Somewhere in the Feywild, deep within the jungles of the Isle of Dread, stands an ancient yuan-ti temple. Within, the black dragon Shademaw calls itself the God of Shadows and rules over its yuan-ti and troglodyte slaves. Adventurers who learn of this beast and its vast treasure sometimes search for its temple, seeking fame and glory. None have ever returned.

This article is the first in our series of Monster Makeovers, where we review the game’s creatures and bring them in line with the current standards. We also present backstory and story hooks to make these creatures more useful to your game. Along the way, we hope to show how to modify and update creatures based on your group’s needs.

Let’s start with one of the most powerful creatures of all: the ancient black dragon. Today, we present Shademaw, the self-styled God of Shadow.
The History of Shademaw

Thousands of years ago, the dragon runt of its litter was cast onto the Isle of Dread to starve and die. For years, the dragon runt survived only on ruthless instinct, eating the crocodiles, snakes, and poisonous fish of the isle’s putrid swamps.

In the center of the isle, an ancient temple had been built along a planar rift to the Shadowfell. The temple’s priest ruled a yuan-ti clan and their brutally enslaved troglodytes, and he brought in the starving black dragon. He named it Shademaw and taught it the yuan-ti’s brutal ways. As Shademaw grew older, so too grew the priest’s station.

Their alliance did not last. Observing Shademaw’s burgeoning independence, the priest and his most loyal subjects attempted to assassinate the dragon. Their attempt failed. High above the temple, Shademaw held the broken body of the priest aloft in his talons, and unleashed its acidic breath upon him. Torrents of burning acid fell across the temple; acid scars are still magically bourn by the temple’s yuan-ti descendants to this day.

Shademaw has since ruled as the “God of Shadow” over the yuan-ti and their troglodyte slaves. Today he spends much of his time in his lair, which is deep beneath the temple and connected to the surrounding jungle by acid-filled tunnels. Shademaw expects unconditional loyalty and servitude from his followers, and he measures their loyalty by the treasures added to his growing hoard.

Adventure Seeds

As a part of a one-shot adventure or side trek in a larger campaign, Shademaw makes for a challenging foe. Here are three potential adventure seeds to bring Shademaw to your game.

A Growing Threat: Feywild kingdoms knew of the yuan-ti temple on the Isle of Dread but thought little of it as a threat. Recently, however, armies of troglodytes have crossed the waters and attacked eladrin villages, stealing whatever treasure they could get their hands on. Those who followed the troglodytes back to their temple have never returned. Only a group as powerful as the heroes might dare to face this shadow.

The MacGuffin of the Gods: During their adventures, the heroes learn of a powerful magic item required for success against the great threats they face. Ancient texts speak of the loss of the item on the Isle of Dread. Rumors claim that the item was given to a mighty creature that rules over an ancient yuan-ti temple. Only by traveling to the isle and facing this beast can the heroes hope to recover the item.

The Shadow Unleashed: For centuries the dark shadow hanging over the Isle of Dread remained dormant. Now, though, eladrin kingdoms have started to fall, one by one, under the horrible acidic breath of this awakened beast. All attempts to slay it have failed. Only the mightiest dare to travel to the ancient yuan-ti temple to face Shademaw.

Shademaw Lore

Scattered across the Feywild are ancient texts and translated scrolls that speak of Shademaw’s history. Locals near the Isle of Dread pass down oral traditions of the beast, which they often use as bedtime stories to scare children, but some of the oldest remember when his shadow last darkened the sky.

Heroes investigating the dragon might learn the following pieces of information.

History DC 29: Oral histories describe a clan of yuan-ti that rules a temple in the center of the Isle of Dread. It has been there for thousands of years, and it stands on a rift between the Feywild and Shadowfell. The yuan-ti there are extremely old and powerful, and they worship Shademaw, the ancient black dragon, as a god.

Nature DC 29: Like other black dragons, Shademaw’s blood and breath are extremely acidic. When badly wounded, his blood can boil through the armor of nearby attackers.

Nature/Dungeoneering DC 39: Shademaw uses a series of submerged tunnels to travel between his lair under the temple and the surrounding swamps. Closer to his lair, the water within the tunnels becomes horrifyingly acidic.

Religion DC 39: Ancient religious texts inked on scrolls of snakeskin speak of a yuan-ti priest that found Shademaw as a young whelp abandoned in the swamp. The priest saw potential in the whelp and raised him to be a tool of obedience and command over the local troglodytes. However, the priest grew fearful of the dragon and attempted to assassinate the beast. He failed. Shademaw took the priest into the air above the temple and melted his body in a torrent of acid. Since that time he has reigned as the God of Shadow over the yuan-ti.

Streetwise DC 22: Eladrin sages whisper of a clan of yuan-ti that worships a terrible beast on the Isle of Dread known as Shademaw. Adventurers seeking glory, fortune, or ancient mystical magic
sometimes explore the swamp’s heart—but as powerful as they are, they never return.

**Shademaw’s Design Considerations**

To design Shademaw, we start with the elder black dragon from *D&D Essentials: Monster Vault*. This base paragon tier dragon does an excellent job of bringing a real threat to a group of five heroes. We’ll begin by updating Shademaw’s statistics using the updated damage expressions (from the July 2010 update to the *Dungeon Master’s Guide*).

All good epic tier solo monsters need a few things to be truly effective. They need ways to do the following:

- Deal with debilitating conditions
- Threaten all heroes regardless of role or location
- Break through resistances
- Become more powerful when bloodied
- Scale up actions along with the heroes
- Design a compelling encounter area

Take a look at how we’ll address these issues.

**Dealing with Conditions**

*Monster Vault*’s elder black dragon has a good trick for dealing with debilitating conditions. Its instinctive devouring trait lets the dragon make a charge attack, make a bite attack, or remove a debilitating condition. We’ll keep it in place. Depending on how challenging you wish to make Shademaw for your group, you might consider allowing instinctive devouring to remove any single ongoing, save ends effect (since it’s otherwise difficult to mitigate effects such as unconsciousness, paralysis, or a particularly restrictive marking effect). Consider this carefully, however—you don’t want to obviate everything the heroes can do.

**Threaten All Heroes**

To help Shademaw threaten heroes regardless of their locations, we can update the acid gob to a minor action that targets a single creature in a close burst 20, so that it doesn’t provoke opportunity attacks. Making it a minor action gives Shademaw an extra attack each round to match the extra actions many epic tier groups possess. (It can still trigger marks, however, which gives defenders a chance to punish the dragon for damaging a ranged striker.) Now Shademaw can keep ranged attackers busy.

**Break through Resistances**

The elder black dragon’s shroud of gloom deals with resistances well: its vulnerable 10 acid boosts damage to those foolish enough to stand toe-to-toe with a black dragon without any acid resistance. For Shademaw, we can increase this to vulnerable 15 acid to break through typical epic level resistances. We can also make it a minor action to provide Shademaw with more usable actions a turn than an elder black dragon. Such high vulnerability can be extremely dangerous, so you should ensure that your group’s heroes have a chance to pick up acid resistance gear (something they should already be considering if they’re anticipating a fight with a black dragon) or they’re likely to die painful gooey deaths.

**Become More Powerful When Bloodied and Scale Up with the Heroes**

To increase Shademaw’s threat when bloodied, we can upgrade the acidic blood trait to 15 acid damage and increase its range to 2 squares (the increase to shroud of gloom stacks with acidic blood damage). Epic tier characters who know they’re going up against a black dragon might be prepared to resist 15 acid. Without a further escalation when bloodied, they’ll resist this completely as long as they aren’t affected by shroud of gloom—meaning, the dragon might not truly scale up when bloodied, just get back its breath weapon and shroud of gloom. So if your party is especially robust, you might consider upgrading acidic blood to 20 acid damage (perhaps 30 if they’re that hearty).

In general, acidic blood is a great example of a trait that scales up with character actions. Some epic tier powers give heroes a huge range of free basic attacks. With a trait like this, each of those attacks has the chance to burn down any nearby hero—this keeps the heroes moving around the map and makes players think twice about using all those free action attacks if they’re too close.

**Design a Compelling Encounter Area**

High damage output can be a problem in challenging epic tier heroes. You want to create an epic fight, and that means presenting a worthy, memorable challenge to the heroes. In-combat skill challenges are a great way to give some protections to your villain and slow down the onslaught of attacks characters make against your monster.
For Shademaw, we can add a pair of pillars tapped into the Shadowfell rift that feed him energy from the Shadowfell rift below the temple. Black tendrils of energy flow from these pillars to Shademaw, allowing him to regain 20 to 40 hit points per round (choose an amount based on your experience with the damage output of your players’ heroes). The heroes can destroy these pillars with three successful DC 29 standard action skill checks. They can instead attempt to destroy the pillars recklessly with minor actions instead of standard actions but risk taking 2d12 + 13 damage on a failure as the fabric of the Feywild grows unstable. Possible skills to disable the pillars include Arcana, Athletics, Nature, or Religion.

These pillars help increase Shademaw’s survivability, can cause the characters to move around the map, and ensure the entire party can’t pin down and nuke the dragon. You want the amount healed to be just enough that the heroes could still fight through it if they decide not to mess with the pillars.

Shademaw’s Lair and Tactics

Shademaw’s lair exists in the lower chambers of the ancient yuan-ti temple. The lair is a natural cavern, and long tubes of acidic swamp water connect it to the jungles beyond the lair.

Acidic pools within Shademaw’s lair allow him to travel from pool to pool under the cavern’s floor as a move action, making it difficult to pin the dragon down. In this way, he seeks to attack more vulnerable party members, focusing primarily on leaders.

Below Shademaw’s lair lies a weakness between the Feywild and the Shadowfell. Two magic pillars pour the imbalance of these two planes into

### Shademaw, Ancient Black Dragon

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 26 Solo Lurker</th>
<th>XP 45,000</th>
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<tr>
<td>Gargantuan natural magical beast (aquatic, dragon)</td>
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<tr>
<td>HP 968; Bloodied 484</td>
<td>Initiative +29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AC 41, Fortitude 37, Reflex 41, Will 39</td>
<td>Perception +28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speed 10 (swamp walk), fly 10; swim 10</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resist 30 acid</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saving Throws +5; Action Points 2</td>
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**Traits**

**Acid Blood (acid)**
Whenever the dragon takes damage while it is bloodied, each creature within 2 squares of it takes 15 acid damage.

**Aquatic**
The dragon can breathe underwater. In aquatic combat, it gains a +2 bonus to attack rolls against nonaquatic creatures.

**Instinctive Devouring**
On an initiative of 10 + its initiative check, the dragon can use a free action to charge or to use bite. If the dragon cannot use a free action to make this attack due to a dominating or stunning effect, then that effect ends instead of the dragon making the attack.

**Action Recovery**
Whenever the dragon ends its turn, any dazing, stunning, dominating, or unconscious effect on it ends.

**Standard Actions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>At-Will</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Bite (acid)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attack: Melee 4 (one creature); +31 vs. AC</td>
<td>Hit: 3d10 + 7 damage, and ongoing 20 acid damage (save ends). Miss: 20 acid damage.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack: Melee 4 (one or two creatures); +31 vs. AC. If the dragon targets only one creature, it can make this attack twice against that creature.</td>
<td>Hit: 2d12 + 17 damage.</td>
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</table>

**Minor Actions**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>At-Will (1/round)</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acid Gob (acid)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack: Close burst 20 (one creature in the burst); +29 vs. Reflex</td>
<td>Hit: The target takes ongoing 30 acid damage and is blinded (save ends both).</td>
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**Triggered Actions**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>At-Will</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tail Sweep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trigger: An enemy misses the dragon with a melee attack.</td>
<td>Attack (Opportunity Action): Melee 5 (triggering enemy); +29 vs. Reflex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hit: 2d12 + 14 damage, and the dragon pushes the target 4 squares and knocks it prone.</td>
<td>In addition, each of the target’s allies adjacent to the target at the end of the push takes 20 damage.</td>
</tr>
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**Breathed Breath + Encounter**

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Encounter</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trigger: The dragon is first bloodied.</td>
<td>Effect (Free Action): Breath weapon recharges, and the dragon uses it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Skills**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acrobatics 29</th>
<th>Stealth 29</th>
<th>Perception 28</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Str 27 (+21)</td>
<td>Dex 32 (+24)</td>
<td>Wis 30 (+23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Con 26 (+21)</td>
<td>Int 23 (+19)</td>
<td>Cha 21 (+18)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Alignment evil Languages Common, Draconic
Shademaw, healing his wounds. See the description of the pillars in the “Shademaw’s Design Considerations” above.

When confronted, Shademaw feels out his attackers before unleashing his full power. He uses every opportunity to blind ranged attackers with his acid gob. When he can group three or more attackers in a burst 5, he first uses his shroud of gloom, and then unleashes his powerful breath weapon. Make sure to remember the –2 penalty to attack rolls inflicted by the shroud of gloom. It’s easy to forget.

Shademaw’s acidic blood trait is an excellent example of a mechanic that forces players to rethink their strategy. In actual play, defenders are forced to back off from the beast or take huge amounts of acid damage. Mechanics such as these can’t be ignored with character powers or equipment—they require actual tactics and changed behavior to overcome.

Shademaw is designed to bring a suitable challenge to a party of five 26th-level heroes. Because of his devastating acid attacks, you might consider providing side quests for your group to gather protections from acid and to gain information about Shademaw before they confront him; he is designed to provide a powerful threat to well-prepared parties. To unprepared groups, he could spell certain death.

Scaling Shademaw

For a smaller group, consider removing the healing pillars. Shademaw alone is powerful enough to fight four characters directly without any additional help.

Groups have a tendency to gain significant power for each additional hero above five due to powerful combinations and synergistic effects. For this reason, when your group is larger than five characters, consider adding two yuan-ti mali-son stalkers per character (Monster Manual 3) and ensure that the healing pillars allow Shademaw to regain 5 more hit points for each additional character above five.

If you think your group will still have an easy time of it, consider adding two Shadowfell portals that generate two serpents of nihal (Monster Manual 3) each at the end of Shademaw’s first turn. They activate as soon as they’re summoned. No more than one such serpent per character can be active at any one time, and characters can make two successful standard action (moderate DC) Arcana, Religion, or Nature checks to destroy the portals.

A Threat to Demigods

Building a creature powerful enough to threaten a group of epic tier heroes is a challenge unto itself. Increasing the attacks, defenses, and damage of a paragon tier creature won’t suffice when faced with exponentially stronger world-stomping heroes. Shademaw is an example of a beast built to face such foes. Pit your epic tier party against him—and give them a fight to remember.

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-warg Jebu.