The Monsters Know What They're Doing

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The Monsters Know What They're Doing

COMBAT TACTICS
FOR DUNGEON MASTERS

Keith Ammann

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Preface

In 1979, as a precocious ten-year-old with a yen for puzzles, I was always excited to get my hands on a copy of *Games* magazine. The September/October 1979 issue, though, seized my attention like no other had, because it included a feature article that described an entirely new kind of game—one involving maps, monsters, and hunting for treasure—called "Dungeons & Dragons." I showed the article to my mother, and before long, I had the Dungeons & Dragons Basic Set in my hands. It contained a rulebook, an adventure module called "The Keep on the Borderlands," and a set of the exact same hard polymer polyhedral dice I'd seen advertised in my mom's teacher supply catalogs.

We sat down to play it, and . . . neither of us could figure out what to do.

It sat on my shelf for a long time.

Later, in high school, I got together with a group of friends who had figured it out and were playing D&D along with other roleplaying games such as Villains & Vigilantes and Call of Cthulhu. Four of us formed a tight group that played D&D, taking turns as Dungeon Master, starting with my friend Julian. I was last in the rotation, so I got to see three different examples of how to be a DM before taking on the job myself.

In those years, I didn't think of what we were doing in our D&D games in strategic or tactical terms. None of us did. We had plan A (*"Get 'em!"*) and plan B (*"Run!"*), and that was the extent of it.

That group disbanded when, one by one, we stopped coming home from college over the summer. I kept playing D&D for a year or two after that in college, but I'd begun to lose interest in the high-fantasy roleplaying genre; then early adulthood hit, and multiple intercity

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moves in pursuit of work, and I never managed to find another gaming group that I clicked with. Eventually, I returned home to Chicago and reconnected with Julian and some other players—but by that time, they'd moved on from D&D as well. They were playing GURPS (the Generic Universal Role-Playing System), which worked with *any* genre, including fantasy.

Everything changed in 2015, when my wife came home from work one day and asked me whether I could help get a D&D game going with some of her coworkers. (Someone at her office had referred to a client as "someone who looks like he'd play Dungeons & Dragons in his mother's basement," to which one of the aforementioned coworkers had replied, deadpan, "I would *totally* play Dungeons & Dragons.") My first thought was to run a fantasy campaign using GURPS, but my wife said her coworkers wanted to play *D&D*, and she prevailed on me to stick with the biggest name in roleplaying games.

I hadn't played D&D since shortly after the second edition of the game came out, and I hadn't kept any of my books, so I went to a friendly local game store and bought the D&D Starter Set. The timing couldn't have been better: Wizards of the Coast, which had bought the rights to D&D from its original publisher, TSR Inc., had recently released the fifth edition of the game. This edition had taken a hulking gallimaufry of accumulated rules and options and streamlined it into a tight, consistent system that treated all its core functions—attack rolls, saving throws, and ability checks—the same way, reducing a plethora of lookup tables to simple calculations, while preserving the game's high-fantasy soul. The more I got into it, the more I liked it (even though I still favored anchored fantasy over wild, fantastic, superheroic fantasy). I also began to recognize certain emergent properties of some of fifth edition D&D's mechanics—properties with tactical implications.

As a young person, I'd always been interested in strategy games, but I'd also never been particularly good at them, because I never learned to *think* strategically. What really drove this fact home for me, a couple of years before discovering fifth edition D&D, was playing the computer game *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*. Over and over, I kept getting massacred, even on the easiest levels. What was I doing

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wrong? I had no idea. However, by that time, after many hard years, I had finally learned *how to learn*. And I figured out that I was failing at *XCOM* because of something I hadn't known I didn't know: specifically, small-unit tactics. When I started reading up on them, my *XCOM* game changed overnight.

As I ran a fifth edition D&D campaign for my wife and her coworkers, I began to think something was missing in how I was running monsters and non-player characters in combat. Reflecting back on my *XCOM* experience, I decided I needed to understand those monsters and NPCs more deeply and to come up with action plans for them *before*, rather than during, our game sessions.

Once I'd come up with these plans, it seemed selfish to keep them to myself. So I created a blog, *The Monsters Know What They're Doing* (themonstersknow.com), where I analyzed the stat blocks of monster after monster for the benefit of other DMs, figuring that what was helpful to me might be helpful to them as well.

I began writing *The Monsters Know What They're Doing* in August 2016. Six months later, I noticed a spike in my traffic, seemingly driven by Reddit. Users of D&D-related subreddits were answering "How I do I run [monster *x*]?" questions by sharing links to my blog. Eventually, I realized that a growing number of other DMs were visiting my blog as a routine step in their combat encounter planning. The comments rolled in: "I love what you're doing here." "This resource is fantastic!" "Thank you for doing this. It's saved me a lot of work."

I now have the honor of presenting *The Monsters Know What They're Doing* to you in book form—consolidated, revised, in some cases corrected, and supplemented with additional material, including analyses of monsters not examined on the blog. Note well: This is not a substitute for the *Monster Manual* (or any other D&D core book); for the actual abilities, traits, and other stats of D&D monsters, as well as the official lore attached to them, you'll need the *Monster Manual*. But if you want advice from a D&D veteran about what to do with those abilities, traits, and other stats when the fur starts to fly, *The Monsters Know What They're Doing* is the book for you.

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Introduction

Any creature that has evolved to survive in a given environment instinctively knows how to make the best use of its particular adaptations.

That seems like a straightforward principle, doesn't it? Yet monsters in Dungeons & Dragons campaigns often fail to follow it.

No doubt this is largely because many of us begin playing D&D when we're teens (or even preteens) and don't yet have much experience with how the world works. Or we come to D&D as adults with little or no background in evolutionary biology, military service, martial arts, or even tactical simulation games, so we don't consider how relative strengths and weaknesses, the environment, and simple survival sense play into the way a creature fights, hunts, or defends itself. Consequently, we think of combat as a situation in which two opponents swing/shoot/claw/bite at each other until one or the other goes down or runs away. Not so.

Primitive societies may fight battles by charging out into the open and stabbing at each other, but trained soldiers don't. They use ranged weapons and shoot from cover. They strive to occupy high ground, where they can see farther and from which it's easier to shoot or charge. While one soldier or fire team moves from cover to cover, another stays put and watches for danger; then they switch. They've learned this from centuries of experience with what wins a battle and what loses it. They know what they're capable of, and they make the most of it. This is what makes them effective.

What makes the predators of the natural world effective is evolution: behavior fine-tuned into instincts over countless generations. Lions, crocodiles, and bears are all potentially deadly to humans. Yet

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lions and crocodiles don't charge at us from out in the open. They use cover and stealth, and they strike when they're close enough that we have little chance of running away. This is their most effective strategy: A crocodile isn't fast enough to give chase over land, and a lion will tire itself out before catching an impala or wildebeest if its prey has enough of a lead. Black and brown bears, which are also deadly up close—and are more than fast enough to chase a human down—use stealth hardly at all. Why? Because, by and large, they don't hunt. They scavenge, forage, and fish. Their environment is different, and their diet is different, so their habits are different.

In a game of D&D, what distinguishes goblins from kobolds from orcs from lizardfolk? In many campaigns, hardly anything. They're all low-level humanoids who go, "Rrrrahhhh, stab stab stab," then (if the player characters are above level 2) get wiped out. They're cannon fodder. Only the packaging is different.

Yet the simple fact that they have different names tells us there should be differences among them, including differences in behavior. One of the great things about the fifth edition of D&D is that not only the ability scores but the skills and features of monsters are specified precisely and consistently. Those skills and features give us clues as to how these monsters ought to fight.

However, because a Dungeon Master has to make one decision after another in response to player behavior (and the better the players, the more unpredictable their behavior), it doesn't take long for decision fatigue to set in. It's easy for even an excellent DM, well acquainted with their monsters' stat blocks and lore, to allow combat to devolve into monsters running directly at the PCs and going, "Rrrrahhhh, stab stab stab."

The way to avoid this is to make as many of these tactical decisions as possible *before the session begins*, just as a trained soldier—or an accomplished athlete or musician—relies on reflexes developed from thousands of hours of training and practice, and just as an animal acts from evolved instinct. A lion doesn't wait until the moment after it first spots a herd of tasty wildebeests to reflect upon how it should go about nabbing one, soldiers don't whip out their field manuals for the

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first time when they're already under fire, and a DM shouldn't be contemplating for the first time how bullywugs move and fight when the PCs have just encountered twelve of them. Rather than try to make those decisions on the fly, the DM needs heuristics to follow so that combat can progress smoothly, sensibly, and satisfyingly. That's what I set out to provide in this book.

This book is aimed at:

- Beginning DMs, especially younger DMs and adult DMs with little or no strategy gaming experience
- Intermediate DMs who are looking for ways to add more flavor and challenge for their players
- Advanced DMs who could figure all this out perfectly well on their own but are too busy to put the time into it
- And players. Yes, players! I don't see anything wrong with your scoping this book for intel. If your DM is using these tips, it's going to make your characters' lives a little tougher, and I don't want them to get slaughtered. If your PCs know something about the creatures they're up against, they can begin to plan for it, and that's part of the fun of D&D.

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Why These Tactics?

To analyze the stat blocks of the creatures in the *Monster Manual* and other books, I proceed from a certain set of assumptions:

- With only a small number of exceptions (mostly constructs and undead), every creature wants, first and foremost, to survive. Seriously wounded creatures will try to flee, unless they're fanatics or intelligent beings who believe they'll be hunted down and killed if they do flee. Some creatures will flee even sooner.
- Ability scores, particularly physical ability scores, influence fighting styles. In this book, I use the phrase "ability contour" to refer to the pattern of high and low scores in a creature's stat block and how it defines that creature's overall approach to combat.

  Two key elements in a creature's ability contour are its primary defensive ability and primary offensive ability. The primary defensive ability is either Constitution or Dexterity, and it determines whether a creature relies on its toughness to absorb incoming damage or on its nimbleness and mobility to avoid it. The primary offensive ability may be Strength, Dexterity, or a mental ability, and it determines whether a creature prefers to do damage via brute-force melee attacks, finesse or ranged attacks, or magical powers.

  Small, low-Strength creatures try to compensate with numbers, and when their numbers are reduced enough, they scatter. Low-Constitution creatures prefer to attack from range, from hiding, or both. Low-Dexterity creatures must choose their bat-

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tles judiciously, because they're not likely to be able to get out of a fight once they're in it. High-Strength, high-Constitution creatures are brutes that welcome a close-quarters slugfest. High-Strength, high-Dexterity creatures are hard-hitting predators or shock attackers that count on finishing fights quickly; they'll often use Stealth and go for big-damage ambushes. High-Dexterity, high-Constitution creatures are scrappy skirmishers that deal steady, moderate damage and don't mind a battle of attrition. High-Dexterity creatures without high Strength or Constitution snipe at range with missile weapons or spells. If all three physical abilities are low, a creature seeks to avoid fighting altogether unless it has some sort of circumstantial advantage—or it simply flees without hesitation.

- A creature with Intelligence 7 or less operates wholly or almost wholly from instinct. This doesn't mean it uses its features *ineffectively*, only that it has one preferred modus operandi and can't adjust if it stops working. A creature with Intelligence 8 to 11 is unsophisticated in its tactics and largely lacking in strategy, but it can tell when things are going wrong and adjust to some degree. A creature with Intelligence 12 or higher can come up with a good plan and coordinate with others; it probably also has multiple ways of attacking and/or defending and knows which works better in which situation. A creature with Intelligence 14 or higher can not only plan but also accurately assess its enemies' weaknesses and target accordingly. (A creature with Intelligence greater than 18 can do this to a superhuman degree, detecting even hidden weaknesses.)
- A creature with Wisdom 7 or less has an underdeveloped survival instinct and may wait too long to flee. A creature with Wisdom 8 to 11 knows when to flee but is indiscriminate in choosing targets to attack. A creature with Wisdom 12 or higher selects targets carefully and may even refrain from combat in favor of parley if it recognizes that it's outmatched. A creature with Wisdom 14 or higher chooses its battles, fights only when it's sure it will win (or will be killed if it doesn't fight), and is

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always willing to bargain, bully, or bluff if this will further its interests with less resistance.

- Creatures that rely on numbers have an instinctive sense of how many of them are needed to take down a foe. Usually this is at least three to one. This sense isn't perfect, but it's accurate given certain base assumptions (which player characters may defy). The smarter a creature is, the more it accounts for such things as its target's armor, weaponry, and behavior; the stupider it is, the more it bases its estimate of the danger its enemy poses solely on physical size.
- A creature with a feature that gives it advantage on a roll (or gives its enemy disadvantage) will always prefer to use that feature. If it uses such a feature to initiate combat and the circumstances aren't right for it, it may never attack in the first place. On average, advantage or disadvantage is worth approximately ±4 on a d20 roll; with midrange target numbers, it can be worth as much as ±5. It can turn a fifty-fifty chance into three-to-one odds, or three-to-one odds into fifteen-to-one odds . . . or the reverse. By comparison, the rarest and most powerful magic weapons in fifth edition D&D are +3. Advantage and disadvantage are a big deal!
- A creature with a feature that requires a saving throw to avoid will often favor this feature over a simple attack, even if the average damage may be slightly less. This is because the presumption of an attack action is failure, and the burden is on the attacker to prove success; the presumption of a feature that requires a saving throw is success, and the burden is on the defender to prove failure. Moreover, attacks that miss do no damage at all, ever; features that require saving throws often have damaging effects even if the targets succeed on their saves.
- In fifth edition Dungeons & Dragons, unless otherwise specified, any creature gets one action and up to one bonus action in a combat round, plus movement and up to one reaction. Any creature that exists in the D&D game world will have evolved in accordance with this rule: It seeks to obtain the best possible

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result from whatever movement, actions, bonus actions, and reactions are available to it. If it can combine two of them for a superior outcome, it will. This principle is widely referred to as "action economy," and that's how I refer to it here.

- I make frequent reference to the Targets in Area of Effect table in chapter 8 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*. It's intended primarily for resolution of area-effect spells and other abilities in "theater of the mind"–style play, but here I use it as a guide to the minimum number of targets against whom a limited-use area-effect spell or feature is worth using. For instance, if the table indicates four creatures in a spell's area of effect, I conclude that the caster is disinclined to waste it against three or fewer if it has any other reasonable choice of action.
- Good creatures tend to be friendly by default, neutral creatures indifferent, and evil creatures hostile. However, lawful creatures, even lawful good creatures, will be hostile toward chaotic creatures causing ruckus; chaotic creatures, even chaotic good creatures, will be hostile toward attempts by lawful creatures to constrain or interfere with them; and nearly all creatures, regardless of alignment, are territorial to some degree or another. Intelligent lawful monsters may try to capture and either imprison or enslave characters whom intelligent chaotic monsters would simply drive off or kill.
- I consider a creature that's lost 10 percent of its average hit point maximum to be lightly wounded, 30 percent moderately wounded, and 60 percent severely wounded. I use these thresholds to determine whether a creature will flee or otherwise alter its behavior or attitude toward its opponents. Except in rare and specific cases (such as trolls using the "Loathsome Limbs" variant rule), they don't affect what the creature *can* do.

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CAVEAT ARBITER

Not all monsters' tactics are interesting.

Despite what I say about monsters knowing the best way to make use of their features and traits, the sad truth is that there are some monsters, including a few I've omitted from this book, whose features and traits don't lend themselves to anything *but* "Rrrraaaahhhh, stab stab stab." Most of these are brutes with only one means of attack, no special movement, and no feature synergy to give them any kind of advantage. Some could pose a special threat to particular opponents but don't, because they're too stupid to distinguish one opponent from another. Some are simplistic in a different way: They're too weak and fragile to do anything but run away when encountered.

The fact that the *monster* isn't interesting doesn't absolve you of the need to make the *encounter* interesting. Keep the following in mind when the situation that you're devising (or that appears in a published adventure) calls for a tactically dull monster:

- Sometimes monsters exist just to soften the PCs up, increasing the danger level of a subsequent encounter. When this is the case, make them weaker and more numerous. This way, the monsters' lack of sophistication is obscured by the challenge of having to fend off a horde of them. If there's no weaker version of the monster you're looking at, reduce its hit points to something at the lower end of its range (remember, you don't have to use the default average hit points *or*

roll for them—you can assign any value within the random range).

- Sometimes a monster is narratively and/or thematically appropriate but otherwise not that interesting. Find other ways to enliven the encounter, such as unusual terrain that the PCs can exploit to outmaneuver a less mobile brute, environmental hazards, distracting developments taking place around the combatants, or an item that the PCs want and the monster has taken (or eaten).
- Sometimes a monster is less of an *enemy* and more of an *obstacle*. Offer your PCs two or three ways around it that they can discover if they're creative. A monster encounter doesn't always have to be a *combat* encounter.
- Sometimes monsters fight other monsters! Not every fight has to be two-sided. Introduce a more complex monster as a foil for the simpler one—*and* for your PCs. Your players will delight in the chaos of a three-way battle.
- If no other solution presents itself, let the battle end quickly, so that you and your players can move on to more interesting things.

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What Monsters Want

Fifth edition Dungeons & Dragons organizes monsters into fourteen different types. In most cases, a monster's type is an excellent indicator of its basic goals and desires.

Beasts and **monstrosities** are easily grouped together, because their priorities are simple: They want food. Also, perhaps, territory, but territory is mainly a way to ensure uncontested access to food, along with individual survival. Monstrosities tend to have animal-level intelligence, although there are a handful of exceptions, notably krakens, sphinxes, nagas, lamias, and those yuan-ti that are considered monstrosities rather than humanoids. Even these exceptions will possess an animal-like instinct to establish and defend territory, despite coming up with more sophisticated rationalizations for this behavior. Combat with a beast or a monstrosity most often occurs for one of four reasons: It's trying to eat you; you're hunting it because it's been eating something or someone else; you've stumbled onto its turf, and it feels threatened; or another foe is employing it as a watchbeast.

Dragons are über-monstrosities with distinctive personalities. They want food and territory, but they also crave two more things: treasure and domination. The treasure thing is a compulsion, because it's not as though they're going shopping with all those hoarded coins and gems. They like beautiful, expensive things, and they want them—end of story. They also have a deep-seated desire to demonstrate their superiority over other beings. Although they generally don't have any interest in the practical aspects of ruling, they're quite fond of *being rulers*, and they think they're entitled to it. Thus, they may act like mafia bosses over a region, extorting wealth in exchange for "protec-

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tion," by which they mainly mean protection from *them*. Even good-aligned dragons share this tendency, although their rule is benevolent rather than exploitative.

Other creatures in the dragon family lack either the power or the intelligence to dominate other beings in the way that true dragons do, but they still exhibit draconic avarice and wrath in the limited ways they're capable of. Pseudodragons gather shiny objects like magpies, wyverns exhibit dominance behaviors as they hunt and fight, and so forth.

Humanoid enemies (as opposed to humanoids just going about their business) are driven by the things you don't talk about at the dinner table: politics and religion. They're social creatures, and therefore their goals are typically social in nature, as are the units they form to bring these goals about. A humanoid boss enemy is a leader of like-minded humanoids who all want the same thing, and the sophistication and abstraction of the goal is proportional to the intelligence of the humanoid(s) pursuing it. Although they may still be fundamentally interested in territory, wealth, and domination, it's *shared* territory, wealth, and domination, and the superficial justifications for those pursuits take the form of ideologies built around tribal, clan, or national identity; moral or theological doctrine; sex or gender roles; caste roles; hierarchies of rulership and allegiance; or rules of trade. The psychologist Jonathan Haidt's moral foundations (fairness, kindness, loyalty, obedience, and sanctity) and their opposites (injustice, abuse, treachery, rebellion, and corruption) come into play: The "bad guys" may be committing one or more of the latter group of sins, or they may be going overboard in their attempts to root those sins out.

If dragons are über-monstrosities, then **giants** are über-humanoids. However, while dragons have broader interests than most monstrosities do, giants' interests tend to be narrower than those of most humanoids, and they're tightly dictated by their species and their place in the Ordning—the giants' status hierarchy. In terms of social ideology, giants are chiefly interested in their relationships with other giants, and this impinges upon humanoid society only to the extent that giants

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need to claim humanoids' territory, humanoids' wealth, humanoids' food supplies, or rulership over a humanoid group in order to establish their intragigantic status. In other words, giants' goals revolve around rivalries, and when this makes them the villains, it's usually because of the collateral damage they're causing around them.

Undead creatures are driven by compulsions generated by whatever spell, influence, or event caused them to rise from the dead. The simplest undead creatures are compelled by the orders of whoever or whatever controls them (or once controlled them). Ghosts are compelled by the need to resolve unfinished business. Other mid- and high-level undead are compelled by hunger, malice, and megalomania. Whatever the compulsion of an undead creature, *everything* it does revolves around that compulsion and serves it in some way. It supersedes everything else, sometimes including the creature's continued existence.

Celestials and **fiends** are two sides of the same coin. They're embodiments of good and evil, but they're not just quasi-humanoids that meander through everyday situations and always do the good or evil thing. They're concerned with cosmic order, and their goals revolve around purification and corruption. Celestials aren't just about doing good things—they're about purging evil influences. Fiends aren't just about doing bad things—they're about introducing evil influences, tempting people to do wicked things they might not otherwise do.

For these reasons, while celestial and fiend goals differ from humanoid goals, they make excellent complements to these goals. The involvement of a fiend might push a group of humanoids to take their ideological pursuits in an evil direction—or desperate humanoids might enlist the aid of a fiend in the pursuit of their goal, corrupting them and their goal in the process. Celestial involvement in humanoid affairs is a trickier needle to thread, and if you're going to make a celestial into a villain, it's almost by necessity going to have to be misinformed or overzealous—or corrupted and on the verge of a fall.

Aberrations, by definition, are beings whose ultimate goals make no sense to us, and for this reason, coming up with decent, plausible schemes for aberration villains can be challenging. Fall back on con-

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ventional schemes of domination, and you risk making your aberration into a funny-looking humanoid, for all intents and purposes. An aberration's behavior has to be *weird*. But also, for an aberration to be a villain rather than a mere curiosity, it has to pose some kind of threat. A good solution for aberrations with mind-control powers is to have them brainwashing ordinary people into participating in their weird schemes. No one wants to be a part of that. Aberrations' activities can have deleterious side effects on nearby habitations. Maybe they're causing nightmares, spooking livestock (the livestock are always first to know when bad juju is going down), disrupting the local economy with excessive demand for some random commodity, or using up a natural resource. Or maybe, like the stereotypical gray alien, they're abducting people, probing them with weird devices, then returning them to their homes. Aberrations' behavior doesn't have to make obvious sense—although, in at least some respects, it should make *internal* sense.

Fey creatures' goals, in terms of how much sense they make to an outside observer, aren't all that different from those of aberrations. However, while aberrations' goals are simply inscrutable, fey goals always have a clear emotional or aesthetic aspect, something that might not make logical sense but would seem perfectly sensible in a dream or to a child. Mischief is common; outright malice is unusual. The seven deadly sins are all well represented, however, as is every primary or secondary emotion, turned up to 11. A fey antagonist is an id without an ego to ground it. No matter how large or small the scale of a fey's goals, they're always *personal*, and the motivations behind them are explainable, if not excusable.

Constructs don't have goals, only instructions—specifically, the last instructions they were given. When the instructions no longer fit the circumstances, they sometimes go haywire trying to resolve unresolvable contradictions.

Oozes don't have goals either; they're sub-beasts that aren't even interested in territory, just food. Most **plants** are the same, although there are a small number of monsters categorized as plants that possess above-animal intelligence. Even an intelligent plant, however, is

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unlikely to possess any goal beyond survival, self-propagation, and protection of its environment; it simply develops more sophisticated means of pursuing these goals, ones that involve understanding other creatures, anticipating causation, and planning for the future. Cursed plants, like blights, have a wee dram of undead-ish compulsion in their mentalities.

That leaves **elementals**, which I find the hardest type to sum up. They're not full-on alien, like aberrations; simple, like beasts and monstrosities; mechanistic, like constructs; nor defined by their social structures, like humanoids. What they are, I think, is *temperamental*, in the sense that they're defined by temperaments associated with their elements. However, the classical humors, which you'd think might be a natural fit for this purpose, aren't. While it's easy to imagine elemental beings of fire as choleric (i.e., bad-tempered and irritable) and their goals as primarily involving destroying things out of anger, phlegmatic water elementals, melancholy earth elementals, and sanguine air elementals fit poorly in adventure narratives and feel off base, somehow. Traits drawn from Chinese astrology and traditional medicine fit better—elemental beings of fire being angry and volatile, those of water being aimless and impulsive, those of earth being stolid and hidebound—but they offer us no insight into air, which isn't one of the five *wǔ xíng* elements. It looks like we have to abandon ancient natural philosophy and rely on our imaginations.

In both literal and figurative senses, elementals are forces of nature, difficult for ordinary mortals to redirect once they get going. There has to be a sense of out-of-controlness about them, even—perhaps especially—the intelligent ones, like genies. We all share a pretty good sense that elemental beings of fire are about burning everything down, but what can we intuitively say about the rest? Elemental beings of earth want to solidify, to suffocate, to entomb—at least metaphorically, if not literally. Elemental beings of water are the flood, the tsunami—inexorable forces carrying away anything and anyone that's not tightly secured, whether it be a seaside village or people's common sense. Elemental beings of air are entropic—they want to scatter what's ordered, create disarray, rearrange everything, then rearrange

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it again, the opposite of their earthy complements, which seek to hold everything in place. In this respect, they're a bit like fey, except that fey can be reasoned with, if you know the rules of their antilogic, while elementals can't.

All the tactics I discuss in this book describe how to use a monster's features effectively, considering what it's capable of. The monster's type, as described here, tells us *why* the monster is doing what it's doing. Ultimately, a monster's choices, in or out of combat, are a function of this motivation, and when you're writing your own adventures, you should use this information not only to generate plot—to determine why your monster is a threat in the first place—but also to contemplate in advance how your monster is going to react when it realizes that the player characters aren't going to let it have what it wants.

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The Monsters

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Humanoids

Dungeons & Dragons is chock-full of low-challenge humanoid creatures, which inexperienced Dungeon Masters may not bother to distinguish from one another—an unhappy oversight, because their differences are key to making these encounters memorable. Goblins are sneaky and slippery. Kobolds are pathetic on their own but fierce in packs. Orcs are brutal zealots with an expansionist ideology. Lizardfolk are intensely territorial. Gnolls are driven by an ever-present gnawing hunger . . . and so on. Making full use of the features in their stat blocks will bring the personalities of these mooks, beastfolk, shapeshifters, underground dwellers, and astral nomads to the fore.

Goblinoids

Here's what we know about **goblins** from the *Monster Manual*: First, from the flavor text, they live in dark, dismal settings; congregate in large numbers; and employ alarms and traps. They're low-Strength and high-Dexterity, with a very good Stealth modifier. Their Intelligence and Wisdom are in the average range. They possess darkvision and the Nimble Escape feature, which allows them to Disengage or Hide as a bonus action—very important to their action economy.

Because of their darkvision, goblins frequently attack under cover of darkness, when their targets may be effectively blinded (attack rolls against a blinded creature have advantage, while the blinded creature's attack rolls have disadvantage). They'll also attack from hiding as much as possible, making use of their high Stealth modifier, and doing so in dim light decreases the likelihood that they'll be discov-

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ered, since many player characters will have disadvantage on Perception checks that rely on sight.

A picture of goblin combat is starting to coalesce, and at the center of it is a strategy of ambush.

A typical goblin combat turn goes Shortbow (action), move, Hide (bonus action). Because they attack from hiding, they roll with advantage. Regardless of whether they hit or miss, the attack gives their position away, so they *change it immediately*, because they can. (The sequence is important. Whenever possible, a goblin must end its turn hidden; otherwise, it's vulnerable. Move/Hide/Shortbow would achieve the same offensive result but leave the goblin exposed to retaliation between turns.)

Being a Small creature, a goblin has a good chance of Hiding successfully behind the trunk of a mature tree; even if it fails, it will still enjoy three-quarters cover (+5 AC). But since you can't hide while someone is looking directly at you, goblins have to use their movement to scramble out of the PCs' field of view, meaning they have to be close enough for their own 30-foot movement speed to describe a significant arc. At the same time, they don't want to be so close that a PC could close the gap between them and attack. So the optimal distance from the targets of their ambush is about 40 feet, no closer—and they don't want to move farther from the PCs than 80 feet, their bows' maximum range for normal shooting.

As long as they can stay out of the PCs' reach, they'll use this tactic over and over. Suppose, however, that a PC does manage to close with one of them. In that case, the goblin Disengages (bonus action) first. Then, depending on how great a threat the PC poses, it either Dashes (action) out of reach—forcing the PC to use a Dash action as well if they want to catch up—or, if it thinks it may be able to finish the PC off, moves its full distance to a place of cover, then Hides (action) again, preparing to attack with advantage on its next turn.

Incidentally, the goblins aren't trying to stay together as a group. They aren't looking out for their buddies—goblins don't do that sort of thing. They are, however, trying to goad the PCs into splitting up.

Goblins are squishy: They have only 7 hp. One good hit will seriously wound them—and also mean that their genius sniping strategy

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has failed. Therefore, a goblin reduced to just 1 or 2 hp flees the scene, end of story. But a moderately wounded goblin (3 or 4 hp) is thirsty and tries to regain the upper hand. It stalks the PC who wounded it, first retreating to a safe distance, then Hiding and moving with Stealth until it can get back to around 40 feet from its quarry, at which point it returns to its Shortbow/move/Hide sniping tactic. A captured goblin surrenders immediately and grovels for mercy, counting on its ability to escape as soon as its captor's attention wanders.

What if the PCs have the good sense to take cover themselves? Goblins aren't brilliant, but they aren't stupid either. They won't waste arrows on a target that's behind three-quarters cover, because that would completely negate the advantage they gain when shooting from hiding. Instead, a goblin stealthily repositions itself alongside or behind its target before shooting and giving its own position away.

A goblin that finishes off its target doesn't immediately go hunting after other targets. If another is already in view, it attacks that one. If not, the greedy goblin first ransacks the body of its victim for anything valuable. A clever and stealthy PC who's counter-stalking the goblins can exploit this weakness.

So far, the entire discussion has been about ranged attacks. Goblins carry scimitars as well, but they don't use these out in the open, because there's no advantage to it. The only time a goblin willingly engages in melee combat is when it has some other overwhelming advantage, such as a combination of numbers, darkness, and the ability to flank, which in fifth edition D&D means attacking from two *opposite* sides of a target creature. (Front-and-side isn't enough to gain advantage on attack rolls. See "Optional Rule: Flanking," *Dungeon Master's Guide*, chapter 8.)

A goblin's +4 attack modifier isn't quite good enough to give it two-to-one odds of hitting an armored enemy by itself, but when advantage is brought into play, a hit is almost guaranteed. If three goblins surround a PC in the dark, the chances are very good that they'll land three hits and not have to worry about retaliation. That being said, if those three hits don't finish the PC off, the goblins will realize that they've bitten off more than they can chew, and on their

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next turn, they'll Disengage (bonus action), go scampering off into the darkness (movement), and Hide (action) someplace where they may later be able to land a surprise hit on a wounded foe.

Also, goblins can tell the difference between a creature that's lost in the dark and one that has darkvision. They won't attack the latter close up if they can avoid it; instead, they'll prefer to shoot with their shortbows. However, in the narrow passages of a cave, establishing a good line of sight may not always be possible, and melee may be the only way to attack. If this happens, they'll use their knowledge of the terrain to tease the party into overextending itself: A lead goblin may use its Scimitar attack (action), Disengage (bonus action), then retreat down the passageway (movement) until it comes out into a more open cavern where it and several other goblins can all jump the first PC who emerges with Readied attack actions. Meanwhile, while the PCs are being drawn forward, other goblins may shoot or stab at them opportunistically from any side passages that exist along the way.

There is one other circumstance when goblins may engage in melee fighting: when commanded to do so by hobgoblins or bugbears, which goblins fear and defer to. They'll do it, but they won't like it. They know they're not good at it; they'd rather be sniping. If pressed into an infantry unit, they'll fight without coordination and desert at the first opportunity. However, that doesn't mean they won't keep attacking if they think there's something to be gained by doing it *their* way.

Goblins recognize the value of stealth and surprise, and they're not about to let anyone get the same advantage against them. They make extensive use of alarms and traps, but since they're not great inventors, by and large, most of these are crude: metal junk that makes a racket when disturbed, falling rocks, pits (with or without punji sticks), simple snares. Every once in a while, though, a lucky goblin may get its hands on a hunter's trap that both restrains its victim and does damage. These are prized possessions, and the goblins use them to protect their most important locations.

The **goblin boss** is distinguished from ordinary goblins by its Multiattack and Redirect Attack features and by the fact that it doesn't use a bow. Additionally, the Redirect Attack action is useful only in

a context in which goblins are fighting side by side rather than in an ambush or skirmish. Based on this, I conclude that goblin bosses are found only in goblin *lairs*—caves, ruins, what have you—where large numbers of goblins can fight in close quarters.

By the way, have you read that Redirect Attack feature? The goblin boss uses its reaction to avoid a hit on itself and to cause it to land on one of its goblin minions instead. What a jerk! Here's a critter that's stronger, better at absorbing damage, and capable of landing more blows than most of its kind, and yet it possesses no notion of carrying the team. "Aw, sorry about that, Jixto! Send me a postcard from Hades!"

A creature like this, even if it fights in melee, is obnoxiously focused on self-preservation. Fighting in a group, it begins on the front line with everyone else, using its Multiattack action to attack twice with its scimitar (note that the goblin boss's Multiattack has disadvantage on the second swing). As soon as it's taken even one hit, however, it changes tactics: After its Multiattack action, it Disengages (bonus action) and moves 15 feet to a position behind the front line where melee opponents can't reach it and it has "meat cover" against ranged attacks. On subsequent rounds, it moves up to 15 feet into a nearby hole in the front line, Multiattacks (action), Disengages (bonus action), and moves back behind the front line again. (If there's no actual hole, remember that it can move through a square occupied by an ally as if it were difficult terrain. Thus, it has just enough movement speed to go *through* the front line, and back, if it has to.)

If the goblin boss's minions are wiped out, it's out of there, and ditto if it's seriously wounded (reduced to 8 hp or fewer).

Hobgoblins are very different from goblins—they're natural soldiers, tough and disciplined where goblins are squishy, lazy, and craven. They have no physical weakness, they're intelligent enough to make and use swords and bows and to conduct reconnaissance, and their Martial Advantage trait gives them bonus damage for fighting in close formation. On the other hand, they have no Stealth proficiency and no Nimble Escape.

Hobgoblins move and attack at night, when their darkvision gives them an advantage over PCs without it; if they don't have the advan-

tage of darkness, they'll attack only with at least a two-to-one numerical advantage. In groups consisting only of hobgoblins, they move in tight teams of four to six. If there are multiple such teams, one consists of archers, positioned between 60 and 150 feet from the action. With goblin troops, they have to be careful: Hobgoblins don't lack the courage to fight on the front line, but they know that goblins do. Rather than set an example that the goblins won't follow, they give commands from behind the front line, where they can keep an eye on the goblins and shoot at opponents with their longbows. Martial Advantage helps them in this instance, even though they're not engaged in melee themselves, as long as they're choosing targets that the *goblins* are engaging in melee.

The more hobgoblin teams that are engaged in melee, the more sophisticated tactics they'll use. For instance, if there are three, one engages directly, one shoots from a distance, and one moves to whichever flank looks weaker before engaging. If there are four, one moves to *each* flank. Five or more try to encircle the PCs. These movements take place *before* the battle begins—hobgoblins are intelligent and disciplined enough to prepare. They also take place at a sufficient distance that their lack of Stealth won't be a hindrance.

Hobgoblins don't flee when they're losing; they execute an orderly retreat. When at least two hobgoblins in a team are seriously injured (reduced to 4 hp or fewer) or killed, the team begins to fall back, starting with the most injured hobgoblins. These Disengage and retreat at their full movement speed. On the next round, the two next-most injured Disengage and also retreat at their full movement speed, while the previous two fall back only 5 feet, so as to remain in contact with the hobgoblins that are now joining them. Meanwhile, in this round, the hobgoblin archer team, if there is one, notices the retreat and focuses its arrows on any potential pursuers, in order to cover the retreat. On the third round, any hobgoblins left in the team Disengage and retreat at full movement speed, joining up with those that have already retreated. They carry out this same maneuver repeatedly, until no enemy is engaging with them anymore.

Despite being the very model of discipline otherwise, according to the *Monster Manual*, hobgoblins flip their lids when they see an

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elf. They attack elves first, "even if doing so would be a tactical error." Does this mean they'll charge into combat prematurely, during daylight, with inadequate reconnaissance, just because they see an elf in the party's camp? That's the DM's call. You could play them this way, but given the extent to which they're built up as being militarily savvy, I'd say that before the action starts, their disciplined nature prevails—they simply construct their battle plans around taking out the elves first. Once the battle commences, though, maybe they allow a human warrior to score free hits on them while they concentrate their attacks on an elf warrior. Maybe the hobgoblin archers keep shooting at an elf mage when they should be covering their fellow hobgoblins' retreat. Maybe the sudden appearance of an elf rogue in its midst causes a hobgoblin melee group to forget what it was doing entirely and fixate on getting that elf. Or maybe they hold true to their disciplined nature, elf or no elf.

A **hobgoblin captain** is an extra-tough hobgoblin with Multiattack and Leadership. The Leadership feature is incredible: For 1 minute (that is, 10 rounds), as long as the hobgoblin captain isn't incapacitated, every allied creature within 30 feet of it gets a 1d4 buff on attack rolls and saving throws. It activates this feature just before melee combat begins, so as not to pass up its own attack action. In other respects, it fights as an ordinary hobgoblin. If there are multiple hobgoblin groups but only one hobgoblin captain, it's attached to the main melee group. Hobgoblin captains don't wield bows, but they do carry javelins. They'll hurl one of these at a fleeing opponent rather than break ranks to give chase.

A **hobgoblin warlord** is everything a hobgoblin captain is and more. It can Shield Bash to knock an opponent prone, and it can Parry a melee blow.

Parry adds +3 to AC as a reaction, so the decision of when to use it is easy: when a player rolls between 20 and 22 on an attack (assuming the hobgoblin warlord hasn't already used its reaction on something else, of course).

Shield Bash requires a little math to analyze. The hobgoblin warlord's Multiattack allows three consecutive melee swings in one action.

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The Longsword attack does the most damage, so it's the default, but when is Shield Bash a reasonable alternative? Assuming a hit, Shield Bash does, on average, 2 hp less damage than a Longsword attack, so the crux is whether the chance to knock the opponent prone is worth these forfeited points. Attacks against a prone opponent have advantage, which raises the probability of a hit by an average of about 20 percentage points. If the hobgoblin warlord uses the Multiattack sequence Shield Bash/Longsword/Longsword, this means it will have advantage on two Longsword attacks after a successful bash. The longsword does an average of 8 damage on a hit,* 15 damage on two. Twenty percent of that is 3, so using Shield Bash before striking twice with a longsword increases the expected damage of those two hits by 3 hp—*if it works*.

The trouble is, the DC 14 for Strength saving throws against a Shield Bash isn't very high. Unmodified, the hobgoblin warlord has just shy of a two-thirds chance of knocking its opponent down. Modified by the opponent's Strength—and keep in mind that it's probably the party's toughest front-line fighters who'll confront the hobgoblin warlord—the chance of success recedes to the neighborhood of fifty-fifty, even less against PCs who get to add their proficiency modifiers to their Strength saves.

Hobgoblins aren't dumb; hobgoblin warlords even less so. They know from experience that a weak opponent (one with a negative Strength modifier) usually won't withstand a Shield Bash, but a stronger opponent often will. However, they also know that if one or more of their allies can land melee attacks on a prone target before they get up—if the advantage applies to their allies' attack rolls as well, not just to the hobgoblin warlord's two attacks—then the expected value of Shield Bash is much more likely to exceed its opportunity cost. Also, in most instances, if an ally of a hobgoblin warlord is near enough to take whacks at its target, it's near enough for the warlord's Martial

* In fifth edition D&D play, the general rule is to round fractions down. In this book, while analyzing damage probabilistically rather than applying it to a PC or monster, I round fractions to the nearest whole number, with one-half rounded to the nearest *even* whole number.

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Advantage trait to kick in, which nearly triples the average damage of one of its Longsword attacks and roughly doubles the average total of the two together. Plus, if the ally is also a hobgoblin, its own Martial Advantage comes into play as well. Add it all together, and the Shield Bash tactic becomes effective enough to try even when it has as little as a one-in-three chance of success.

Bugbears are even stronger than hobgoblins, but they lack hobgoblins' intelligence and discipline. They do formidable melee damage, thanks to their Brute trait (which is like landing a crit with every hit), and their Surprise Attack ability allows them to nova on the first PC they engage. Bugbears are stealthy, too, so despite being brute fighters, they fit in well with the ambush strategy that goblins employ. The difference is, while goblins engage in hit-and-run sniper attacks, the bugbear lies hidden until its foe comes within reach (or creeps up on its foe unseen until it comes within reach), then springs out and smashes it to a pulp. It's indiscriminate in its target selection: It attacks whoever it can get at first. It doesn't distinguish between targets that look weaker and targets that look stronger. To the bugbear, they all look weak.

Bugbears carry two weapons: morning star and javelin. They don't fear in-your-face confrontation, and the morning star does more damage, so the only reason for them to use javelins is if for some reason they can't get close enough to whomever they want to attack.

Bugbears love mayhem and will chase down a fleeing opponent. Their survival instinct, however, is powerful. If one is seriously wounded (reduced to 10 hp or fewer), it will become confused and flee, using the Dash action and potentially exposing itself to one or more opportunity attacks. If by some miracle a group of PCs captures a bugbear alive, it will be humiliated, traumatized, and willing to do just about anything to preserve its own life.

A **bugbear chief** is an exceptional member of the species, with Multiattack and the Heart of Hruggek trait, which gives it advantage on saving throws against a variety of conditions. It also has Intimidation +2, so one might suppose that a group of bugbears led by a bugbear chief would initiate a "parley" (consisting mostly of taunts and threats) at the beginning of an encounter. However, bugbears' Stealth

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proficiency is one of their advantages, so why would they blow their cover simply to hurl taunts and threats? Bugbear chiefs have Intelligence 11 and Wisdom 12; that's not the sort of mistake they'd make. There can't be many circumstances in which a party of adventurers and a bugbear chief would have anything like a purposeful conversation, but I can think of a few: Maybe, somehow, the party has managed to surprise the bugbears rather than vice versa. Maybe one side is besieging the other, and they've reached a stalemate. Maybe the PCs are high-level enough that the bugbear chief realizes it will be hard to win a fight against them, yet they still have something the bugbears want. (Of course, the bugbear chief's idea of "negotiation" will still consist mainly of demands, threats, and insults.)

KOBOLDS

Kobolds differ from goblins in significant ways. Their Intelligence, Wisdom, and Constitution are all lower. They have Sunlight Sensitivity, which means that while goblins may prefer to dwell in the dark, kobolds *must*. Like goblins, kobolds set traps; unlike goblins, they're not nimble or stealthy.

What's most distinctive about kobolds is their Pack Tactics trait, which gives them advantage on attacks when ganging up on a target. That's the crux of how kobolds ought to fight. Kobold society has evolved to be highly cooperative. Unlike goblins, forever squabbling and looking out for themselves, kobolds instinctively work together, even without having to discuss what they're doing.

A kobold attack begins as an ambush: Hiding kobolds (which aren't exceptionally stealthy but may gain the element of surprise anyway, since they have decently high Dexterity and live in dark places) pop up and pelt the party with sling stones from 20 to 30 feet away in order to soften them up. This lasts until either the player characters close with the kobolds or the kobolds have lost any advantage they had, such as the PCs being restrained by a trap or blinded by darkness. At this point, the kobolds surge forward and engage in melee.

Kobold melee combat is all about swarming. No kobold will ever fight an enemy hand-to-hand by itself, not even one its own size. Any

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kobold that's the only one left fighting a single foe retreats, possibly regrouping with other kobolds fighting a different foe. However, a seriously wounded kobold (1 or 2 hp remaining) turns and runs. It's not smart enough to Disengage to avoid an opportunity attack; it Dashes instead. If at any point the attacking kobolds no longer outnumber the front-line PCs by at least three to one, they'll withdraw. They can't do much damage on their own—on average, just 4 hp per hit—so they have to make every attack count. But kobolds using Pack Tactics against a target wearing chain mail can still deal damage two times out of three.

That's basically it. Kobolds don't get bonus actions or reactions (other than opportunity attacks) that might increase the complexity of their behavior. They have Pack Tactics, so they attack in packs. When attacking as a pack no longer works, they cut their losses. They also know to stay out of bright sunlight. If their enemies retreat into a well-lit area, kobolds simply won't pursue. Kobolds that retreat don't bother switching to ranged attacks, because their slings don't have enough range to keep target PCs from closing with them again.

Winged kobolds are only slightly better. Because they can fly, they can sustain the ranged-ambush phase longer . . . unless they run out of rocks to throw. Their flying movement is enough to allow them to swoop down, grab a rock, swoop back up, and throw the rock, but if the PCs block their access to the rocks, so much for that. They also have two more hit points than regular kobolds, but that makes no difference with respect to when they'll flee.

If kobolds are lucky enough to defeat a whole party of adventurers, they'll haul them off as prisoners and taunt them for entertainment.

Orcs

Unlike goblins and kobolds, **orcs** are strong and tough. They're not very smart—their behavior is largely driven by instinct—but they possess average Wisdom and decent Dexterity. They have the Aggressive trait, which allows them to move their full speed toward a hostile creature as a bonus action, effectively allowing them to Dash forward, then attack. Curiously, they have proficiency in a social skill: Intimi-

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dation. Their standard melee weapon, the greataxe, deals damage that can be deadly to a level 1 character.

These are no hit-and-run skirmishers or snipers. Orcs are brutes. They charge, they fight hand-to-hand, and they retreat only with the greatest reluctance when seriously wounded. (Being fanatical valuers of physical courage, orcs—unlike most creatures—are willing to fight to the death.)

The Aggressive trait applies chiefly to one situation: when a group of orcs is between 30 and 60 feet away from the player characters. As a DM, you should therefore assume that first contact with a group of orcs always takes place at this distance, that the orcs will be initially hostile, and that they'll charge the second they decide talking is boring. However, the fact that orcs have any social skill at all—even if it's just Intimidation—suggests that there ought to be some opportunity to interact before combat begins.

Any parley with the orcs will be brief (no more than a handful of chances to cajole, bluff, or bully them) and somewhat one-sided, as the orcs will issue nothing but demands and threats. At this point, any hostile action on the PCs' part, including moving closer than 30 feet for any reason, ends the parley immediately and initiates combat.

However, a smooth talker may be able to stave off an attack by making a Charisma (Persuasion) check with disadvantage—against DC 15, say, or maybe DC 20 if the orcs are there for a specific purpose, such as guarding something or staking a territorial claim. If it succeeds, the orcs' attitude shifts from hostile to indifferent; if it fails, however, give the party only one more chance to successfully reach a détente.

The PCs may also try to bluff their way past the orcs by making a Charisma (Deception) check with disadvantage (no disadvantage if they've been talked into indifference), opposed by the orcs' Intelligence or Wisdom, depending on the nature of the bluff. If they succeed, the orcs believe their lie. If the lie fails, however, the orcs attack immediately.

Finally, a PC may try to threaten back! Have them make a DC 20 Charisma (Intimidation) check, opposed by a Wisdom check for the orcs. If the PC and the orcs both succeed, the orcs appraise the

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situation, attacking immediately if they're stronger than the party but retreating if they're weaker. (Before the encounter begins, use the XP Thresholds by Character Level table in chapter 3 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide* to determine which side is stronger. If the orcs' adjusted experience points would make them a Deadly encounter for the party, consider them stronger; otherwise, consider them weaker.) If the PC succeeds on their Intimidation check and the orcs fail their Wisdom check, the orcs are rattled, their attitude shifts to indifferent, and the PC gets advantage on their next social skill check with the orcs. If the PC fails, the orcs attack.

Orcs initiate combat by charging, using Aggressive (bonus action) plus their movement to close the distance between themselves and the party's front line, followed immediately by attacking with their greataxes (action). From this point on, it's a slugfest. As long as the orcs aren't seriously injured, they keep fighting, using their Greataxe action every round and moving on to the next PC back if they hew down one in the front line. If there's a PC between 30 and 60 feet past the one the orc has just felled, it has a chance to use Aggressive again—so why not? This should create a moment of excitement in your session and put a healthy fear of orcs into your archers and spellslingers.

Despite their aggression and stupidity, even orcs know when they're overmatched. Depending on how you, the DM, believe that this particular group of orcs should act, a seriously injured orc (reduced to 6 hp or fewer) may be willing to fight to the death for honor's sake, or it may possess more of a will to survive, in which case it will Disengage and retreat its full movement distance. (My own inclination is to have orcs that see their fellows retreating successfully be more willing to retreat themselves, while orcs whose fellows have been slain will fight to the death themselves.) An orc that finds itself fighting two or more foes rather than just one tries to reposition itself so that it has to fight only one, if possible. Since this will always involve moving out of at least one opponent's reach, there are three possible ways: Dodge, then reposition; Disengage, then reposition; or reposition, risking an opportunity strike, then attack. The first two, frankly, strike me as un-orc-like, while the third strikes me as *very* orc-like. If there's no way for the orc

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to evade its extra attackers without their simply closing with it again, then Disengage/retreat seems like the most likely response—either that or, if its fellows have been slain, fiercely fighting to the death.

The fact that a group of orcs has retreated doesn't mean combat is over. The survivors long for payback. Orcs aren't stealthy, so they won't stalk the characters, but they'll certainly keep an eye out for the PCs as long as they're in that vicinity. If they re-encounter the PCs, and if the PCs seem to be weakened in any way, the orcs will seize the moment and attack—once again, using Aggressive to charge in and strike the first blows.

The *Monster Manual* lists several orc variants that may appear in encounters with intermediate-level PCs. The **orog** is a much stronger, tougher, and smarter variant with many more hit points and two swings per Multiattack action. Ordinary orcs aren't smart enough to strategize, but orogs are. A group of orcs that includes one or more orogs and that knows the PCs are in the area doesn't go after them right away but rather waits until nightfall, to take advantage of the orcs' darkvision: In darkness, PCs who lack darkvision are effectively blinded and make attack rolls with disadvantage, while the orcs have advantage on their own attack rolls. Orogs also have the sense to Disengage before repositioning in melee combat and may even order regular orcs to do the same. However, their Wisdom is no higher than that of a regular orc, so they're prone to the same "death before dishonor" attitude when they're low on hit points.

An **orc war chief** is a formidable opponent, even more so than an orog. It possesses the orog's Strength and Constitution, a high Charisma, less Intelligence than an orog but more than an average orc, Multiattack ability, and proficiency bonuses on several types of saving throws, plus two fearsome features: Gruumsh's Fury and Battle Cry.

Gruumsh's Fury is a passive trait that increases the orc war chief's weapon damage by 1d8 on every hit. This doesn't affect its tactics at all; it simply makes the orc war chief a wickedly effective damage dealer. The real game-changer is Battle Cry, a once-per-day power that gives the orc war chief's warriors advantage on attack rolls for the next turn. The effectiveness of Battle Cry is maximized when it can buff

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the greatest number of orcs. Therefore, there's no reason at all for the orc war chief to wait to use it, save one: The war chief has to forgo its own attack to use it, because Battle Cry is an action. The cost/benefit analysis hinges on which is expected to do more damage: a horde of orcs with advantage or a single orc war chief swinging its greataxe.

By itself, an orc war chief, with +6 to hit, has a 70 percent chance to hit an AC 13 opponent. It does an average of 15 damage with every hit, and it gets two swings per Multiattack action. Therefore, its expected damage per round is 21. A regular orc, with +5 to hit, has a 65 percent chance to hit an AC 13 opponent; it does an average of 10 damage with every hit, and it gets only one chance per round. Ordinarily, therefore, its expected damage per round is 6. If the orc attacks with advantage, however, its chance to hit increases from 65 percent to 88 percent, so its expected damage increases to 8. In short, giving a single orc advantage on its attack roll increases its expected damage by about 2 (2.1, to be exact). From this, we can determine that the orc war chief will prefer to use Battle Cry rather than charge with its troops and Multiattack when it commands a force of no fewer than ten ordinary orcs.

Would an orc war chief have any way to calculate this? No. But it would know intuitively, from its battlefield experience (which comes mostly from fighting other orcs, who have AC 13—that's why I chose that number), that issuing a Battle Cry before charging seems to make a difference in a group of ten or more orc warriors, while in a smaller group, it doesn't.

All that being said, the Battle Cry action also allows the orc war chief to make a single attack as a bonus action, meaning that if it's already next to an enemy, it's giving up only one of its two potential attacks. So if the war chief is fighting alongside five or more other orcs, but fewer than ten, it still uses Battle Cry—*after* it's already charged with the rest of its band.

Last, there's the **orc Eye of Gruumsh**, a battlefield cleric. Smarter and wiser than an ordinary orc but not any stronger or tougher, the Eye of Gruumsh is distinguished most by its spellcasting ability. (It also has Gruumsh's Fury, but again, this is a passive trait whose only function is to increase weapon damage—although this makes more

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of a difference for the Eye of Gruumsh than for the war chief, because the Eye of Gruumsh uses only a spear, not a greataxe.) The variety of spells at its disposal potentially makes the Eye of Gruumsh's combat strategy much more complex, so we need to take a look at the effects and effectiveness of each spell and how it fits into the Eye of Gruumsh's action economy.

One spell stands out: *spiritual weapon*. Unlike all the Eye of Gruumsh's other spells, this one is cast as a bonus action and, in addition, gives the caster a new bonus action to use every round. This completely changes the Eye of Gruumsh's action economy. The Eye of Gruumsh still charges with all the other orcs, because otherwise, its Aggressive trait would be wasted. But on its second combat round it casts *spiritual weapon* as a bonus action, and on every subsequent round (up to the spell's 1-minute duration) it continues to use its bonus action, again and again, to attack tougher or harder-to-reach opponents with the Floating Spear of Glowy Force.

The question now is, what does the Eye of Gruumsh do with its action? *Spiritual weapon* won't require concentration, so it can start the battle off with a spell that does: *bless*, *guidance*, or *resistance*, of which *bless* is clearly the strongest. (Which of its companions would the Eye of Gruumsh bless? Orcs aren't exactly altruistic. I'd say it would first take a blessing for itself, then give one to the orc war chief, if there is one, then to any other individual that stands out in the group.)

How about once combat is underway? *Augury* takes a full minute to cast and has no purpose in combat. *Thaumaturgy* is interesting, but one has to consider its primary application to be during the parley phase, when the orcs are trying to maximize their fearsomeness. That leaves *command*.

Command can have a tide-of-battle-swinging effect. One possible beneficial outcome of *command* is that a PC may be forced into a position that gives opponents advantage on melee attacks. Another is that a PC, ordered to flee, may be subjected to one or more opportunity attacks.

Let's look at what the Eye of Gruumsh gives up by doing this: its Spear action. Against AC 13 (what most orcs are used to, as men-

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tioned above), with +5 to hit, the Eye of Gruumsh has a 65 percent chance of dealing an average of 11 damage, for an expected damage per round of 7. For the Eye of Gruumsh to forgo its Spear action in favor of casting *command*, the effect of the spell needs to inflict at least 8 expected damage.

As we saw previously, giving an ordinary orc advantage on an attack roll increases its expected damage by about 2. That's not enough for the Eye of Gruumsh to give up its own Spear action. What about an orog? Still not enough: The damage increase is about the same, although it is doubled because of the orog's Multiattack. An orc war chief? Now it starts to get interesting, because the war chief does so much damage with each hit. But the increase in expected damage from attacking with advantage turns out to be surprisingly small: only about 3 per attack, or 6 altogether. And, of course, the Eye of Gruumsh doesn't itself benefit from ordering a foe to grovel, because it gives up one attack action to gain advantage on the next, allowing it one hit at most, rather than two. In addition, we have to remember that the target of a *command* gets to make a saving throw, so all these gains are attenuated by the probability that the target will shrug it off.

However, what if the Eye of Gruumsh can provoke multiple opportunity attacks on an enemy by ordering them to flee? For starters, opportunity attacks are *reactions*, meaning we're adding a new element to the action economy. Also, this isn't about the difference between attacking with advantage and attacking without it—it's about the difference between getting an attack and not getting an attack. One orc's expected damage per attack is 6—not as much as the Eye of Gruumsh's expected damage per attack—but *two* orcs' expected damage is double that, and three orcs' expected damage is triple that, and so on. An orog's expected damage per attack is 7, and an orc war chief's is 10. *Command*'s chance of success is only fifty-fifty even against an average person, so we have to figure that there need to be several orcs on hand to make opportunity attacks for this stunt to be worth trying.

Here's our conclusion: An orc Eye of Gruumsh forgoes its own Spear action in order to cast *command* against a foe that's within reach

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of four or more ordinary orcs, or two or more plus a leader. It issues the command "Scram!" (equivalent to Flee) in order to provoke an opportunity attack from every orc that can reach the target.

GNOLLS

Gnolls are described in the *Monster Manual* as rapacious raiders, scavengers, and nomads with hyena-like heads. They have high Strength and low Intelligence; their behavior is driven by their violent and destructive instincts. Like many other humanoid D&D monsters, they have darkvision. They wield spears and longbows, according to the *Monster Manual*, and they have one distinguishing feature, Rampage, which allows them to move half their speed and make a bonus bite attack after reducing a foe to 0 hp in melee.

Honestly, I'd dispense with the longbow—it doesn't make sense in the context of what else the *Monster Manual* says about gnolls. Their Strength is high enough that they gain little advantage from using one. They aren't smart enough to craft one or social enough to barter for one. According to the flavor text, gnolls prefer to strike at easy targets; longbows are designed to puncture armor. And gnolls' single unique feature is melee-oriented.

So my vision of the gnoll is strictly a hand-to-hand fighter. As creatures with high Strength, high-average Dexterity, average Constitution, and a respectable five hit dice, gnolls are shock troops. When they spot a vulnerable target, most likely during a nighttime patrol (darkvision provides advantage on attack rolls against PCs who don't have it), they strike at once. They're fearless and aggressive, using their full movement speed to approach their targets, then attacking with spears; if one such attack reduces an enemy to 0 hp, the gnoll Rampages toward another enemy within 15 feet and bites it (bonus action).

As vicious as they are, however, gnolls are creatures of instinct without ideology, and they place their own survival over such concepts as valor or honor. If one is seriously wounded (reduced to 8 hp or fewer), it turns tail and flees, using the Dash action to get away as fast as possible and potentially exposing itself to one or more opportunity attacks in the process.

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A pack of gnolls may be led by a **gnoll pack lord**, which is a more able specimen in every respect, including getting two swings per Multiattack action and having the Incite Rampage feature. (It also wields a glaive, which I have to imagine—given that even the gnoll pack lord's Intelligence is only 8—consists of a pillaged sword lashed to the end of a spear. By gnoll standards, this surely qualifies as technological genius.)

Incite Rampage is part of the gnoll pack lord's Multiattack combo, so the gnoll pack lord doesn't have to forgo attacking to use it. Effectively, what Incite Rampage does is grant another gnoll in the pack (a technicality in the wording of Incite Rampage restricts its application to other gnolls, plus giant hyenas, since these are the only creatures with Rampage) the equivalent of an immediate opportunity attack against its opponent. This happens during the gnoll pack lord's action. Incite Rampage consumes that gnoll's reaction, so if its opponent moves out of its reach, it can't make an *actual* opportunity attack.

Aside from this feature, the only other distinctive thing about the gnoll pack lord is the fact that its "glaive" (snicker) gives it 10 feet of reach rather than 5 feet. None of this makes the gnoll pack lord's tactics any more elaborate than a regular gnoll's.

At first blush, the **gnoll Fang of Yeenoghu** also appears to be little more than an exceptionally able gnoll, with a Claw/Claw/Bite Multiattack in lieu of weapons. But the Fang of Yeenoghu has some actual intelligence, so it maneuvers around the battlefield and targets vulnerable PCs, particularly those who dish out a lot of damage but can't take it. Gnolls sense weakness and zero in on it, so assume that the Fang of Yeenoghu can "read" a PC's hit points and Armor Class and strike accordingly. This also allows the Fang of Yeenoghu to maximize the value of its Rampage feature, because by targeting PCs with fewer hit points first, it increases its chances of getting to Rampage more than once. If you're a tenderhearted DM who wants to protect the fragile flowers in your players' party, don't throw a Fang of Yeenoghu at them, because that thing's gotta follow its nature.

One other detail about the gnoll Fang of Yeenoghu, which has nothing to do with its tactics but is still worth noting: Unlike gnolls and gnoll pack lords, the Fang of Yeenoghu isn't categorized as a hu-

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manoid. It's a fiend, and as such it's detectable by a paladin's Divine Sense or a ranger's Primeval Awareness, and a *protection from evil and good* spell offers defense against it.

LIZARDFOLK

Lizardfolk aren't sophisticated, but they are significantly tougher than goblins, kobolds, and orcs. According to the *Monster Manual* flavor text, their most salient behavioral trait is their territoriality, followed by their generally acting like South Seas cannibals in a movie from the 1940s. On the flip side, the text does acknowledge that lizardfolk may occasionally form alliances with outsiders, but we'll set that aside, since it's not going to influence their combat tactics.

Lizardfolk, like orcs, are brutes: average Dexterity, high Strength and Constitution. They're also proficient in Perception and Stealth, and they're more or less amphibious—they can't breathe underwater, but they can hold their breath for up to 15 minutes, and they can swim as fast as they can move on land.

Based on this information, the most likely lizardfolk encounter scenario is with a group of scouts patrolling the outskirts of their territory. They'll be alert to intruders—it's why they're out there. Once they notice intruders, they start stalking them (from cover to cover if on land, underwater if in a swamp), until they're close enough to attack. Then they strike first, with surprise if possible.

The lizardfolk's Multiattack action specifies, "The lizardfolk makes two melee attacks, each one with a different weapon." The choices available are Bite, Heavy Club, Javelin, and Spiked Shield. Honestly, the only combinations of these that don't strike me as silly are Heavy Club/Spiked Shield and Javelin/Spiked Shield. The lizardfolk's upright physiology makes the idea of their lunging to bite absurd, let alone lunging to bite in combination with swinging or thrusting a melee weapon. Of course, it's all cosmetic, since every one of the lizardfolk's attacks has the same attack modifier and deals the same damage; the only difference is whether the damage done is bludgeoning (the club) or piercing (everything else), and even that isn't a real difference unless a PC is covered by a magic item or spell that provides resistance to one type of damage and

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not the other. Let's just say that a lizardfolk's Multiattack action consists of one weapon strike and one shield bash and leave it at that.

Lizardfolk don't have any feature that grants them bonus actions or unique reactions, and their Intelligence is low, so we can assume that they fight like primitives: They pick an enemy, they bash that enemy, and they keep going until the enemy is dead or they're seriously wounded themselves (reduced to 8 hp or fewer). At that point, whether they keep fighting depends entirely on whether or not they're within their own territory. If they are, they keep fighting to the death. If they're not—if they were scouting beyond their borders, or if they were on a raid—they Dash back toward their own territory as fast as they can, potentially incurring one or more opportunity attacks. Instinctively, they always attack from the direction of their own territory and position themselves with their backs toward it. They may ambush, but they don't flank.

Long-range weapon attacks confuse them, and magic awes and terrifies them. A lizardfolk shot by an arrow or crossbow bolt instinctively moves in the direction of its territory. (If it's already within its territory, it moves toward the center of that territory.) Depending on the type of spell, the damage it does, whether the lizardfolk can see the caster, and whether they can get to them, they either try to rush the caster or run for their lives. Rushing is more likely if they can see the caster, the spell does no more than light damage (5 or less), and/or there's no other PC in the way. Running is more likely if they can't tell where the spell came from, the spell does serious damage (14 or more), and/or there are too many enemies between themselves and the caster.

Lizardfolk never surrender voluntarily: They assume that they'll be killed. However, lizardfolk who are subdued and captured are impassive about it and will talk to their captors, if any of them speaks Draconic, without sullenness or bluster. That being said, they'll also turn against their captors in a heartbeat if their chances of success look good. An unarmed lizardfolk *will* bite, as well as grab the nearest handy object to use as an improvised weapon.

A **lizardfolk shaman** is basically a reskinned druid. It's distinguished by its spellcasting and shape-changing abilities, the latter of which is restricted to the form of a crocodile. That's pretty good, com-

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pared with most of the spells the lizardfolk shaman can cast. But one of its spells is so effective that the crocodile form has to be considered a secondary self-defense measure.

That spell is *conjure animals*, which requires concentration and therefore prevents the lizardfolk shaman from casting its other most potentially effective spell, *entangle*. But by itself, *conjure animals* should give a party of PCs pause. It allows the shaman to summon one CR 2, two CR 1, four CR 1/2, or eight CR 1/4 reptiles. There's no CR 1 reptile in the *Monster Manual*, but check out the other options:

- one swarm of poisonous snakes
- four crocodiles
- eight constrictor snakes
- eight giant lizards
- eight giant poisonous snakes

You can consider the different abilities these creatures have (crocs and constrictor snakes can grapple, giant lizards are tanks, giant poisonous snakes deal heavy damage), but you can also feel free to base your decision entirely on the emotional reaction you want to elicit from your players: Do you want icky-creepy-get-it-away-from-me (one square full of writhing danger noodles), moderate freakout (four crocs), or full-scale panic attack (eight king cobras)?

From the caster's point of view, "more" usually trumps "better." More creatures mean more attacks, and summoning four or eight rather than just one will bump up the encounter multiplier by one or two levels, unless the lizardfolk group already substantially outnumbers the PCs (see the Encounter Multipliers table, *Dungeon Master's Guide*, chapter 3).

Therefore, unless you're specifically looking to elicit a different reaction, the first thing the lizardfolk shaman is going to do once an encounter commences is cast *conjure animals* to call up as much reptilian backup as possible. After that, the shaman doesn't enter melee combat—not that it couldn't, being just as strong and tough as any other lizardfolk, but unlike them, it's smart enough to know that if it took a solid hit, its concentration could be broken, and then there'd go

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the cobras. Instead, the shaman lobs *produce flame* cantrips (which do 2d8 fire damage rather than 1d8, because the shaman is a level 5 spellcaster) at any enemies within 30 feet. Its fellow lizardfolk, incidentally, aren't afraid of *this* magic—on the contrary, since the shaman is on *their* side, they're feeling extra bold and are much more likely to rush an enemy caster rather than run from them. They'll also become mighty salty if anyone dares to assault *their* shaman.

Speaking of enemy casters, if one makes the mistake of coming within 30 feet of the lizardfolk shaman, it casts *thorn whip* and yanks them forward, so that the other lizardfolk can pound them into jelly.

What if the shaman is targeted by a ranged attacker? It's still caught off guard, but its greater mental flexibility allows it to come up with a purposeful response. If its concentration isn't broken, it sends a couple of the king cobras (or whatever creatures it summoned) after the PC who shot it. If its concentration is broken, its main contribution to the battle has just been negated, and until it takes care of that marksman, there's not a lot more that it can do: Most of its spells don't have great range. But since its fellow lizardfolk are useless against ranged attackers, the shaman has to take care of the problem itself. In a swamp, it can Change Shape into crocodile form, submerge, and go after the shooter. In jungle, this won't work, because a crocodile has only 20 feet of movement speed over land, so a marksman can easily keep their distance. The shaman will be forced to conclude that the battle is going south and cast *fog cloud*, either to cover the lizardfolk's escape (if they're outside their territory) or to enshroud the PCs so that the lizardfolk can reposition themselves more advantageously.

In general, any time a battle outside their territory goes badly for the lizardfolk—say, at least half of them seriously wounded—the lizardfolk shaman casts *fog cloud* to help them get away. (Inside their territory, the shaman will have already cast *fog cloud* on the PCs *first*, to allow the lizardfolk warriors to sneak up on them quickly.) If the *fog cloud* is dispelled (by *gust of wind*, say) while the lizardfolk are retreating, the shaman will follow up with *plant growth* to slow their pursuers even further. (What about *entangle* and *spike growth*? Their utility diminishes significantly in a swamp or jungle, where the terrain

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is already difficult. And the fact that they also require concentration forces a choice between one of them and *conjure animals* or *fog cloud*, which are clearly superior.)

The **lizard king/queen** isn't complicated at all. Mostly, it's a bigger, badder lizardfolk. For its Multiattack, it can use Claws/Bite, Trident/Bite, or Trident/Trident. Let's get real: If you're leading a bunch of tribespeople carrying clubs and shields, are you going to go out there and *chew* on your enemies? No, you're going to go out there with an even more impressive weapon and show everyone how it's done. Your Trident attack does more damage than your Bite attack (assume that it's wielded two-handed, since the stat block makes no mention of a shield), and besides, your Skewer feature only works with the trident. Of course you're going to use the trident for both attacks!

There is one other detail to note about the lizard king/queen: its immunity to the frightened condition. We can infer from this that the lizard king/queen ain't afraid of *nothin'* . . . least of all Trawiodol the Uncanny's *dancing lights*. The Royal Reptile isn't going to run from a spellcaster, *ever*. No, it's going to single the caster out for special pointy attention, just to show all the other lizardfolk why it's the boss and they're not.

YUAN-TI

Yuan-ti are snake-human hybrids, created in the earliest days of civilization, whose culture fell from an advanced, enlightened state into fanaticism and cruelty. They live in a caste-bound society in which those who most closely resemble humans make up the lowest stratum, while the most snakelike constitute the highest and most powerful. One distinctive characteristic they all share is the innate ability to cast *suggestion*: Like Kaa in *The Jungle Book*, they try to win your trust before they mess you up. Another is that they all have magic resistance, so they have no reason to fear spellcasters more than anyone else.

The most common and least powerful caste are the **yuan-ti purebloods**. (Counterintuitively, "pure" is a pejorative to the yuan-ti; the more adulterated by reptilian essence they are, the more they're esteemed.) Their physical abilities are average-ish, with a slightly elevated

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Dexterity; their Intelligence and, particularly, Charisma are higher, implying a species that approaches combat from a mental angle first. This implication is emphasized further by their proficiency in Deception and Stealth. They have darkvision, suggesting that they're most at home in dim places and/or most active at night. Along with *suggestion*, they can cast the cantrip *poison spray* three times per day at its base damage level of 1d12 (I like to imagine that they spit it from their mouths). They can also cast *animal friendship* on snakes, for whatever that's worth.

According to the *Monster Manual* flavor text, yuan-ti purebloods often put on cloaks and try to pass for human in order to "kidnap prisoners for interrogation and sacrifice," so let's start with that: The yuan-ti wants to kill you, but it doesn't want to kill you right here and now. Instead, it wants to get you someplace where it can kill you in a way that makes its gods happy.

Therefore, a yuan-ti pureblood encounter is going to begin with the yuan-ti cloaked and hooded, using Deception to hide what they are, and casting *suggestion* as soon as the player characters approach within 30 feet, saying something along the lines of "This is a dangerous place, and you look like you could use some extra help. Come with us." I'd say that their moderately high Intelligence combined with the fact that this is an innate ability lets them "read" the PCs to pick out which ones have the lowest Wisdom saving throws and therefore will be most susceptible. Remember that a single yuan-ti can target only a single PC at once with this ability; if you want to charm more PCs, you need more yuan-ti.

If the *suggestion* succeeds, they'll take the PCs back to their settlement, overwhelm the PCs with numbers and grappling attacks, and prep for their sacrificial ceremony. If it fails, the PCs will undoubtedly attack, and if they don't, the yuan-ti will.

Yuan-ti purebloods are competent, though unexceptional, at both melee and ranged combat. In melee, they have Multiattack, letting them attack twice per turn with their scimitars. At range, they have only one shot per action, but their arrows are poisoned, which makes ranged attacks marginally better, though not enough to make a meaningful difference. Thus, whether they opt for melee or ranged combat

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depends in large part on where they are when combat begins. If they're in the thick of things, they choose melee; if they're at a distance, they choose ranged; and they pretty much stay wherever they are unless they're forced to flee. *Poison spray* doesn't offer them any real advantage over either a scimitar or a shortbow, unless they're disarmed somehow.

Yuan-ti have had hundreds of generations to live and adapt on their own, so they'll have the same self-preservation instinct as any evolved species. If they're seriously injured (reduced to 16 hp or fewer), they'll run away, using the Dash action (yuan-ti purebloods don't have the training to Disengage).

Combat with yuan-ti purebloods by themselves isn't that interesting; it gets better, though, when you combine them with **yuan-ti malisons**. Malisons are mostly-humanoids with serpentine heads (type 1), arms (type 2), or lower bodies (type 3); the third type is my personal favorite, because I think it synergizes best with the yuan-ti pureblood. All three types have high Charisma and Intelligence and also high Strength and Dexterity, making them good commanders and shock troops. They can also Shapechange back and forth between their yuan-ti form and a Medium-size snake form; their equipment doesn't change with them, however.

As a snake, a yuan-ti malison gets one Bite attack per action, doing 1d4 + 3 piercing damage plus 2d6 poison damage. In contrast, a type 1 or type 3 yuan-ti malison can attack twice with its scimitar, doing 1d6 + 3 on each hit for about the same total damage, or twice with its longbow, doing 1d8 + 2 piercing damage plus 2d6 poison damage on each hit, for roughly *twice* the damage. I know which one *I'd* choose. Changing into snake form offers the yuan-ti malison no combat advantage at all, except—implicitly—immunity to the prone condition (the stat block doesn't say this explicitly, but think about it for a second), and it comes with the disadvantage of divesting it of its weapons. I'd say this is a dubiously useful ability at best, and I wouldn't have a yuan-ti malison Shapechange during combat, except maybe to escape through a tiny hole.

One of the things I like about the type 3 yuan-ti malison is that it has the extra attacking feature Constrict, which does 2d6 + 3 blud-

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