Sometimes the best weapon a dungeon delver can have is knowledge of how to deal with the monsters that lurk underground. So lend an ear to the voices of experience quoted in this section as they tell their tales and dispense their advice, and grab a piece of parchment—you’ll want to take notes.

This section spotlights a group of monsters that have a long history in the D&D game—including the beholder, the mind flayer, and the rust monster, to name a few. They’ve been “kept alive” as the game has evolved because they’re just so . . . monstrous.

Aboleths

“Beware of what waits for us below, my friends. Drive any thought that is not your own from your mind, for it will betray you and leave you vulnerable to their corruption. Take solace in the knowledge that these horrors are flesh and blood, and they feel pain.”

—Mord, escaped thrall

Aboleths are the slimy overlords of the subterranean realm. Their bodies are bizarre and revolting, their abilities maddening, their motives and origins inscrutable. In short, aboleths embody the alien horror of the Far Realm. Their emergence is a sign that cosmic forces are turning their gaze toward the sane world.

Aboleths dwell in subterranean lakes and oceans, surfacing to bend others to their malevolence. With hosts of corrupted thralls in their service, they instigate schemes with far-reaching consequences. When confronted, an aboleth turns its attackers against themselves by dominating their minds. The lash of its slimy tentacles destroys an enemy’s sanity, and those who fall to an aboleth are doomed to become victims of its desecration.

When an aboleth is the hidden master of an evil scheme, its enemies typically don’t realize the truth until the monster reveals itself. This subterfuge makes preparing for battle difficult, so adventurers must learn the telltale signs of an aboleth’s presence. The creatures frequently send thralls to the surface to spy and instigate their plots. These thralls can be identified by their emotionless insistence on completing their assigned tasks. Those who manage to escape sometimes feel a gibbering in their minds that crescendos when an aboleth is nearby, and observant delvers might notice trails of slime leading to the edge of a dark lake.
Ankhegs

“We didn’t get too many ankhegs back home. Too rocky. Usually they’d show up by accident, drawn to the sound of our smithies. When they’d appear, they’d get all riled up and spit acid everywhere. We had to take them down quick, before the acid tarnished the forge.”

—Korag, dwarf outcast

Ankhegs hunt humanoids, so they stick close to settlements to gain easy access to their prey. The burrowing creatures avoid detection by staying underground. When on the hunt, an ankheg comes to the surface just long enough to snatch a victim, then drag it into the beast’s tunnels to tear it apart with razor-sharp mandibles. The more the victim struggles, the angrier the ankheg gets, and the nastier the fight becomes. Since adventurers have a tendency to fight back, ankhegs can get extremely nasty.

The good news is that most ankhegs hunt alone. They don’t gather in large numbers because each one needs a lot of food to survive, and having too many ankhegs in one area depletes the food supply. They do work together during the mating cycle, though, digging a burrow where they drop their eggs. The parents grow more aggressive, both to drive off predators and to bring in meat for the broodlings when they hatch.

Beholders

“When don’t listen to the lies spread by gossipers! There is only one, and it is Xocol’yalax! Others are pretenders, not worthy of my sight! Now recount the ten thousand odes of my greatness that I taught you, and make them perfect this time!”

—Xocol’yalax, beholder

When people on the surface world whisper about the terrible creatures that lurk in far depths, they’re usually talking about beholders. Nothing compares to a beholder’s otherworldly appearance and capabilities. Its eyeslets writhe like a nest of snakes, spitting magic energy with every glance. It need only look at a victim to burn or freeze or disintegrate it. If a beholder’s enemy survives the barrage of eye rays, the floating creature simply opens its mouth to bring to bear its vicious bite.

Beholders’ megalomaniacal delusions are as dangerous as their abilities. They create subterranean domains for themselves, taking on titles such as “supreme majesty” or “all-seeing overlord.” A beholder delights in imposing its will on others, especially when the lesser beings consciously accept its superiority. Beholders build menageries of slaves and collect creatures that they find interesting. The superiority complex of beholders would be humorous if they didn’t insist on trying to rule the world.

Carrion Crawlers

“Whole nests of the things would gorge themselves in the killing caverns of the orc wars. The beasts were so intent on shoveling the dead into their mouths that you could slip right past them, if you could stand the stink.”

—Korag, dwarf outcast

Carrion crawlers wallow in filth, decay, and slime. They scour subterranean environments for easy meals among the dead or dying, but if they can’t find those, they ambush live prey with their poisonous tentacles. The caterpillar-like bodies of these creatures let them launch these ambushes from bizarre angles, attacking from dungeon walls or ceilings so that enemies cannot fight back easily. Experienced delvers know to watch out for pools of dripping slime in tunnels—a drooling crawler might be lurking overhead.

The sight and sound of a carrion crawler feeding can make the bravest adventurer queasy. The hideous sucking noises are more disturbing when you consider that their meal might still be alive. Being paralyzed by a carrion crawler’s poison is one of a delver’s worst fears: shoveled headfirst into the monster’s maw, fully aware but utterly powerless.
Cave Fishers
"Meepo already feel like little worm all alone in the dark. Why nasty monsters hook him like one, too?"
—Meepo the kobold

These insectlike predators cast their sticky nets into the tunnels of dungeons, angling for everything from buzzing stirges to errant explorers. Cave fishers prefer overhangs or ledges in moist caverns. Their craggy carapaces let them hide perfectly against a cavern wall, where they wait patiently for prey to wander near. Some cave fishers spin a noose of filament that snatches a creature, strangling it. Others fire harpoon-like spikes into the flesh of their victims. Either way, a cave fisher immobilizes its prey, then carries it back to the nest to be feasted on by the beast’s ravenous brood.

Cave fishers rely on cunning rather than strength to catch their meals. They usually stay in areas close to the surface, which typically see heavy foot traffic by small humanoids. A lone goblin or kobold can’t put up much of a fight, but a fully equipped adventurer can take down a cave fisher—if you can close with the creature. There’s the problem. Cave fishers crawl along walls and ceilings like spiders, favoring ambush locations where their prey has limited maneuverability or cover.

Grimlocks
"Drow slave-pits are overflowing with grimlocks. Those brutes are as cruel as their masters and would fight to the death even if drow whips weren’t behind them. Against a grimlock, one blow—well timed, swift, and perfectly aimed to the heart—will do more than a dozen errant cuts."
—Meliera, bloodsworn

Even among the harsh races of the Underdark, grimlocks stand out as some of the most savage and violent. The fearless raiders wander the endless caverns, always on the move and quick to slay whatever they encounter. Although they use only primitive stone or bone weapons, their brutish strength can overpower most humanoids. Untold millennia underground have given them uncanny senses, enabling them to function in complete darkness. This ability is a serious problem for surface dwellers— although grimlocks can’t see the flicker of torchlight, they can feel its warmth, and they go for the person with the light first.

The tiny glimpses of grimlocks’ tribal culture that adventurers have seen suggest that the creatures don’t spend all their time brutalizing and eating everything they find. They have an ingrained hatred of outsiders, though, so no one has been able to live among them. Grimlocks savagely attack dungeon delvers, but they battle other subterranean monsters as well. This hatred might come from the fact that many Underdark creatures enslave them. Grimlocks attack mind flayers more zealously than they do any other race.

Hook Horrors
"We use t’file down hook horror claws and use ‘em as arches for our homes. Didn’t need keystones ’cause the claws were strong enough t’hold up the entire roof without buckling. Findin’ ways to use the claws wasn’t hard. Getting ‘em’s another matter."
—Thorry, trapsmith

These creatures range through caverns in search of food. Similar to great bears of the upper world, hook horrors are renowned for their orneriness. They don’t go looking for fights, but if surprised, cornered, or wounded, they hit back hard. The creatures’ size and chitinous plating make them incredibly strong and resilient. Their claws are nearly six feet long, studded with jagged barbs and ending in a fishhook shape larger than a human hand. When angered, a hook horror smashes a foe with these claws, pulls an enemy close, and rends flesh with its beaked jaws.

Underdark explorers have suggested that hook horrors might be more than violent beasts. Solitary creatures have exhibited complex behavior that suggests intelligence. Additionally, hook horror clans, usually consisting of a handful of individuals, have been seen demonstrating teamwork, compassion, and ritualized behavior. Thus, some delvers say that avoiding their territory is not only safer but more respectful.

Mimics
"Look, when I tell you not to touch anything, I have a very good reason. Let’s just say that sometimes the dungeon bites back."
—Karl, deep delver

Although mimics come from the Far Realm, they have found the world’s dungeons to be good hunting grounds. These amorphous, slime-like creatures take the forms of everyday objects in their chosen environments. Treasure chests, religious altars, and elaborate doorways are among their favorite shapes because they attract the attention of curious passersby. A mimic waits, indistinguishable from the surrounding features until prey comes within reach. Then the creature shows its true nature, becoming a writhing mass of ooze, teeth, and tendrils.

Experienced adventurers know to be alert for a mimic whenever they discover an interesting object while dungeon delving, and such caution has denied the creatures many potential meals over the years. As a result, some mimics have wised up, taking the forms of humanoids and actively hunting gullible
prey. As these mimics become more common in dungeons—and sometimes on the surface world—adventurers might start second-guessing everyone they meet, wondering if a new acquaintance is really a toothy mass of hungry slime.

Mind Flayers

“There were hundreds of skulls in that pit, practically spilling over the edge. But that wasn’t what made me run—it was the mangled holes in each skull’s forehead, like something had bitten right through it.”

—Risha, drow assassin of Maelbrathyr

No creatures haunt the nightmares of dungeon-delvers more than mind flayers. Their far-reaching schemes and boundless hatred of other races puts them among the supreme villains of the Underdark. Their combination of psychically enslaved servitors and withering mental attacks makes them a threat for any group of adventurers. Defeat at the hands of a mind flayer is a fate worse than death, leading to either slavery or a sickening feast on the victim’s brain.

Mind flayers are obsessed with the perfection of their species. They reproduce by corrupting other creatures and capture promising hosts that can be transformed into new mind flayers. This need spurs their cabals to expand into new realms, where they work to subvert existing centers of power. If an attempt at transformation produces disappointing results, the mind flayers might call for the systematic genocide of the host’s race. On the other hand, a successful transformation means that mind flayers seek out similar creatures to undergo the process. Unfortunately for adventurers, their skills and abilities make them attractive targets.

Myconids

“It started when we found spores clinging to the soles of our boots after we returned from the tunnels, and it just didn’t stop. Mushrooms began popping up over the whole village, crowding us out of our houses and smothering our gardens. It wasn’t long before they started moving around, wondering what we were doing in their home.”

—Durthee, svirfneblin refugee

The idea of walking mushrooms might make some adventurers snicker, but experienced delvers know that the implacable spread of myconids is no laughing matter. Colonies of these plant creatures are expanding throughout the world. Thriving in dank environments such as caverns and dungeons, myconids take hold of an area quickly. Their spores create huge fungal masses that crowd out other plants and animals. Their lairs are pungent with decay, and the growth is sometimes so thick that explorers have to hack their way through. Myconids don’t take kindly to those who damage their colony, nor do they have patience for opponents who try to slow their advance.

Despite their hostility, myconids are not evil. Some people can understand and perhaps empathize with their need to expand. Opening negotiations with a myconid sovereign is a good tactic for those who don’t want to fight a charging army of spiny fungi. Once they are attacked, myconids pour from their lair like a colony of fire ants, and they don’t stop until they or their foes are compost.

Oozes and Slimes

“The trick to dealing with oozes is to give them something to focus on. They’re as brainless as they are deadly, so if you poke them with something, they’re likely to fixate on it. Just be sure it’s not something that dissolves too quickly.”

—Karl, deep delver

Clinging to dungeon walls or seeping formlessly through cracks, oozes and slimes exist only to feed on anything their acidic bodies touch. They don’t think or feel, and they barely react to external stimuli. They are driven by the instinct to consume and lurk in the moist darkness, waiting for a meal to pass by. Everything is food to them, and their goopy bodies scrub clean dungeon walls and adventurers’ bones alike.

The best way to protect yourself from oozes is to pay attention. The creatures are generally lethargic, especially after eating, when they become torpid masses of jelly. Even active oozes move very slowly; most adventurers can walk away from one without breaking a sweat. The danger is that oozes and slimes can become almost invisible in the right conditions. You could walk right into one before realizing it. Never stick your hand into a damp niche before checking first, and always prod pools of water before drinking.

Otyughs

“’Ick! No want to smell fat stink-monster!”

—Splik, grudging goblin guide

Plenty of explorers attest that otyughs are the most foul, filthy, diseased sacks of tentacles and flesh in dungeons. Although the creatures are products of the natural world, they reek with what some swear must be a supernatural stench that is second only to the smell of troglodytes. It’s as if their bloated, flabby bodies absorb the rot and decay around them.

An otyugh is almost invisible when wallowing in a pile of filth, its skin adapting to match the color of the putrid surroundings. A consummate scavenger by nature, the creature’s aggression stems mostly from its territorial nature. It lays claim to a rich feeding ground and tries to drive off or consume all who intrude. An otyugh entangles a creature in its
tentacles, which are covered with vicious hooks that sink into flesh, then pulls the victim into its cesspool and chews it up.

Most otyughs are irritable loners, squatting idly in a noisome pit or slowly wandering through dungeons until they find a place disgusting enough to make their own. Only priests of Torog, god of the Underdark, show any affinity for otyughs, though the slimy creatures are exploited by troglodytes, hobgoblins, and other dungeon-dwelling races for both waste removal and defense.

Purple Worms

“Sing the tale of Vonak Blood oath, who fought and slew the bale worm. For seven days he struggled in the belly of the beast, his golden axe painted crimson. Vonak knew no fear and felt no weariness, and at last he cleaved the monster’s heart. So mighty was the worm’s thrashing that it shook the mountains.”

—A dwarven legend told in Cor Talcor

Dungeon monsters don’t come bigger, nastier, or hungrier than purple worms. These hundred-foot-long horrors burrow through stone and earth at great speed, driven only to eat. One titanic worm’s burrowing can create tremors or sinkholes large enough to threaten whole communities. Like a force of nature, it can burst through a fortress wall, writhing and thrashing at armies that are helpless to stop it. The monster opens its huge mouth and simply crawls forward, shoveling masses of prey into its gullet. Inside its body, the victims are awash in digestive slime that quickly dissolves their flesh. Everything from a kobold to a giant is food to a purple worm.

As the apex predators in the Underdark, purple worms have a rich mythology. Their appearances have marked the destruction of cities, the creation of important underground landscapes, and speculation about the true depth of the Night Below. The drow consider the worms a test sent by Lolth to judge their worth. Goblins think that the worms are hungry gods whose appetites might offer guidance or protection in exchange for offerings of wealth—and the chance to snatch a supplicant here and there for an easy meal. Since ropers have tremendous life spans and can hibernate for decades, their gullets might hold ancient treasures.

Rost Monsters

“Oh, how I hate those things. Not because they eat swords or armor or all that nonsense, but because they ruin the nicest treasure! The best thing to do is blast them with something loud and flashy; it makes them scatter like cockroaches.”

—Ella, treasure hunter

A relatively docile and inoffensive rust monster can upset the nerves of mighty heroes more than can the most despicable demon. Physically, rust monsters are hardly threatening. They are spindly and flighty, their antennas atwitter as they scuttle, and are quick to flee unless someone is carrying metal objects. The smell of metal makes rust monsters aggressive, but adventurers clad in armor or laden with treasure drive them into a feeding frenzy. A hungry rust monster charges toward metal heedless of opposition, scampering back to safety only after it is sated.

Most people hate rust monsters with a passion that is astounding but fully deserved. If left unchecked,
the beasts can cause havoc to whole communities. In dwarven culture, not killing a rust monster one encounters is a crime, and some adventurers claim that dragons hired them to clear out nests of the creatures lurking near their hoards.

Stirges

“There’s nothing worse than walking into a stigre lair unawares. They swarm you in seconds, sometimes so thick you can’t even see through them to find the way out. Experienced Deep Guides can read the signs that stirges are near and toss a rock down the tunnel to distract them long enough for everyone to run past.”

—Karl, deep delver

Among the world’s most widespread monsters, stirges infest underground environments just as they do the nooks and crannies on the surface. Cavern stirges swarm in colonies large enough to turn a cave’s ceiling into a writhing mass of spindly claws and leathery wings. Although some of these stirges find exits to the surface world at night to hunt, many are satisfied with the ample prey of the Underdark. In fact, some prefer to stay in dungeons, which have fewer places for prey to hide.

Trying to fight a swarm of stirges is a fool’s proposition, especially while underground, so travelers and explorers have developed other ways to deal with a colony: The drow use a particular type of spider that nests among the stirges and hunts the creatures to extinction. Svirfneblin drow use a particular type of spider that nests among the stirges and hunts the creatures to extinction. Svirfneblin drow use a particular type of spider that nests among the stirges and hunts the creatures to extinction. Svirfneblin drow use a particular type of spider that nests among the stirges and hunts the creatures to extinction. Svirfneblin drow use a particular type of spider that nests among the stirges and hunts the creatures to extinction.

Troglodytes

“I remember that a troglodyte chieftain was brought before my mother in chains. She wanted to see if its kind could be hired as mercenaries or at least enslaved. The beast lashed out and tried to escape. The guards stopped it, but my mother slew them anyway—not because they failed to keep the creature chained, but because its stink couldn’t be washed from their clothes.”

—Khiira, Underdark envoy

These reptilian degenerates are known for their violence, barbarism, and nauseating stench. Nothing smells worse than a pack of troglodytes, slick with stink and slavering for fresh meat (though otyughs smells worse than a pack of troglodytes, slick with stink and slavering for fresh meat (though otyughs smells worse than a pack of troglodytes, slick with stink and slavering for fresh meat (though otyughs smells worse than a pack of troglodytes, slick with stink and slavering for fresh meat (though otyughs smells worse than a pack of troglodytes, slick with stink and slavering for fresh meat (though otyughs smells worse than a pack of troglodytes, slick with stink and slavering for fresh meat (though otyughs smells worse than a pack of troglodytes, slick with stink and slavering for fresh meat (though otyughs smells worse than a pack of troglodytes, slick with stink and slavering for fresh meat (though otyughs smells worse than a pack of troglodytes, slick with stink and slavering for fresh meat). They are driven by a bestial desire to kill and consume, often without regard for the size or power of their prey. Troglodytes form obsessively territorial clans. Sometimes these groups are as eager to kill each other as they are other races, though competing clans put aside their differences when given an opportunity to spill the blood of other creatures.

Troglodytes are well adapted to life underground. They scramble over rocky terrain easily and can go for days at a time without food.

Umber Hulks

“Umber hulk tunnels are risky for travelers. The creatures do so much thrashing when they burrow that their holes could cave in at any time. When you also consider that umber hulk migrations follow patterns, suddenly that purple worm tunnel sounds mighty appealing.”

—Jasyn of Therund, founding Deep Guide

Umber hulks are greatly feared in the Underdark. Not just because their claws rip through stone as if it were parchment. Their reputation is also due to their ravenous appetite. When hungry, umber hulks never stop looking for food. Their hunting methods aren’t subtle; an umber hulk typically bursts through a stone tunnel and tears its prey apart with savage blows. Their scimitar-sized mandibles bristle with serrations, and their armored shells are thicker than plate armor. Veteran delvers know that when the ground shakes, it’s time to take cover.

Umber hulks are solitary hunters, but their tunnels are thick with small creatures scavenging their kills or relying on the larger beasts for protection. After feasting, an umber hulk might let these vermin crawl over its mandibles and claws to pick clean any remaining scraps.

Umber hulks rest only when molting. This process leaves them in a torpid state for several days as they shed their exoskeletons and emerge even bigger, faster, and stronger. This period is one of the few times of vulnerability in an umber hulk’s life. Discarded shells are marvelous finds for dungeoneers because they can be sold or fashioned into supremely sturdy armor and shields.