

# DIRGE OF THE DREAMWALKER

## CONCEPT

The horror genre classically evokes fear through powerlessness or hopelessness. This can be difficult to achieve in a classic fantasy RPG setting due to players having heroic capabilities, and the un-fun nature of losing one's agency in a game that is primarily about making meaningful choices.

In *Dirge of the Dreamwalker*, the horror is not directed **at** the players but is instead carried out **by** the players, while still leaning in to a broader sense of psychological horror through both the dreamlike setting as well as the broader consequences of the players' actions.

This adventure works best for a group of 4 to 6 low to mid level players.

## STRUCTURE

Section 0: Setting the Scene - The players meet a strange Dreamwalker on their way to town

Section 1: A Dreamwalker – The players speak with the Dreamwalker and are given a task to investigate 3 individuals, and to learn their fears and guilts.

Section 2: The Town of Ironfort - The players have a chance to meet their targets, interviewing them and others to try to get information about their fears and guilts.

Section 3: The Nightmares - The players delve into the nightmares of their targets and, hopefully, are prepared enough to carry out the Dreamwalker's task.

Section 4: Conclusion – The players witness the consequences of their actions.

## SECTION 0: SETTING THE SCENE

The players are travelling along a dirt road towards the town of **Ironfort**. Located at the foot of a large mountain rich with ore and with a dense forest nearby, the mining and logging industries are both going strong here.

If this encounter is being used as part of a larger campaign, the simplest thing to do is to have the players be headed past Ironfort, planning to only stop to rest. More advanced Dungeon Masters could have the players have business to attend to in town, having them complete their tasks concurrently with this adventure, or even involving some of the key NPCs.

When the players are nearing the town, you can read or paraphrase the following passage:

“As you wind a corner on the dirt road you've been walking on for the last several hours, moving around some trees, the town of Ironfort suddenly becomes visible in the distance - A stone wall 6 or 7 feet high surrounds the town, the tops of a few buildings poking up from behind it, and a large gate set into it straight ahead of you.

Midway between you and the wall, you see a lone figure sitting on a stump, their head in their hands. They looks fairly unremarkable at first - A medium adult male sized build, wearing a simple cloth outfit showing quite a bit of wear, the wear especially evident in the boots - Though

as you approach you start to notice a few oddities. Their figure seems to blur at the edges, his shadow is being cast in the wrong direction.. And as you get quite close, you see wisps of smoke coming from their head and back, vague blurry images visible in the smoke.

They look up at you when you get close, and you see that they have no face - Only swirling shadows and smoke that are constantly shifting.”

## **SECTION 1: A DREAMWALKER**

If the players ask the creature who or what it is, it answers without reservation. It is a **Dreamwalker**, a spirit servant to the karmic forces of the world. Its job is to balance karma by entering the dreams of those who have done wrong and giving them nightmares both as punishment and to evoke their guilt in hopes of helping them see the error in their ways.

If the players doubt its abilities, it will proceed to tell them each their greatest fear and something they are guilty about. Have the players roll a **Wisdom Saving Throw**, and ask them each to state one Fear and one Guilt. Whoever achieves the highest result he has trouble discerning, but still have them state their fear and guilt for later purposes. In an ongoing campaign, you may already have this information and not need to ask it explicitly.

If the players do not doubt its abilities, still have them roll the save. It will make casual mention of their fears and guilts over the course of conversation.

The spirit tells them that its current problem is that while normally it can see a person’s fears and wrongdoings, it is having trouble with 3 individuals in this town, and it wants the players’ help in collecting this information manually. In reality, the spirit knows exactly what the 3 individuals’ fears and guilts are, and it has ulterior motives for asking the players for help - But it will not reveal this at this time.

The spirit will attempt to convince the players to help them differently depending on whether they are generally Good-aligned or Evil-aligned.

For a good-aligned group, the spirit will appeal to their sense of good, and remind them that these 3 targets have committed terrible wrongs, and that these nightmares are meant to help rehabilitate them.

For an evil-aligned group, the spirit will note that they appear to have a karmic debt themselves due to past wrongdoings, and they may be owed a visit from a Dreamwalker - Though by helping him in this task, they would alleviate this debt and it would be much less likely they would be visited.

If the players decide to instead attack the Dreamwalker, use the statblock of a **Ghost** with the addition that each round all players must pass a DC 15 Wisdom Saving Throw, on their first failure suffering a random effect from the **Nightmare Effects Table** below for the next hour, and

further failures adding an additional hour to the duration. Whether it is defeated or defeats the players, the Dreamwalker dissipates and the players' vision will begin to have darkness creeping in at the edges. A voice will speak to them in their minds - "Your karmic debt has worsened considerably. Should you not assist me, nightmares will be the least of your concerns" - And if the task has not yet been explained, it will be explained now.

### **Nightmare Effects Table**

- 1 -10ft Movement Speed - Thick shadows make the terrain more difficult, though others can't see these shadows
- 2 - Disadvantage on Perception Checks - A shadowy figure is visible in the corner of your eye at all times, distracting you from other things around you
- 3 - You cannot pick up an item without first putting something else down
- 4 - Speaking a lie causes blood to start dripping from your nose and eyes - 2d6 psychic damage
- 5 - Disadvantage to Persuasion, Advantage to Intimidate - Your voice sounds like multiple voices speaking in harmony, and it is very disconcerting
- 6 - Advantage to Arcana, Disadvantage to other Intelligence-based Skills - Memories that are not your own enter your mind, confusing you and distracting from your actual knowledge, though they seem to contain facts of arcane significance

If the players refuse the task but don't take violent action, the Dreamwalker will reveal some more information - That their meeting was not by chance, and that should they not complete this task, a misfortune could befall them - And that being given this chance to lighten their karmic debt should be seen as a mercy - The same effect as above will happen, with darkness creeping in at the edges of their vision.

Whether they took the task on willingly or had it forced on them, the Dreamwalker tells the players that the 3 targets have now been marked for them, and that it will meet them at the town square at nightfall, and fades away.

If the players continue to refuse the tasks, the Dreamwalker won't stop them from leaving - But next time they go to sleep, proceed to **Section 3. The Nightmares.**

## **SECTION 2: THE TOWN OF IRONFORT**

Heading into town, they spot their targets almost immediately, each bearing a smoking shadowy rune on their forehead visible even from a distance. Clarissa Chaville, a young socialite is chatting with her friends in the village square. Doran Emberhand, a middle aged blacksmith is hammering away at an anvil at the side of his storefront, while occasionally glancing around as if looking for somebody. A young human man, Liam Strong-Shield can be seen walking home with his purchases from the market, apparently slightly inebriated despite it being quite early in the day.

At this point the players may choose to approach their targets directly to speak with them, may go around to ask other people about them, or may simply wait. If they choose to wait, proceed to the **Events** section, but otherwise give them as much time as they want to speak with the targets, as long as things seem to be moving along.

### **Clarissa Chaville**

Clarissa has a fear of **others thinking poorly of her**. This fear was at the root of her guilt - While her parents were sick, she neglected to take care of them so that she could continue to attend lunches and teas with her social circle, more worried about how they saw her than in the health of her parents. **Her parents eventually died due to her neglect, and she secretly buried them behind their house under their garden, telling everybody else that they had moved away.**

Clarissa always seems a bit tired (she overworks herself doing favors for others) and suppressed stress and anxiety are apparent whenever she is asked to do something she doesn't want to do - Which she will of course do anyways. She speaks positively about her friends despite the fact that they take advantage of her for favors and tasks. She will continually try to find things to do for the players, especially if they seem to not like her.

If approached immediately, Clarissa will be with four other young socialite women, all well dressed (With Clarissa being slightly less well dressed). Clarissa will start by noticing the players are new to town and asking if they need anything, such as offering to book a room at the tavern for them. During this, her friends will be smirking condescendingly at her. One of her friends will eventually ask in a sweet voice for Clarissa to go pick up their dresses for next week's festival, which Clarissa will scramble off to do. The "friends" say that they're doing her a favor since her parents abandoned her here and she needs something to do besides all the gardening she's taken up. They will, however, note that it's lucky her parents left before an incident that happened a couple months ago - A prisoner escaped from the guard barracks and killed several elderly people in their homes before being apprehended and ultimately killed.

If Clarissa is asked directly about her parents later, she quickly changes the subject. If asked about her garden, she also changes the subject, although if pressed she eventually will let people see it, obviously uncomfortable but not wanting to upset anybody. She will only intervene if anybody seems like they're going to dig into her garden.

### **Doran Emberhand**

From a long line of blacksmiths, Doran's family has lived in this town for a long time and is invested in local politics. Doran speaks very positively of the town's new mayor who was elected a month ago - Bryce Brightwing - and very positively about his new tax policies, which while expensive are supposed to provide some much needed infrastructure for the town.

In the months before the election, **Doran intentionally sold faulty armor to supporter's of Bryce's opposition in hopes they would sustain injury and perhaps be unable to vote.** Unrelated to his guilt, Doran is incredibly **afraid of the woods** (both of potentially getting lost

and of being attacked by wild animals) due to a negative experience as a child, and refuses to go there.

Doran pays one of the locals to collect dry fallen wood from the nearby forest for his kindling - Despite the fact that it's a very short walk and a very easy task, he pays quite well for it. His usual helper is indisposed (Due to preparations for a funeral - His parents were recently killed by an escaped prisoner) - When the players approach him, he will start by offering the players 5 gold to collect the tinder for him. If they refuse, he will keep increasing the amount, eventually stopping at 10 gold per person.

Doran will speak about politics without prompting - Noting that taxes have been higher lately so he's needed to ramp up his work, but that it's good because their new mayor Bryce Brightwing is going to do a lot of good for the town - He's glad that he supported him when he was running for mayor.

Others in town will note that Doran's a great blacksmith, though a bit opinionated and can talk your ear off. People say he must have a bad leg as he never leaves that shop of his, and pays local kids quite well to collect tinder for him.

If the players seem to agree with Doran's political views, he'll proudly and readily confide his faulty-armor scheme to them, since they're travellers who he won't see again - His secret should be safe with them!

### **Liam Strong-Shield**

A human adopted by dwarves, Liam bears a dwarven last-name. Liam used to work for the town guard until a prisoner managed to overpower him and break out before going on a killing spree. What truly happened is that **Liam took a bribe from the prisoner to release him, and now feels terrible guilt about the deaths that are on his hands.** Liam has several scars on his body from his time with the guards, despite the fact that the town has a temple with magical healing that can remove scars - Liam is **afraid of magic** and refuses to receive magical healing.

When approached by the players, Liam will be wearing affluent clothing, will be slightly inebriated, and will have many visible obvious scars.

If asked about his scars, Liam will mention that the magic healers here are unreliable and unskilled, and he didn't want to risk them making a mistake. If the players offer magical healing he'll decline it and say he's gotten used to it. If they continue to press, he'll eventually become agitated and hostile.

Any investigation into the local church will reveal that there's nothing wrong with their healers - They're all very competent, though potentially of lower level (1st to 3rd level Clerics)

If asked about the incident with the prisoner, Liam will try to divert the subject. If pressed, he will state that it was a terribly traumatic incident that caused him to quit - If confronted with the truth,

he will deny it and will demand the players leave. If they don't, he will become violent. The city guards will generally side with Liam as they believe his story.

If asked about any injuries from the prisoner, Liam absent-mindedly states that he doesn't have any scars from that.

Liam is still living a comfortable lifestyle despite being unemployed for the last two months (due to the money received from the bribe) - He eats well, drinks a lot (and is tipsy in the middle of the day), and his house is not only in a good state of repair but he has been spending money on new furniture recently.

Others in town will express sympathy for Liam having been attacked like that, but will say that he must be doing well as he's been still spending a lot even despite the increased taxes under their new mayor Bryce Brightwing

### Events in town

If the players do not interview anybody and wait for something to happen, or if they are proceeding through their interviews but seem to need a little more inciting action, the following 3 **Optional** encounters that can be used to move things along.

1. An argument breaks out at the marketplace breaks out and two people start fighting - It's an argument about recent tax changes, one man is struggling financially and the other believes these taxes are a good thing - The players may choose to intervene, if they don't (or after some time) **Doran** confidently strides over to the two and tries to break it up and talks them down, eloquently explaining the benefits of the tax as he's well versed in this (and he's very much in favor of the tax). At the same time, **Clarissa** can be seen checking on the two men who were fighting, asking them both what they need, and agreeing with anything either of them says even when the two say conflicting things.
2. A creature can be seen running through town - A massive **Owlbear**. Locals can be heard shouting that it must have broken out from the nearby tower of "The Red Wizard". **Liam** will come out of his home with his sword and shield ready to fight the Owlbear, as will **Doran** with his large hammer, and they will start helping direct people away from it if the players seem to have it handled. A few combat rounds later, 4 **Flame Mephits** will fly in from the same direction - Much weaker threats, but **Liam** will quickly flee. When the Owlbear becomes injured it will flee towards the woods - **Doran** helps chase it but only until it reaches the edge of the trees.
3. Shouting can be heard - **Liam** appears to have shoved an adolescent boy onto the ground in the village square. When asked, he claims that the boy lept out at him and surprised him. The boy is an apprentice at the Red Wizard's Tower nearby, and Liam is afraid of him due to his fear of magic. If following encounter #2, the boy may be looking to capture any surviving mephits. **Clarissa** will show up and will offer the boy whatever

he needs, but will also console **Liam** and claim that he was right, she definitely saw the boy jump out at him (Although she wasn't there to see it)

### **SECTION 3: THE NIGHTMARES**

Eventually, the sun will start to set. Hopefully by this point the players have learned some of their target's fears or guilts. As everyone returns to their homes, the Dreamwalker will be seen pacing in the village square.

The Dreamwalker briefly asks them how it went. If it has not yet revealed that it knows their fears or guilts, it may pretend to have misheard them as a way to state a few of these to them. If the players are wrong about any of the fears or guilts of their targets, it may try to guide them in the right direction with some hints.

The Dreamwalker opens a shadowy portal for them, and tells them that stepping through will bring them to a dreamscape version of this town, where they will be able to find their 3 targets and try to evoke their fear and their guilt. It warns to not try to talk to anybody else or to disturb anything else.

Stepping through the portal, they find themselves in the same town - Though the sky is starless, with a strange aurora providing enough light to see by instead. The town itself seems warped, with buildings shrunk or expanded, and the locations of their 3 targets especially warped.

Should the players have refused the Dreamwalker's task earlier, rather than walking through a portal to get here, they will find themselves here unexpectedly the next time they go to sleep.

Throughout their time in the dreamscape, players will also see hints of their own fears and guilts. These can be magnified over time if they do not correctly know their targets' fears and guilts, and will be magnified further if the players did not come here willingly (due to refusing the Dreamwalker's task)

Each location will also contains several items that, if taken out of the dreamworld, will possess magical properties as well as negative effects - Suggestions are listed under each location.

#### **Liam's Home**

**Liam** is sleeping in a lavishly furnished home, which as they enter seems to expand around them, the house and furniture growing in size. Each player will need to succeed on an Athletics check to climb the massive stairs leading to Liam's bedroom, or find some other way to navigate this challenging environment. By the time they reach Liam's bedroom, he is massive as well, sized to match everything else (Use **Hill Giant** statistics) and will react violently when woken. Any time the players use magic he will shrink slightly (Losing 10 Maximum HP). After magic has been used 10 times he will have shrunk to the size of a small child, crying and scared.

Mentioning the deaths that are on his hands will count as having used magic, and can be repeated up to once per player.

### **Suggested Items**

Liam's house in the dreamworld has a few particular items of interest -

1. The Shifting Painting - A painting that shifts between scenes of different landscapes - When attuned to the painting, you have Advantage on Nature checks while in the type of landscape currently displayed on the painting, but you and your travelling companions suffer a 25% chance of getting lost whenever travelling in the wilderness.
2. The Planar Encyclopedia - A book on his bookshelf that stands out from the rest and details all the known planes of existence but seems to be missing a chapter. Advantage on Arcana checks involving Planar Knowledge, but that missing chapter causes a terrible curiosity to start to form, weakening the mind of the reader, and imparting a Disadvantage on Wisdom Saving Throws.
3. The Bribe - A bag of coins sitting on a dresser. This bag always contains 25 gold coins at the start of each day, but for every 200 gold spent, the user will be implicated for a crime they did not commit.
4. Lieutenant's Sword - A ceremonial sword mounted on the wall made from silver and rubies. This sword suffers disadvantage on attack rolls as it is not designed for actual combat, but imparts Advantage on Charisma-based rolls when dealing with guards or those in the military as they will view you as being higher ranked. The downside is that the wielder will find responsibility being thrust upon them by those that they influence with this sword, with guards or local militia deferring to them on greater issues (and then holding them responsible if the issue is not solved correctly)

### **Doran's Smithy**

The smithy has expanded, sitting vast next to a forest of stumps. Faceless men with well crafted axes and damaged armor are chopping the trees as they regrow. **Doran** is sleeping peacefully inside. If woken, Doran is in good spirits. If the players are able to carefully move Doran into the woods (or otherwise bring the trees to him, or regrow the stumps outside) he will be terrified and run off into the dark void. If Doran is provided faulty armor (either taken from the faceless men, or otherwise procured) he will feel courageous enough to leave as well, and will be felled by one of the axemen.

### **Suggested Items**

5. Doran's smithy has several racks of weapons and armor that all appear unremarkable (Some of the armor is intentionally damaged, and would be a good choice to invoke Doran's guilt) - Each item taken will have a random **Uncommon** enchantment, but on rolling a Natural 1 will impact an effect from the **Nightmare Effects Table** for 10 minutes as the dreamworld begins to seep through.

6. Near his anvil is a very unique looking smith's hammer as well, bearing a carving of a bear on its handle. This hammer is able to craft items similar to the ones from #5, but when used also confers an effect onto the crafter from the **Nightmare Effects Table** for 10 minutes the first time it is used, 1 hour the 2nd time, 24 hours the 3rd time, and on the 4th use the hammer loses all magical abilities but the effect from the table becomes permanent.

### **Clarissa's Home**

The socialite **Clarissa** is sitting in her house sipping tea with two shades barely visible near her. Making statements indicating they do not like her (to invoke her fear) will put her on edge, and calling out the two shades as being her parents (to invoke her guilt) will cause her to begin outright sobbing - As she does so, a creature of darkness seems to form, comprised of her guilts and fears - A four legged animal with a wicked spined tail - Use the stats for a **Manticore**. Clarissa doesn't seem to notice and will simply continue to cry and perhaps flee the scene during the battle, disappearing into the darkness.

### **Suggested Items**

7. Clarissa's tea set is painted with images of fairies and other woodland creatures and inset with gold. When tea is consumed from these cups, they confer the effects of a **Protection from Evil and Good** spell keyed to Fae. However, users find themselves unable to lie for the duration of the effect.
8. A jewellery box off to the side of the room contains a necklace with a large well-crafted diamond hanging from it. This diamond is worth 1000 gold pieces. If it is ever lost, it appears back on the user at dawn. If sold, it will similarly reappear on the user, and any money gained (or items purchased with that money) will be gone. The only way to be rid of the item is to use the diamond as a spell component, such as a Raise Dead spell - But the downside is that the spell's effect will only last until dawn.
9. In the jewellery box there are also a pair of simple gold wedding bands that belonged to her parents. Two people wearing these rings will be aware of each others' direction and distance at all times, but if one becomes Stunned, Unconscious, Dying, Petrified, Paralyzed, or any other effect that removes them from combat, the other wearer will find the same effect happening to them.

### **Wandering**

Should the players try to wander from these three locations, they will find themselves inadvertently looping back, the logic of this dream world not following the normal laws of physics. If they persist, they will eventually find themselves in a dark void, and will be attacked by a group of 1d4 shadowy **Manticores**. On a successful attack, these creatures inflict a random effect from the **Nightmare Effects Table** in addition to their regular damage.

## **SECTION 4: CONCLUSION**

After either concluding the three scenarios, or if all players die or fall unconscious in the dream world, they find themselves all waking up back in reality the next morning.

Any items taken from the dreamworld take on a shadowy, blurry quality, as well as minor magical abilities that come with downsides. Suggestions for

Investigating in town, the players will find any of their targets that they were successful with acting a bit differently - Perhaps acting with a little less confidence, being a little calmer and more methodical, a little more careful. If the players have any items from the dream world, their three targets will regard those items with curiosity and fear, but others in the town won't seem to notice anything strange about them.

Any of their targets that they were unable to scare or guilt will not be acting any differently at all.

If the players are able to stay in town over a longer period of time, they may notice larger shifts in behavior in any of the targets they were successful with. Doran may start being more accepting, Liam may try to get back to work, and Clarissa may distance herself from the other socialites.

Outside the town, the Dreamwalker is waiting for them. It asks them questions about the three fears and three guilts of the targets, casually referencing them, and implying that it knew what they were all along.

For evil groups, the Dreamwalker will imply that, success or fail, this was a warning - if they continue down the path they're on, they could be somebody else's target in the future, receiving vivid nightmares every night for months on end.

For good-aligned groups, the Dreamwalker will imply that this was an opportunity given to them to help clear their own guilt by doing something good - And whether they succeeded or failed, it will try to recruit the players as Dreamwalkers. If they accept, the first step is receiving the **Eyes of the Dreamwalker**, an enchantment that allows them to gain glimpses of a person's guilt and fears (As **Detect Thoughts**, but limited to surface-thoughts related to fear and guilt only) as well as giving them a small dark-lensed mirror. This mirror can be broken to call the Dreamwalker to them if they ever need another door to the dreamworld opened, and in the future the Dreamwalker may teach them to open these doors themselves.