

DUNGEON CRAWL CLASSICS®

THE VEILED VAULTS OF THE ONYX QUEEN

DCC #101: A LEVEL 0 ADVENTURE
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A 0 LEVEL ADVENTURE

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*I have felt a nameless wind blow
with a stench of fetid breath
And walked with gruesome acolytes
through benighted halls of Death
I have seen unholy urns belch
sapphire smoke into the gloom
And I have gazed upon the unreality
of the charnel corpse god in its tomb
I have seen its gruesome jaws and
provided provender for its board
And listened to its soulless hierophant
whisper secrets with poisoned words
I may no longer die as men may die
nor sin as men may sin
I now forever haunt the underworld
without the sun upon my skin*

— — — — —
Strange epitaph found scratched
inside an empty tomb.

INTRODUCTION



his adventure begins *in media res*, with the characters awakening deep within the royal burial vaults where they are set to become unwitting sacrifices to the corpse god Mordiggian. There, they must piece together the clues as to their whereabouts, contend with a cabal of death cultists, stop a vile sacrament, close a gate to the underworld, and ultimately thwart a vile queen and the corpse god himself—if they want to escape the charnel palace and save their very souls.

The Veiled Vaults of The Onyx Queen is a 0-level adventure intended for 12 or more characters. Inspired by the works of Clark Ashton Smith and H.P. Lovecraft, judges wishing to use this scenario to kick off a campaign can easily place it anywhere in their own setting and campaign world.

During the course of this adventure, the characters' occupations and alignments play a large role in shaping the outcomes of certain situations. Judges would be best served to make note of both before starting, as it will go a long way toward making the PCs and the game more memorable for the players.

ADVENTURE BACKGROUND



For centuries, house Yoros has ruled over the eastern realms. Benevolent and just, the good family Yoros has governed with impunity, and under the rule of its current queen, the people flourish.

But within every great family there lies a dark secret.

Queen Yoros is not the merciful ruler she portrays but rather a ruthless cultist who practices dark sorcery, vile necromancy, and demon worship. Obsessed with youth and

everlasting life, she has spent a lifetime secretly mired in vile sacraments and profane ceremonies, all in the hope of achieving her goal of immortality. Yet despite the countless souls who have perished screaming on her blood-soaked altars, it wasn't until a chance encounter with a strange figure deep within her family burial vaults did she learn of Mordiggian—the forgotten demon-lord of the dead.

Convinced that Mordiggian alone could grant her darkest desires, Queen Yoros quickly set to venerate the forgotten lord. Through grotesque rituals not performed since ancient times, she called forth the charnel god from realms beyond reality, where forgotten deities wait dreaming in the dark. Together, they formed a dark pact that would see the queen live forever and the corpse god's death cult once again flourish. Secretly, she transformed her own family's burial palace—a megalithic windowless structure used to house the royal dead—into a mausoleum-cathedral of Mordiggian. There, within its shadow-haunted vaults, purple-robed death cultists once again honored their corpse god, and the queen was granted everlasting life.

But all power comes with a price.

Along with maintaining the death cult, Queen Yoros must deliver 95 souls every 95 years to mark the Onyx Jubilee of her dark covenant, thereby renewing her pact with Mordiggian. Failure to do so results in an eternity of torment and unfathomable agony as the corpse god's bride in the underworld.

Now, the queen's 95th year approaches, and the Onyx Jubilee is set to begin. As the realm celebrates the good fortune of their long-lived monarch, a group of unsuspecting villagers are set to become provender for the corpse god himself. Trapped within the gloom-haunted halls of the dead, they must fight for their lives to escape the veiled vaults of the Onyx Queen.

RUMORS AND SUPERSTITIONS



For the common folk of the realm, the lives of the ruling monarchy have always been a source of fascination and envy. As such, there is no shortage of rumors and gossip spread among market stalls and ale houses regarding the royals and their often-scandalous behavior.

Before beginning the adventure, each player should roll 1d8 on the following table to determine what juicy bit of gossip their PCs may have overheard. It is up to the players to determine if what they have heard is true or false.

1. Since the death of her beloved and only nephew more than 30 years ago, the queen has not been seen in public. (T)
2. Your old nan swears her mother often spoke of attending an Onyx Jubilee when she was a young girl. (T)
3. The queen is dead, having passed away years ago. The celebration is an elaborate ruse to maintain law, order, and morale within the realm. (F)
4. The queen is actually bedridden and near death, and

it is her unscrupulous lady-in-waiting who steers the realm from the shadows. (F)

5. Having no heirs, the queen has called the best and brightest of the realm to attend her palace where she is to secretly name a successor from among them. (F)
6. The queen has an unnatural fear of fire and has gone so far as to outlaw the practice of cremation within the capital city. (F/T)
7. Despite the queen never marrying, there has been scandalous accounts of men and women being secretly escorted into the palace during the night. (T)
8. Although the royal courtiers claim to be inviting only those villagers most prestigious in their chosen occupation to attend the palace during the celebration, you know of a few villagers who have been chosen despite not being very good at their jobs at all. (T)

PLAYER BACKGROUND

The merciful Queen Yoros' Onyx Jubilee is fast approaching, marking the 95th year of her glorious rule, and preparations are in full swing. So, when royal courtiers appeared in towns and villages across the realm, identifying those subjects who showed uncommon skill in their given profession, the masses rejoiced. For Queen Yoros was long-lived and much-beloved throughout the land.

As luck would have it, you have been chosen to attend the royal palace and ply your given talents (whatever they may be) in preparation for the great celebration. Honored with your newfound fortune, you find yourself treading the lavish splendor of the royal palace with a sense of great anticipation and wonder.

PLAYER START

The adventure opens *in media res*, that is to say, right in the middle of the action! The PCs begin the game in **Area 1-1 - Larder of the Dead**, as they slowly awaken from their poisoning.

JUDGES NOTES: PCS' STARTING ITEMS

Having been poisoned during their initial visit to the palace and presumed dead, the PCs' bodies have been moved to the former royal burial palace where they are to be sacrificed as food to the corpse god himself. As such, the PCs begin the game with only the clothes on their backs and any items that would normally be found stored upon their person. This includes most tools, weapons, and trade goods that would be kept slung to belts or stored in a pouch. Any animal companions or items that must be carried (e.g., staff, shovel, pushcart, etc.) are not present and have been disposed of prior to the PCs' internment. Should a player or judge question the availability of a starting item, a simple Luck check can be made to determine the outcome.

THE MAUSOLEUM-CATHEDRAL OF MORDIGGIAN

General Features: This megalithic windowless structure has housed the royal dead for generations, serving as the royal burial palace before secretly being converted into a mausoleum-cathedral of the corpse god Mordiggian. Now it is a cultist-ridden warren of terror and obscure shadow where the corpse god eternally watches all things from his black vault beneath the temple.

Unless noted otherwise, the structure is a riot of swarming opulence, wrought of solid white marble gilded in gold reliefs. Massive pillars rise 50' to sweeping ceilings whose vastness is but half-revealed by the glowing coals that smolder in urnlike vessels throughout.

The air carries with it a faint fetor of corruption and temple incense that disturbs the senses. The entire palace hums with a sense of mystery and deathly menace. Yet, despite the stillness that haunts the gloom, there is always a lingering sense that some invisible presence is watching from beyond the shadows.

Royal Burial Vaults: The six royal vaults located within the burial palace house the greatest of the empire's departed monarchy. As is customary for the rich and noble, burial vaults are often outfitted with traps, tricks, and puzzles whose complexity and lethality serve to ward off tomb robbers as much as it serves as a symbol of status and prestige for its departed occupant. The 20'-tall doorways to all six royal burial vaults are constructed of solid alabaster and have no handles or fixtures. The doors are unlocked, and despite their ponderous size, they swing open with even the gentlest push.

Area 1-1 - Larder of the Dead: *Your eyes open to oblivion.*

No spark of memory, nor tremor of recognition fills your mind, as if awakened in the midst of a dreamless slumber. Only the sour taste that fouls your mouth gives any indication that you yet live.

Slowly, you struggle to gain movement in paralyzed limbs and find yourself lying in a great marble hall. A flickering light shines dimly upon the slack faces and lifeless eyes of countless others who also lay prostrate throughout the chamber.

When suddenly, movement betrays the deathly stillness of the room; purple-gowned figures wearing silver masks carved in the likeness of skulls move about, loading limp bodies into a curious-looking cart made of leather and monstrous bones.

Be it divine providence or just plain luck, the PCs have somehow resisted the fatal kiss of the lotus tincture they were given upon entry to the palace. They now find themselves alive and trapped within the royal burial palace where they are to be offered as sacrifices to the charnel god.

They awaken lying upon the cold marble floor amid ordered rows of dead bodies. Prowling the room are the hunched figures of four death cultists who go about loading bodies into a cart. Should the PCs' actions reveal they are among the living, the cultists attack with savage ferocity.

PCs who attempt to play dead and not alert the strange fig-



DEATH CULT OF THE CORPSE GOD

The primary worshippers of Mordiggian are men and women who, through vile rituals and necrophagy, have transformed themselves into hideous flesh-eating monstrosities. As such, these death cultists are not truly undead but rather a perverse parody of un-death. Yet their soulless nature and sluggish decline into un-death allows them to be turned as unholy by clerics. Only those followers who reach the title of hierophant and beyond have made the true transformation into the living dead.

Death cultists crouch beastlike under heavy purple gowns that trail about their feet, keeping the horror of their visages hidden beneath silver masks (30 gp) carved in the likeness of leering skulls. Beneath the masks are diabolic faces that are half human and half canine, with long spiky teeth that protrude from snarling lips. In combat, death cultists move with the swiftness of tigers, howling like blood-mad hyenas as they deliver devastating blows from their hooked talons with bestial ferocity.

ures must succeed in a DC 10 Luck check to do so. Note that, for the purpose of this check, each player need only roll once for all their characters, using the PC with the highest Luck score. Should the check fail, the cultists become aware of the still-living PCs and attack.

If the death cultists attack, read or paraphrase the following:

Suddenly, the robed figures close upon you with unnatural swiftness. Howling like blood-mad hyenas, they lurch forward with hooked talons held high.

Death Cultist of Mordiggian (4): Init +1; Atk claw +0 melee (1d5) or bite +0 melee (1d3); AC 12; HD 1d8; hp 3 each; MV 40'; Act 1d20; SP can be turned as unholy, aversion to sunlight; SV Fort +1, Ref +1, Will +0; AL C; Crit M/d6.

A death cultist has an unnatural sensitivity to the sun. Each round a cultist is exposed to direct sunlight inflicts 1 hp of damage as their flesh bubbles and sears under its rays.

Dead Villagers: The dead lay side by side and are comprised of many ages and differing ranks. Nobles and rich merchants are crowded beside beggars in filthy rags; there are many gaps in the ordered rows, suggesting that certain corpses had been removed.

A more thorough investigation of the 15 bodies show that each of them bear no wounds save for bloated black lips that smell of a sweet narcotic perfume, the same smell and taste as in the PCs' own mouths. An untrained DC 8 Intelligence check determines the cause of death as poisoning by a tincture of black lotus blooms. Note that PCs with the profession of alchemist, apothecarist, forester, sage, healer, herbalist, shaman, smuggler, or wizard's apprentice can make a trained skill check given their background and would thus roll 1d20 on their attempt.