

LEVEL 5 ADVENTURE MODULE

FIFTH EDITION FANTASY #4

WAR-LOCK



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WAR-LOCK

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WAR-LOCK

By Michael Curtis

War-lock is an adventure designed for the 5th edition of the original fantasy roleplaying game. It is intended for four to six 5th-level PCs and can be completed in two or more sessions. In the course of *War-lock*, the PCs discover a legendary warlord has risen phoenix-like from his secret tomb and is assembling a new army to conquer the civi-

lized lands. The party must stop this revived threat before he achieves his full power and gathers a monstrous army to serve him. However, doing so is not easy, as the warlord's life essence is contained in a potent relic known as the *Odium Heart* and secreted in a stronghold protected by traps and guardians.

BACKGROUND

Afanasi Wyrmburn was born to wage war. He arose from the fearsome woodsmen tribes of the North, fighting his way to civilized lands via countless acts of bloodshed and battle. Afanasi discovered his skill at slaughter was in high demand amongst the mercenary companies that earned their gold by waging war in the border skirmishes and civil wars that commonly erupted in the so-called enlightened kingdoms. Before he was 25, Afanasi commanded his own mercenary band, the feared and formidable Steelwyrms Company.

Although Afanasi and his men never lacked for employers and filled their war chests with wages and plunder, the young commander was incensed by the manner in which war was conducted in the civilized lands. All too often, the Steelwyrms Company had its rightful conquests and associated glory stolen from them by wizards and sorcerers who, deigning to arise from the comfort of their campaign tents, strode atop a nearby bluff and obliterated opponents with fire and lightning—often after the Steelwyrms had decimated their enemy's ranks. The glory and awe went to the magicians and the mercenaries' efforts left forgotten. Afanasi declared this would end.

The warlord followed scraps of legends and weird tales, his search taking him deep into the Bone Mires. There he found what he sought—the witch known as the Eye of Dhzh, the Black Crawler. Under her tutelage, Afanasi made a compact with Dhzh, pledging to serve the Black Crawler in return for supernatural power. Afanasi emerged from the swamps a changed and far more formidable man. The warrior had become the War-lock.

Infused with diabolical power, the War-lock led his men on a campaign of destruction and conquest that ravaged the Western Kingdoms for seven years. Baronies fell to the Steelwyrms, plunder accumulated like snowdrifts in a blizzard, and no single kingdom's army could stop the War-lock's troops, troops that seemed more than mortal. His enemies did not know that Afanasi had discovered a potent magical object known as *Temper's Cauldron*. This relic birthed frightful warriors from whoever was baptized in its bloodied silver waters. These troops, called "warborn," in conjunction with the War-lock's sorcery, proved almost unstoppable. Almost.

Ultimately united by the War-lock's threat, the Western Kingdoms put aside their quarrels and combined their armies to face Afanasi. In terrible battle, the two sides clashed, sundering their ranks against one another as the soldiers waded through a morass of blood-drenched earth. Afanasi was slain at the height of the battle, laid low by a combination of steel and sorcery, brought down by the wizards he despised. But the Kingdoms' victory was not complete: the War-lock's loyal captains spirited both Afanasi's body and *Temper's Cauldron* away from the battlefield, depriving their enemies of their trophies.

In accordance with the War-lock's wishes and following longstanding orders, the Steelwyrms captains brought Afanasi's corpse and the cauldron to a secure holdfast located in the barrens known as the Sere. The War-lock had erected this "swordhold" to serve as safe house and sanctuary—especially in the event of his death. Within its walls, the War-lock prepared safeguards to restore his life by eldritch means should he fall in battle. He placed

a fraction of his soul into an ensorcelled vessel protected by the Swordhold, a container dubbed the *Oidium Heart*. With his life force so preserved, steps could be undertaken to revive the War-lock in the event of his demise.

In the wake of the final battle, the War-lock's captains brought his corpse to the Swordhold, placing it inside the mechanism that would slowly resurrect him as his mortal essence seeped back into his physical form. Unfortunately for Afanasi, his enemies sought out his hidden fastness and his loyal captains had no choice but to take to the field once more and lure them away from the Swordhold. The captains, the last living beings who knew of the War-lock's schemes, perished leading their foes away from their commander's resting place, but by doing so, ensured his corpse remained undiscovered.

For 99 years, the War-lock laid inert, his life slowly returning to the mortal clay. After decades of slow restoration, Afanasi's consciousness reawakened, but with no one to release his body from the device that restored him, the War-lock remained trapped beneath its revitalizing stream of power. His overlong exposure created an intrinsic connection between the War-lock and his repository of power, making him now nearly-immortal...so long as the *Oidium Heart* remains intact.

Despite the unforeseen benefit of exposure to the *Heart's* power, the War-lock remained imprisoned within the Swordhold, bound semi-awake in his tomb and dreaming to conquer the world once more. Two weeks ago, a group of gnolls discovered the Swordhold and sought shelter and plunder within. While exploring the holdfast, the gnolls' shaman discovered Afanasi and the War-lock offered the gnolls a deal: free him and serve as the nucleus of his new army and be rewarded with undreamt-of power and riches. The gnolls, laughing at the prospects of slaughter, readily agreed. The War-lock baptized the gnolls in *Temper's Cauldron* and the first of his recruits emerged reborn.

During the last 14 days, Afanasi's army has grown, its numbers swelling as the humanoid tribes and human outlaws that dwell in the Sere have gathered beneath the War-lock's banner. Afanasi will soon have sufficient numbers to embark on a fresh campaign of evil. Preparing for this event, he sends a scouting party out of the Sere. There, the warborn gnolls' savagery compels them to attack a lonely inn—one in which the PCs are currently staying. This misstep provides the outside world with its first warning of the War-lock's return. If the party acts

swiftly, they can stop Afanasi before he grows too formidable, ending the War-lock's campaign before it begins. If they fail, however, it's unlikely they'll be alive to witness the consequences of the war...

STARTING THE ADVENTURE

War-lock begins with the party traveling along a seldom-used trail known as the Sore-Foot Track. The exact location of the lonely trail and the party's purpose for traveling it are left to the GM. The most likely explanation is that it is a shortcut between two large settlements, reducing travel time for those brave enough to journey along it.

The Sore-Foot Track is a rutted, partially overgrown cart path winding its way along the northern border of a large region of broken lands known as the Sere. The Sere is known to be a haven for outlaws and monsters, and few travelers brave the Sore-Foot Track these days. Read the following to the party at the beginning of the adventure:

The day has been long and exhausting, just another in a string of such days on the road. Your journey takes you along an ill-used and poorly maintained path that skirts the edge of a vast expanse of broken land. Bare hills separated by rocky gullies and the occasional stand of wind-twisted trees stretch out to the south, marking the region of badlands known as the Sere. To the north are empty meadows, with the rare sight of a farmer's field protected by piled stone fences to break the monotony. Aside from the stray sighting of a cow grazing in the meadows or a goat standing atop a rocky knoll, silhouetted against the sky, you've seen no signs of life on your journey.

The only excitement on the trip so far was a tremendous evening thunderstorm that wracked the sky three nights ago, sending you scurrying for cover in a shallow hillside cave. You watched the night burn incandescent with lightning and heard the crack of bolts striking in the hills. Come morning, a thin haze of smoke hovered over the Sere, a sure sign of small brushfires kindled by lightning burning in the barrens. The haze of burning grass and trees makes the hills even gloomier and more foreboding, but the fires are likely to burn themselves out soon and pose little threat.

The sun slowly crawls towards the western horizon and nightfall is fast approaching. Almost like a granted wish, a slight rise in the track reveals a pair of buildings ahead of you. The structures appear in good repair and a signpost crowned by a battered, whitewashed lantern stands along the roadside: A sure sign of a lonely inn desperate for business. The thoughts of soft beds and hot meals quickly fill your minds.

A DC 10 Intelligence (History) check allows a character to recall there is an old inn known as the Rusted Gorgon along the Sore-Foot Track and that this is likely it. If the party seems concerned about the brushfires, a DC 10 Wisdom (Survival) check determines that, given the barren landscape of the southern hills, there is little danger of the fire spreading and it's likely the brushfires will burn out in a day or two.

THE RUSTED GORGON INN

The Rusted Gorgon Inn is one of the few spots of civilization along the Sore-Foot Track, a place where travelers can purchase a good meal for both themselves and their mounts and spend a night in comfort before enduring the next leg of the merciless route through the wilds. Although the Rusted Gorgon is seldom full, a steady stream of overnight guests keeps the inn running.

The inn was once a farmstead, but when raids of monsters and bandits from the wilds of the Sere grew a bit too commonplace for the owner, he sold the stead to Alro Popper. Popper, then nearing 30 winters of age and having accumulated a tidy nest egg during his career as a guild clerk, dreamed of escaping the confines of the city and saw the potential for an inn along the Sore-Foot Track. Although his wife, Mewlis, had her doubts, Alro turned the old farm into a profitable hostel. The couple has endured nearly 40 years of struggle on the fringes of one of the most inhospitable regions in the land, but without the presence of the Rusted Gorgon, travel along the Sore-Foot Track would swiftly die. The inn also serves as a tavern and meeting place for the handful of hardy farmers and herdsman that dwell on the plains north of the Rusted Gorgon, and it is considered by them an indispensable part of their hardscrabble lives. If the inn were ever threatened, the locals would band together to assist Alro and Mewlis however they could.

A signpost topped by a white-painted iron lantern and placard bearing the inn's name stands at the roadside in front of the place. The inn is a two-story building with a fieldstone lower level and a timber second floor, and possesses stout shutters, narrow windows, and reinforced front and rear doors, allowing it to double as a stronghold in times of trouble. The farmstead's original barn is now the Gorgon's stables and storage space.

GENERAL FEATURES

Basic Construction/Layout. The ground floor of the Rusted Gorgon has exterior fieldstone walls 2 feet thick. The inn's second story is timber frame with plastered walls. Ground level floors are smoothed river stones, while the second level has timber floors. Ceilings are high on the ground floor, measuring 15 feet in height, but are only 8 feet high on the second level.

Light. The common room, kitchen, and any occupied room are considered in bright light, as are the hallways during the daylight hours. After dark, all hallways and unoccupied rooms have dim light.

Windows. The inn's windows are 2 feet wide by 3 feet tall, and each has a pair of wooden shutters than can be closed and barred from inside. A decorative diamond-shaped cut-out in each shutter allows them to double as arrow slits when closed, granting three-quarters cover. A wooden plug allows these cut-outs to be sealed in cold weather to stop drafts. Barred windows can be burst open with a DC 20 Strength check.

Closets. These small chambers hold bedding, cleaning supplies, spare lamps and lamp oil, and similar everyday supplies.

Locked Door. This door separates the public section of the upper floor from the staff's private rooms. Each of the staff has a key to this door. Others can pick the lock with a DC 15 Dexterity check.

Rented Rooms. Most of the inn's rented rooms contain four simple wooden beds with blankets, straw-filled pallets, and feather pillows. A chest or wardrobe is provided for storing clothes, but travelers must supply their own lock (Arlo will lock valuables in his office at a guest's request). Each room also has a small table with pitcher and wash basin, and two earthenware chamber pots. A forged iron candle holder with spare candle provides illumination. The rooms' doors can be locked, but the locks are simple affairs (DC 10 Dexterity check to pick).

Staff. The inn has a small staff of four, which is sufficient to attend to the infrequent traveler passing through the region. These individuals are:

Alro Popper, the inn's owner and barman. Alro is old (70 years) and squinty-eyed, but sharp of hearing. His gray, scraggly beard barely conceals a large boil on his left cheek.

Mewlis Popper, the inn's cook and Alro's second wife. Mewlis is thin and stooped, but with streaks of black still in her waist-long gray hair. She is 62 years of age and wears a well-cared for housedress with a much-stained apron draped over it.

Ahlura, the inn's barmaid and chambermaid. Ahlura is plain-looking with a large nose, but possesses brilliant emerald green eyes. She wears a faded forest green bodice and a long purple skirt. Ahlura is in her mid-20s and has worked for the Poppers for five years.

Yovan, the inn's stableman and bouncer. A beefy man in his early 30s, Yovan has a thick black beard and a mop of dark curly hair. He dresses in stained workman's leathers and keeps a short cudgel hanging from his belt. Yovan speaks with a faint accent, identifying him as originally hailing from the western lands.

PLAYTESTING ANECDOTE

During the playtest of *War-lock*, the party entered the inn and met the staff. As I was describing Alro Popper, one of the players immediately pictured the innkeeper as Tim Conway's Old Man character (do an online search if you're too young to know who I'm talking about), resulting in a storm of chuckling as I took that idea and ran with it. Alro tried to serve the party with a tray of glasses that rattled as he shuffled across the common room floor, and the rest of the staff went to great lengths to avoid an Alro-inspired catastrophe. How you interpret and present the barman is up to you, but as we demonstrated, you can play him for laughs, which could lead to a deeper sense of loss if Alro is slain by the gnolls.

The staff is happy to see customers and welcomes the PCs warmly, offering them seats in the empty common room. The smell of fresh baked bread and simmering stew drifts from the kitchen, and the common room is rustic but comfortable. Meals and lodging are available, and costs are detailed below.

Ahlura happily waits on the party, with both Alro and herself inquiring about the group's trip and destination with honest interest. Starved for business and new faces, both barman and barmaid are eager for news of the outside world and can share a little knowledge of the local area themselves (see Rumors sidebar). Mewlis ap-

pears briefly to welcome the party before returning to the kitchen, while Yovan busies himself with either stabling the party's horses (if they have them) or doing chores in the stables. It is full dark by the time the PCs are fed and their after-dinner drinks served. At this point, life gets dangerous in the Rusted Gorgon.

RUMORS

Both Ahlura and Alro enjoy talking to customers, but know little of events outside of the local area. The Sere remains a source of both danger and mystery, and dominates any discussion they have with travelers. Inquisitive PCs can learn the following if they allow the two to talk long enough.

Brushfires have been seen in the hills of the Sere since the lightning storm three nights ago. Lightning strikes must have started the slow burn, but none have gotten close to the roadway.

Strangely, there was smoke visible in the Sere even before the brushfires. The staff of the Rusted Gorgon didn't dare venture into the barrens, but surmised the smoke was probably from the campfires of humanoid monsters like orcs or gnolls, or from one of the outlaw bands that regularly hide out in the wilds.

There's a fallen stone building in one of the eastern gullies inside the Sere. Some locals who have braved a trip to visit it claim it's haunted.

The druid, Jaime Hawkeyes, dwells in the Sere. He's often sighted atop hills but never visits the Rusted Gorgon. Nobody knows what he gets up to back there in the wilds, but he's never been known to bother the inn or travelers on the Sore-Foot.

A stone circle stands atop a lonely hilltop in the Sere. It is presumed Jaime protects it or otherwise keeps watch on the location.

Old rusted swords and armor occasionally turn up in the Sere. The old timers say that there was once a great battle in the gullies and hilltops, and these objects are relics of that skirmish.