

DREADFUL VILLAINS AND THE DEPTHS THEY DWELL.



EVERYTHING A DUNGEON MASTER NEEDS TO ADD
MORE VILLAINS AND NEFARIOUS PLOTS TO A CAMPAIGN.



WHAT MAKES A VILLAIN?

The villain is a person or creature that strikes fear and anger into the hearts of those who know their names. A villain is a person whose moral code may be skewed or simply deranged entirely.

A villain may not know that their code is wrong, or may think that what they are doing is the right thing - a villain is a person, before they are a monster. When thinking about why someone or something is evil, think first about the reasoning they may have. More often than not, a villain is misguided, or has simply lost their mind or control over themselves. "Great power corrupts deeply, and entirely," and it's true. Many villains simply lost control over their power, or traded far too much of themselves to acquire it. These are the villains people remember, and these are the villains you'll find in this guide. Villains, and where they dwell is a guide that primarily focusses on creating and penning down a villain for your unique setting, however there is included 10 villains each with their own unique circumstances, abilities, moral code and lore.

VILLAIN SCHOOL: ROLEPLAY!

So, you have a villain already that you love dearly, but your players toy with him/her/it because they can afford to. Your villain can never seem to pull off a plot hook without your players stomping all over it, and it frustrates you because no matter what you do your villain just isn't a villain to your players. Well the good news is you aren't alone, and 9 times out of 10 it's because you aren't projecting that villain when you roleplay.

Human psychology determines how we roleplay our characters, and some DMs simply don't have the capacity to roleplay a convincing villain, the key here is not to roleplay a villain from a comic-book you loved as a kid, but instead roleplay like you're up against someone you truly despise.

These aren't players at your table, they're your bullies, they are here to ruin your life, you are the villain and they just fell into your trap.

When you're conjuring up a villain's backstory using this guide, think of all the things in life that made you furious or violent. Make its backstory as anger inducing as you can, because these emotions will seep into the roleplay, and when you're presenting your villain at the table, suddenly you won't be a DM behind a screen - you'll be Ghorrk Demoth'khor the Executioner.

I know what you're thinking, "That just isn't me, I can't conjure that up," and that's fine. Sometimes roleplaying like that just isn't for everybody, but the key to a great villain is genuine emotion from the person presenting them. If you're angry, then your villain is furious. Just like how your players are smug when their characters are fearless. Emotion dictates roleplay.

MY VILLAIN ISN'T SCARY ENOUGH.

So, your Villain has shown up a couple of times but they still don't quite strike the fear into the hearts of your players that you're looking for. This can usually mean one of two things: Your villain just isn't threatening and your players think they could take them in a fight, or they have given your players no reason to be afraid of them.

Classic villains will always have a motive for their actions, and for some that is clearer than others, but it's almost always a revelation to the protagonists when it comes to light. Make your villain confident in their next encounter, proclaim your plan to them, make them genuinely worry about what would happen if your villain escapes this time.

There is no better motivator for players than to have something they treasure taken from them, be it literal treasure or something attached to them that they take for granted, like an eye that your villain needs more.



Getting Started, The Principles of a Great Villain.

All villains have a story, and all stories have two sides. Villains almost always think they are doing the right thing, but this isn't always true - sometimes it's far deeper than that and often it's impossible for players to truly comprehend the depth of a villainous character. Despite this, the only way to develop a solid villain is to flesh out an incredible backstory. It doesn't have to be deep or thought provoking, it just needs to explain why the villain is here, and why they think the way they do. Additional detail will aid in the projection of the villain in roleplay, as mentioned on the previous page. The Dungeon Master's Guide provides a solid foundation for constructing a Villain with additional class options on page 94-96, as well as including all the relevant roll-tables to help inspire a villain's motivations.

VILLAIN SCHOOL: BE SADISTIC.

It's just a game, and at the end of the day your players should be able to separate you from the characters you present to them. A sadistic villain will seem more real to them even if it seems immoral to present the concepts in a person that they would encompass. Liches literally take peoples souls and feed it to their phylactery to keep themselves alive for hundreds, even thousands of years. Imagine how many people a lich has killed compared to what would be considered a catastrophe in modern society. Challenge the limits of your players by creating moral situations where they must choose a high ground and stick to it, because these are the villains that (succeed or fail) leave a lasting impression on anybody.

If it makes them uncomfortable without making them actually upset then it's a villain done well - but it's crucial to find that balance. Don't upset your players by introducing elements in a villain that are actually, offensive to them or anybody else, it is just not a good idea.

MOTIVATIONS OF A MANIAC

Villains are a rare example where you as a DM have free reign over exactly what is conjured and how it impacts the world the players are contained within - it is your setting, but it's their world. Villains can take many forms, morally ambiguous, destructive, or emotionally scarring - but they all have a purpose. The Necromancer is trying her best to perfect the art to revive her husband with his soul intact and undamaged. The Mayor of Sleacaster is trying to secretly fund a war effort by siphoning funds out of the city treasury.

Every great villain has a reason they are acting, and it's never for fun. Villains who act on primal instinct are wildcards that can be good and bad for a campaign - a Villain who kills for fun is a villain who doesn't keep company, which makes them vulnerable. When developing a villain, whether you used the roll-tables from the DMG or not, it is important to at least come up with a framework for your villain in the setting. Roll-tables are great for fun, witty combinations, but a real villain is thought out and calculated. The best way to achieve this is to answer three questions:

What kind of person is my Villain?

What is my Villain's goal?

How does my party affect my Villain?

These questions will start you off with a solid foundation you can build a backstory and a motivation from.



Getting Started, The Principles of a Great Villain.

By now you should have a backbone for your villain - a motive, a simple (or extensive) back-story and a reason for them to affect the party in some way, be it past present or future. But there is still something missing, a thing that all villains have that we are lacking... we have a goal... but we don't have a master plan.

VILLAIN'S ARE NOT OMNIPOTENT.

A common mistake DM's make with villains is that they know everything, when this is completely untrue. Villains with huge underground information networks might know almost everything, but its almost impossible for one person or creature to know it all.

With this in mind, don't screw over your players with a villain who is always 30 steps ahead. They shouldn't know about the wizard's new spells she literally *just* learned that day unless they are extremely well informed.

It's only fair you obey the same meta-gaming rules your players are expected to.

VILLAIN SCHOOL: TREACHERY.

Villains are cunning, and they'll attempt to bring down their obstacles in any way that can - often that means they will embed themselves in the lives or adventures of their biggest threat to gauge ability and learn weaknesses. A lot of times, when a party member falls out of the party or dies, they will simply re-roll another character, while this is not a bad mindset for a player to have as it promotes moving away from the grief of losing a part of themselves, it also presents an opportunity for the DM to spin up a new villain story.

It is uncommon for a good-hearted character to suddenly become evil, for instances such as this the Villain will likely display the qualities expressed earlier in the guide where they assume their actions are for the greater good. For NPCs however, the DM has total creative freedom over the type of betrayal that occurs.

An NPC who has helped or expressed concern for players might have been trying to get them trapped or killed all along, leading them to danger in order to remove the threat to themselves, or they may have been simply directing the party to the villains own unique obstacles and using the party to eliminate them with little to no danger to themselves.

A much less common fantasy villain trope is the boss of a villain. Villains usually do not work alone, and many times they are directed from the show of a higher power, be it a deity or a stronger, more influential figure in society who chooses to remain unseen. Either way, the villainous options involving treachery are far more impacting than others.

HEROIC VILLAINS

Some villains are not your run of the mill evil-doer. Sometimes they perform heroic acts and become labelled a villain by those who don't understand the gravity of the sacrifices made. It is villains like these that make players seriously consider the action they themselves take or how they deal with certain types of crime or allegations towards your villain. A person who killed and purged a whole town of innocents from undead infection will be labelled a villain for killing innocents, even though the act saved the land from an undead plague outbreak saving millions.

When a villain is labelled such by their deeds as a good person they tend to assume the role entirely, adopting traits of a villain or abandoning the person they were entirely and succumbing to the reality they had done something terrible. Villains such as these are the trickiest and the hardest to build for a campaign, as they need to be carefully thought out and planned in advance. Their motives, their moral standing and their plans are usually cemented in good intentions, whoever this can lead them down a path more suited to that of a demon. Corruption is very common in villains such as these, as the morality of the person breaks down into contempt for those who shunned them or labelled their actions as villainous. This means that more often than not, heroic villains become corrupted versions of themselves, sworn to destroy the very thing they fought to protect.



The Perfect Villain's Perfect Home.

LAIRS AND HOW THEY AFFECT YOU.

Every top class villain has a lair, and every lair grants a creature benefits to increase encounter difficulty. However that isn't always the case and should be regarded as one of the few rules in 5th edition that is not essential to the system's function.

Lairs are the place a Villain calls home. They are dark, dreary and often include a multitude of traps and cliché ways to harm and stall your party. At least... that how most villains are portrayed in their homes anyway. But your villain is different, they are their own person with their own quirks and preferences. If your villain prefers the comfort of drink and the effects that it provides, then their lair may be messy and untidy, filled with broken bottles and wrought with the awful stench of rotting food.

Some lairs are more dangerous to a villain than to their enemies, and this can often take the form of a lair built underground or in a polar region, and should be carefully considered by the DM before implementation. Do they prefer the solitude of an ice fortress, or the deep dark underground behind a waterfall? Do these places pose a threat to the villain, and if not then why would they choose that place to set up shop and why does that same place pose a threat to anybody else?

Questions like these need to be addressed early, as there is nothing worse than when a player calls you out on a villain's home and you can't provide a solid excuse on the spot.



Creating a Lair: A Villains Manual for the Dream Home.

So, we have a villain and we know what we need to do to create a lair. The only problem is that the framework mentioned in the previous page is simply a primer, there is a lot that goes into a lair to make it truly villainous. Locations in campaigns are often dismissed by players as they pass through them, but a villain's lair is meant to strike fear into the hearts of adventurers and heroes, they make people think twice before stepping too closely to a door or oddly empty hallway.

The attention to detail in a villain's lair is an affordance that DMs can assume creative freedom with - it's a sure-fire location in the campaign, so planning around it is never wasted efforts and will undoubtedly increase the quality of the encounters there. Take the time to make it memorable.

A LAIR IS NOT A DEATHTRAP.

Classic dungeons and lairs from Gygas are known to put players in the meatgrinder, but those are very carefully balanced around player actions and consequences. A villain's lair is almost always dangerous and expansive, but it's never impossible to navigate.

There is always an easy way to the boss room that's incredibly hard to find, and the traps can always be disabled or simply avoided. Don't punish your players for finally reaching the big-bad's home - If they've made it this far then give them everything you've got. Just make sure it's possible.

VILLAIN SCHOOL: LAIR TRAPS.

Every lair has traps to aid the villain in keeping hidden and secreted away in some back-end part of the world, but those traps can vary in many ways that DMs often do not consider.

A Villain hiding out in Orc lands in a safe place may have built traps centred on spike pits using cultural poisons or weapon mechanisms that are available in that area - They won't have access to advanced mechanical expertise if they are hiding in the middle of nowhere.

It needs to be possible for the party to disable traps! it is critical that players know about, and actively search for traps. It's very boring and unsatisfying when as a player you just walk blindly into traps because you cannot do anything about it - and its abusive as a DM to prevent players from being able to avoid them.

Traps are a resource, they need to be spread out and varied in purpose in order to keep players on their toes - classic dungeons will combine gas traps, explosive traps, trap doors, portal magic etc. in the same dungeon, and this is because it prevents a cycle of *Observe > Action > Result*, where a player sees a trap and simply rolls to disable it because they've come across it so many times. Immersion in RPGs is fleeting, and if players are constantly being exposed to the same tricks, eventually they'll fall into the cycle.

Don't bunch up your traps! It's always funny to avoid one trap and fall in another immediately after, maybe even a third trap after that... but any more than that will cause players to groan and give up. It's not fun anymore, but it's also a great tactic maybe once or twice.



CONSTRUCTION: LAIR COMPOSITION

When composing a Villain lair its often fun to just scatter a few hallways and a couple big rooms with some monsters in it - but what makes a great lair? Well, the best lairs are often the biggest - and the most confusing to navigate. The reason a Lich is almost never found is because they live in ancient forgotten ruins buried deep underground in tombs the size of cities. It may seem overwhelming at first and it's rare that parties ever fully explore lairs, but it's worth it to map out and create labyrinthine lairs designed to get players lost. Even better than that strategy is to create a lair that seems like its empty or already been looted. Nothing is more deceiving than when the players think they are in the wrong place on their own - and that is a strategy that very few DMs utilize.

Mega dungeons are not fun. Well... sometimes they are for the players, but never for the DM. Tracking so many rooms and navigating the players and yourself through a Mega dungeon can get monotonous, and after 3-8 games it just gets old. Some DMs have run entire campaigns out of Mega dungeons that have been incredible successes but for a villain's lair it's not recommended. A lair should not be more than 30 rooms, and most of them should either loop back on each other or contain secret passages into others to truly confuse players.

Loot and treasure is not abundant in a lair! While it may be very enticing to just drop a +2 longsword in a barrel, it's just not feasible that a villain would allow the heroes invading his home to powerup before reaching him. All loot should be tracked and awarded when the players find the villain's treasury or the secret stash. Of course, there are exceptions, such as other unfortunate adventurers who have met a grievous fate, but loot should as a rule of thumb, be awarded sparingly.

CONSTRUCTION: LAIR PSYCHOLOGY

Villains love to play tricks on people's minds, and psychological warfare in a lair is 100% to the villain's advantage. Breaking a hero's will to fight before they reach the goal is the best way to remove them from the equation early, if they don't remove themselves immediately. Villains will employ every trick in the book - triggered message spells to eat away at players' minds, sowing the seeds of doubt - inconspicuous pots that emanate dark thoughts and suggestions, and even health potions with additional nasty effects in disguise as normal, healthy potions.

When a player triggers any of these things, its often kept to the player themselves, the idea of a villain doing these kinds of things is to make individuals turn against one another when the stress levels begin to sky-rocket as the dungeons gets more dangerous. Lairs will aid this sort of thinking, even if it's not the villains goal, it's just a great way to entice players into a false sense of danger - Make the walls seem to shift in their presence, litter random objects here and there that don't do anything but seem to serve some sort of purpose. make an empty room with a large pot and a single brick missing from the wall - located in the pot. The players will assume it's a trap, even if it isn't. and if it is? well... that's a risk they'll weigh on their own.

Lairs are places meant to hide their owner or protect them, more often than not they are designed to do both, so it's up to the DM to consider all the things mentioned thus far to create a truly thrilling lair for a villain who deeply deserves the attention.



Bringing it all Together, The Perfect Villain.

The defining moment in a campaign with a major villain is the moment the party finally manages to challenge the villain that has built carefully constructed throughout this guide. This is the moment when everything comes together in the highest stress, highest pressure moment in the world, this is the time when the party makes it or breaks it as they fight for their lives and possibly even the lives of many others.

In an encounter of this nature it is paramount that the feeling of helplessness or doubt is heavy in the party, they need to feel like its possible they might lose. the fear and doubt that has been fostered until now will finally take form in the greatest moment in history.

Truly, this is the moment when a DM gets the chance to shine, take no prisoners.

THE FINAL SHOWDOWN.

This is it, the final battle. your party is broken, beaten and worn from countless hours of battle and careful deliberation as they have made their way through what they believe to be the villain's lair. They arrive at the doors of the villain's chamber and are prepared for the fight of their lives.

This is the moment when a DM reaches out and throws the dice of fate. A villain showdown should never be an equal opportunity fight, it should be a battle where the players fight with nothing but the skin of their teeth between life and death. To make an encounter like this special, a DM needs to take everything they've learned in this guide and throw it full-pelt at the party. They've learned their lessons, they've had their warnings, now is the time to show them that this final fight was never about them snatching an easy victory. It's going to be the battle of ages and now you have the tools to make sure they never forget it.



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