

VILE RITUAL ENCOUNTERS

PRESENTED HERE, THREE rituals vile and evil. Designed to challenge PCs at the end of each tier of play, each ritual serves as a climactic encounter to end a campaign arc or begin a new one, presenting a nefarious purpose, suggested performers, and a round by round guide for preventing the ritual from completing. Detail the rituals as you see fit, adding flourishes that are right for your setting. In general, the rituals stay within the listed challenge rating, though on occasion, failing to stop the ritual adds to the challenge. Use your best (and most wicked?) judgment when GMing these dark and magical encounters.



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THE SUMMONING (CR 5)

PURPOSE

The purpose of this ritual is to summon the unholy servant of the cultists' blasphemous god. Little do the cultists know that in completing the ritual, they seal their own doom; the arrival of the devil releases a wave of energy that slays them all.

PERFORMERS

To create a single CR 5 encounter, the roster of evil ritualists includes one **cult fanatic**, three **dust mephits**, and four to six **cultists**. The completion of the ritual triggers another CR 5 encounter, as a single **barbed devil** is summoned. The ritual has two stages, described as follows.

STAGE ONE

Atop an altar stands a single humanoid figure in voluminous black robes. The robed figure's face is shadowed by an ornately embroidered hood pulled tight. The figure holds a wicked green blade above the struggling captive, whose wide eyes dance with terror.

On the floor before the altar, an assortment of wicked men and women utter dark words. Their invocations create motes of violet-hued magical energy, which is being collected by small winged monstrosities who flit here and there. The invokers regard you with malice.

The primary action of the performers in this stage is to complete the ritual. The cultists are free to attack the party, and will gladly throw themselves in the way of any PCs attempt to target the mephits or the fanatic. A DC 10 Intelligence (Arcana) check identifies that the mephits are the key to progressing the ritual. Freeing the victim requires a DC 16 Dexterity (Sleight of Hand)

check. If the victim is freed, the ritual is stopped, and the foes attack the party until they are dead.

Rounds 1 and 2: The cultists rush and attack the party, uttering the invocation as a bonus action. The mephits collect dark energy orbs as a bonus action. The mephits use their action to move, transporting the orbs to the fanatic. If they are engaged in melee, they use their actions to disengage and then attempt to reach the fanatic or an orb. The fanatic does not move, but will cast his spells (*command*, *spiritual weapon*, *hold person*) against the party.

If any mephit survives to the end of round 2, the ritual progresses to Stage Two.

STAGE TWO

As a winged horror delivers one final mote of darkness, the robed cabalist plunges the wicked green blade into the captive. A pained cry is drowned out by the cheers and jeers of the ritualists. Withdrawing the dagger from the body, the robed figure surveys the battle. The body begins to twitch and convulse.

The body requires no more actions to transform, only time. All the cultists and remaining ritualists are free to attack the PCs and defend the transforming body.

Rounds 3 and 4: The fanatic drives his blade into the sacrifice's heart as a bonus action on initiative 20 on round 3. He then joins any remaining foes in defending the transforming body, using his magical dagger (see Treasure) in melee combat against the PCs. The body can be destroyed (AC 12, 30 hit points, vulnerability to radiant damage). Destroying the body halts the ritual.

If the body remains intact at the end of round 4, the ritual progresses to Completion.

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COMPLETION

The body twitches a final time and then is still. Suddenly, with an enormous thundering sound, the body is transformed! A pulse of violet energy erupts from the altar as the body changes shape. What evil thing has been summoned?

Round 5: On initiative count 20 of round 5, the transforming victim releases a wave of infernal energy. The wave instantly slays all remaining cultists and mephits. PCs must make a DC 10 Wisdom saving throw, becoming frightened for one round on a failure. The summoned barbed devil then attacks the party until it is slain.

TREASURE

The sacrificial blade of the fanatic is a +2 *dagger*. The cultists each wear a jewelled silver symbol of their god worth 25 gp. The fanatic carries a scroll case containing a description of the dark ritual the PCs witnessed. A buyer of exotic and dangerous things might pay up to 300 gp for such mad scribblings.

THE POISONING (CR 10)

PURPOSE

The purpose of this ritual is to poison a civilized region's major source of water. The greater motivation for this act is left to the GM.

PERFORMERS

To create a single CR 10 encounter, the squad of brutal guardians includes one **gladiator** and two or three **thornfists***. If the ritual progresses to Stage Two, four **awakened trees** join the melee.

* Brandes Stoddard, "Monstrous Menagerie: It's Already Ogre," *EN World ENSider*, <https://www.patreon.com/posts/monstrous-its-5124529>

STAGE ONE

A massive iron cauldron bubbles and glows with sickly green magic. Set on a wooden frame beside the river, the cauldron is stirred by an enchanted paddle that slowly churns the vomituous mixture. A barbarous warrior stands near the cauldron, holding an armful of firewood. To his right and left are brutish minions, their bodies bristling with thorns and rough bark.

The first priority of the guardians is to protect the enchanted cauldron as it brews the poison. PCs can attempt to disable the cauldron using brawn, brains, or magic.

Rounds 1, 2, and 3: The gladiator uses his first action to break the branches over his knee and toss them on the ground in the direction of the PCs. The thornfists instantly rush to the splinters of the branches and from there join combat. The gladiator stays within 10 feet of the cauldron, liberally using his Shield Bash action in an attempt to keep the PCs from tampering with the poison. The thornfists use their Spike Growth and Hail of Thorns actions to slow and damage the party as they approach. If the thornfists are engaged in melee, they attempt to grapple PCs and drag their victims to the churning river to toss them in. The river is adjacent to the camp, and the thornfists can close the distance to its banks in one round. PCs thrown into the river must make a DC 12 Dexterity save to catch themselves on the rocks and avoid being swept downriver.

The following actions stop the cauldron's magical mixing:

- ▶ Any PC within 5 feet of the cauldron can attempt to stop the magical mixing device with a DC 16 Strength (Athletics) or DC 16 Intelligence (Arcana) check.
- ▶ A *dispel magic* spell ends the mixing ritual; the ritual counts as a 5th-level spell.
- ▶ If the device successfully mixes the cauldron until the end of round 3, the ritual progresses to Stage Two.

STAGE TWO

The paddle flies out of the cauldron, and the frame creaks audibly as the cauldron tips over and the concoction begins slowly pouring out into the river. Foul mist rises from the water as the pollution races downstream. It will take only a few moments for the cauldron to empty.

The mixing is complete. The cauldron now begins to automatically pour its vile contents into the river, and the PCs must now attempt to stop it from pouring and contend with the resulting corruption.

Rounds 4 and 5: On initiative count 20 of round 4, the cauldron begins pouring its contents into the river. The alchemical admixture is so potent, it immediately corrupts a copse of trees on the river bank nearby. Four awakened trees creak noisily to life, their branches and leaves glowing a sickly green. The trees have a +1 to their AC and deal an additional 4 (2d4) poison damage on each successful attack. The trees take one round to reach the site of the cauldron. Use your discretion when adding the trees—adding all four makes this encounter much more difficult, especially if the number of other foes has not been thinned.

At this point, the only way to stop the ritual is to stop the cauldron pouring. A DC 18 Strength (Athletics) check allows the PC to tip the cauldron into an upright position using brute force.

The ritual is complete if the cauldron continues to pour to the end of round 5.

COMPLETION

The last drops fall from the cauldron into the bilious green river, ensuring calamity downstream.

Now that the pouring is complete, the remaining guardians will battle the PCs to death. The river is now a source of corruption, spreading sickness and evil through its waters. The long-term impacts of this are left to you.

THE IMMOLATION (CR 15)

PURPOSE

The purpose of this ritual is to summon a fireball that streaks through the skies, animating every open flame within a hundred miles and infusing it with fell purpose.

PERFORMERS

To create a CR 15 encounter, this fiery ritual requires four **red dragon wyrmlings** and one **mage**.

STAGE ONE

Four enraged red dragons beat their wings against cruel restraints. Standing in the center of the draconic fury, a single robed figure beside a large floating skull. The skull is cracked, and brittle, but glows brilliantly with arcane markings.

The mage has been collecting the chained dragons' fire into the ritually inscribed skull of an unnamed evil entity. He stokes the dragon's flames with taunts from behind a *wall of force* (dome form).

Rounds 1 and 2: The party enters the ritual space 120 feet from the inscribed skull. The four dragon wyrmlings use their Fire Breath against the PCs in the first round, but the magical skull sucks the fire in, and the flames make the skull glow brighter. Incensed, the wyrmlings use their other attacks on round 2 if possible. They cannot fly, nor can they flee the scene; the adamantine chains that tether them to the ritual site are too strong for them to break.

The mage hides inside the barrier which is directly next to the skull. The skull is not inside the barrier. The mage casts offensive spells against the party from inside the force dome without dropping concentration on the *wall of force* spell. The mage cannot be targeted by spells or attacks while inside the barrier. The dragons gave up attacking him long ago. The dome can be destroyed by a *disintegrate* spell.

The skull is fully charged once the dragons breathe their fire in round 1. It slowly begins to rise in the air. Touching or attacking the skull triggers a *fireball* spell, centered on the skull, and cast at 5th level. The skull can be destroyed or stopped by:

- ▶ A single blow with a magical bludgeoning weapon that causes at least 10 damage.
- ▶ A DC 18 Strength (Athletics) check made after grabbing it (and suffering the full effects of the *fireball*).

If the skull's ascent is not stopped by the end of round 2, the ritual progresses to Stage Two.

STAGE TWO

Glowing like a small sun, the skull rises into the air. Long tendrils of fire flick menacingly from the skull's burning sockets.

The skull has risen to its apex. The mage drops the *wall of force* and attempts to escape, and the dragons seethe and roil. Flaming tendrils grow and envelop the skull.

Rounds 3, 4, and 5: The mage flees the ritual site. The ritual is complete, and the skull's evil purpose is only moments from resolving. The mage uses Disengage and Dash actions to escape capture, casting spells only to further that aim. The dragons attack the PCs, using their Flame

Breath whenever possible, now unaffected by the skull. On initiative count 1 of rounds 3 and 4, tendrils of flame lick forth from the skull, targeting the closest PC within 60 feet. The affected PC must make a DC 14 Dexterity saving throw, taking 30 fire damage on a failure, or half as much on a success.

The skull can be destroyed or stopped as described in Stage One, but the skull now floats 20 feet in the air. If the skull remains intact and floating at the end of round 5, the ritual completes.

COMPLETION

In an instant, the flame-wreathed skull rockets high into the air. With a crackling explosion, fire shoots out, radiating into the sky in all directions. The ritual is complete, and from your vantage you see tiny pinpricks of light start to dot the countryside.

The fires are alive. And they are spreading.

The skull shoots upwards into the sky, and streaks across the horizon. A wave of gray-white ash blankets the region, instantly animating any open flame and transforming it into a fire elemental. The size and power of the elemental is commensurate with the size of the flame which spawned it. The region is now under assault from these elemental foes, and it could fall upon the PCs to stamp out this wicked immolation. 🧛