

TP9 The Keenbone Initiative

By Dan Hass



The Thane of Virbur has engineered tacit support from the Onyxbane dwarves under his influence to support the surface revolt against the Tofarian Empire, but it is delicate. The thane is engaged in several activities that he hopes will solidify support, and the most important is to enlist other Onyxbane communities in the campaign. But the Keenbone kobolds won't stand by idly as their generational enemies grow stronger. Can heroes circumvent the Keenbone initiative and establish the Onyxbanes as reliable allies? A Dungeons and Dragons® 5th Edition Adventure for 1-8 9th level characters. Episode nine of *Tyranny in Purple*.

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Adventure Summary

TP9 The Keenbone Initiative is a Dungeons and Dragons® 5th Edition adventure designed for 1-8 9th level characters. It is designed to run using only the *Basic Rules (BR)*, *DM Basic Rules (DBR)*, *Princes of Apocalypse Supplement (PA)* (free: [here](#)) along with the *Systems Reference Document (SRD)*; free [here](#). It also utilizes the free *Unearthed Arcana (UAF) Feats (here)*, and *Wardrow's Feat Compendium (here)*. The DM and players should get a strong exposure to D&D 5th Edition and if it is going to be a primary hobby the *Player's Handbook® (PHB)*, the *Monster Manual® (MM)*, and the *Dungeon Master's Guide® (DMG)* are necessary investments.

While the encounters include scaling for 1-8 characters, parties of 1 or 2 PCs and 7 or 8 PCs are fringe circumstances that may play oddly. Specifically, parties of 1-2 are highly susceptible to a single bad die roll, and 7-8 can slow play dramatically. Ideally a party will be 3-6 PCs.

It is set in the *Dimgaard Campaign Setting* (the *Dimgaard Campaign Guide* is available [here](#)), but could be set elsewhere. Digital copies of the maps are available [here](#).

Dimgaard Philosophy

Dimgaard's primary principle is that D&D should be an entertaining experience. In particular, it should be fun and interesting. The "best" D&D is a collaborative storytelling event where the DM provides the framework and supporting details, while the players contribute by roleplaying the heroes (their characters) that results in epic tales.

"Epic" implies that the heroes be challenged and that success is a question to be decided by the heroes' deeds and choices. *The Lord of the Rings* is only an epic because the reader doesn't know until the final pages if Frodo, Aragorn and the rest will achieve their objectives or die, fruitless, in their efforts.

A great Dimgaard session (and really any D&D session) is where there is the finest line between success and failure and the heroes *just* manage to win (occasionally, just surviving is "winning"). But for those narrowest of victories to have true meaning, they cannot be foregone conclusions, and likely there will be times when the PCs fail – Boromir comes to mind or Gandalf's expedition to Isengard where he was captured.

Preparing the Adventure

It is always a good idea for the DM to read through an adventure before running it. *TP9 The Keenbone Initiative* is no different.

There are some rather complex encounters that will benefit if the DM spends a few minutes deciding how she will play them. *TP9 The Keenbone Initiative* can be run with a lot of interaction between the PCs and NPCs depending on the inclinations of the players and DM. The module deliberately gives **just enough** information about NPCs to move the plot along, leaving a lot of room for a DM to individualize these to her campaign. It makes things smoother if the DM spends a few minutes deciding how she will deliver the NPCs' interactions. Some DMs revel in the opportunity to assume the personas of multiple NPCs over the course of a session while others prefer a summary approach. The decision is a matter of style and showmanship. Similarly, many players look forward to opportunities to interact "in character" while others prefer to summarize. Neither approach is "correct"; both are valid ways to collaboratively build a story, but the DM should try to anticipate her players' preferences (and decide her own) and prepare accordingly.

A battlemat or dungeon tiles may be helpful, but not necessary.

Items for Review

- Magic Items. *cloak of elvenkind*, *ioun stone* (absorption), *staff of charming*, *ring of evasion*, *stone of good luck*, *sword of wounding*, *vicious weapon*
- Monsters. giant scorpions, hook horrors, lich, noble, piercers, veteran, violet fungi
- Other. Abilities of: Fighter (arcane archer), Fighter (Champion), Rogue (thief), Wizard (evoker); poisons: malice, oil of Taggit, Short Term Madness
- Spells. *darkness*, *dispel magic*; the evokers (Encounter 4) have an extensive spell list

Running the Adventure

TP9 The Keenbone Initiative is made up of six encounters. An encounter is "something significant that happens" (on average an encounter should take 20 to 40 minutes of game time). Generally, these will fall into two categories: roleplaying or combat. Often the decision as to what type of encounter it will be is based on the PCs' actions. Sometimes a combat encounter may evolve into a roleplaying encounter when mistaken identities, misunderstandings, or action based on false assumptions are corrected, thus ending the violence. Other times conversations, interrogations, or negotiations can become heated and erupt

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in violence changing a roleplaying encounter into a combat encounter.

Dimgaard gives the DM opportunities to reward good roleplaying. Good roleplaying can generally garner players an easier path to achieving the desired outcomes.

However, it takes stellar roleplaying to completely avoid combat. Dimgaard is a dark and violent place where opponents with short tempers often find violence the most direct route to achieving their goals.

The encounters in *TP9 The Keenbone Initiative* challenge PCs in different ways. The combat encounters are expected to meet the definition of **hard** (*DMG* p.81), but additionally there are encounters to test the PCs' ability to deal with diplomatic situations and pose difficult questions about their characters' morals.

Modification "Exploits"

Technically each encounter uses a **medium** XP budget per the encounter building guidelines. And for many parties a **medium** encounter may turn out to meet the definition of hard as PCs may be built for roleplaying and the party may not have optimized their tactics.

Modifications have been made to the creatures which do not increase the calculated CR of the creature but do increase the challenge of the creature. These are denoted with a ¹. These are not intended to be used with all parties, nor does a DM need to use every suggested modification. The DM should gauge the effectiveness of the party and decide which of these to use (keeping in mind the definition of **hard** encounters).

Adventure Background

The Onyxbanes of Virbur have been convinced to join the Chogneau rebels – but there is dissent. Further, the Keenbone kobolds are concerned about a powerful dwarven alliance, and the Tofarians are preying upon this fear and suspicion to provoke the Keenbones into a war against the Onyxbanes to distract the dwarves to the point where they won't entangle themselves in the rebellion above ground.

Tofarians have placed advisors with the Keenbones to mold them into a force that can neutralize efforts by the rebels to utilize resources within the Cavern Realm.

Virbur's Thane Grurfad is a supporter of the aboveground action. (This was the focus of *TP8 The Onyxbane Factions*.) He has

contact with dwarves who live above ground who have related the Tofarians' tyranny. He has several ideas that he is trying to implement, and one of the initiatives involves the heroes.

Tofarian Involvement

In *TP8 Onyxbane Factions*, Tofarian involvement to prevent the Onyxbanes from entering the war was exposed. This was just the outlying efforts. The focus of the Tofarians is to organize the historical enemies of the Onyxbane dwarves (the Keenbone kobolds) into a force sufficient to keep the Onyxbanes tied up so that they cannot field an army outside the Cavern Realm.

Many of the dissenters in Virbur will be persuaded if another Onyxbane enclave can be brought into the alliance. In particular, the dwarven town of Morndirth is extremely influential among the Onyxbane dwarves, and if it can be brought into the campaign, many of the hesitant dwarves would be convinced. The movement would have a distinctly dwarven nature – at least in the Cavern Realms, and the historical and religious nature of Morndirth holds a powerful sway over the Onyxbanes.

While there are several small Onyxbane enterprises nearby, none will be as influential as Morndirth. Thane Grurfad will send a mission to Morndirth, which is about three days' travel. He suggests the PCs accompany that mission. That would serve several goals: (1) It would demonstrate cooperation between the dwarves and the heroes; (2) The PCs would likely be the strongest advocates for their cause; (3) It would show the heroes' prowess should combat arise.

Morndirth's Importance

Among the Onyxbane mythology, Morndirth is the location where Moradin first appeared to the leader of a clan of mountain dwarves and blessed them to become prosperous and numerous. Supposedly Moradin promised that the Onyxbanes would become the dominant race in the Cavern Realm.

Over time it became a destination for pilgrimage, and its tombs reserved for the most notable leaders of the Onyxbanes. There is no natural resource, but it is one of the most prosperous communities of the Onyxbanes because of the continuous tourism.

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Adjusting for Different Levels

While the module is designed for 9th level PCs, the DM can adjust it for PCs of varying level. The DM needs to calculate **Party Strength** by summing the PCs' levels and dividing by the number of PCs, and then rounding down. If this results in a number that is different from the actual number of PCs, use the Party Strength to scale the events (encounters and hazards). For example, if there are 5 PCs, but their Party Strength is only 4, the DM should scale encounter for 4 PCs and hazards that affect each PC should affect only 4.

Upon reaching Morndirth, the PCs face a new group of Hammers of Moradin – the influential warrior sect that is prominent in Onyxbane culture.

Rests

The PCs are expected to complete 6+ medium or hard combat encounters without taking a long rest. Even short rests should be cautiously allowed since many PCs' resources recharge on a short rest.

Once the action starts, the PCs can't take a long rest only at the point indicated. The action begins with the PCs having just completed a long rest, and PCs can benefit from only one long rest during a 24-hour period.

Adventure Outline

The heroes are asked to escort an envoy from Virbur's Thane Grurfad to the highly influential Onyxbane community of Morndirth.

The Tofarians have organized the Keenbones and are waiting for the PCs (and other important figures) about a day away from Morndirth.

If the PCs overcome the kobolds, they must face the Tofarian advisors.

PREVIEW

Starting the Adventure

Downtime in Virbur

Virbur is a town centered around using the lava flow – an elemental vent – to craft special items. To that end, downtime is an opportunity for the DM to decide what range of exceptional items she wants to expose the PCs to. The elemental vent is a chance for the DM to inject a general +1 weapon or two. At 9th level, this is about the place where a PC is expected to have a magic weapon optimized to the PC's strengths. (Previously presented magic items in this campaign were not likely useful to stronger builds such as Great Weapon Masters or Polearm Masters).

It has been several days since the action of *TP8 The Onyxbane Factions*; the PCs have had time to fully recover their resources and the DM can award several days of downtime if desired and still accommodate the storyline. The *PHB 187*, *DMG 127*, and the *Dimgaard Campaign Guide* all have suggestions for downtime activities and the DM may develop some of her own.

PCs' Resources

Managing the PCs' access to extraordinary equipment is another tool to modulate the difficulty of the encounters. If PCs are underpowered, downtime can contribute resources (potions, scrolls, etc.) to increase their effectiveness. Stronger parties may not need this type of support.

When the downtime is resolved, read or paraphrase: The days since the Council of Underthanes voted to support the rebellion have been filled with the minutia associated with getting that alliance well-formed. Meanwhile, there are still those in Virbur who have doubts about Onyxbane participation in activity beyond the Cavern Realm.

This morning Thane Grurfad has asked you to attend a meeting to discuss the progress, and you begin the morning with a meal with a group of talented adventurers you have come to rely on.

With the introductions complete, the DM can launch the action with the following:

Thane Grurfad coordinates the meeting, but mostly it is his advisors that provide the content of the meeting. Within the religious community, the Hammers of Moradin still have concerns that the alliance expands the Onyxbanes beyond the dwarven concerns, but they are persuaded not to undermine the effort for a while.

The miners still have their issues regarding expenses and inflation. They question the premise that new trade with the surface will be the promised boon for their raw materials. Historically, it has been the crafters and traders who reap the windfall from such new markets – not those who deal in raw materials or commodities.

The various crafts guilds have a great deal of optimism. These are traditionally the beneficiaries of war economies.

The broad concern of the Virbur populace is that the Onyxbanes could be drawn into a conflict that is broader and more complicated than promised.

The final analysis is that about one-third of the dwarves of Virbur are unreliable, but that no active groups are opposing Virbur.

Finally, Thane Grurfad moves to ongoing plans and says, "Dwarves are a race of solidarity. By far the most influential achievement would be enlisting other Onyxbane communities to our cause. I've prepared a delegation to go to Morndirth. It is about a three-day journey through the Cavern. I would have the heroes travel with the delegation. They have already persuaded the Underthanes of Virbur, and that inspires confidence that they would be successful in enlisting Morndirth.

Additionally, the path to Morndirth is fraught with danger, and escorting a Virbur delegation through that territory will eliminate the questions about the prowess of our new allies.

It will take about three days of travel through the Cavern Realm to reach Morndirth. The dwarven delegation is led by an underthane – Elgnun. He is a **noble** (*MM 348*) with 27 hit points. In combat, he tries to find a safe location and takes the Dodge action each round. The PCs are charged with protecting him.