Monster
Makeover:
The
Demilich

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Illustrations by David Sourwine and Scott Roller

Back in 1978, Gary Gygax created a creature that would haunt adventurers for the rest of their days. Older than the ages, cold as stone, and as deadly as the very depths of the Abyss, Acererak the Demilich filled our dreams and nightmares for decades. Although it has reappeared in 4th Edition, today we’re looking to rebuild the demilich—and capture even more of its true terror.

Ecology of a Demilich

The earliest mentions of the demilich go back to the original Tomb of Horrors published in 1978, wherein a magic-user-turned lich traveled so far from its mortal beginnings as to leave only a single jeweled skull behind: Acererak. This demilich had traversed consciousness and morality; it had barely a single spark of memory of life. It cared nothing for the lives of mortals except as souls to be devoured.
The original demilich description listed the abilities we’ve come to love. First and foremost is the demilich’s soul drain ability. This attack removes the soul of the victim and traps it within one of the demilich’s gemmed teeth. Each hero who avoided these attacks might fall prey to a curse that causes an enemy to hit him or her successfully, or he or she could be teleported six hundred miles away. The demilich’s protections were as hard to handle as its attacks. Though it had just 50 hit points, only a very select set of attacks could damage or disorient it, only certain spells could harm it (such as shatter), and only a handful of powerful weapons could affect it (such as +5 vorpal weapons and swords of sharpness wielded by fighters, rangers, and paladins).

For a more complete look at the demilich, consult our old D&D® Alumni, which covered both Acererak and Vecna.

**Design Considerations**

Let’s go over a few design notes before we dive into the statistics.

**Soul Drain**

We’re going to start our demilich makeover with its most important ability: soul drain. The latest edition of the Dungeons & Dragons® game largely removed instant kill effects, and for good reason. No one wants his or her character killed in the first round of a battle. We could have removed instant kill effects, and for good reason. The original demilich description listed the abilities we’ve come to love. First and foremost is the demilich’s soul drain ability. This attack removes the soul of the victim and traps it within one of the demilich’s gemmed teeth. Each hero who avoided these attacks might fall prey to a curse that causes an enemy to hit him or her successfully, or he or she could be teleported six hundred miles away. The demilich’s protections were as hard to handle as its attacks. Though it had just 50 hit points, only a very select set of attacks could damage or disorient it, only certain spells could harm it (such as shatter), and only a handful of powerful weapons could affect it (such as +5 vorpal weapons and swords of sharpness wielded by fighters, rangers, and paladins).

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**Soul Drain Option**

If you’d rather avoid draining healing surges, you can replace soul drain in Ashavona’s statistics block on the next page with the following power.

**Soul Drain**

(necrotic) + Recharge when no creature is taking ongoing damage from this power

*Attack:* Ranged 20 (one creature); +25 vs. Will

*Hit:* Ongoing 25 necrotic damage (save ends). If the target drops to 0 hit points or fewer because of this effect, the target dies, and the demilich gains an action point.

*Miss:* Ongoing 15 necrotic damage (save ends).

**Offensive Capabilities**

To ensure that our demilich has sufficient ability to act in combat, we’re going to provide it with two turns per round. Although its soul drain is still limited to a single creature at a time, it can use several of its abilities on each turn—meaning it can use curse against two targets and use four shadow rays per round. The demilich’s shadow rays is its primary way to damage ranged attackers.

Triggered actions include astral cage, which serves as a means to tie into the demilich’s astral nature and keep those powerhouse hitters from getting in too many attacks per round.

**Bloodied**

As with all good solos, our demilich should get more dangerous when bloodied. We’ll handle boosting the danger in two ways. First, the demilich can instantly use curse against enemies all around it, so now everyone feels a lot more vulnerable. Second, the damage of its aura increases to 15. The aura is particularly hard on adjacent cursed melee characters who might now have to back off—making your players rethink their strategies is a good goal for a bloodied effect like this.

**Terrain**

Epic tier solo creatures have a tendency to take considerable damage from epic heroes. Although it wreaks havoc with the desired growing tension of a battle, players enjoy pouring on as much damage as possible as fast as possible. To that end, additional defenses might be needed to prevent a quick kill. Instead of implementing the demilich’s original protections directly into the monster statistics block, we’re going to tie them into the demilich’s lair.

For our demilich, we can implement protective wards that represent its original protections. These wards serve to add a different flavor to the battle.
encouraging the heroes to move around the map and adding some additional strategy and mechanics to the battle.

We’ll give our demilich three such protections: the ward of force, the ward of necromancy, and the ward of the unholy. Each of these wards must be broken down with the right skills. Only one hero can work on any single ward at a time, though others can assist someone attempting to disable a ward. Disabling a ward is a two-step process that normally requires standard actions; a hero can choose to use a minor action instead on one of these attempts, but doing so increases the DC and risks damage to the hero on a failure. These wards do not need to be destroyed. Though they add significant defenses to the demilich, a powerful party can ignore them and might still defeat it.

You might adjust these wards to fit any party facing your demilich. You could, for example, replace the ward of force with a clockwork ward built to challenge rogues. You might remove a ward for groups that will already be suitably challenged by the demilich, or add a fourth ward for a group with six players who might otherwise find the battle trivial. Use these wards to provide the maximum amount of fun and challenge.

The Ward of Force

The ward of force is a stone pillar that pulses with runes of physical protection. This ward gives the demilich resist 10 to all damage, and it must be smashed down with two successful DC 27 Athletics or Endurance checks as standard actions. A hero can instead use a minor action, but the DC becomes 36, and a failure results in the hero taking 3d8 + 9 force damage. After two successes, the pillar is smashed down, and the demilich loses the resistance this ward provided.

The Ward of Necromancy

The ward of necromancy, a horrific humanoid statue that resembles a decaying body, fills all living creatures in the chamber with a terror beyond mortal reckoning. The effect causes all creatures in the room except the demilich to take a –2 penalty to attack rolls until the ward is destroyed. Destroying this ward requires two successful DC 27 Nature or Arcana checks made as standard actions. A hero can instead use a minor action, but doing so increases the DC to 36, and a failure creates a pulse of necrotic energy in a close burst 3 that deals 3d8 + 9 necrotic damage. After two successes, the statue crumbles into dust and the attack penalty disappears.

The Ward of the Unholy

This squat statue of a long-forgotten demon prince hums with unholy energy. While the demilich is within the room, it regains 20 hit points at the start of its turn. The ward can be destroyed with two successful DC 27 History or Religion checks made as standard actions. A hero can instead use a minor
action, but doing so increases the DC to 36, and a failure deals 3d8 + 9 psychic damage and dazes the hero until the start of his or her next turn.

**Tactics**

*Soul drain* is the demilich’s primary attack, and the demilich uses it as often as it can. To keep the battle interesting, consider changing the target of *soul drain* each time that power is used instead of focusing on a single victim. It then uses *shadow rays* with any remaining standard actions or action points it might have. And remember, it can use *curse* every turn to spread around the defense penalties and give itself opportunities to shake off adverse conditions.

The demilich’s ability to fly and to use *astral cage* against defenders keeps it mobile and prevents it from getting boxed in. Be careful not to make this situation become too annoying—sometimes players just want to smash something (change “sometimes” to “smash lots NOW” when that something is draining their souls away).

**Lore**

The following lore can introduce a demilich into your campaign. For this example, we have named our demilich Ashavona.

The characters can learn the following by studying the ancient texts of history (History check) or through divine or arcane investigations (Arcana or Religion check) and succeeding on a skill check against a moderate DC of the characters’ level):

Four thousand years ago, a powerful wizard named Ashavona wished for nothing except to save her husband. All her powers and skills could do nothing for him, so she began delving into the dark arts of necromancy. Through these dark arts, she attempted to preserve her husband but only lost him further. The rotting husk she reanimated had none of the soul of her beloved. From that moment on, Ashavona decided that if she could not bring him back, she would seek to reunite with him across space and time.

One hundred twenty years after her birth, Ashavona stepped away from life and became a lich. Her own soul lost, she continued to seek the soul of her beloved. Thousands of years have passed since she began exploring the vastness of the Astral Sea. Mortality exists now for her as a barely remembered spark of her former life—and of her physical body, only her jewel-encrusted skull remains in the catacombs below her shattered tower.

**Adventure Seeds**

How you confront your players with the demilich determines much of the creature’s ultimate success. Give your players the information they need to battle such a foe, but ensure that this information also elicits the primary emotion you seek: fear. No living thing facing such a creature should feel anything other than fear. With that in mind, you can tailor one of the following adventure seeds to introduce the demilich into your campaign.

- **Shadows under the Tower**: Though Ashavona’s tower was shattered thousands of years ago, it still remains a den of dark and powerful evil. Adventurers from across the land have attempted to penetrate its depths in search of treasure or knowledge, but have never returned.

- **The Lost Artifact**: An ancient artifact of critical importance to the heroes rests within the catacombs below the Tower of Ashavona, the ruins of a once-mighty tower of necromancy.

- **The Captured Spirit**: Whispers and faded screams echo through the night, beckoning the characters to rescue a soul lost for thousands of years in the astral prisons below the Tower of Ashavona.

**About the Author**

Mike Shea is the webmaster of *SlyFlourish.com*, a site focused on building the better 4th Edition Dungeon Master, and the author of *Sly Flourish’s Dungeon Master Tips* and *Sly Flourish’s Running Epic Tier D&D Games*. Mike lives with his wife, Michelle, and his dire worg Jebu.