

THE FOREST OF FLESH

BY KEITH BAKER

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MORDAIN THE FLESHWEAVER is the subject of dozens of horrifying tales. One story describes an early effort to create a new dragonmarked house, which instead produced a line of foulspawn that devoured Mordain's own family. Mothers tell their children that Mordain steals disobedient youths for his experiments, replacing them with perfect simulacra so their parents never know. Whatever the truth of these stories, Mordain was excoriated from House Phiarlan in 797 YK. According to the records of Salyon Syrralan d'Sivis, the Twelve tried to execute Mordain and failed. Salyon's account states that Mordain was bathed in acid, burned at the stake, drowned, and even dismembered, and after each attempt "he rose again, his vigor unchecked and flesh rebound." He was petrified and sent to Dreadhold, but he escaped before reaching the island prison; Salyon speculated that "no lesser mage could set his will over the flesh of Mordain."

The first confirmed sighting of Blackroot—Mordain's tower—occurred in 873 YK. In the heat of the Silver Purge, a troop of Aundairian templars pursued



a few werewolves far to the south of modern Aundair. Weeks later, another patrol encountered a lone survivor, half-mad and delirious. He spoke of a tower "with blackened, leathery walls, twisted as the limb of a dragon reaching up to grasp the sun." The soldier couldn't account for his companions, and his own condition was testimony to the horrors he had seen. His upper torso had been fused to the lower body of what was posthumously confirmed to be a werewolf. His mental state quickly deteriorated and he soon died of self-inflicted wounds.

Blackroot's location has long since been confirmed, though the tower is shielded from scrying and divination. Virtuous champions have set out to

destroy the foul wizard and his works. Emissaries from the Five Nations sought his aid in the Last War, and mages have dreamed of stealing his secrets. However, few gaze on the face of Mordain and return unchanged . . . assuming they return at all.

KHRESHTRHYYL: THE FOREST OF FLESH

Droaam is home to many fearsome creatures. Medusas match wits with harpies and hags. Ogres, minotaurs, and trolls compete in tests of might. Even these monsters avoid the lands around Blackroot. The gnolls call it *KhreshtRhyyl*, "the Forest of Flesh"—and this is more than a colorful figure of speech. Long

SEEKING THE FLESHWEAVER

Mordain matches one of the greatest mystical talents of the millennium with an utter disregard for the suffering of others. What could bring a group of adventurers to Blackroot? A wizard might hope to acquire the unknown rituals and potent implements locked away in the tower. A Brelish paladin could make it his quest to remove this dark shadow from the border of his homeland. Mordain need not be an enemy, though. He lacks empathy or morality, so he often inflicts terrible suffering when it furthers his quest for knowledge. However, Mordain has no interest in doing evil for its own sake, and any of his experiments could end up serving a greater good. His vast knowledge could be the key to averting a terrible catastrophe, and he might possess information or items that the PCs need to pursue a quest. A few examples are presented below.

1. The adventurers have business in Khazaar Draal, realm of medusas and basilisks. It's said that Mordain can provide adventurers with absolute protection against petrification. Mordain does nothing for free, and he has no interest in gold; he asks for a service or sacrifice before he bestows any of his gifts.

2. Following an encounter with a previously unknown aberration, a PC is afflicted with a condition that defies all forms of mundane and magical treatment. At first it grants the victim useful powers, but it soon becomes clear that the affliction is turning the victim into an aberration—and that it will destroy his mind when it has wound its course. If anyone can lift this curse, it's Mordain. Is this disease a relic of the daelkyr, or is it the work of Mordain?

3. In addition to his knowledge of aberrations, Mordain is the foremost authority on aberrant dragonmarks. When a new wave of aberrant marks appears

across Khorvaire, the Twelve sends the PCs to seek Mordain's insight on the matter. Alternatively, an adventurer with an aberrant mark learns that the Fleshweaver has a hoard of aberrant focus items; perhaps she can earn one of these treasures by working for the wizard.

4. House Jorasco hires the party to retrieve a viable sample of a particular plant from the lands around Mordain's tower, or House Vadalis seeks one of the strange beasts Mordain has created. The party might not have to deal with Mordain, though removing things from the domain of the Fleshweaver can have unforeseen consequences.

5. A colorful bird with four wings and two heads approaches a PC trained in Arcana and rituals. This beast carries a message from Mordain that summons the character to Blackroot. No reason is given. Does the Fleshweaver seek an apprentice? Does he have a gift to bestow—some creation he wishes to test in the world? Or has he foreseen the character's epic destiny and now wishes to shape it for his own ends?

6. A PC discovers that some of the people closest to him have been replaced by near-perfect simulacrum. This can only be the work of Mordain the Fleshweaver, but why has he done this? Can the heroes free the originals from Mordain's tower?

7. Many humanoid races have yet to be given a major role in the setting. If the DM wants to add a particular race to the setting, a city of these creatures can appear on the border of Droaam and Breland. This is Mordain's work. Can the inhabitants come to terms with their new neighbors, or will minor skirmishes threaten to turn into a full-scale war between Breland and Droaam? Is this Mordain's intent?

ago Mordain released creatures called skinweavers (see below) into the woods. These beasts weave webs, much as spiders do, but instead of producing silk, skinweavers craft their nests using the recycled flesh of their victims, stretching entrails, strands of muscle, and flayed skin between trunk and bough. Many of these are long abandoned, like cobwebs drifting in the wind. Nonetheless, gnawed bones and glistening strands of flesh are a common sight in the forest, and they serve as a clear warning to turn back.

The woods of KhreshtRhyyl are unusually dense and humid for Droaam, which is one more sign of the power Mordain holds over this region. The canopy above remains dense throughout the year, and even at high noon only dim light makes its way to the forest floor. Anyone trained in Dungeoneering can recognize certain plants that are found underground only; this includes phosphorescent fungi that create paths of light snaking through the darkness. Other plants are unknown beyond the forest. These include potent hallucinogens; bloodvines, which produce human blood in place of sap; banshee's boughs, trees that howl in agony when disturbed in any way; and many others. The ghoul's rose produces the stench of rotting flesh to attract insects, and the beautiful stormflower deals lightning damage to anything that touches it (1 lightning damage for touching a flower, up to 6 lightning damage per round for standing in a patch of stormflowers).

The creatures of the region are as diverse and dangerous as the plant life. Some are aberrations, though most are bestial creatures unique to the area as opposed to being servants of Xoriat or Khyber. The skinweavers are one example of Mordain's ingenuity, but tales speak of skinless wolves, insane elementals, and frenzied beasts formed from the combination of two or more of the creatures found elsewhere in Droaam. Adventurers might find a troll with the voice and wings of a harpy, or a hydra with a medusa's

head sprouting from each of its six necks. Rot scarabs, bloodweb spiders, and stranger insects chitter in the darkness. Vine horrors, oozes of colors never seen in the world beyond, and aberrant dryads linger just off the phosphorescent paths. The laws of nature have been shattered here. Characters familiar with Nature or Dungeoneering may claim that it's impossible for so many deadly creatures to thrive in such close proximity to one another, and this again is the work of Mordain. Many of these monsters have been engineered to survive with minimal sustenance, and predatory instincts and reproductive systems have likewise been altered; some beasts reproduce at a remarkable rate needed to maintain their numbers, and others are sterile and could be exterminated by travelers. Because of this, even the most innocent creatures can pose a deadly threat. The *tryyl*, a rodent found in the forest, is a little creature possessing the adorable traits of rabbit and hamster. But a *tryyl* also has poisonous flesh, a venomous bite, and an uncanny reproduction rate held in check by its diet within the forest. Should a few of these creatures be brought to Breland or Aundair, they could quickly spread across the land and become an environmental menace. Both the Gnoll Brotherhood and the Wardens of the Wood have dealt with *tryyl* before, and they react violently if they discover adventurers smuggling these or any other creatures from KhreshtRhyyl.

Although the monsters are the obvious threat, travelers face other hazards when passing through the

forest. Overland speed is cut in half due to the dense growth and obstacles, and in tactical situations much of the land should be considered difficult terrain; alternatively, an adventurer who fails a Nature check (DC 18; PCs should be allowed to make passive checks) could unwittingly walk into a patch of storm-flowers or disturb a banshee's bough. All Perception checks in the woods take a -2 penalty due to the constant cacophony of strange insects, scurrying *tryyl*, and the distant howls of trees and beasts alike.

Due to the strange nature of the region, PCs can

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use either Dungeoneering or Nature for foraging, but an adventurer takes a -5 penalty to the check—and with the number of poisonous and hallucinogenic substances in the woods (including the mucus the skinweavers use to preserve their fleshy webs) failure can have unpleasant consequences. One of the most common maladies is a disease known as verdant whispers; however, the DM should feel free to introduce other diseases.

If they can survive the dangers of the forest, adventurers eventually come to a vast clearing at its heart,

where the tower of Blackroot reaches up toward the sky. On close examination, the windowless tower appears to be made from the flesh of a black dragon; the walls bleed if damaged, though they regenerate at an astonishing rate. In some of the stories, Mordain welcomes visitors into the open gates of the tower; in others they must battle vicious guardians or carve a passage through the bleeding walls. The reception visitors receive depends on their purpose, as well as whether Mordain thinks of them as guests—or raw material for his next round of experiments.

SKINWEAVER

NO CORPSE IS WASTED IN MORDAIN'S DOMAIN. The skinweaver builds webs from skin and muscle, stretching entrails between trees and bones in a grotesque mockery of a spider. Heads and hands become hosts for the foul creatures' spawn. Some might assume that skinweavers could be created only from the bodies of warlocks or wizards, but the arcane powers of these creatures are instinctual; thanks to

Verdant Whispers

Spread by touch, verdant whispers causes victims to enter a delirious state.

Level 6 Disease

Attack: +11 vs. Fortitude

Endurance improve DC 22, maintain DC 17, worsen DC 16 or lower

- The target is cured. **Initial Effect** The target takes a -2 penalty to Perception checks. In addition, the target can perceive nonexistent sounds or motion in its peripheral vision. **Final State** The target must make a saving throw at the end of each turn. If the target fails, on its next turn it makes a melee attack against a random creature within 5 squares of it, charging if the target has to do so. If no creatures are within 5 squares, the target does nothing but move in a randomly chosen direction. At this point, the target has completely lost touch with reality and is living in a world of waking nightmares.
- Initial Effect** The target takes a -2 penalty to AC, Reflex, and Will defense due to its inability to focus on its surroundings.
- Final State** The Perception penalty is increased to -4 because the false sensory input grows worse.

Mordain's twisted skills, a fighter's head can also cast spells in the Forest of Flesh.

Although skinweavers can induce decomposition, a skinweaver head can also produce a clear mucus that preserves flesh. This has an effect similar to *gentle repose*, and it preserves the creatures' webs. Most skinweavers work in the midst of a network of vile strands, which are treated as difficult terrain. A skinweaver's forest walk allows it to ignore its own webs.

DESCRIPTION

Skinweavers are formed from the severed hands and heads of humanoid beings. The flesh is perfectly preserved, and a skinweaver head can even be beautiful—until one takes a closer look. The heads have six spindly, chitinous legs protruding from the sides of the skull and two smaller foreclaws, with a spiderlike abdomen sealing the base of the neck. A skinweaver hand is severed beneath the wrist and mounted on an armored body similar to that of a scorpion, with the hand in place of the scorpion's tail. Skinweaver flesh is far tougher than that of the original humanoid, and these creatures can take a surprising amount of damage.

Skinweaver hands are psychically bound to a particular skinweaver head, and they act with perfect, silent coordination. If a skinweaver group is present, determine initiative only for the heads; the hands act on the same phase as their linked head. If a skinweaver head is killed, its linked hands immediately focus their attacks on the killer and continue to fight until slain. If the hands survive, they seek a new head with which to bond. Skinweavers do not employ any language, but the heads are excellent mimics and repeat phrases said around them in battle.

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Skinweaver Hand	Level 8 Artillery
Small aberrant magical beast (blind)	XP 350
Initiative +9	Senses Perception +9; blindsight 10, tremorsense 10
HP 74; Bloodied 37	
AC 20; Fortitude 20, Reflex 22, Will 18	
Immune disease; Resist 5 necrotic, 5 poison	
Speed 5 (forest walk), climb 5	
⊕ Unclean Touch (standard; at-will) ◆ Necrotic +15 vs. AC; 1d4 damage plus ongoing 5 necrotic damage (save ends).	
⊙ Rotting Hex (standard; at-will) ◆ Necrotic Reach 10; +13 vs. Reflex; 2d6 + 4 necrotic damage. If the target moves closer to the hand on the target's next turn, the target takes an additional 1d6 + 4 necrotic damage.	
➤ Rending Bolt (standard; encounter) ◆ Necrotic Area burst 3 within 20; +13 vs. Reflex; 2d6 + 4 necrotic damage and ongoing 5 necrotic damage (save ends). <i>Miss</i> : Half damage, and no ongoing damage.	
† Choke Hold (standard; sustain standard; encounter) ◆ Necrotic +15 vs. AC; 10 necrotic damage, and that target is dazed and immobilized (until escape), and the skinweaver hand enters the target's space and is immobilized until the end of the hand's next turn. The skinweaver hand can sustain the power as a standard action. If it does, the target takes an additional 10 necrotic damage and the effect continues until the end of the hand's next turn. If the hand is forced out of the target's space, it cannot sustain this power.	
Alignment Unaligned	Languages —
Skills Athletics +8, Stealth +14, Thievery +14	
Str 8 (+3)	Dex 20 (+9) Wis 10 (+4)
Con 20 (+9)	Int 6 (+2) Cha 14 (+6)

SKINWEAVER HAND TACTICS

Skinweaver webs create patches of rough terrain, but the skinweavers can ignore these webs due to forest walk. The hands use their mobility to keep their distance from an opponent, relying on ranged attacks. Occasionally one hand uses stealth to ambush a party, launching a preemptive choking attack against a lightly armored caster while the head and hands strike from a distance. The hands are clever enough to use their rending bolts in relays, so they don't waste the ongoing damage on an opponent who is afflicted by another hand's bolt.

Skinweaver Head **Level 10 Controller**Small aberrant magical beast XP 500**Initiative** +7 **Senses** Perception +12; darkvision**Crawling Flesh** aura 6; enemies within the aura take a -1 penalty to attack rolls and reduce their necrotic resistance by 10.**HP** 108; **Bloodied** 54**AC** 24; **Fortitude** 23, **Reflex** 21, **Will** 23**Immune** disease; **Resist** 15 necrotic, 5 poison**Speed** 5 (forest walk), climb 5⊕ **Vicious Bite** (standard; at-will) ♦ **Necrotic**
+15 vs. AC; 1d6 damage plus ongoing 5 necrotic damage (save ends).⤵ **Dreadful Word** (standard; at-will) ♦ **Fear, Psychic**
Ranged 5; +14 vs. Will; 2d6 + 5 psychic damage, and the target takes a -3 penalty to Will defense until the end of the skinweaver head's next turn.✱ **Mucus Web** (standard; encounter) ♦ **Zone**
Area burst 2 within 15; +14 vs. Reflex; target is immobilized (save ends); creates a zone of difficult terrain; any creature that ends its turn in the zone is slowed (save ends). The zone lasts for the duration of the encounter.↶ **Fleshweaving** (move; recharge ⓧ ⓧ) ♦ **Healing**
Close burst 2; skinweavers in the burst regain 10 hit points.**Arcane Mimicry** (standard; recharge ⓧ ⓧ ⓧ)
The skinweaver head can use one encounter or at-will wizard power of 10th level or below that has been used in the last round and within 10 squares of the head. This is considered to be a standard action, even if the original power was a move or minor action. If the power is an attack, the skinweaver's attack bonus is +14 and its damage modifier is +5.**Alignment** Unaligned **Languages** –**Skills** Arcana +13, Bluff +15, Insight +12**Str** 6 (+3) **Dex** 14 (+7) **Wis** 15 (+7)**Con** 20 (+10) **Int** 16 (+8) **Cha** 20 (+10)

About the Author

Keith Baker has been an avid fan of DUNGEONS & DRAGONS since grade school. His life took a dramatic turn in 2002 when he submitted the world of Eberron to the Wizards of the Coast Fantasy Setting Search. In addition to developing the *EBERRON Campaign Setting* and *Shadows of the Last War*, he has worked for Atlas Games, Goodman Games, and Green Ronin.

SKINWEAVER HEAD TACTICS

Merely moving close to a skinweaver head causes a creature's flesh to crawl. A head uses existing obstacles and its disgusting *mucus web* to hold enemies at bay, which allows its hands to strike from afar. If an enemy uses an arcane power against the skinweavers, a head can mimic the spell in the caster's own voice, flinging the power back against the party. Though a skinweaver head appears to display intelligence through its actions, it does not speak and instead mockingly mimics speech it hears.

