CHAPTER 5 | The Shadowdark

GLIMMER, CITY OF SECRETS

For paragon tier and epic tier characters

The incunabulum city of Glimmer lies upon a broad island in a half-drowned vault deep within the Shadowdark. The waves of the surrounding sea roll across the city-isle’s bone-strewn shore. Most visitors reach Glimmer by way of ferry. Pale cavelight rings the island, illuminating hundreds of wide catacomb mouths that lead deeper inside. The failed majesty of a much older, fallen city is heaped above the winding entrances to Glimmer like a crown of broken spires.

CITY DISTRICTS

Glimmer is a city of winding streets, low-ceilinged plazas lit by corpse-lights, and stony silence broken by occasional muffled cries of an ongoing interrogation.

THE GROTTO (ENTRY DISTRICT)

Incunabulum gondoliers pole slender ferries from the edge of the drowned vault to the island containing the city of Glimmer. The three largest catacomb mouths are flooded, allowing watercraft unrestricted access. Inside, the catacombs open into the largest chamber of the city—the “port” where ferries and small ships come to dock.

Visitors from mundane worlds find the great bazaar that fronts the docks filled with all manner of oddities from across the Shadowfell, the world, and planes more distant. Many of the shops sell secret lore and hidden knowledge, each one specializing in a niche area of knowledge. Representative shop signs include “Eladrin Death Songs,” “Sunken Islands of Tharnasia,” “Conspiracies of the Purple Masters,” “Misplaced Keys,” and so on.

Several inns are located in the Grotto, including Cloak and Soul, Tongs, and Fisher’s Rest. Travelers are not made to feel too unwelcome when they walk into the common rooms of any of these places. Still, visitors who make enemies in Glimmer could discover that even the most secure rented room probably contains a secret door that allows entry to a stealthy incunabulum.

At best, Glimmer is indifferent to strangers. Newcomers can find lodging, trade, and perhaps answers to vexing questions. However, visitors who allow themselves to be led too far astray from the main streets of the city are never heard from again. Rumors suggest that the missing fall victim to unscrupulous incunabula who couldn’t resist interrogating the strangers for their secrets.

Sometimes groups wake to discover that one of their number has been stolen away. Other times entire parties fail to return to the common room after their rest. Those taken in this manner wake strapped to a shadowy, gurgling device. Their fate is to undergo the Unveiling.

THE HOWLING (LIBRARY DISTRICT)

Libraries are the heart of incunabulum culture, so it’s no surprise that the largest interconnected catacomb tunnels are stuffed with intricately constructed shelves overflowing with scrolls of incunabulum-made parchment. Each scroll is dense with lore, and most of it is utterly trivial. However, buried amid the dross are real gems, such as the location of a king’s lost treasury, the true name of a powerful demon, or the answer to the riddle carved on the side of an obsidian mountain tumbling through the Elemental Chaos.

A loose hierarchy of incunabula controls the flow of information in Glimmer. The Lady of Secrets is the head librarian of Glimmer, and she is ensconced in the central library of the Howling. She coordinates with incunabula in other locations who keep similar collections. One day, Vecna might demand an accounting, and the incunabula stand ready to answer.

THE UNVEILING

The Unveiling is the prosaic name that incunabula give to their interrogation process. It is “final” because living creatures subject to the process die, while dead souls and undead are destroyed (but see below). The victim gives up every piece of information he or she possesses, no matter how minor or petty. The process involves a ritual not unlike the one used by incunabula to pass inherited wrappings to young incunabula. However, unlike in that ritual, the victims of the Unveiling have their organs drawn out and placed in jars, even as their bodies are shrouded in funerary wrappings. The brain is the final organ to be extracted; instead of being stored in a jar, it is eaten by the questioner, who gains the complete knowledge possessed by the victim. The questioner has 12 hours to choose among all knowledge so gained and record it on parchment before it all fades.

In some cases, creatures subject to the Unveiling rise as a variety of undead, depending on the skill and intent of the questioner.
The Howling derives its name from the constant, though faint, shrieking of bodiless ghosts that haunt the catacombs. These sad calls are the only remnants of souls of the dead that fell into the hands of incunabulum inquisitors instead of making their way to the court of the Raven Queen.

The Court (Nobles District)

Among incunabula, status and prestige are paramount. Those in Glimmer who have accomplished great things are accorded titles, stipends, and the respect of their peers. Decorated achievers reside in the Court in individual housing, instead of the rude mausoleumlike tenements most incunabula inhabit. Though minor shrines to Vecna exist throughout Glimmer, his largest temples are in the Court. Glimmer is one of the few places in the world and its echoes where the Vecna cult appears so openly. Most incunabula revere the god of secrets, and many serve their lord actively. In the Court, nobles are conspicuous about their service and undertake elaborate rituals every day (involving the interrogation of a soul, a living victim, or an unwilling undead creature). Incunabula from other neighborhoods are common in the Court, despite their lack of title; they are on their way to or from one of the two largest temples to Vecna.

Glimmer Knowledge

Streetwise DC 15: Glimmer is a city lost somewhere in a half-drowned vault in the Shadowdark. Visitors arrive by ferry and must pay a fee of one secret, no matter how minor or personal, to the gondoliers.

Streetwise DC 25: Glimmer is not instantly lethal to outsiders and travelers, making it a sought-after destination within the inhospitable environment of the Shadowdark. The city is known for the secrets that can be bought within its narrow, tomblike confines.

Streetwise DC 30: Glimmer’s inhabitants, called incunabula, wear shrouds of tight cloth wrappings, as if imitating mummies, making it difficult to pick them out from undead mummies, liches, and similar monsters that also inhabit the city. Aside from the native incunabula and undead, Glimmer hosts a variety of other races and creatures native both to the Shadowfell and the world.
People, Groups, and Sites

The rule of Glimmer is officially shared between Masarma Brum, the Lady of Secrets in the Howling, and Feliano Neme, the High Priest of Vecna in the Court. Despite the fact that both are putatively working toward the same end, each constantly plots against the other in a never-ending secret war of innuendo and assassination.

Day-to-day control of Glimmer falls to the White Hand, which is composed of dozens of squads of undead under the command of an incunabulum keeper. The White Hand answers to both Masarma and Feliano, but in practice some squads are loyal to the Lady of Secrets and others to the High Priest.

Egas Abreu the Parchment Maker is one of the most sought-after incunabula in Glimmer. Most agree that the quality of his parchment is superior to all others, both for its archival qualities and its color and feel under the quill.

The Mouth of the Oracle is a natural stone arch set up in a wide plaza. Mist fills the arch, and from it constantly issue whispers, words, and portions of slurred speech in every language known (plus quite a bit of what must be gibberish, since no one can understand it). Stepping through the arch appears to have no effect. The Mouth was brought to Glimmer as an object of research, then became an item of curiosity. No sound from the arch has ever been construed as a message, a warning, or anything consequential. Still, some can’t resist searching for meaning in the Mouth’s word stream.

Origin of the Incunabula

Vecna is lord of the incunabula, having lured them into his service with a promise of access to knowledge unending; however, he was not their creator. The incunabula already possessed the means to satisfy their curiosity by interrogating the living and the dead for the least scrap of knowledge. According to incunabulum legend, the race came into being thanks to the ancient First Shroud, the initial wrapping that the Ancestor used to encase his body and thus absorb the knowledge imprinted upon it. The First Shroud was, according to incunabulum legend, taken from the swaddling grave clothes of a child of Nerull. (Nerull was the original lord of the dead who served in that role until he was unseated by the Raven Queen.)

Though they commonly ally with undead, incunabula do not aspire to immortality through undeth. Doing so would preclude their wrappings from being used to form the next generation.

Twenty-one lines of incunabulum heredity are currently recognized. Each is traced through inherited wrappings and is distinguished by a surname. Incunabulum surnames are similar to mundane family names. Many recognized lines have gone extinct over the centuries (once, there were as many as thirty-three lines).

Physical Qualities

Incunabula are humanoids who wrap themselves in long strands of ancient, magically preserved cloth. The wrappings are not merely an odd cultural affectation; once an incunabulum dons a particular set of wrappings during a special coming-of-age ritual (which shares many features with the process of mumification), the strands of cloth become an integral portion of the incunabulum’s body.

When an incunabulum dies, only its wrappings are salvaged. Those wrappings are divided, and from them two or three additional sets are prepared. These recycled wrappings are given to young incunabula who undergo their own coming-of-age rituals. In this way, fragments of secret knowledge and power are passed from one generation to the next. The wrappings possess bits of memory that stem from the first of the incunabula line.

Over their wrappings, incunabula gild themselves with rings, bracelets, circlets, and other adornments, frequently taken from the bodies of those they have selected for interrogation. One can roughly
reckon the power and knowledge of an individual incunabulum by the quality of his or her adornment.

An incunabulum lives for two or three hundred years, or longer for those who have learned the secrets of enhanced longevity.

**MONSTER THEME: INCUNABULUM AGENT**

Incunabula use the Unveiling ritual to draw out all vestiges of knowledge and secrets within a creature’s memory, and also to create loyal undead servants or allies. Some of these are mere mummies, but the Incunabulum Agent theme can be applied to almost any monster to create a new undead ally.

Incunabula prefer using the process to create humanoid beings, although it functions perfectly well on beasts and magical beasts as well. So far, the incunabula have failed to apply the effect to animates (such as skeletons and golems) or to insubstantial creatures (such as wraiths), though experiments continue.

Monsters of any role can benefit from the Incunabulum Agent theme, with lurkers and controllers making particularly good specimens. Creatures commonly used by the incunabula as agents include Underdark and Shadowfell natives such as dwarves, drow, shadar-kai, dark creepers, purple dragons and shadow dragons, wights, bodaks, and ember hulks.

Creatures that have the Incunabulum Agent theme appear partly wrapped in funerary linens.

**Origin:** The creature’s origin becomes shadow.

**Keyword:** The creature gains the undead keyword.

**Skill Modifiers:** +2 bonus to Arcana, Insight, or Stealth skill checks.

**ATTACK POWERS**

Creatures that have the Incunabulum Agent theme favor attacks that pin foes down so they can be dealt with later by the use of additional force or a follow-up attack. The powers available in this theme favor monsters that have direct attacks.

**CONDITION THE SUBJECT**

*Condition the subject* is a good way to enhance the abilities of lurkers, soldiers, and brutes that have limited attack powers. A bodak skulk can use *condition the subject* with its *slam* (which also weakens the target) so its bodak reaver ally can use its *death gaze* on foes that are not only immobilized but also weakened.

**CONDITION THE SUBJECT** (minor; usable only while adjacent to an immobilized enemy; encounter)

Until the end of the encounter, the creature can make two melee basic attacks as a standard action against immobilized enemies. While this power is active, the creature can make only basic attacks. The creature can end this power at any time with a free action.

**CONFUSING SECRET**

*Confusing secret* gives this power to lurkers, soldiers, or brutes that have allies that can slow or immobilize opponents. A drow warrior can pick the time to launch its *rapier attack* with *confusing secret* to be certain its target is adjacent to at least one other ally.

**HALTING SHOT**

This power gives the allies of an artillery monster, a controller, or a lurker the ability to focus their attacks on locked-down foes. A cyclops storm shaman can use *halting shot* with its *tempest orb* so that its chimera ally can use its *dragon breath* on foes that can’t move out of the blast area.

**INQUISITOR’S GLARE**

When this power is given to a controller, it widens the creature’s threat potential. A bearded devil might unleash its *inquisitor’s glare*, greatly enhancing the harmful effect of its *glaive*.

**UTILITY POWERS**

These powers enhance a creature or allied creature’s attacks or help protect the creature against attacks.

**ALL THE ANSWERS**

Give this power to monsters that are allied with incunabula or other creatures that can immobilize foes. Gnoll huntmasters that hurl their axes from a safe distance at already immobilized characters might become great threats to the characters.

**MARTIAL SECRET**

*Martial secret* is the defensive lore that all incunabula share, so allied incunabulum-themed creatures are also likely to possess it. Rakshasas, with their deceptive veils, make great incunabulum-themed monsters because they can hide their wrappings (as well as their tiger’s visage). When the truth becomes known, martial secret allows them to avoid at least one punishing cut.