeping here.

LEIA’S SECRETS

The housekeeper Leia is a loyal servant, but somewhat superstitious. In the aftermath of Johann being possessed, she is terrified for the young man, who she knows has a secret relationship with Laxman. When first speaking with the characters, she tries to remain tight-lipped, but reveals the following information with appropriate roleplaying or a successful DC 13 Charisma (Intimidation or Persuasion) check:

- If asked about Johann, Leia says that he was always a sweet, friendly child who wanted to learn about and help everyone. At eight years old, he once brought home an injured bird and tried to repair its wing! (See puzzle 3.)
- If asked about Birgitte, the housekeeper speaks of how Johann has often been lonely due to the amount of time Eirik devotes to his work. She believes the young man would have benefitted from having another parent (see puzzle 3).

- If asked about Laxman and Johann, Leia admits to an inkling that the young men’s relationship might have “a deeper dimension than what most people might think” (see puzzle 3).
- If the gravity of Johann’s condition and possible fate is impressed upon her, Leia lets slip that Laxman must be devastated, as any lover would be (see puzzle 3).
- If the characters make it clear that any information about the Skormans might be useful in helping Johann, Leia mentions that visiting the master bedroom might reveal secrets about the devil, but she begs the characters not to tell Eirik she gave them this information.

WHAT LAXMAN KNOWS

Though Laxman remains overwhelmed by fear and uncertainty throughout the adventure, any character who helps him focus with appropriate roleplaying or a successful DC 14 Charisma (Intimidation or Persuasion) check can learn the following:

- If asked about Johann, Laxman rhapsodizes at length about how wonderful he was, before catching himself and mumbling something about being best friends. He says he admired Johann, who seemed to really “know himself.” He is adamant that Johann would “never hurt a fly,” and talks of how disturbing it is to see him possessed in this violent way (see puzzle 3).
- Laxman doesn’t want to reveal the secret nature of his relationship with Johann. Only if pressed about it in the context of Johann’s life being in danger does the young exorcist confess that the two are romantic partners. He speaks of how the relationship has been weighing on Johann’s mind recently, not because he was unsure of himself, but because he was worried about what his father would think. The two had recently spoken of their plans to travel together after Laxman’s apprenticeship ended (see puzzle 3).
- If asked about Nimuchnimurpal, Laxman says he doesn’t know a lot. He’s never worked on an exorcism where the possessor’s hold on the victim has been entirely psychic (see puzzle 1).
- If asked about Rukhmani’s research, Laxman admits that it’s well beyond his understanding, but that people often overlooked the important footnotes in Rukhmani’s writing (see puzzle 3).

EIRIK’S INSIGHTS

Eirik Skorman is focused entirely on saving his son, but the shame he feels for what happened to Birgitte weighs heavy on him. He shares any the following information if questioned by the characters:

- Eirik says nothing about his wife and grows visibly upset if asked about her, saying, “I don’t want to talk

about the pain of the past.” He admits that not having a second parent has been hard on Johann because of how busy Eirik is with his work and other responsibilities. Any character who succeeds on a DC 12 Wisdom (Insight) check can tell that Eirik is hiding something more than just pain when he speaks of Birgitte.

- If confronted about the spirit in the master bedroom, Eirik breaks down crying. He confesses everything about the deal with Nimuchnimurpal (detailed in “The Story So Far” section at the beginning of the adventure), and speaks of the old pamphlet in his study that he used to first summon the devil.
- If asked how he feels about Birgitte’s spirit, Eirik admits that he doesn’t like being around the specter, but that Johann often visited the master bedroom in fruitless attempts to learn about his mother (see puzzle 3).
- If asked about his son, Eirik mentions fondly that Johann has “no head for money,” and won’t follow him in the family textile business. Instead, he studies with the local healers, learning their trade (see puzzle 3).
- Eirik knows about Johann and Laxman’s relationship, but hasn’t wanted to pressure his son into revealing that relationship before he’s ready. If the characters either reveal that they know about it, or if they stress that they need to know Johann’s secrets, Eirik tells them that he knows Laxman was very important to Johann, especially since he had few friends his age and no mother (see puzzle 3).

ENACTING THE EXORCISM RITUAL

When the characters decide that the spell diagram is complete, Laxman regains some of his confidence and offers to help in performing the exorcism ritual. He burns incense, makes arcane gestures, and pronounces a long incantation for his part in the ritual, even as each character attempts a specific action meant to lend some part of themselves to the magic being enacted.

The action a character undertakes could involve a gesture, a sound or benediction, the use of some component, or even a mental visualization of an image. Go around the group and ask each player a question that corresponds to their character’s class, as shown on the Ritual Actions table. For multiclass characters, you decide which question to ask. Award inspiration for each answer.

RITUAL ACTIONS

CLASS	RITUAL QUESTION
Barbarian	What visual image representing the devil leaving Johann's body do you concentrate on?
Bard	What haunting rhythm or melody do you produce?
Beastheart	What animalistic sound do you make?
Cleric	What is the invocation you send to the gods?
Druid	What animalistic gesture do you enact?
Fighter	What defensive motions do you perform?
Illrigger	What visions of horror do you focus on?
Monk	What images of stability do you imagine?
Paladin	What gesture of strength do you make with your weapons?
Ranger	What offering of nature do you place into the spell diagram?
Rogue	What gesture of dismissal or disdain do you perform?
Sorcerer	How do your eyes change momentarily?
Talent	What feeling that's difficult to put into one word do you infuse into the ritual?
Warlock	What words are forced out of your mouth?
Wizard	What does the glowing pattern you trace in the air look like?

When the ritual is concluded, Johann releases a mighty scream. Fetid water streams out of his eyes, ears, nose, and mouth, coalescing into the form of the devil Nimuchnimurpal. The young man then collapses, unconscious.

BATTLING THE DEVIL

When Nimuchnimurpal appears in the flesh, the fiend screams curses at the characters and attacks. Laxman rushes to Johann’s unconscious body, dragging him upstairs and to safety as the fight rages. Having had their plans destroyed by the characters, the devil no longer focuses on either of the young men.

Based on how well the characters did at solving the puzzles, the battle could kick off with any of a number of puzzle-specific events, even as Nimuchnimurpal gains puzzle-specific features.

PUZZLE-SPECIFIC EVENTS

As a result of mistakes made while solving the puzzles, the following events might occur at the start of the battle.

BIDIRECTIONAL ENERGETIC CLASH

Placing a rune in the wrong location in puzzle 1 triggers this event, which causes an explosion of arcane energy to burst out of Nimuchnimurpal as the devil exits Johann's body. Each creature in the basement except Nimuchnimurpal and Johann must make a DC 15 Strength saving throw. On a failed save, the creature is knocked prone and can do only one of the following on their next turn: move, take an action, or take a bonus action.

FURY OF THE TAINTED SEAS

Making any mistake in puzzle 4 triggers this event, causing the tainted water within the runic prison circle to splash out. Four 5-foot-square puddles form on the ground in the basement in locations of your choice. Each puddle is difficult terrain, and a creature that enters a puddle for the first time on a turn or starts its turn there must succeed on a DC 15 Constitution saving throw or be poisoned until the end of its next turn.

UNSTABLE MAGIC

Placing an incorrect stabilization rune in puzzle 2 triggers this event, causing the spell diagram to warp magic in the basement. At the start of each round during the fight, randomly choose a spell from the Unstable Magic table (or randomly select any cantrip or 1st-level spell from the wizard's spell list). That spell is cast as if originating from Nimuchnimurpal, though no components are needed, no actions are spent, and the devil can still cast other spells on their turn.

Spells with an area of effect are automatically placed to maximize the number of characters affected by them, while single-target spells affect one character at random. Spells have a spell attack bonus of +5 and a spell save DC of 15. If a spell would normally require concentration, it instead lasts until the start of the next round.

UNSTABLE MAGIC

d6	SPELL
1	<i>Acid splash</i>
2	<i>Burning hands</i>
3	<i>Fog cloud</i>
4	<i>Grease</i>
5	<i>Magic missile</i>
6	<i>Poison spray</i>

PUZZLE-SPECIFIC FEATURES

As a result of mistakes made while solving the puzzles, Nimuchnimurpal might gain the following features at the start of the battle.

BURROWING WORDS

The devil gains the following action option if an incorrect rune is placed during puzzle 1:

Burrowing Words. Nimuchnimurpal chooses one Humanoid they can see within 120 feet of them, which must succeed on a DC 15 Charisma saving throw or be charmed by Nimuchnimurpal for 24 hours. While charmed in this way, the target regards Nimuchnimurpal as a trusted friend to be heeded and protected, and they follow Nimuchnimurpal's orders to the best of their ability even if doing so puts them in harm's way.

Each time a charmed target takes damage, they can repeat the saving throw, ending the condition on themselves on a success. The effect also ends if Nimuchnimurpal is destroyed, on a different plane of existence than the target, or uses a bonus action to end it.

Nimuchnimurpal can have only one target charmed in this way at a time.

EXPLOSIVE ARCANA

Nimuchnimurpal gains the following trait if the characters place any rune in the wrong order or in the wrong place while solving puzzle 2:

Explosive Arcana. Whenever Nimuchnimurpal succeeds on a saving throw against a spell or whenever a spell attack misses them, the fiend unravels the spell's magic and forcefully sends it back against the caster. The creature that cast the spell must succeed on a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw or be pushed back 15 feet in a direction of Nimuchnimurpal's choice. If the creature collides with a wall or a heavy object, they immediately end their movement and take 1d4 bludgeoning damage. Additionally, a creature that fails the save can do only one of the following on their next turn: move, take an action, or take a bonus action.

NOVICE ERRORS

For each simpler rune used in puzzle 2, the devil gains one use of the following bonus action:

Novice Errors. Nimuchnimurpal exploits their foes' mistakes, gaining advantage on the next attack roll they make before the end of their next turn.

ECHOES OF JOHANN

With any incorrect or missing rune in puzzle 3, the devil gains the following bonus action, whose potency increases for each incorrect or missing rune:

Echoes of Johann. Nimuchnimurpal summons two **lemures** for each incorrect or missing rune in puzzle 3, which appear in unoccupied spaces within 60 feet of the devil. Each lemure looks exactly like Johann, except for one mutation from the Echo Mutations table. The lemures take their turns immediately after Nimuchnimurpal each round, pleading for their lives in a mockery of Johann's voice while attacking Nimuchnimurpal's foes.

ECHO MUTATIONS

d8	ECHO MUTATIONS
1	One eye is replaced by a miniature, fully formed human hand.
2	A second face resembling Laxman grows on the echo's stomach.
3	The echo's teeth are replaced by fingernails.
4	The echo has a skeletal lower jaw.
5	The echo's knees and elbows bend backward.
6	The echo constantly drools and weeps fetid water.
7	The echo shows off a long, barbed tongue.
8	Both of the echo's eyes are replaced by hissing cockroaches.

AFTERMATH

Saving Johann's life earns the characters the Skormans' undying gratitude. Eirik rewards the party with a *spell scroll of enhance ability*. For a relatively high-level party, he also offers a *cloak of displacement* he was planning to sell. Leia offers the characters a peculiar magic rock she collected a long time ago, which can be shattered as an action to produce the same effect as drinking a *potion of invulnerability*.

If Birgitte's spirit hasn't already been banished, defeating Nimuchnimurpal results in the spirit vanishing forever. Eirik accepts that laying his late wife's spirit to rest is for the best, and eventually moves back into the master bedroom.

After the harrowing ordeal, Laxman and Johann reveal the nature of their relationship to Eirik, who is perfectly supportive. Johann's father welcomes Laxman into the family and offers him a permanent place in the Skorman house. He even offers to have a family portrait of himself and the two young men painted, but is quickly discouraged by his embarrassed son.

Laxman and Johann decide to travel together to one of the great cities, with plans for Johann to become a healer or surgeon while Laxman continues his studies as an exorcist. Perhaps the pair will cross paths with the heroes again someday?

MODIFYING THE ADVENTURE

As the GM, you can adjust elements of this adventure to best suit your group.

DIFFICULTY LEVEL

If you'd like to add more combat or to lengthen this adventure, you can make one or more of the following changes:

- Birgitte uses the **ghost** or **wraith** stat block.
- The characters must defeat Birgitte before they can glean any information from her, with the broken spirit continuing to manifest long enough to speak to the characters.
- When the characters first enter the basement, Laxman's attempts to help Johann fail dramatically, allowing Nimuchnimurpal to summon other devils appropriate for an initial hard encounter.

If you want to make the puzzle elements easier or faster, consider the following changes:

- Leia and Eirik are more talkative, and more likely to give hints and information.
- Laxman recovers somewhat from his state of shock, and can provide the characters with hints to the puzzles as needed.
- If the players are stumped, a character can place a correct rune in a puzzle with a successful DC 15 Intelligence check. Be careful about allowing this more than once or twice!

SENSITIVE CONTENT

If your table would rather not discuss issues of child-birth-related death, alter the fiction so that Birgitte died months after Johann was born, killed by a wasting disease caused by Nimuchnimurpal's magic. In this scenario, Eirik might feel his wife's loss even more keenly having watched her waste away over long months—a cruelty that would no doubt bring the devil pleasure.

If you'd rather not include themes of heteronormativity and family secrets at the table, you can use one of these ideas instead:

- Eirik is a strict parent who believes that Johann is still too young to have any sort of romantic relationship—perhaps because he has inklings of what Nimuchnimurpal's deal might mean for Johann.

- Rukhmani has forbidden Laxman from having any distracting relationship, and it's Laxman who wants to keep everything secret. Guilt over Rukhmani's death prevents Laxman from easily sharing the truth with the characters.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

BIAS AND OPPRESSION IN FANTASY WORLDS

People engage in fantasies and games for many different reasons. Sometimes, we simply need an escape from our current reality. We don't want to be reminded of real-world oppressive forces in our games. When playing in this way, the key thing to remember is that not including certain topics is also a political choice. It's good practice to try to be aware of what you are and aren't including in your game!

Other times, we want to feel powerful in the face of real-world oppression. For some players, confronting real-world inequalities can be meaningful and validating. (I've [written about that](#) for *Nerve*.) Still other players seek out games as a means to explore questions of identity and society. Sometimes, we *want* to seek out parallels to the real world in order to better understand our relationships to real-world issues.

"Puzzling Out The Devil" includes themes of queer people hiding the truth about their sexuality. Queerness is not the central theme of this adventure, but it is an important one. It motivates NPCs, giving shape to their desires, to their backstories, to their personalities. I deliberately included such themes to allow the stories created

at the gaming table to have more nuance, for characters to be more well rounded. Additionally, I'm a gay artist. I want my artwork to reflect issues I find important, and to ask my audiences to confront the fact that these issues exist.

Discuss with your players that such themes exist in this adventure. Don't be afraid of "getting it wrong." As I wrote for Camdon Wright's thoughtful RPG *One Child's Heart*, everyone makes mistakes when playing characters from communities outside their own, and "what's important is to remember that identities are important, to be aware of your own biases, to recognize one's own mistakes and ignorances, and basically, to treat people as people."

It might be helpful to use various calibration tools (sometimes called "safety tools") when running this adventure. In addition to the MCDM Tabletop Safety Toolkit, Kienna Shaw and Lauren Bryant-Monk have produced an excellent compilation of popular tools called the [Tabletop Safety Toolkit](#). If your table is uncomfortable discussing or including such issues in your game, that's fine! I've included ways you can modify the adventure, and you're absolutely free to make any other changes you see fit.

EXTRA RESOURCES

If you'd like to read more about the thoughts in this author's note, I recommend these resources:

- [On the Importance of Queer Romances—Role-play as Exploration and Performance of Sexuality](#) by Tanja Sihvonon and Jaakko Stenros
- [Wyrding the Self](#) by Jonaya Kemper
- [Playing with Eros](#) by Maury Brown

—Sharang Biswas

EJECTION

- Process of removing an external entity from a host
- Always try simple spells first. If they fail, use runic diagrams
- Basic but reliable: Trikala triangle formation

Type

ॐ	Shilbi	Types 1-3 Entities	
ॐ	Strigma	Types 4-5 Entities	
?	OmkaSha	Types 6-9 Entities	V. dangerous

Runes ALWAYS go on VERTICES of the shapes

Otherwise, "Bidirectional Energetic Clash"

Hold on Victim

ॐ	Riktin	Entirely psychic hold on the victim
ॐ	Aloman	Psychic hold with physical protuberances
ॐ	Prabhasana	Anatomical transformation of victim

Modify with Pushpuran verses for rare transformational

- ॐ Channitam "unravel" → Lower types, physical
- ॐ Silphil "unspool" → Mid Types, physical
- ॐ Bhansari "unglue" → Mid types, psychic
- ॐ Ighdam "unalturate" → Higher types, psychic
- ॐ Limtihaan "unbind" → Higher types, physical
- ॐ Sovam "undo" → Higher types, transformational

ॐ

On the Stabilization of Common Patterns of Magical Flow as Recorded by the Cabal of the Fragrant Truth

...six-fold the spell must be stabilized, and the glyphs arrayed evenly about the circumference of a ring of power that may enclose other workings.

Two master glyphs, which shall not be discussed in this treatise, will take prime positions about the ring, aligned to the north and to the south.

For the other glyphs, proceed clockwise from the upper master glyph, with two glyphs between each master glyph and preserving the order of external conditions that I have thusly laid out:

I. If the current heavenly configuration has the stars in liminal conjunction with the sun, make use of the sign of thrimsan. If the stars are not arrayed in such a way, instead use the sign of thamrani.

II. The runeworker must be familiar indeed with the current state of the Upper Planes during the time of casting. Whether the planes are in the alignment of Roshni or in the alignment of Andher is vital to know. If the former, they must apply the glyph of kauravi, and if the latter, the glyph of anra.









III. The temperament of the fauna of the region often produces vibrations that interact with such magic, for the mark of shamrani most befits regions where sluggish reptiles dominate, while the mark of thilmtha is appropriate where energetic birds are more common.

IV. Finally, one must make a thorough study of the body shape and complexion configuration of the afflicted person. The marks of bhanu and polma are necessary here. Polma cannot be used unless the afflicted's constitution can reasonably be described as humaceous. For stigmoid or eltrograde constitutions, a wise practitioner should instead employ vavupatna.

If these external conditions cannot be ascertained, a simpler array of glyphs may be used to achieve stabilization, though the efficacy of stabilization will be significantly reduced.

TREATISE ON STABILIZATION RUNES (CONTINUED)

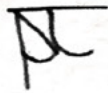
Common Glyphs for Stabilization of Magical Energies, listed in standard Chandrakala order

	Thamrani
	Shamrani
	Polma
	Thilmtha
	Thrimsan
	Anra
	Vavupatna
	Kauravi

Simpler glyphs, when external conditions cannot be ascertained, in order of external factors described previously



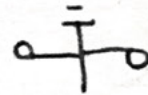
Atyavasam



Bhilma









Riptu



Svangetherumna

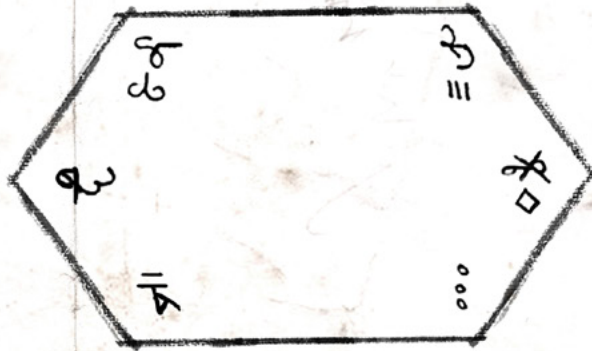
There is very little scholarship on how the psychological makeup of the possessed individual affects how they must be treated. My experience has shown that to prevent lasting mental trauma in the victim, anchoring runes keyed to the victim's hopes, dreams, and desires should be placed between the ejection runes, along the sides of the triangle traced by the runes. I have compiled here the fruits of my research, runes of my own invention that correspond to various human emotional needs. One must select the few that strongly match the victim's wants and goals.

My research has not yet discovered a significance to the order in which the runes are placed within the triangle. Currently, I believe that the order is unimportant.

	"The warmth of companionship"
	"To reconnect with one's history or family"
	"The sting of pain, inflicted without judgment"
	"To ease the suffering of others"
	"The glamor and power of wealth"
	"Solitude far from civilization"

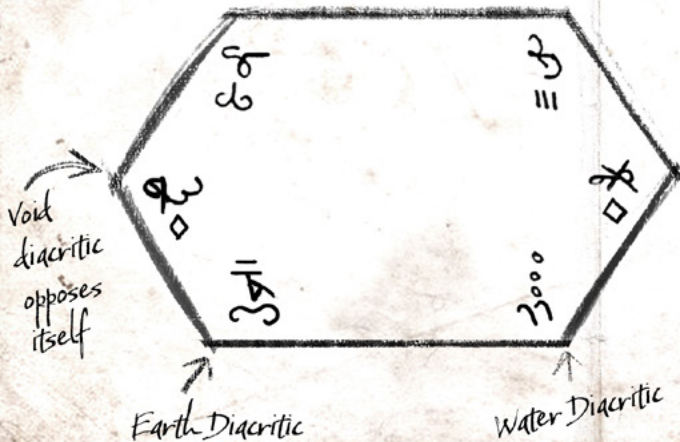
Laxman,
 While I'm gone, I'd like you to practice elemental
 balance of your rune diagrams. You've been sloppy lately.
 You must think and work like a scholar!

Balance the following
 runic diagram.
 (Don't try casting them.
 They're only potency
 runes, but still.)



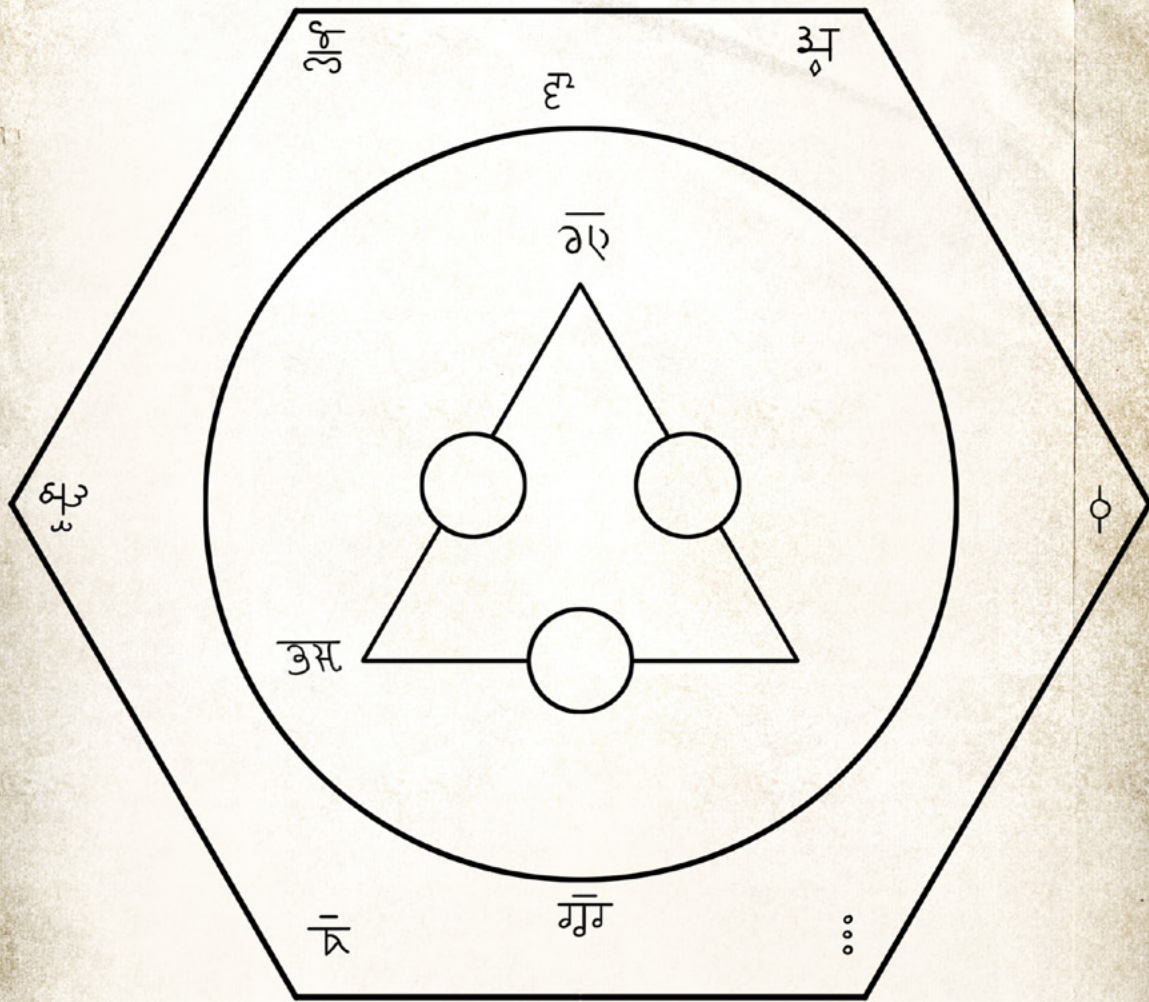
- 1) Potency runes bolster the power of exorcism magic
 - 2) They must be elementally charged with diacritics below them
 - 3) Opposite vertices must have opposing elemental charges in order to be balanced
- The finished diagram would look like this

Element	Diacritic
E	☿
F	♃
A	≡
W	♁
V	♄



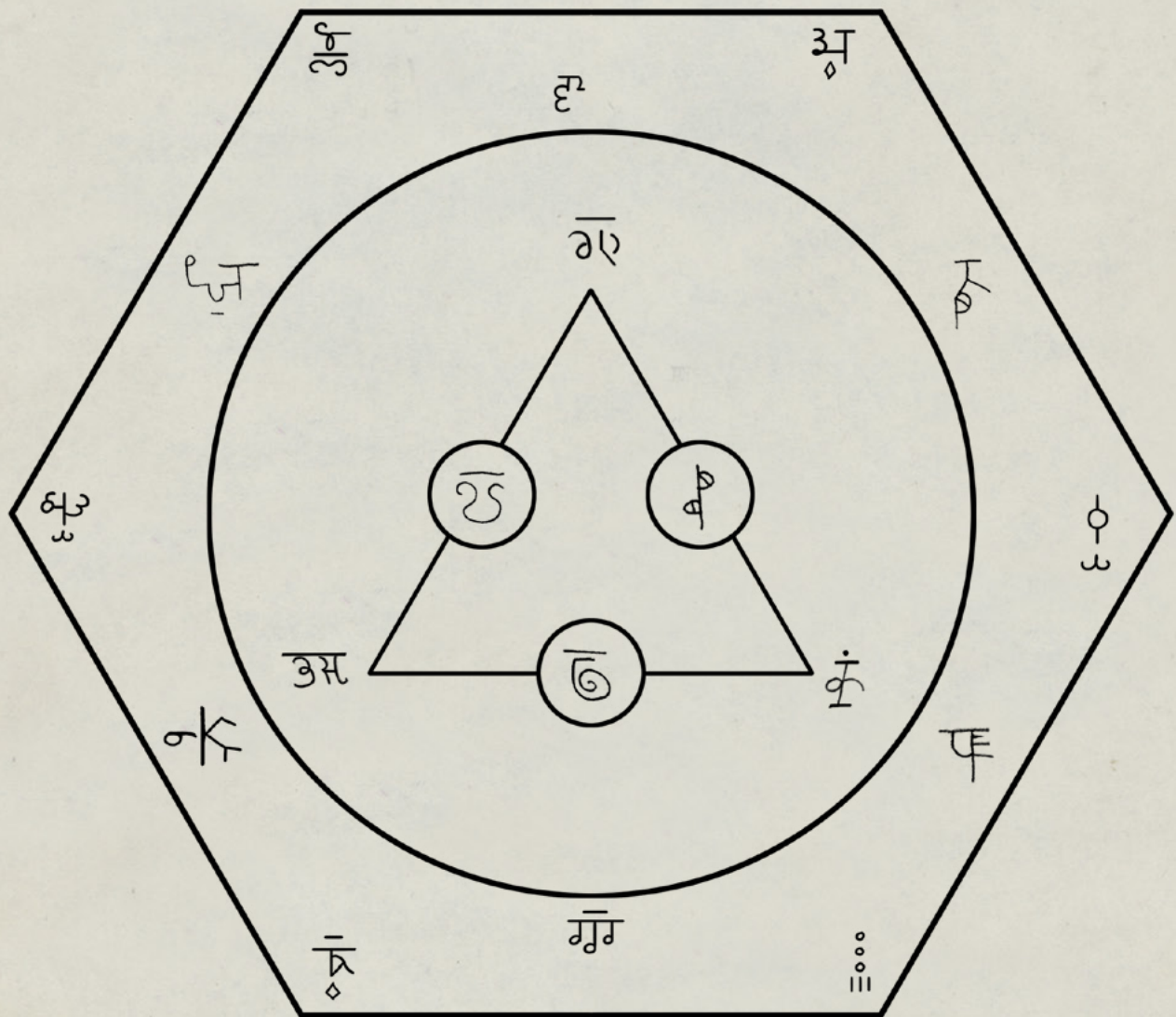
Note 1: there is no associated fiend mentioned hence opposing vertices must all balance, BUT for elementally attuned entities, the diagram must have a dominant charge that opposes the entity's attunement.

INCOMPLETE RUNIC SPELL DIAGRAM




Complete Runic Spell Diagram

Note: This Runic Spell Diagram is not the same as the prison circle! The devil is trapped within the prison circle, whose runes are not part of the puzzle. This spell diagram was added later, and attached to the prison circle to allow for the exorcism to take place.



Puzzle Solutions

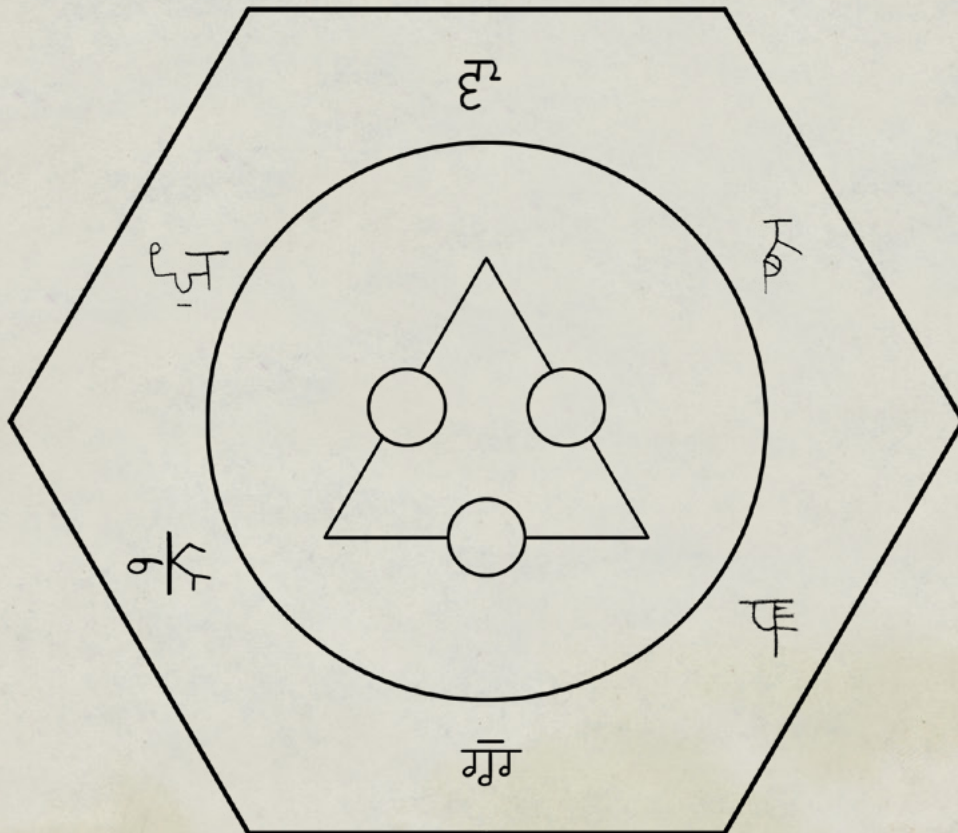
Puzzle Part 1: the “Bhansari” rune drawn on the bottom-right corner of the triangle.

 Bhansari “unglue” → Mid types, psychic

A rune in the wrong location triggers the “Bidirectional Energetic Clash” event.
Use of an incorrect rune grants Nimuchnimurpal the Burrowing Words action.

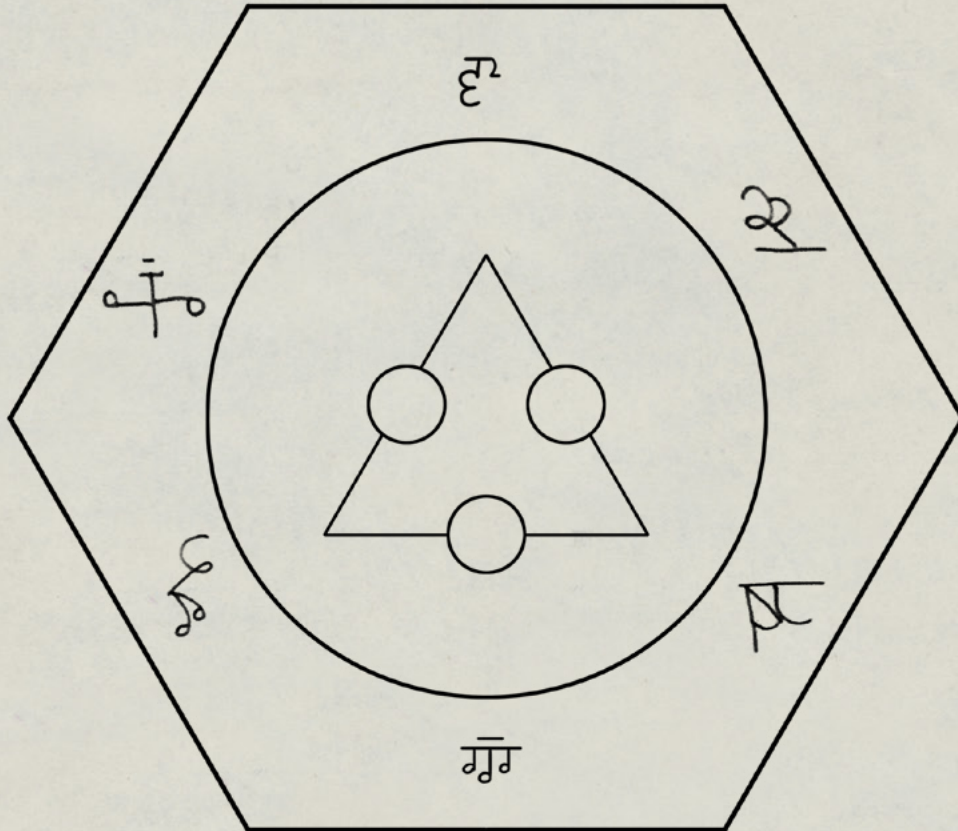
Puzzle Part 2: The following runes must be placed in clockwise order, not counting the original glyphs:

- thrimsan
- kauravi
- thilmtha
- vavupatna



QM CHEAT SHEET (CONTINUED)

As an alternative solution, the following runes can be swapped in:



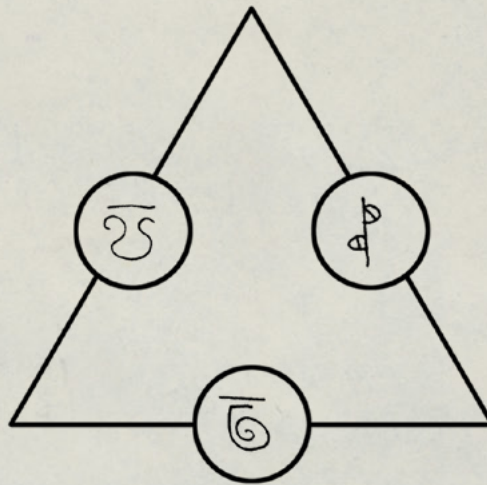
Placing an incorrect rune triggers the “Unstable Magic” event.

Any rune drawn in the wrong order or place grants Nimuchnimurpal the Explosive Arcana trait.

If alternative runes are used, Nimuchnimurpal gains one use of the Novice Errors bonus action for each alternative rune.

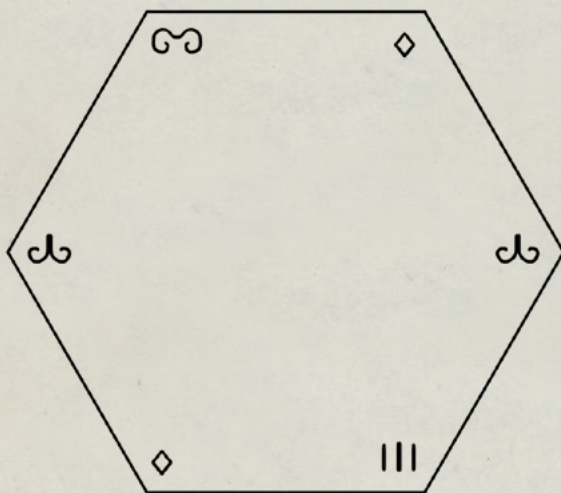
QM CHEAT SHEET (CONTINUED)

Puzzle Part 3: The three correct runes must be placed in any order.

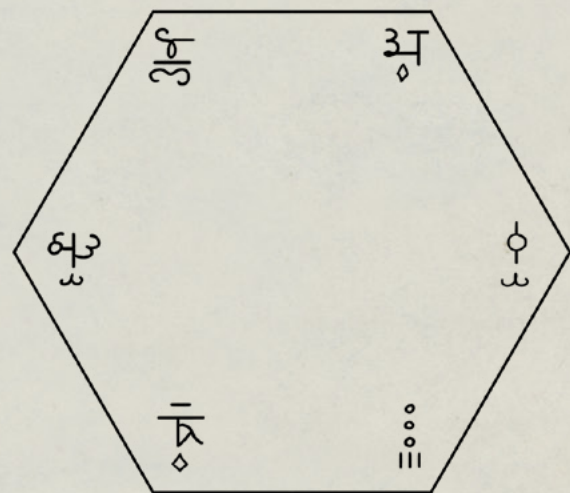


Failing to place the three correct runes grants Nimuchnimurpal the Echoes of Johann bonus action, increasing the potency of that action for each incorrect or missing rune.

Puzzle Part 4: The correct diacritics must be added below runes that have none.



Correct Diacritics



Full Solution

Any incorrect or missing diacritic triggers the "Fury of the Tainted Seas" event.

RESOURCES

PUZZLING OUT THE DEVIL

<https://mcdm.gg/Arcadia202210/PuzzlingOutTheDevilGmCheatSheets.pdf>

<https://mcdm.gg/Arcadia202210/PuzzlingOutTheDevilHandouts.pdf>

<https://mcdm.gg/Arcadia202210/PuzzlingOutTheDevilHandoutsPlainText.pdf>

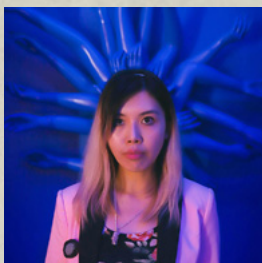
MCDM TABLETOP SAFETY TOOLKIT

<https://mcdm.gg/SafetyToolkit>

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CELESTE CONOWITCH is a game designer based out of Seattle. She is the producer, GM, and editor of the 5th Edition actual play podcast *Venture Maidens*. When not plotting behind the screen, she works as a senior game designer at Kobold Press and has freelanced with companies like Wizards of the Coast, 2CGaming, and MCDM Productions. To keep up with Celeste, follow her on Twitter [@cconowitch](https://twitter.com/cconowitch).



BANANA CHAN is a Cantonese Canadian ENnie Award-winning game designer, writer and publisher living in the US. They are the owner of a small board game and RPG publishing company called Game and a Curry. Her latest work has been on *Deimos Academy*, *Suburban Consumption of the Monstrous*, *Exquisite Crime*, *Questlings: RPG*, *Jiangshi: Blood in the Banquet Hall* (featured in Forbes, Huffington Post, and Critter Hug), *Van Richten's Guide to Ravenloft* and *Betrayal at House on the Hill: 3rd Edition*. They hate Mondays and love lasagna.



SHARANG BISWAS has won IndieCade and IGDN awards for roleplaying games, and has showcased interactive works at institutions such as The Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, Pioneer Works in Brooklyn, and The Museum of the Moving Image in Queens. He has written for games such as *Avatar: Legends*, *Spire: The City Must Fall*, *Jiangshi: Blood on the Banquet Hall*, *Into the Motherlands*, and *Dungeons & Dragons Live*. Find him on Twitter at [@SharangBiswas](https://twitter.com/SharangBiswas).

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