Advanced Dungeons & Dragons 2nd Edition

GREYHAWK ADVENTURES

Vecna Lives!

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Introduction

"The morning after the Feast of Himar, certain citizens of Fleeth came out of the town and entreated upon the besiegers to speak with Lord Vecna, the Whispered One, in his spidered pavilion. They told him they were ready to place the city and all their possessions at his discretion, provided their lives were spared. The Whispered One replied that he could not agree to such terms, nor indeed to any others, and that he would see the heads of all Fleeth stacked before him.

"Hearing his terrible utterance on their fate, these same burghers beseeched him to mercy, offering themselves if he would spare the good people of Fleeth. Perhaps the Whispered One was amused, for he ordered them to place one of their number, his family, and slaves into Lord Vecna's hands.

"Lots were taken and an upright burgher, Goodman Artau, called his family from within the walls. 'Join me, for the Great Lord has granted us safety to leave this land,' he told his wife, seeking to ease her mind. Reassured by his gentle words, she and her children passed through the gate to join her husband. Pleased, the Whispered One gave them all over to Kas the Hateful.

"For a day, the burghers watched Goodman Artau and his family die at the hands of Kas. When at last it was done, the burghers pleaded to take their leave, certain their city had been saved. But the Whispered One turned to his barons and spoke to them. 'My lords,' he said, 'the people of this city are ready to surrender it at my discretion, on condition that their lives are spared. However, I will not make peace with them on these terms, nor any others, except with your consent.'

"'Our sagacious master,' replied the barons, 'we advise, and even beg you, to accept the terms they offer.' But the Whispered One did not listen. That very day the mangonels and war-wizards were set up outside the walls. The assault went on for about five hours and then the wizened lord broke the walls of Fleeth with a wave of his hand.

"By the dawn, the heads of citizens were stacked before the burgers. Their own wives and children stared at them foremost. This was the humor of Vecna, and as his final cruelty, he allowed these burghers to depart in peace and guaranteed their safety for the remainders of their sorrowful lives."

—from *The Chronicle of Secret Times* by Uhas of Neheli

Vecna Lives is a high-level adventure for use with the AD&D® 2nd Edition rules. In addition to the rules set, this adventure uses many of the places and people described in the WORLD OF GREYHAWK® Campaign Set, the *City of Greyhawk* Boxed Set, and the GREYHAWK Appendix to the *Monstrous Compendia*. These products are necessary to completely use the material given here. Also helpful are the *GREYHAWK® Adventures* and *Manual of the Planes* rule books. Although the adventure can be played without these products, you will find your task as DM much easier if both are available. In addition, the *Falcon's Revenge, Falconmaster,* and *Flames of the Falcon* adventures provide additional material and background on the city of Greyhawk and surrounding lands. Hints and suggestions of what is to come appear in these adventures, although these may turn out to be only rumors.

Vecna Lives! is intended for a party of six to eight player characters. A balanced mixture of races and classes is recommended and characters should be 12th to 15th level (or the player should have commensurate skill). Since Vecna's powers can be adjusted to the needs of your campaign, player characters should have magical items appropriate to your style of play. It is not recommended that any character begin the adventure possessing an artifact or relic.

Successful completion of this adventure requires steely resolve and steadfastness on the part of both players and DM. This is no surprise for the players—in any adventure they expect to meet challenges that will test, even threaten, their existence. However, because of the high risk in this adventure, the DM must also be prepared to act boldly and decisively.

In short, this adventure is meant to kill characters. If you are a DM who cannot bring himself to kill a player's prized character or one who can be pressured to "give a guy a break," you must be extra strong when running *Vecna Lives!* Beginning with the opening scenes, player characters *will* die here! If you let characters off the hook, allowing them to survive when they should be dead, then the fear that is so important to this module will not be generated.

To this end, you must carefully consider whether you will allow your players to use their favorite player characters in this campaign. If you do, you must be ready to kill these characters—sometimes coldly and harshly. There are many opportunities for characters to die in this adventure

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and some of them are quite arbitrary and may even seem unfair. Unless your player can accept the death of a favored character, it may be best to use the player characters provided.

The reason for all this emphasis on character death is quite simple. *Vecna Lives!* is meant to be a nerve-wracking, even terrifying, adventure. You want your players to be scared. One of the most frightening things in an AD&D® game is the complete destruction of a player character. Unless your players feel like they could be annihilated at any moment, they will not get the full enjoyment *Vecna Lives!* has to offer.

The Horror of Vecna

In many ways, *Vecna Lives!* is like a horror movie. Through your descriptions and the vivid imaginations of your players, the adventure tries to evoke an atmosphere of suspense and tension. In a horror movie, the director has a variety of tools to help him scare you out of your seat—editing, music, sound effects, make-up, lighting, and special effects. In addition to these technical tools, he has the full range of dramatic techniques used by all story-tellers—prologues, pacing, misdirection, characterization, pathos, foreshadowing, allusion, and more, all building to a satisfying climax.

Like the director, you, the DM, have a variety of tools and techniques at your disposal. You are in complete control of the story. Role-playing games have their own versions of special effects. Encounters can be edited just like scenes in a movie. Furthermore, you, too, are a storyteller with all the tricks of that trade.

Since this adventure is already prepared, the basic plotting is done for you. Still, since your player characters could easily go off the track, you should bear in mind the elements of a good story

for those times when you have to "wing it." Read the climax to this module before you start playing the adventure—even if you don't read anything else in advance. This way you know what the big, final scene is. Then be careful that you don't top it earlier in the adventure. You don't want the end to be anticlimactic.

To get the most out of this adventure, you must work carefully to build a suspenseful atmosphere for your players. While the basic tension comes from the adventure itself, more has to come from you. The most challenging adventure in the world can be thoroughly boring if it isn't told with enthusiasm. After all, being a DM is a lot of work. If you're doing your job right, you should be exhausted at the end of each gaming session.

Surprise and Suspense

It's important to know that there is a difference between surprise and suspense. Surprise, yelling "boo!" to make someone leap out of their chair, is a useful technique, but don't mistake it for suspense. A horror movie or adventure that relies on monsters leaping out from around every corner quickly becomes boring. Everyone starts to anticipate the next "boo!"

Surprise does have its uses, however, and can be a part of suspense. A good sudden scare will make your players feel physically excited—heart racing, rapid breathing, and hands shaking. However, these feelings will quickly pass if you haven't built any suspense.

Order of Encounters

When you are ready to play, plan your gaming sessions out in advance. Try to plan out the sequence of encounters. Each encounter is like a movie scene. A director puts the scenes of his movie in a certain order do more than to tell his story. The juxtaposition of scenes and the change

from one scene to the next affect the mood of the tale. The example below highlights the difference.

Example #1
Scene 1: The heroes arrive in town on a bright, sunny morning. They find a carter to bring their gear to the castle of Count Draman, their host.
Scene 2: The heroes arrive at the castle and find their host dead, his body pinned to a great chair by a thick spear.

Example #2
Scene 1: The heroes arrive in town in the midst of a howling storm. There is no one in sight. Answering their calls, the carter refuses to go out on such an ill-omened night and the characters are forced to leave their gear in the village. They march through the pouring rain to Count Draman's castle.
Scene 2: The heroes arrive at the castle and find their host dead, his body pinned to a great chair by a thick spear.

Although both examples describe the same events, each has a very different mood. The first creates surprise, perhaps even mild shock. There are no clues, no warnings of what is to come. The second scene creates a sense of foreboding and dread. The storm and the superstitious carter are hints and suggestions of what is to come. Although cliche and obvious, these clues make the players watchful, perhaps even nervous. Some other useful juxtapositions include the following:

Victory/Defeat: Allowing the player characters to succeed against a seemingly major villain, deadly trap, or a puzzle increases their confidence. This victory may be followed by a stinging defeat or the discovery that their accomplishment was only a small part of something greater and more powerful.

In this adventure, for example, you might end a session with the

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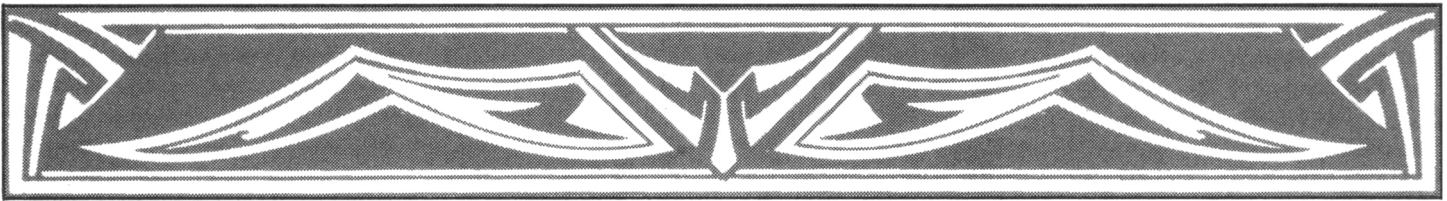
player characters discovering the *sword of Kas*, which they will believe is the weapon needed to destroy Vecna. In the next session, they confront Vecna with their treasured weapon, only to discover it is ineffective against him.

This technique must be used sparingly, however. You don't want to take away all your player's accomplishments or they will get discouraged. Wait until they are overconfident and cocky, then give them a reverse and it will remind them that things are not as easy as they seem.

Innocence/Evil: This technique does not involve throwing vampiric killer children at your player characters or having the sweet old granny be an axe-murderer! You can, however, highlight the contrast between good and evil by placing two encounters back-to-back. For example, the players arrive in at a small hut where good and honest folk greet them. These NPCs have no dark secrets or ulterior motives and the characters learn useful information from them. Upon leaving, the player characters cross the ridge and descend into the gloomy valley dominated by the dark castle on the far side. The extreme difference in the two scenes highlights the danger that is always nearby.

Humor/Terror: Laughter, forced or not, is an important release for suspense. Most good horror movies have some elements of fun in them—tense moments that build up to a joke. The line between comedy and terror is slim and laughter can easily be turned to fear. Humor causes players to lower their guard, leaving them vulnerable to new attacks. For example, the player characters are attacked by a bumbling band of cultists—the villains fall down at inopportune moments, get in each other's way, and even faint in terror. In the middle of this comic scene, the evil ghost of Kas floats into the room,

intent on destroying the player characters. The laughter suddenly gives way to fear.

Mood

A vital factor in building suspense is establishing the proper mood. You do this with words and descriptions. Some of the examples above have already shown this. Mood is established through the setting of the encounter and the behavior of NPCs. Storms, suspicious strangers, gloomy castles, dark forests, and more are all fairly standard horror devices to establish a mood. Unfortunately, they are also heavily overused and have lost much of their impact.

Your task is to find ways to make these elements fresh and exciting. You need to find ways to skew them off of player expectations. You need to change the rules of the horror setting.

For example, there is the standard castle illuminated in the night by a bolt of lightning. It has been used so many times that it is something of a joke. Instead, you should find something else to set the mood. The castle is seen by day, in a cold, autumn drizzle. The walls have a greasy, wet sheen to them and the ivy's green leaves are just beginning to turn brown. It could be wintertime and the castle's roofs are covered in sooty snow while curving icicles hang from the eaves. It could be a wonderful spring day with a bright and shining castle, giving no hint of the horrors that lay inside.

Foreshadowing

Suspense is a form of fear. If your players are not afraid, there can be no suspense. So, how do you make players afraid?

To make your players sweat, you must let them know they are in danger before anything actually happens. Take a standard dungeon-delving situation—the monsters waiting on the other side of the door.

Which creates more tension—the player characters open the door and discover the monsters, or the player characters hear a strange noise on the other side before they open the door? In the second case, the players suddenly stop and have to judge the amount of risk. They know something is there, but don't know what.

The trick is to give your players hints that they are in danger without revealing enough for them to avoid that danger. In movies, this can be done by showing the audience the threat (the monsters lurking behind the door) but not showing it to the hero (about to open the door). This is a little harder in a role-playing game, since players are both audience and heroes.

You can use foreshadowing techniques to some extent. Fleeting, incomplete, and inaccurate glimpses of the major villains will put characters on their toes. The characters can discover Vecna's grim handiwork just moments after the fact. Ancient manuscripts suggest the full extent of Vecna's power. Even his Hand and his Eye, as powerful artifacts, only suggest the full extent of Vecna's power.

Tricks and Tools

Description and pacing are not the only tools you have to create tension. In a role-playing game, there are a number of other things you can do to drive your players crazy.

Timers and Stopwatches: If you can, bring a kitchen timer or stopwatch to your game. Be sure to put it where the players can see it. Then, when the players are in the middle of a particularly tense situation, where fast decisions must be made, start the timer. Give each player ten seconds (or even less) to say what he will do. Cut the player off at the end of this time—even if he's still describing his actions—and go to the next player. Make sure they see the timer counting

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off their seconds. For your part, try to resolve everything quickly, without delays. Keep this pace going until you reach a point where their characters can rest.

Don't do this too often. Timers really increase the pressure the players feel, so you should save this until you really need it. That way, when it happens, they will feel the tension all the more.

Lights: While it's not recommended that you try to play by candlelight (it's too hard on the eyes for one thing), you can do some simple lighting tricks while you play. Dimming the lights (if you can) during scenes that build up to a major encounter can enhance to spookiness of the events. (It can also tip off your players that something is going to happen if you use it more than once or twice.)

Another trick is to turn out the lights completely, plunging your players into unexpected but momentary darkness. This obviously should be saved for those crucial moments when the party is engulfed in darkness, knocked unconscious, etc. A flashlight can then be used to create special effects—although it is no more practical to play by flashlight than by candle.

Sounds: Music is an effective way to build suspense, but it is hard to use without the proper equipment. You simply cannot put on a CD, tape, or record and let it play while you game. You must be able to control the timing and choice of music.

CD players with remote control are particularly useful for this. Before the session, select the CD or CDs you think appropriate, noting down the track numbers. Write these on a sheet of paper, including the effect or mood they create. Then, during play, you can use the remote to key up the track you want when you need it. The remote also enables you to turn off the music

when you no longer need it.

Not everyone has access to CD players and remotes. With planning, a portable tape player can do the same thing. In this case you will need to select not only the music, but also the order you will need it in. Once you've done that, you can make a tape of the pieces you need. Earphones (so you can cue the tape to the correct spot during play) are helpful.

Finally, a pocket dictaphone tape-recorder can be used the same way. The sound quality will not be the best, but most have a cue feature that enables you to jump forward and backward on the tape quickly. Furthermore, you can record your own sound effects (including dialogue).

Good sources for sounds and music are sound effects records, movie soundtracks, and anthropological folk recordings ("Chants of the New Guinea Tribesmen" or other such "primitive" music). Some of these may be available at your local library.

Secrecy: A few minor precautions will go a long way toward keeping your adventure suspenseful. An often forgotten practice is to simply keep the name of the adventure a secret. Don't tell the players they are playing an adventure titled *Vecna Lives!* If you do, you can be sure those players who know something of Vecna will suspect anything and everything. While that might be good for a while, it will ultimately spoil the adventure.

If possible, keep this adventure hidden—don't even show your players the cover. Plead innocence if they accuse you of using it. Make up a fake adventure name if they ask what they're playing. Only after the characters are well into the adventure (far enough that they can't back out), should you spring the true title and purpose on them.

The Story of Vecna

Vecna is very much a figure of mystery. He dates back to a time of near-prehistory in Greyhawk, before the migrations, before the wars between Suel and Baklunish, perhaps even before the ascendancy of the Suloise Empire itself. He is a figure more of legend than fact and, like all legends, there are embellishments, exaggerations, distortions, contradictions, and confusions attached to his name.

The following information about Vecna is a collection of truth, contradiction, and misinformation. It's not meant to give a precise background of this mighty archlich. Instead, it represents the confusing picture the player characters are likely to gain if they research Vecna's history.

In his time, Vecna was considered the mightiest of all wizards, unsurpassed in his knowledge of all the arcane arts. From the loneliest chamber of a black tower, he ruled over a now-forgotten nation. Some say his realm was beyond the great mountains to the west. Another theory holds his tower once rose from the very depths of the Nyr Dyv. A few writers even go so far as to claim Vecna's dominion extended over another plane and that he was ultimately destroyed by a revolt of the greater powers that dwelled there!

Even in life, Vecna's strictness and cruelty were infamous. He built a great kingdom based on his wizardly skills and his fiendish cruelty. Some tales claim he bred entire villages like cattle, simply to keep his foul laboratories supplied with subjects for his experiments. Others describe military campaigns where he annihilated entire cities beneath tidal waves of rock and earth. Old tales from the Duchy of Urnst even claim Vecna was responsible for the creation of the Bright Desert!

With time, like all things human (although some tales claim he was