

So last episode I mentioned Return to the Glory. An adventure put out by Wizard of the Coast with a number of different writers. I wanted to do a deeper dive on my biggest issues and how I would change them. This may be the start of a new project for me to work on.

Return to Glory is an adventure from Wizards of the Coast written by the following authors: Chris Lindsay, M.T. Black, Celeste Conowitch, Ma'at Crook, Amy Lynn Dzura, Claire Hoffman, James Introcaso, Rich Lescouflair, Greg Marks, Shawn Merwin, Alan Patrick, Travis Woodall

REUNITE and grow STRONG together ... RETAKE the STRONGHOLD that was once yours... RECLAIM the KNOWLEDGE that you lost... RETURN to The GLORY of days long past!

Your people once dominated everything south of the mountains; you had the greatest, most advanced underground stronghold ever known to orc-kind. Then the cataclysm happened. Centuries have passed, and only a few tribes have survived and assembled under the banner of one cause. Reclaim what was once yours!

This adventure is designed for four to six ORC characters, levels 6 to 8, and is optimized for five characters with an average party level (APL) of 6. Characters outside this level range shouldn't participate in this adventure without heavy modification to the difficulty of the encounters.

This adventure takes place in the Forgotten Realms near Turmish, in the western Orsraun Mountains just north of the Flooded Forest. To run this adventure, you need the fifth edition Player's Handbook, Dungeon Master's Guide, and Monster Manual.

Stat Blocks. The Monster Manual contains stat blocks for most of the monsters and nonplayer characters (NPCs) found in this adventure. Whenever this adventure presents a new monster or NPC, you'll find its stat block near the encounter in which it appears, or in appendix A. When a creature's name appears in bold type, that's a visual cue pointing you to the creature's stat block in the Monster Manual.

Background

The stories say that at one time your people dominated everything south of the mountains; that you had the greatest, most advanced underground stronghold ever known to orc-kind. Then the cataclysm happened. You don't recall what it was, but it scattered the unified tribes to the four winds, and as you fought to survive, all that you once knew, all that you once had, was lost. Centuries have passed, and only a few of the tribes have survived and assembled under the banner of one cause!

Overview

This adventure is essentially a dungeon crawl beneath the mountains west of Turmish. Ideally, characters will begin the adventure at 6th level and advance to 9th level by the end of adventure. It's likely to take many days for the orc heroes to fully explore and clear out the underground complex. It's conceivable that they could return to a secure camp outside to take their rest each evening if they so choose.

Boneyard (APL 6)

Champions from the orcs' history are interred in this part of the complex. However, with nobody tending their halls over the years, undead creatures gravitated here and await the characters.

Eroding Ones (APL 6)

In the past, this area of the city was used for celebrations and ceremonies. It housed the ancestors' history and the vows of treaties, held their weddings, and honored those they viewed in high regard. A pair of flameskulls have taken refuge here.

Chambers of the Overlox (APL 6)

This area contained the personal chambers of the Overlox (the orc sovereign) as well as the throne room, council chamber, and various other rooms. Through a twist of fate, it is now controlled by a red slaad from Limbo that has set this area up as a breeding area.

Found Fortunate (APL 7)

Orcs known as the Found Fortunate were responsible for implementing numerous infrastructure innovations in the city, including converting these caverns into an aqueduct. It has since been taken over by kuo-toa refugees.

Watchful Eye (APL 7)

Orcs known as the Watchful Eye were tasked with guarding the city. They cultivated their talents of perception and mindfulness to better protect the communities of the city. Adventurers may rediscover magical orb called the Eye of Gruumsh within.

Song Trackers (APL 7)

The Song Trackers are a group of orcs renowned for their warriors' ability to follow a creature, even if all they have to go on is a whisper of sound. They also have a history of producing bards, famous for their voices. Unfortunately, their musical demesne has become haunted.

Lake of the Ancestors (APL 7)

These caves were once holy to Yurtrus the White Hand and his followers. It was here, at the edge of the city, that his followers memorialized those heroes worthy of an afterlife in Gruumsh's horde. A heroic effort will be required to make a way through.

Rotting Root (APL 8)

Shortly before the fall, Dirt-Under-Nails, a dwarf druid, claimed this area as his home. While on an excursion into the Underdark, he happened upon a strange, sapient fungus which made him an offer he couldn't refuse. The druid was infected by its spores, returned home, and has been here ever since.

Red Wardens (APL 8)

This cavernous area was once a subterranean garden that served as a font of flora used for both medicinal and dietary needs. Also called the Red Falls, this area gets that name from the

stream that flows through it. The rocky sediment along the bottom of the stream, combined with the light from above, gives the water a reddish hue.

Luthic's Zealots (APL 8)

A small shrine to Luthic, the orc goddess of medicine, still stands in this area, which originally housed the hospice caring for those who once lived here. Unfortunately, a host of undead as well as a diabolical fiend is housed here now.

Fang Trust (APL 8)

A community of orcs known as the Fang Trust looked after the city's worgs here. The Great Claw resides within, and it isn't likely to be tamed.

Quill Keepers (APL 8)

The Quill Keepers were the city's scholars who recorded histories and taught young citizens how to read and write. Wizards and sorcerers performed experiments and created orc magic here as well, and so members of that tribe will be eager to reclaim this area. Hopefully they remember something of what was once taught.

False Hope, Dark Promises (APL 9)

As you're preparing to play this adventure, you'll want to ask each of the players about their characters' hopes and dreams for this expedition. This should occur before they even begin wandering around the dungeon, and can happen as part of a 'sending-off' ritual held by the elders that set them on this task. You will need this information to effectively utilize the reality warping ability of the balhannoth that makes its lair in this area.

Omens and Superstitions

Orcs live in constant awe of their gods, and their behavior is rooted in that mentality. They believe that they can see the influence of the gods everywhere in the world around them, and the priests of a tribe are entrusted with the responsibility of identifying these signs and omens—both good and bad—and deciding how the tribe should react to them.

Orcs believe that any seemingly unimportant discovery or event—a bear's claw marks on a tree, a flock of crows, or a sudden gust of wind—might be a communication from the gods. If the tribe has encountered a similar omen before, the priests understand how to interpret it, but if a sign from the gods has no clear explanation, the priests might have to meditate for hours or days to get a vision of its meaning.

Every group of orcs has particular superstitions and recognizes certain omens. These tenets vary from tribe to tribe, and are often based in events that the tribe has experienced. Each tribe detailed herein also has particular omens and superstitions to which they adhere. As your players build their orc characters, have them choose from one of the tribes detailed in this adventure and then provide them with a listing or have them take notes on their particular tribes' omens and superstitions. Feel free to award inspiration any time these are appropriately roleplayed as you play through this adventure.

I have uncomfortable feelings about the words “omens and superstitions”. It could have simply been traditions. Or religious practices. The omens are also a bunch of proverbs and talismans when they could have been holy symbols instead? Since this is from a group of mostly white people just the wording choice makes me...uncomfortable.

My first biggest gripe with this adventure is that as far as I can tell this city does not have a name. There are multiple places where we could learn a name, the Eroding Ones area, the Rotting Root area, or the Quill Keepers area. Not only is there no name given despite multiple points where it could be found, there isn't even any guidance for how to name orc cities and settlements for the DM. A cursory search using google doesn't yield any list of orc city names that ideas can be gotten from.

2. The Three Burdens Three orcish champions are entombed within this section of the complex, and this hallway memorializes their achievements. Each alcove in this hallway sports trophies from earlier remarkable victories.

Illumination. Each alcove's treasures emit dim light in a 5-foot radius.

Northern Alcove. The bust of the icy countenance of Ganash, Tusk of the North scowls from the wall. A thin layer of frost covers the trophies kept here, which include human-crafted arrows, a silvered elven warhammer, and a variety of gnomish polyhedral objects covered in numbers ranging from 1 to 20.

Central Alcove. A bust of Yurtriel, the Primal Scream, stands on a small pedestal. Creatures that draw close hear a muted howling coming from her mouth. She wears a necklace made of carved igneous stones and opals. It is worth 225 gp.

Southern Alcove. A bust of Klannk, Defiler of Wizards, stands atop a pile of tattered spellbooks. The books have been defaced and are unusable, and the bust looks immensely pleased with itself. The bust's septum is pierced with a pearl ring; the pearl bears the orc sigils for “consume” and “remove magic” upon it. If the pearl is consumed, you gain the effect of the dispel magic spell (+7 to ability checks). It tastes like salty bones.

Trap. If the characters see these treasures and don't take them, they are subjected to bestow curse (DC 17) for the duration of their stay in these dungeons. If they take at least one, but not all, of the treasures, the DC is 15. If the characters take all the treasures, they each instead gain one blessing of your choice, chosen from chapter 7 of the Dungeon Master's Guide; this blessing expires ten minutes after is granted and a character may only benefit from a single blessing in this manner.

So I am baffled. Completely baffled as to why these orc characters are being PUNISHED for not grave robbing LEGENDARY ORCISH HEROES. This city is obviously something known and sacred to the orcs. The resting place of these orcs and who they are would be known and assuming the orc characters are culturally aware WHY would they steal from these alcoves? Why would they not let their heroes rest and keep their items?

There's no way to know who wrote this section but whoever did it feels like they had lacked a fundamental understanding of how a group of people would treat the items of their ancestors, specifically PoC. I say specifically PoC because orcs are coded as PoC, in that the stereotypes used to oppress PoC, specifically Black and Indigenous folk are used to describe orcs and half orcs.

This part should be reversed. If they take any items they are cursed. The blessings should last longer than 10 minutes and each item should have something magical in it instead of just the Southern Alcove. Specifically something magical and culturally relevant.

I'm actually imagining that not only is there bust of their heads here but behind the bust are the literal weapons used by the heroes. The bodies could also be there in like a glass coffin, but that's more iffy depending on orc burial practices.

5. Tombs

This room once held services in respect of powerful orc warriors and leaders, whose bodies were sealed behind the walls upon their death. Unlike standard orcish funerary services, which often involve complete immolation or a traditional burial, these highly respected members of society were interred here so that their spirits would remain in the world for guidance and leadership. Now, however, two of the spirits have become wraiths and the third is a banshee; maddened by many years of silence, they have developed a hunger for life that far surpasses any desire for glory that they held in life—but should they be appeased, they may provide boons to those that come here.

The tombs belong to well-known orc legends, so no ability checks are needed. The sigils of these orc legends are outside the three indicated areas, and once the characters have spent one minute here, they emerge, intent on attacking unless the characters can appease them.

Illumination. A collection of quartz crystals embedded into the ceiling emit a natural glow. They bathe the room in dim light.

Appeasing the Spirits. These spirits are angry but can be appeased through reasonable creative solutions. Consult their tomb descriptions below, call for a DC 12 ability check (encourage the players to choose an appropriate skill and describe its use in the matter), and consider the following potential options or craft your own:

- Regale the orc spirits with tales of their own glory in life.
- Please the undead orcs with tales of the characters' exploits in their honor or stead.
- Demonstrate physical traits or qualities of the undead orcs, such as emitting primal screams or conjuring frost magic and effects.

Tomb of Ganash, Tusk of the North. A druid of immense power, Ganash channeled the pure, frozen rage of the northern blizzards. Rumored to be permanently coated in primal ice, he

wielded the greatclub Frostshock, carved from the heart of an ancient glacier. He has become a wraith.

Tomb of Yurtriell, the Primal Scream. Yurtriell led raid after raid with her clan of skilled warriors. Time and time again, they clashed with and annihilated elves and humans alike, pushing back those that would encroach upon sacred orc lands. She and her troops would emit terrifying primal screams for the entire duration of battle, sowing panic and discord among their foes. She has become a banshee.

Tomb of Klannk, Defiler of Wizards. In life, Klannk reputedly had an extreme desire to find and eliminate any wizards among the enemies' ranks. Some say that he could "smell the magic," and demonstrated no small amount of glee when engaged in melee with an arcanist. He has become a wraith.

Treasure. If the undead are appeased, they offer special rewards to the characters:

Ganash, Tusk of the North. Ganash offers Frostshock, his +1 greatclub to the characters. Crafted from ice, it's been enchanted to never melt, regardless of temperature.

Yurtriell, the Primal Scream. Yurtriell screams in the faces of the characters, but this effect emboldens them and grants the benefits of a bless spell for 1 minute.

Klannk, Defiler of Wizards. Klannk traces the Orc sign for "power" on the floor. Each character that views it has advantage on their next attack roll. This effect only works once per character.

This is a burial area for powerful orc warriors and leaders. I need an explanation as to why a female orc becomes a banshee. Let's just take a quick look at the banshee lore from 5e.

The woeful banshee is a spiteful creature formed from the spirit of a female elf. Its face is wreathed in a wild tangle of hair, its body clad in wispy rags that flutter and stream around it.

Divine Wrath. Banshees are the undead remnants of elves who, blessed with great beauty, failed to use their gift to bring joy to the world. Instead, they used their beauty to corrupt and control others. Elves afflicted by the banshee's curse experience no gladness, feeling only distress in the presence of the living. As the curse takes its toll, their minds and bodies decay, until death completes their transformation into undead monsters.

I hate this lore because it's unnecessarily gendered and should be for ANY ELF that uses their beauty poorly but despite hating the lore THIS IS THE LORE OF BANSHEES. This adventure breaks the lore of the game and for what reason? With no explanation? Not even a sidebar. I could be interested in this lore being broken if there was an interesting reason.

And okay let's say I was fine with the banshee and I have no inherent issues with wraiths neither of those stat blocks do LEGENDARY ORC HEROES justice. I would use the [Book of Demigods](#), but [E.R.F Jordan](#) to beef up the orcs and make the CR 13+

Since I ramped up the heroes I would also have the fight not necessarily end in death if the players lose. Since they are orcs and these are orc heroes if the players lost I would have the three heroes commend them on their worthy battle. As a reward for entertaining the spirits essentially, they can take an item from the trophy area without being cursed and they get a mark from one of the heroes.

The players would have to make a choice between which legendary hero they would receive a boon from. The boon would then be placed somewhere on their skin, forearm whatever and they would be able to activate it. I don't know if I would have the ability be a one time use or have it last as long as they are in this underground city but the mark itself stays – this will be important for later.

A few paragraphs up it says, “maddened by many years of silence, they have developed a hunger for life that far surpasses any desire for glory that they held in life—but should they be appeased, they may provide boons to those that come here.” And then the DC to appease the spirit is a DC 12 ability check. This is a Tier 2 adventure and this current situation is dealing with maddened undead spirits. Also the remove curse DC was 17. DC 12 is a joke. I'd bump it up to at least 15 – 18+ range.

7. Owlbear Lair

Yesterday, three elven adventurers used this room as their lair. Unfortunately for them, a young pair of hungry owlbeats also wanted to be here. When the characters first enter the room, the owlbeats are fast asleep, having gorged on the hapless elves; should they awaken, they are neutral to friendly in their initial reactions due to their recent feeding. If the characters are cautious and respectful of the owlbeats, they may follow them for a time in the hopes of finding another easy meal or two.

Treasure. The dead elves weren't well equipped, and the damage caused by the owlbeats was significant. Even so, a few valuables remain. Any character with a passive Wisdom (Perception) score of 12 or higher spots a silver necklace with an ebony brooch that is worth 45 gp, and a spell scroll of awaken. If the characters spend ten minutes searching the room and corpses and succeed on a DC 15 Intelligence (Investigation) check, they find a gore-covered orb of time hidden beneath a pile of detritus.

This little encounter here could a perfect orc culture world building opportunity. Instead of having owlbeats be here consider there being wolves, dire wolves or worgs – still stuffed from the elven adventurers so it doesn't have to be combat. The players can look around the room and make a history check to determine where these types of creatures were kept for whatever purpose, combat, mounts, hunting companions etc. And maybe

have a sidebar that explains what happens if you awaken the leader of any of these groups, of any of these monsters.

12. Wedding Cove

Hot spring water bubbles up from the bottom of this cove, which slopes to a depth of 10 feet. Cold water drips from the ceiling, causing a steam cloud to hang over the surface of the stone and pool. The water isn't stagnant; a slow current carries it out to the adjoining tunnel. This cave is covered in brilliant, multicolored paints, now flaked and faded. Any orc knows this is a site for wedding ceremonies; partners are united within the waters.

Characters willingly entering the pool together receive the benefits from the wedding mode of a ceremony spell (from XGE). For the next 7 days, these characters gain a +2 bonus to their AC while they are within 30 feet of each other. No benefits occur if a character coerces, manipulates, or threatens others to enter the pool,

Treasure. If a character investigates the bottom of this cove, they find a ring of mind shielding

This could have been another great world building moment for orc culture. An interesting look into their marriage practices but instead we get a pool of slowly running water? Alright sticking with the Faerun theme of orcs and combat here is how I would spice this up: I would take this blurb from the [Adventurer's Domestic Handbook](#) and turn it into a cinematic featuring ghostly figures doing the marriage ceremony:

The couple are chained together in a fighting arena, forced to fight a number of rounds against increasingly difficult enemies side-by-side while connected by 10 feet of heavy chain. The first round features heavy-hitting enemies, and once they defeat them the couple is asked, Do you swear to be each other's strength? The second round features slippery, dextrous enemies, and once they are defeated, the announcer bellows, Do you swear to trust each other foremost? The third round features enemies that wield elements, sap strength, or leech life, and once they are defeated, the couple is asked, Do you swear to endure all together?! As the couple faces their last enemy—often only one, but large, dangerous, and powerful—the question is asked: Do you swear to be unbreakable? Killing the beast in tandem is considered the act of marriage —couples deal the final blow together, and walk out of the ring sealed together.

All these creatures would be created from the water via magic so the pool is still relevant.

This area contained the personal chambers of the Overlox (the orc sovereign) as well as the throne room, council chamber, and various other rooms. In the years since the city fell, various creatures have occupied this area. For many years, it was dominated by the sorcerer Ignatia, who subdued the local duergar and conducted experiments here. A few days ago, she summoned Brolgalgeld, a red slaad from Limbo, but her magic circle was imperfectly drawn, and the vile creature escaped and killed her. The slaad now controls the duergar and has set this location up as a breeding area.

17. Pantry and Well

Small alcoves and stone shelves line the walls, holding the broken remnants of old barrels, crates, and boxes. A low wall of ancient bricks circles a well in the center of the room. A black pudding lurks at the bottom of the well, about 20 feet down. If anyone looks down the well, shines a light down it, or throws something in it, the creature surges up and attacks.

Treasure. A character who searches the shelves and make a successful DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check locates a human statuette made of silver with jade eyes. It is worth 250 gp.

I want the treasures in this city to be more grounded in orc culture. The statuette could have easily been in the shape of Luthic the Cave Mother. A history or religion check can determine these kinds of statuettes are common place – maybe not in silver – and represent the watchful eye of the Cave Mother over her children.

Song Trackers

The Song Trackers are a group of orcs renowned for their warriors' ability to follow a creature, even if all they have to go on is a whisper of sound. They also have a history of producing bards, famous for their voices. Much of their training would take place outside the city, such excellence required constant work.

32. Instrument Fabrication A short hallway opens into a larger area, the walls of which are lined with work areas covered in dust. Work Areas (Musical Instruments). On the work surfaces reside; a lute without tuning pegs and strings, a hollowed-out bone that has two holes drilled in it (the beginnings of a flute), and a headless drum. Looking through the drawers and cabinets of these stations reveals tools still in excellent condition. Two sets of each of the following are found: woodcarver's tools, jeweler's tools, and tinker's tools. A successful Intelligence (Investigation) DC 20 in this area reveals a hidden panel behind which is a beautiful cli lyre.

There was a whole conversation about orcs being coded as PoC because of the stereotypical language used to describe them and then we get more instruments that are bog standard western fantasy. If I was redesigning this I would go with an udu or ogone which are [lgbo musical instruments](#).

And just to explain my reasoning. Like it was mentioned on the previous episode PoC need to reclaim orcs. They're ours now and as such when rebuilding their image, moving

away from the racism in their writing I'd probably utilize some actual African elements as a Black person reclaiming them.

42. Lake of Blood

The Lake of Blood is the final resting place of the orcs of the city. Four water weirds guard the lake, summoned long ago to prevent anyone from disturbing the remains of the dead. They attack anyone swimming in the lake and will also respond to the Blue Lady's call within two rounds, should she mentally summon them. Despite its name, the Lake of Blood is only filled with water running from an underground spring. The constant motion of the water stirs up the muck, leaving the water cloudy, even if there is light to see by.

Illumination. The cavern is completely dark.

Lake. The lake bottom is uneven, dropping to depths of 40 to 60 feet. The floor of the lake is covered in the same black mud as the shore, and is similarly peppered with the bones of centuries of orcish dead. The water is cloudy, making it slightly obscured within 10 feet, and heavily obscured beyond that.

Treasure. The lake bottom is covered in the bones of the dead, some of which took their valuables with them. A character who spends ten minutes searching the lake bottom and succeeds on a DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check finds a watertight silver coffer worth 50 gp that contains a necklace of wolves' teeth and pieces of quartz worth 10 gp, and a potion of greater healing

I think something we needed here is explicitly stating who was considered worthy and having it include a plethora of people. And the best way to do this would have been like a short short story, no more than a page long describing the individuals that RISE out of the lake to show their moments of death. An orc man who died during child birth, two lovers tied together in brutal combat against a crowd of enemies. An orc woman with a prosthetic arm stabbing into the back of a foe etc.

CONCLUSION

Once all the problems have been dealt with the characters leave the underground city and begin the real work; using the marks to unite the clans, this adventure is the start of a political campaign with lots of different twists and turns.

If the orcs grave robbed in the Lake of Blood area there should probably be some social consequences during the political campaign part of this.