

DG1 Secrets in the Dark

By Dan Hass



A dungeon and a dragon (well, dragonish)... Away we go! Fortune (or fate) has brought together a fugitive dragon cultist and an alien creature that has been terrorizing the surrounding communities. It is time for heroes to emerge to set the situation right. A Dungeons and Dragons® 5th Edition Adventure for 1-8 1st level characters.

Version 2.

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You can also find a huge volume of Dimgaard adventures for less than 50¢ in the current kickstarter: www.kickstarter.com/projects/1000694697/dimgaard-vol-xviii-5e-dnd-adventures.

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Adventure Summary

DG1 Secrets in the Dark is a Dungeons and Dragons® 5th Edition adventure designed for 1-8 1st level characters. It requires a *Player's Handbook*® (PHB), a *Monster Manual*® (MM), a *Volo's Guide to Monsters*® (VGM) and a *Dungeon Master's Guide*® (DMG). It also uses selections from *Unearthed Arcana* ([here](#)); it refers to the article *Starter Spells* (SS).

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 a free pdf available at drivethrurpg.com) but could be set in other campaigns. The Digital copies of the encounter 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. *DG1 Secrets in the Dark* 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. *DG1 Secrets in the Dark* 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

- Feats. Mobile
- MM. baboon, cultist, giant wolf spider, marilith zombie
- Spells. *alarm*, *ceremony* (SS), *glyph of warding*, *light*, *longstrider*, *minor illusion*, *sacred flame*, *Tasha's hideous laughter*

Running the Adventure

DG1 Secrets in the Dark is made up of four 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 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

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dark and violent place where opponents with short tempers often find violence the most direct route to achieving their goals.

The encounters in *DG1 Secrets in the Dark* 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

A few years ago, a band of hobgoblins took up residence in an old mine and were raiding the nearby communities. Eventually, a group of "crusaders" eliminated the hobgoblins. However, vestiges of the hobgoblins' occupancy remain.

Sometime later, the giant wolf spider P'tha was *awakened* by a benevolent druid in the hopes P'tha would be something of an adventuring companion. Alas, P'tha's temperament was towards evil, and he went his own way. He wandered into the deep forest and happened upon an overgrown entrance to the hobgoblins' mine.

To his pleasure, P'tha discovered that in the tunnel's entry chamber lurked hobgoblin zombies – vestiges of the previous inhabitants, and perfect guards for his new home. He found what appeared to be a living chamber at the bottom of a tunnel, and took up residence. He found he could easily pass by his de facto zombie guards using his Stealth and climbing across the

ceiling. He began to launch raids against settlements in the nearby communities at night, preying upon their livestock.

Meanwhile, the dragonborn adept Arjhan was part of a recently formed cell of the Red Dragon Cult in the nearby town of Leischport. The Cult's first criminal foray – an attempt to raid the town armory – went horribly wrong, and Arjhan was the only survivor. He barely escaped with his life and fled into the forest.

He, too, stumbled upon the tunnel system, and using his *minor illusion* spell was able to sneak past the zombies. He found another abandoned living chamber and made himself comfortable.

P'tha knows about Arjhan but is indifferent towards him. As long as Arjhan doesn't endanger his operation, P'tha is comfortable sharing the space with Arjhan.

Adventure Outline

The PCs learn of the existence of the derelict mine and are provided at least one reason to explore it.

Nearing the mine entrance, the PCs impinge on the territory of baboons and disturb an area of acid bloom.

Zombies – the animated bodies of hobgoblins – lurk at the entrance to the mine and the area is infested with a disease.

The dragonborn cultist has established a sanctum. So, too, has the awakened giant wolf spider P'tha.

With the denizens of the dungeon overcome, the PCs can eliminate the shrine to Maglubiyet that is the source animating the zombies.

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. If they insist, both Arjhan and P'tha realize their refuge has been compromised and flee to a distant safe location.

Starting the Adventure

As new characters, the DM can award an indefinite amount of downtime prior to play. Of course, the PCs have very little wealth to spend on downtime activities, but the DM may still engineer activities that can be of benefit. 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.

Downtime and New 1st level PCs

1st level is extremely fragile. This is especially true of new characters who haven't even had the chance (or resources) to acquire things like *potions of healing* that can save a 1st level party from a party wipe. These challenges can be interesting, and it is not recommended that a DM overtly violate this structure by awarding extra starting equipment or starting wealth to spend on additional equipment.

However, a DM can ameliorate this by awarding some downtime that incorporates options that require no payment – for example, *Sacred Rites* (*DMG 129*). A DM could also construct a new downtime. For example, a friendly spellcaster from a new character's background, or class, training in exchange for services rendered to an organization prior to the first session; an Acolyte's religious organization casts *aid*; a new ranger or druid is sent off with a supply of *goodberries*; a PC could begin his career by benefiting from an Inspiring Leader (*PHB 167*) of the DM's design; or any PC of the appropriate age could have just completed the *ceremony* (SS 2) for **Coming of Age** or **Dedication**.

Of course, PCs can begin the session having already utilized features of their character – a druid can begin with *goodberries* cast the night before or a wizard can begin with *find familiar* already cast.

When the downtime is complete, the following serves as an opportunity for the PCs to introduce themselves. The DM should read or paraphrase:

You have decided to forgo the safety of hearth and home to explore the world and perhaps make your fortune. You have spent the past years of your life preparing for this course of action, and launching your journey, you find yourself in the riverfront town of Leischport. As you consider your next moves, you have made the acquaintance of other individuals with aligned goals.

There are several possibilities for launching the action. The DM can construct one based on the PCs' particular backgrounds or circumstances, but here are two possibilities the DM can draw from.

1. Pursuing the fugitive

The morning's big news is that cultists of the Red Dragon attempted to raid the town watch's armory. All but one were killed. The one escaped and has eluded capture. Earl Damose doesn't want to commit troops to pursue out of fear this is a prelude to something more significant, and he won't dilute the town's defenses toward what may be a diversion. He is offering a reward for bringing the cultist to justice.

2. The Huntsman's Problem

The lead huntsman in Tallywood posted a reward for anyone who can find out what has been depleting game in the lord's forest and attacking livestock at night. He has a cow that was killed, and thinks it may provide clues.

Regardless of the introduction, the PCs must locate the tunnel. This likely involves tracking (*DMG 244*) across dirt and/or grass with less than a day's time elapsed, and the creatures either leaving a bloodied trail (P'tha) or in such a rush that it left a trail (Arjhan); presumably this will be a DC10 Wisdom (Survival) check unless something unusual happens. Players may offer a different mechanic for following either P'tha or Arjhan and can judge accordingly.

When the PCs are in the vicinity of the derelict mine, the DM should present Encounter 1.

Encounter 1: The Local Fauna

Random Encounters

The *DMG* p.85 has a section on random encounters. In Dimgaard adventures, the first encounter is often isolated from the storyline, and heavily skewed towards combat. This serves multiple purposes.

The DM can use it to gauge the PCs' combat effectiveness to modulate the subsequent encounters. However, if the encounter goes badly, the PCs can still successfully complete the adventure.

The random encounter also presents the DM with an opportunity to tailor the adventure. She can substitute an encounter she has designed for the particular PCs in her campaign and still complete the storyline of the adventure.

Finally, there may simply be a different encounter that the DM believes would be more interesting to present to the players. There are Encounter Galleries in the Kickstarter offerings that may offer alternative encounters that make substitution an easier task.

Map. Forest

Background. The area near the mine entrance is the territory of a troop of baboons.

This is a deeply wooded part of the forest. Through the thick canopy, only dim light reaches the forest floor. There are numerous trees, and the dense undergrowth makes the area difficult terrain. In the distance, unknown birds screech regularly. Scents of exotic flowers mix with those of decaying organic matter, and from the smell, there may be the remains of some dead animal nearby. Suddenly, the sound of something moving through the trees and vines floods the scene.

Running the encounter. The baboons come climbing through the foliage and attack the invaders.

What is the Challenge?

Usually, an encounter is designed to test the PCs' ability to deal with specific situations. Here the PCs face an opponent that is likely much more mobile (because of the baboon's climb speed), and superior in number. While a relatively weak opponent, the terrain and numbers should combine to make it a significant challenge for new characters.

Scaling the encounter. The troop leader has 9 hit points, a +2 bonus to attack rolls (for a +3 to hit with its bite), and is CR 1/8 (25 XP); otherwise it is the same as the other **Baboons**. There are two baboons per PC (one of which is the troop leader).

Baboon. *MM* 318.

¹Hit Points 5 (1d6+2)

¹CON 14 (+2)

¹Saving Throws Dex +4, Wis +3

¹Skills Acrobatics +4

¹Mobile. Per the Feat (*PHB* 168).

¹Snatch. As a bonus action, a creature within 5 ft. of the baboon must succeed on a DC12 Dexterity (Acrobatics) check or the baboon grabs an item the target is holding.

Reactions

¹Deflect. When targeted with a ranged attack that it can see, the baboon makes a Dexterity (Acrobatics) check. If the check is higher than the attack roll, the attack misses.

Concluding the encounter. With the baboons dealt with, it takes a short time for the PCs to uncover the mine entrance, but there are dangerous plants in the area.

Hazards (Traps)

The demands of the adventure day are impossible to implement in a standard, four-hour session. A combat encounter will consume thirty+ minutes even though it lasts only three rounds. If the DM is presenting 6+ combats, it leaves little time for anything else in a session.

To allow for story building, character development, and roleplaying, Dimgaard adventures simulate the results of a combat encounter with hazards – a type of trap, environmental effect, disease, or similar mechanic. These can be applied to the party and resolved with minimal session time spent. By implementing 2-4 of these events, the session has time for non-combat encounters and activities.

If the DM feels the extra resource taxes are unnecessary (and is either not tracking XP, or doesn't feel the hazard's XP is necessary), she can exclude them.

Acid Bloom (25 XP per PC)

Plant event

The area is also infested with dangerous plants. They erupt in a cloud of acid. Each PC suffers 3 (1d6) acid damage. A DC13 Dexterity saving throw halves the damage. If the save fails by 5+ the PC's armor is pitted and until a skilled armorer spends a day repairing it, its protection is reduced by one. (The DM may decide that the *mending* cantrip will repair the damage.) Any PC with proficiency in Nature has advantage on the saving throw.