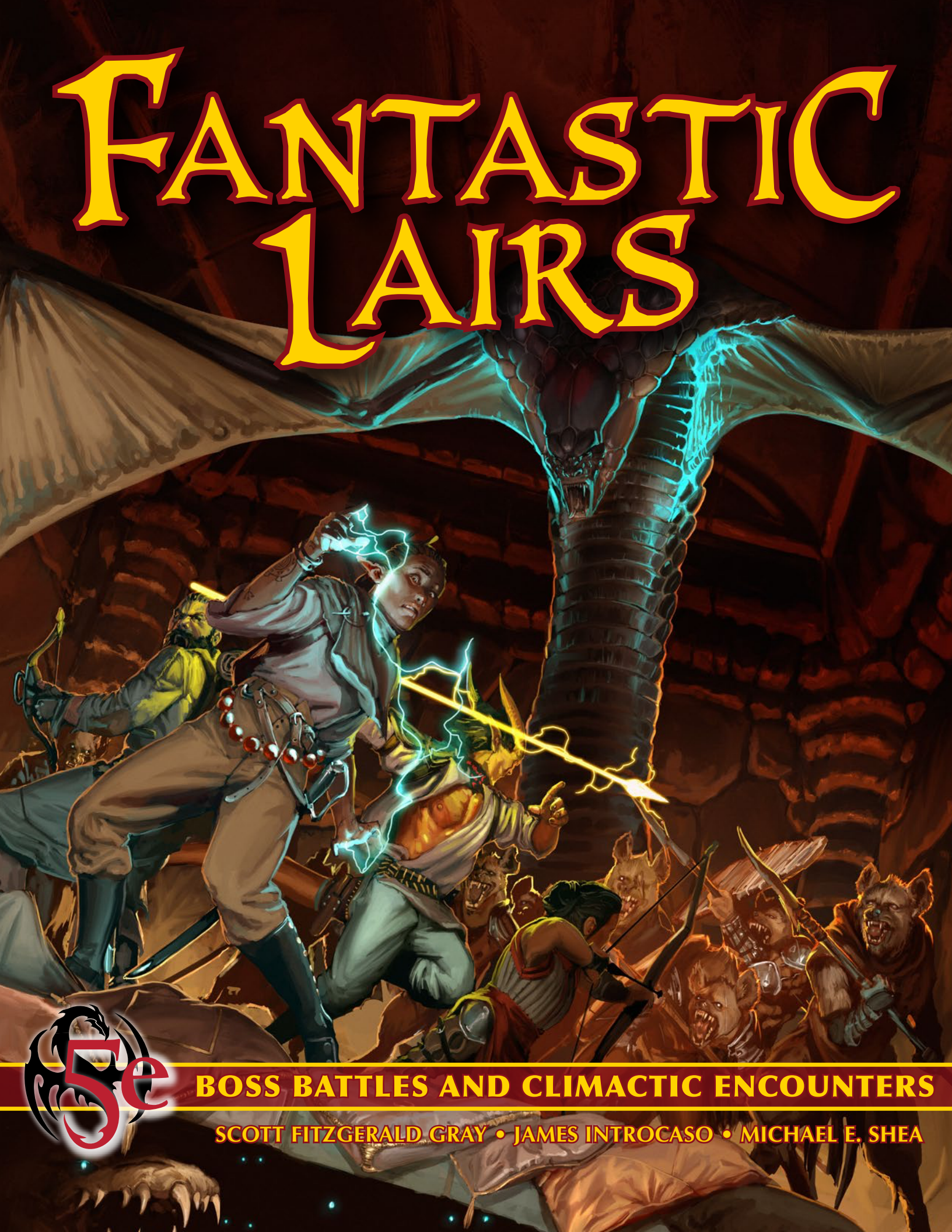# FANTASTIC LAIRS

BOSS BATTLES AND CLIMACTIC ENCOUNTERS

SCOTT FITZGERALD GRAY • JAMES INTROCASO • MICHAEL E. SHEA

SCOTT FITZGERALD GRAY • JAMES INTROCASO • MICHAEL E. SHEA

FANTASTIC LAIRS

BOSS BATTLES AND CLIMACTIC ENCOUNTERS

DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT
James Introcaso, Michael E. Shea, Scott Fitzgerald Gray

EDITING
Scott Fitzgerald Gray

SENSITIVITY EDITING
Tanya DePass

COVER AND BACK COVER ART
Jack Kaiser

INTERIOR ART
Xavier Beaudlet, Allie Briggs, Nikki Dawes, Jack Kaiser,
Enmanuel Martinez, Victor Leza Moreno, Thomas Perkins

CARTOGRAPHY
Elven Tower, Diana Muñoz, Alex VanDerAa

COVER AND INTERIOR GRAPHIC DESIGN
Marc Radle

LAYOUT
Scott Fitzgerald Gray

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CAVES OF THE COCKATRICE

A cockatrice and her twisted offspring have long laired in a cavern complex rumored to be a site of ancient fey magic. Treasure hunters, explorers, and underground wanderers are drawn to seek this mysterious site—and are never seen again.

This lair is optimized for four to five 1st-level characters.

BACKGROUND

Many centuries ago, creatures from the Feywild crossed over from their world into the Material Plane. A cave that bordered those two realms became the sanctum of druids and wizards of the unseelie fey, who followed a powerful fey lord known as the Shadow King. They built a doorway between worlds through which they and other servants of the Shadow King could travel. It was even said that the Shadow King would step through the gateway from time to time, enjoying the pleasures of the natural world before returning to his dark court.

But over centuries, the Shadow King and his court turned their attentions elsewhere. The magic of the gateway faded and the doorway closed, though the remnants of the Shadow King's power did not wholly pass from the world.

Decades ago, a wandering cockatrice found the abandoned cave and made it her lair. Over long years, the descendants of this cockatrice became twisted by the unseelie magic of the cave, which they continue to inhabit to this day.

INTEGRATING THIS LAIR

You can use the following hooks to integrate this lair into your campaign, whether as part of a longer adventure or as the focus of a single play session:

- The lair might be a location the characters stumble upon or which they've been sent to in order to recover an item, a person, or information. The cockatrice caves might be a contained site, or could be just one part of a larger underground complex of natural caverns, perhaps with some other connections to the fey.

- This location might be a section of a larger underground complex avoided by intelligent humanoids. Evil dwarves who live in a nearby city might shun these haunted caverns. The petrified humanoids in the lair might be bandits, orcs, or

hobgoblins who wandered away from their more secure lairs and ended up here. The characters might also stumble upon these caves while seeking an alternative secret entrance into an underground city.

- As an encounter intended for 1st-level characters, this lair might stand as its own full adventure. Characters of 1st level need little more than a battle against some cockatrices and their offspring to bring them up to 2nd level and get them ready to adventure onward. Setting the lair up as a one-shot adventure could involve a local settlement sending the characters out to investigate the recent disappearances of farmers or hunters who veered too near the haunted cavern.

APPROACHING THE COCKATRICE LAIR

This lair can be set up as a deep underground cavern, or might be found close to the surface world with a tunnel entrance leading directly into the cockatrice's caves. When the characters approach the lair of the cockatrice, read or paraphrase the following to set the scene:

> The rough-walled tunnel opens up to a series of larger caverns ahead. Numerous pieces of broken stone lie on the ground, many appearing to be finely carved. One piece is recognizable as a stone humanoid hand, broken off at the wrist.

COCKATRICE CAVES FEATURES

The areas of the cockatrice's lair have the following general features:

- Tunnels in the lair are 6 feet high.
- Larger caverns have ceilings rising to 12 feet high.
- All areas of the lair are unlit.

COCKATRICE HATCHLINGS

Throughout the lair lurk the cockatrice's hatchlings. These hatchlings might be indifferent to the characters or hostile toward them, as you desire.

Whenever you see a bold reference to a **cockatrice hatchling**, use the **lizard** stat block with the following changes:

- It has a Constitution of 6 (−2), and 1 (1d4 − 2) hit points.
- Its lack of object permanence grants it disadvantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks and a −5 penalty to its passive Wisdom (Perception) score.
- The hatchling has the following attack instead of the lizard's bite attack:

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +0 to hit, reach 5 ft., one creature. *Hit:* 1 piercing damage, and the target must succeed on a DC 8 Constitution saving throw against being magically petrified. On a failed save, the creature begins to turn to stone and is restrained. It must repeat the saving throw at the end of its next turn. On a success, the effect ends. On a failure, the creature is petrified for 1 minute.

- It has a challenge rating of 1/8 (25 XP).

COCKATRICE CAVES

The following encounter areas are keyed to the map of the cockatrice lair.

C1. CAVERN ENTRANCE

A statue of a dwarf stands at this junction of four rough-walled natural tunnels, its face staring down toward its two broken arms on the ground. A successful DC 12 Wisdom (Perception) check made to inspect the statue confirms that it is very lifelike—and most likely a petrified humanoid. (This unfortunate explorer is dead and cannot be restored from their petrified state. See area C5 for more information.)

Any character inspecting the cracked tunnel walls to the north notices gentle wisps of wind blowing through the cracks, through which can be heard the faint sound of running water. A character who succeeds on a DC 13 Wisdom (Perception) check to search the tunnel walls notices an Elven glyph on the cracked stone of the north wall.

With the glyph spotted, a successful DC 14 Intelligence (Arcana or History) check recognizes it as the mark of the Shadow King, a dark lord of the fey. If an elf or half-elf touches the glyph, the wall around it fades into shadow for 1 minute, revealing a tunnel into area C2.

The cracked wall can also be broken through with a successful DC 14 Strength (Athletics) check. The noise of doing so alerts the cockatrice and her hatchlings in area C4 to the presence of intruders.

MIKE'S THOUGHTS: BE NICE AT 1ST LEVEL

This lair has been designed for 1st-level characters, who are much more fragile than characters of any other level in the game. Be nice to 1st-level characters, who are weak enough that death can come as an unwelcome surprise to the whole table at once. Though the cockatrice and her hatchlings in this encounter are dangerous, they don't necessarily need to fight optimally if the characters are having too tough a time. Go easy on the characters at 1st level. You can always dial up the danger later on. When they hit 7th level and above? That's the time to bring on the pain.

C2. THRONE OF THE SHADOW KING

A large sinkhole in the center of this cavern leads to an underground stream flowing west to east, 20 feet below the cavern floor. The western branch of the stream is fed by the waterfall in area C3. The eastern branch leads out to beyond these caverns.

A cracked statue of an elf sits atop an ornate stone throne in the northwest corner of the cavern. A successful DC 12 Intelligence (History or Nature) check reveals that this is not a petrified creature, but a centuries-old statue depicting the Shadow King, a dark lord of the fey.

A glyph-marked darkwood bracelet rests in one hand of the statue of the Shadow King. The bracelet is an uncommon magic item whose wearer can cast the *dimension door* spell, but who has the poisoned condition while in contact with iron or other metal. Once its spell is cast, the bracelet crumbles into ash.

This bracelet is attuned to the fey gate in area C4, as are the cockatrice and her offspring. As such, the wearer of the bracelet has advantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks made to notice those creatures.

C3. WATERFALL

A narrow waterfall flows down from the upper reaches of this 20-foot-high cavern into a 20-foot-deep sinkhole in the floor, then out through a tunnel connecting area C3 to area C2. A single **cockatrice hatchling** wanders around in here, looks curiously at the characters, and attempts to nibble on one character's foot.

C4. HATCHERY

A bubbling pool of hot mud fills this small cavern with humidity. Piles of cockatrice eggs lie along the edges of the cave, which is home to two **cockatrice hatchlings** per character.

When the characters first approach this area, they see a statue of a dwarf against the far wall turn from stone back to flesh and curse loudly. The dwarf is then swarmed by the hatchlings, who quickly turn it back to stone again.

Any creature that enters the hot mud for the first time on a turn or starts its turn there takes 3 (1d6) fire damage.

C5. CAVERN OF FROZEN FEAR

This rough-walled cavern is the main lair of the cockatrice, which feeds on ever-present insects and other vermin when not hunting the humanoids that wander into this cavern. As the characters approach this area, the cockatrice lurks amid the broken statues of its previous victims, hoping to catch them unawares while they investigate the unseelie pull of the ancient fey gate.

> A dozen humanoid statues, many of them broken, decorate this broad cavern. Tall columns of stone rise to the rough ceiling, and a rune-decorated gateway of worked stone stands before the rock wall to the north, swirling with magical energy.
>
> Two podiums flank the gateway, holding glowing crystals of violet and green. The green crystal has a large crack in it, and sends intermittent pulses of arcane energy arcing into the stone of the wall and floor.

FEY-TOUCHED COCKATRICE

The fey-touched cockatrice, the central boss of this lair, resides here. Its proximity to the unseelie gate has twisted the creature's nature, so that it uses the **cockatrice** stat block with the following changes:

- It has proficiency in the Stealth skill, giving it a +3 modifier on Dexterity (Stealth) checks.
- It can cast the *misty step* spell as a bonus action, no components required.
- It has a challenge rating of 1 (200 XP).

TACTICS

If it becomes aware of intruders, the cockatrice attempts to hide among the statues, flies out to attack its foes, and then uses *misty step* to return to the shadows. If the characters manage to sneak up on it, the cockatrice is pecking at the leg of an undamaged statue of an elf (see the section on Celestria Avondel for details).

The cockatrice is accompanied by two **cockatrice hatchlings** for each character in the party above two.

The cockatrice and the hatchlings all have darkvision and prefer to fight in the dark. They first attack any character holding a light, attempting to extinguish it so they have an easier time hunting their prey.

STATUES

The cockatrice's petrification ability normally does not petrify creatures permanently. However, the proximity of the chaotic magic of the fey gate means that creatures that suffer mortal wounds while petrified in this area die and become mundane statues. Roughly half the statues in this area have suffered this fate, and are missing arms, legs, or heads. Other statues, however, have been petrified more recently and are still alive. These statues take the forms of wandering villagers, hapless explorers, or other NPCs specific to your adventure, all of whom have become trapped in this cavern and repeatedly petrified by the cockatrice and her brood.

A character or a cockatrice can attempt to topple a statue onto a creature within 5 feet of the statue. Doing so requires an action and a successful DC 12 Strength (Athletics) check, and forces the targeted creature to make a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw. On a failed save, the target takes 7 (2d6) bludgeoning damage and is

knocked prone and restrained under the statue (escape DC 12).

NATURAL COLUMNS

The two natural columns of stone within the cavern can be used as cover. Because the cockatrice hatchlings have trouble maintaining focus on other creatures, whenever a character goes out of sight behind a pillar, any hatchlings aware of the character immediately forget about them, and go off in search of other targets.

FEY GATE

The fey gate here was once a portal to the unseelie realms of the Feywild, but has become unstable over long centuries. The nearby podiums, which once powered the gate, now send chaotic energy arcing into nearby objects and creatures.

Any creature that moves within 15 feet of the gate for the first time on a turn or starts its turn there must succeed on a DC 12 Dexterity saving throw or take 3 (1d6) lightning damage.

REANIMATED STATUES

Once the threat of the cockatrices is removed, each intact and still-living statue reanimates within 1d12 hours. Depending on how you've set up this lair and the scope of the adventure around the encounter, these petrified NPCs might include any of the following:

Dawson the Gray Hunter. An elf **assassin** who decided to lie low in this "harmless" cave while hunting for a noble lord.

Myla Rosewood. A young halfling **commoner** whose far-ranging explorations have taken her to this cavern.

Alec Thornripple. A human **scout** whose quarry fled into the cave.

Gundra Blackboot. A dwarf **bandit** following rumors of a cave full of treasure.

Lord Marvell Thoroughgood. A human **noble** who planned to impress his love interest by cutting off the head of a mystical monstrosity.

Sevel Grayblossom. An elf **cultist** who came to the cave to find the Shadow King's throne and bracelet in area C2.

CELESTRIA AVONDEL

The final statue is that of an elf **mage** named Celestria Avondel. Celestria arrived here from the Feywild more than 150 years ago, and was caught unawares by the first cockatrice to make its lair in this cavern. She has since remained permanently trapped in the cave, living for only seconds each day as generations of cockatrices

and their offspring continually repetrify her each time she returns to life and tries to flee.

Celestria is overjoyed at finally being freed from her captivity, though she is dismayed at the amount of time she has lost in her petrified state. She is equally dismayed at the state of the fey gate. She thanks the characters, gifting them the sword she carries (see below), and then spends her days researching how to repair the fey gate and return to her home in the Feywild.

TREASURE

If rescued, Celestria rewards the characters with the magic scimitar she carries. She was never particularly good with the blade, she explains, and feels that its story will take a brighter turn in the hands of such valiant adventurers.

The blade is an uncommon *magic scimitar* that requires attunement, called Windharrow. A wielder attuned to Windharrow can use an action to cast the *gust of wind* spell. When attuned by a character of 5th level or higher, Windharrow becomes a rare *+1 scimitar* whose wielder can use an action to cast the *invisibility* spell. If attuned by a character of 10th level

or higher, Windharrow becomes a very rare *+2 scimitar* whose wielder can use an action to cast the *ice storm* spell. If attuned by a character of 15th level or higher, Windharrow becomes a legendary *+3 scimitar* whose wielder can take 1 minute to cast the *wind walk* spell.

Once the scimitar's spell is cast, it can't be cast again until the next dawn.

ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTY

You can adjust the difficulty of this lair in a number of different ways. For more difficult encounters, consider any of the following options:

- Add one or more additional fey-touched cockatrices with the modifications described in area C5.
- Add more cockatrice hatchlings.
- Give one or more cockatrices maximum hit points.
- Increase the damage dealt by the fey gate and any toppled statues.
- Replace the cockatrice and her hatchlings with other monsters known for their petrification attacks, including **basilisks**, **medusas**, or **gorgons**.

To reduce the difficulty of the lair, consider any of the following options:

- Reduce the hit points of the cockatrice
- Remove the cockatrice hatchlings, or make them strictly noncombatants, or both.

EXPANDING THIS LAIR

You can expand this lair by building on or modifying any number of the hooks found within it:

- Rescuing Celestria can introduce a new NPC to the campaign who might offer the characters quests meant to help her return to her Feywild home.
- You might put the characters in charge of figuring out whether the fey gate is still active, or how it might be activated after a search for special components or rituals.
- The Shadow King might become a prominent part of your adventure or campaign, having felt the presence of the characters as they approached his throne or came near his gate.
- If the fey gate is ever opened, it can become a connection point between your world and the unseelie world of the Feywild, offering all kinds of possibility for adventure.

ASHSNARL'S
SECRETS

Inside a cunningly lifelike mechanical dragon, Lady Tharandra Everflame commands her kobold servants to raze the settlements and roast the people of the realm that once shunned her chromatic dragon heritage.

This lair is optimized for four to five 5th-level characters.

BACKGROUND

The half-dragon Tharandra Everkind's mother was the brave knight Lady Rahinda Everkind of Filton. While pregnant, Lady Rahinda killed the great red wyrm Cinderfall, whose blood mingled with that of the wounded knight to create Tharandra's draconic heritage.

As a child, Tharandra trained hard for knighthood, but her fire breath accidentally killed her mother. The people of Filton shunned the half-dragon thereafter, and Tharandra desired revenge. She trained for battle and gave herself a knight's title and a new name—Lady Tharandra Everflame. The half-dragon conquered a warren of kobold inventors known as the Fire Smelters, who now follow her. The kobold inventors' greatest achievement is the mechanical red dragon they built

for Tharandra, called Ashsnarl, which the half-dragon now uses to burn and plunder Filton and the lands around it.

INTEGRATING THIS ENCOUNTER

Deciding what sort of settlement or realm Filton is (or replacing it with an existing location in your campaign) can help establish the characters' connection to this encounter.

You can use the following hooks to integrate this lair into your campaign, whether as part of a longer adventure or as the focus of a single play session:

- The characters find out about Ashsnarl by seeing the aftermath of the dragon's destruction first hand. The leaders of Filton offer them a reward (see "Treasure") for the head of the dragon (which all believe to be a living creature), and the characters set out to follow Ashsnarl's destructive trail. In every ruined settlement, they find Fire Smelter kobolds and their construct creations, left behind to deter would-be heroes from tracking the dragon.
- One or more of the characters knew Tharandra as a child, and returns home to Filton just after Ashsnarl attacks. Surviving witnesses know that the

dragon carried off captives in the direction of the nearby mountains where the Fire Smelters dwell. The characters confront the Fire Smelters in their caves to free the captives, but Ashsnarl is already out destroying the next settlement. The characters must race to battle the dragon if they hope to end its destruction.

- If you prefer to build a single-session adventure around this lair, the characters are visiting Filton when Tharandra attacks, and are drawn into the fray by bystanders screaming for help.

APPROACHING ASHSNARL

The machine that Lady Tharandra Everflame uses to raid settlements looks exactly like an ancient red dragon. When the characters first notice Ashsnarl, they should think that they face a dragon rather than a mobile lair. Read or paraphrase the following to set the scene:

> An enormous red dragon shoots jets of flame from its mouth and nostrils as it crawls steadily forward, marring and shaking the earth with its giant claws. Its massive wings are furled, the dragon seemingly content to plod along at a casual speed.

Wherever you set up the start of this lair, give the party appropriate cover. If the characters succeed on a DC 10 group Dexterity (Stealth) check, the creatures inside Ashsnarl do not notice them as they approach.

OUTSIDE ASHSNARL

Tharandra and the Fire Smelter kobolds control Ashsnarl from inside the dragon's head (area A3), looking out through one-way window eyes. A creature piloting Ashsnarl can speak into a tube to make their voice sound monstrous and send it out through the machine's mouth, making it sound as if the dragon is speaking.

Ashsnarl is 20 feet high, 130 feet long from head to tail, and 30 feet across the widest part of its body. The machine has AC 19, 250 hit points, a damage threshold of 10, and immunity to fire, poison, and psychic damage. Each round, Tharandra or a kobold piloting the machine can use an action to make use of one of the following options:

- Ashsnarl moves 40 feet.
- Ashsnarl attacks one creature within 5 feet of it with a claw. The machine has a +6 bonus to the attack roll and deals 11 (2d6 + 4) slashing damage on a hit.
- Ashsnarl shakes from side to side. Each creature climbing or riding the outside of the machine must succeed on a DC 13 Strength saving throw or be hurled to the ground within 10 feet of the machine and knocked prone.
- Ashsnarl spews fire in a 30-foot cone. Each creature in that area must make a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw, taking 24 (7d6) fire damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one. Once this option is used, the machine cannot spew fire again for 5 minutes.

REALIZING THE TRUTH

The characters can recognize Ashsnarl's true nature in a number of ways:

- Any character who can see Ashsnarl, is within 10 feet of it, and has either proficiency with tinker's tools or a passive Wisdom (Perception) score of 15 or higher notices the bolts that hold the dragon's joints together.
- A character who succeeds on a DC 12 Intelligence (Arcana or Nature) check or who has interacted with a true dragon before notices that Ashsnarl acts unnaturally. The creature's movements and attacks are slower and more stilted than those of a typical dragon, and its breath weapon is too small for a dragon of its size.
- A character who hears the pilot's voice come through the machine and succeeds on a DC 13 Wisdom (Insight) check recognizes that some other creature is speaking through Ashsnarl.
- Any character who touches Ashsnarl notices that the dragon feels surprisingly oily and metallic.

ENTERING ASHSNARL

While Ashsnarl is being piloted, a creature can climb onto and up the outside of the machine with a successful DC 13 Strength (Athletics) check. A creature on top of Ashsnarl can lower a rope to grant other creatures advantage on this check. If the machine is inactive, no check is required to climb it.

Once on top of Ashsnarl, the characters can enter the machine in the following ways:

- An easily noticeable 5-foot-square hatch on top of the dragon's back is locked by a wheel from the inside. The hatch has AC 19, 18 hit points, and immunity to fire, poison, and psychic damage. A successful DC 17 Strength (Athletics) check forces the hatch open, and a successful DC 15 Dexterity check using thieves' tools or tinker's tools unlocks it from the outside. The hatch leads to area A1.
- Particularly crafty characters (especially those who have fought Fire Smelter kobolds in the lead-up to this encounter) might attempt to convince the kobolds inside Ashsnarl to open the top hatch. With suitable roleplaying or a successful DC 14 Charisma

(Deception) check, one of the kobolds in area A1 can be duped into letting the characters inside.

- Ashsnarl's eyes are 2-foot-diameter windows with AC 13, 4 hit points, and immunity to fire, poison, and psychic damage. Breaking through the windows brings characters into area A3. Medium and Small creatures must squeeze to pass through the windows. Large and larger creatures cannot enter the machine this way.

ASHSNARL FEATURES

The interior areas of Ashsnarl have the following general features:

- Ceilings in the machine are 8 feet high.
- Small jets of flaming gas shooting from metal pipes along the walls fill all areas of the interior with bright light. A creature that touches these flames for the first time on a turn or starts its turn in contact with them takes 2 (1d4) fire damage.
- While Ashsnarl is active, its engine and gears clank and whir loudly, making it difficult to hear anything else. Wisdom (Perception) checks that rely on hearing are made with disadvantage.
- The metal walls of Ashsnarl are covered in pipes, pistons, gears, switches, levers, and other mechanical parts. The critical components of the machine are behind the walls, so damaging the external components doesn't hinder Ashsnarl's operation. However, if any character interacts with the external components, a Fire Smelter kobold from area A3 comes to investigate.
- The metal interior of Ashsnarl is hot enough to fill the air with a shimmering haze. Creatures that do not have resistance or immunity to fire damage cannot rest while within the machine.

FIRE SMELTER KOBOLDS

The tough, red-scaled kobolds inside Ashsnarl attack intruders as soon as they notice them. The kobolds fight fiercely, but flee when there are fewer of them than there are characters, or if Tharandra falls. Whenever you see a bold reference to a **Fire Smelter kobold**, use the **lizardfolk** stat block with the following changes:

- A Fire Smelter kobold is Small and has resistance to fire damage.
- They have 22 (5d6 + 5) hit points.
- They have an Intelligence score of 12 (+1).
- A kobold can climb on the gear-covered walls and ceiling of Ashsnarl's interior with a climbing speed equal to their walking speed.
- They do not have the lizardfolk's swimming speed or Hold Breath trait.

The kobolds know all the information contained in the "Background" and "Tharandra's Death" sections, and additional information about Ashsnarl's mechanical workings at your discretion. A kobold reveals what they know with a successful DC 10 Charisma (Intimidation) check.

At your discretion, some of the Fire Smelters might not be completely loyal to Tharandra, having grown tired of her bullying ways. Such kobolds might be convinced to aid the characters in some way with a successful DC 15 Charisma (Persuasion) check.

ASHSNARL

The following encounter areas are keyed to the map of the mechanical dragon.

A1. BELLY

A narrow ladder built into a freestanding wall near the center of this area leads up to a wheel-locking hatch in the ceiling. Large mechanical elements, including many fast-moving gears and blisteringly hot coils, take up much of this area. Many iron crates are haphazardly piled up around the area, some of which might contain treasure (see below).

HEATING COILS

The four coils at the center of this area generate the heat that fuels the dragon and its breath weapon. Any creature that touches a coil for the first time on a turn or starts its turn in contact with one takes 7 (2d6) fire damage.

GEARS

Large gears raised two feet off the ground spin and grind along the edges of this area. A creature that is pushed into the gears must make a DC 15 Strength saving throw. On a failed save, the creature takes 11 (2d10) bludgeoning damage and is restrained. On a successful save, it takes half as much damage and is not restrained. A restrained creature must repeat the saving throw at the start of each of its turns, ending the effect on itself on a success and taking the damage again on a failure.

A creature that is not restrained can use its action to attempt to free a creature it can reach that is restrained by the gears. Freeing a creature requires a successful DC 15 Strength (Athletics) check, or a successful DC 15 Intelligence check using tinkers' tools.

GUARDIANS

One **Fire Smelter kobold** per character works in this area, monitoring and adjusting the mechanical elements of Ashsnarl. The kobolds are accompanied by a mechanical dog that uses the **hell hound** stat block with the following changes:

- It is a construct.

- It doesn't have the Keen Hearing and Smell trait.
- It can understand Draconic but can't speak it.
- It is immune to fire and poison damage and the poisoned condition.

A2. CRAMPED HALLS

Small and smaller creatures can move down these narrow halls without any problem. Medium creatures must squeeze to move through, and Large and larger creatures cannot move through these areas.

While Ashsnarl is active, both halls become dangerously hazardous. The creatures in areas A1 and A3 have worked inside the machine long enough to learn the timing of the hazards, and can avoid them without having to make saving throws.

A2A. PISTON HALL

Giant iron pistons regularly slam down from the ceiling to the floor of this hall. Each creature that enters this area for the first time on a turn or starts its turn there must succeed on a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw or take 5 (1d10) bludgeoning damage and be knocked prone.

A2B. FLAME HALL

This hall intermittently fills with a giant cloud of flame that quickly dissipates. Each creature that enters this area for the first time on a turn or starts its turn here must succeed on a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw or take 11 (2d10) fire damage.

A3. HEAD

> Two round windows hang above a large, curving console covered in switches and levers. A huge pendulum set into the ceiling swings back and forth across this chamber, narrowly missing a low table set with maps each time it descends. Gears, pipes, pistons, and other mechanical features cover the walls.

Unless the characters have managed to draw them out, Lady Tharandra Everflame and a number of kobolds are also here, controlling Ashsnarl on its path of destruction.

> A snarling draconic humanoid with red scales exhales a puff of flame as she barks orders in Draconic to a number of red-scaled kobolds working this area's controls and clambering along the walls. Around the half-dragon's neck, a glowing red ruby pulses on a chain.
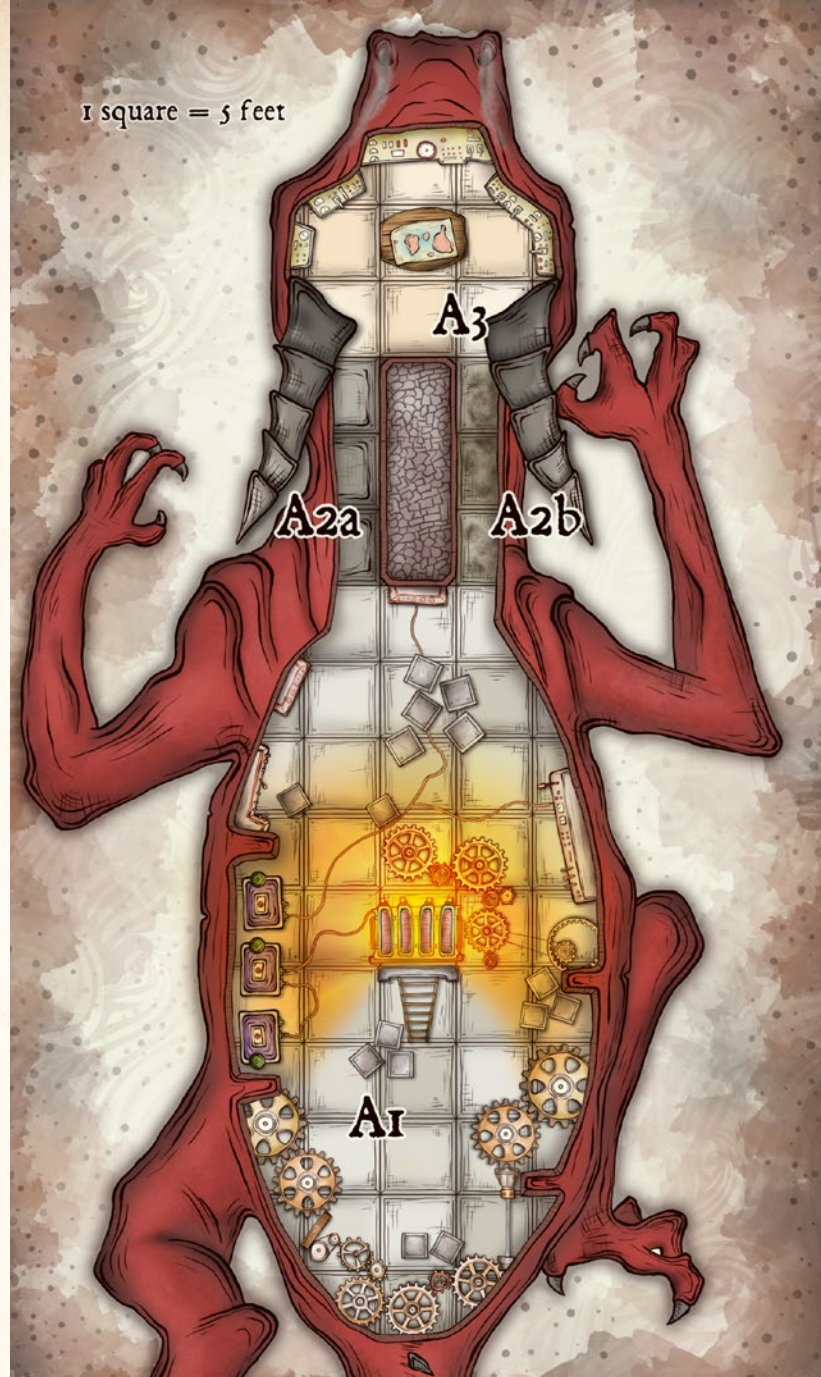
CONTROL PANEL

The main control panel at the front of the head controls Ashsnarl's movements and the traps in this area (see below). A *detect magic* spell reveals an aura of transmutation magic that connects the panel to Tharandra's necklace (see "Tharandra's Death" below).

A creature that can reach the control panel can use an action to attempt a DC 12 Intelligence (Arcana) check. (Tharandra and her kobolds automatically succeed on this check.) On a successful check, one of the following events occurs of the creature's choice:

- The creature can use any of the options noted in "Outside Ashsnarl."
- Ashsnarl's head shakes. Each creature in this area must succeed on a DC 13 Strength saving throw or be knocked prone.

- Jets of flame shoot down from the ceiling. Two creatures of the triggering creature's choice must each succeed on a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw or take 11 (2d10) fire damage.

Each event can occur only once per round. Tharandra orders her minions to make full use of the control panel's flame jets to attack the characters.

The control panel also has a tube that allows a creature to speak as Ashsnarl (see "Outside Ashsnarl").

Scott's Thoughts: The Heroes' Dilemma

Whether a fight is a straight-up brawl from the first moment the enemies are seen, or the final result of a failed attempt to prevent violence with diplomacy or negotiation, it's always possible to raise the stakes beyond the broadest strokes of victory or defeat by turning a victory condition into a dilemma.

In general terms, a dilemma is any situation where one is forced to choose between two undesirable alternatives, rather than pushing for a clearly positive outcome. In fiction and film, dilemma is often modeled as, "Damned if they do; damned if they don't"—the idea that no matter what choice a character makes, something bad will happen as a result. And this model of dilemma works great in RPGs.

Consider a scenario in which the characters have Tharandra on the ropes in this lair encounter—but they know that the magic of the exploding Ashsnarl might kill innocent bystanders around the mechanical dragon. Or what happens if Ashsnarl's destruction takes place while other groups of Fire Smelter kobolds are on a rampage, and the characters only have time to end one threat? Anytime the characters are set on a clear victory over a boss, you can ask yourself, "What's the worst thing that could happen as a result?", then make sure the players understand those stakes.

Playing with dilemma this way can raise the emotional tone of your game, by letting the characters engage in victories that aren't always clear-cut. However, the biggest difference between fiction and RPGs is that in a campaign, the characters are the avatars of real people—the players who bring those characters and the story of the campaign to life. In fiction, it's possible to engage at the highest level of interest with a character who faces dilemma after dilemma, constantly being pushed back before making a final victorious surge forward. But in an RPG campaign, that kind of structure can easily lead to disillusioned players who quickly lose interest in continuing.

So use dilemma to heighten the tension in key encounters and adventures, marking points at which you want to challenge the players as much as the characters. But make sure those dilemmas lead quickly to more straightforward victories and consistent forward movement in the campaign—even as they remind the players and the characters alike that the stakes of the campaign can be quickly raised in the most challenging ways.

KOBOLDS

This area contains two **Fire Smelter kobolds** for every character.

PENDULUM

Each time a creature crosses the center of this area, it must make a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw to avoid the pendulum. On a failed save, the creature takes 10 (3d6) bludgeoning damage and is knocked prone. Tharandra and her minions automatically succeed on this saving throw.

The pendulum has AC 19, 27 hit points, and immunity to fire, poison, and psychic damage. A character who is proficient with tinker's tools and succeeds on a DC 15 Intelligence check determines that the pendulum helps Ashsnarl maintain balance. If the pendulum is destroyed, Ashsnarl careens over onto its side and stops moving. Each creature inside Ashsnarl when this happens must make a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw. On a failed save, a creature takes 7 (2d6) bludgeoning damage and falls prone. On a successful save, the creature takes half the damage and does not fall prone.

LADY THARANDRA EVERFLAME

Lady Tharandra Everflame enjoys taking revenge on the people who wronged her. To the half-dragon, this gruesome work is cathartic, and a deserved punishment for her former neighbors. When she first sees the characters, she tells them to beg for mercy before ordering her kobolds to attack.

A character can try to stay the attack by begging for mercy, apologizing to Tharandra for the wrongs done to her as a child, offering to join her, or otherwise treating her with respect. Tharandra can be swayed by anyone using her proper knight title and succeeding on a DC 17 Charisma (Deception or Persuasion) check. She is not completely heartless, and might keep the characters tied up in area A1 or let them work alongside her as long as they agree to help purge the land of her former bullies. Unfortunately, nothing can change the vengeful half-dragon's mind about burning down her former home, meaning that the characters will eventually have to face Tharandra in combat if they wish to stop her.

Tharandra uses the **knight** stat block with the following changes:

- Her alignment is chaotic evil.
- She has resistance to fire damage.
- She has blindsight with a radius of 10 feet and darkvision with a radius of 60 feet, and can speak Common and Draconic.

- She gains the following action option:

  Fire Breath (Recharge 5–6). Tharandra exhales fire in a 15-foot cone. Each creature in that area must make a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw, taking 24 (7d6) fire damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

- She has a challenge rating of 5 (1,800 XP)

  Tharandra fights to the death, since she knows that her demise results in Ashsnarl exploding—a secret she does not willingly reveal.

THARANDRA'S DEATH

A character who succeeds on a DC 15 Intelligence (Arcana) check made to examine Tharandra's necklace senses the magic within it that connects her life force to Ashsnarl. A *dispel magic* spell cast on the necklace removes this enchantment. A character can snatch Tharandra's necklace from her with a successful DC 18 Strength (Athletics) check made as an action.

If Tharandra dies while wearing the necklace or if her necklace is removed, the machine's controls stop working, and its mechanical works begin to tick loudly, vibrate, and become even hotter. Ashsnarl explodes 30 seconds (5 rounds) later. Each creature inside the machine when it explodes automatically takes 33 (6d10) fire damage. Creatures outside the machine but within 60 feet of it must make a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw, taking 33 (6d10) fire damage on a failed save, or half the damage on a successful one.

Because the kobolds know what causes Ashsnarl to explode, they flee the moment the machine starts ticking. Tharandra does not fear a little fire damage, and stays to hinder the characters if she is alive. Fleeing kobolds attempt to kick out the windows in area A3 or open the hatch out of area A1, and will scream at the characters that the machine is going to explode if they cannot otherwise get away.

TREASURE

Treasure for this lair might come in the form of a reward for slaying Ashsnarl, given by grateful settlements in the region. Alternatively, the crates in area A1 might hold loot that Tharandra and her kobolds stole during previous raids. Either way, the characters earn the following:

- Coins worth 2,000 gp
- A ruby shaped like a red dragon's head, set on a gold chain (worth 500 gp)
- One *potion of climbing*
- One *potion of healing*
- A *flame tongue greatsword* with a hilt made of dragon bone, which roars when swung

  If you use the *flame tongue greatsword* as treasure, it can be the weapon Tharandra uses.

ASHSNARL AS TREASURE

If the characters are clever, they might try to claim Ashsnarl as a prize. If you don't want to have the party riding around in a mobile fortress, you can decide that the battle with Tharandra left the machine damaged beyond repair. But you might alternatively decide that the characters driving around in a giant dragon machine is the fun way to go. Ashsnarl is not a subtle ride, though. The attention the characters will draw to themselves as the machine's new owners could lead to all sorts of adventures as the authorities, criminals, and monsters attempt to steal Ashsnarl.

ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTY

You can adjust the difficulty of this lair in a number of different ways. For more difficult encounters, consider any of the following options:

- Make Tharandra a **gladiator** or **assassin**, with the half-dragon changes noted above.
- Give some or all of the Fire Smelter kobolds their maximum 35 hit points.

  To reduce the difficulty of the lair, consider any of the following options:

- Make Tharandra a **bandit captain**, **berserker**, or **spy**. Use the half-dragon changes noted above, but reduce the damage dealt by her breath weapon.
- Reduce the number of Fire Smelter kobolds in areas A1 and A3, or have some of the kobolds flee the fight.
- Use the **wolf** or **worg** stat block for the mechanical dog.

EXPANDING THIS LAIR

You can expand this lair by building on or modifying any number of the hooks found within it:

- The Fire Smelter kobolds could be a thorn in the characters' side long before this climactic encounter. The characters might continually find the kobolds harassing survivors and picking over the burned remains of settlements after Ashsnarl has passed through.
- A red dragon named Sulfinox—Cinderfall's daughter, who sees Tharandra as a sister—aided in Ashsnarl's construction. With Ashsnarl destroyed, Sulfinox vows to continue her sister's work and take revenge on the characters.
- Ashsnarl is merely the first in a long line of terrible war machines built by the Fire Smelters. Their ultimate plan is to create a five-headed mechanical dragon with multiple breath weapons.

THE TEAM

SCOTT FITZGERALD GRAY

Scott Fitzgerald Gray (9th-level layabout, vindictive good) is a writer of fantasy and speculative fiction, a fiction editor, a story editor, and an editor and designer of roleplaying games—all of which means he finally has the job he really wanted when he was sixteen. His work in gaming covers three editions of the Dungeons & Dragons RPG, including working as an editor on all three core rulebooks for fifth edition D&D.

Scott shares his life in the Western Canadian hinterland with a schoolteacher named Colleen, two itinerant daughters, and a number of animal companions. More info on him and his work (some of it even occasionally truthful) can be found by reading between the lines at insaneangel.com.

JAMES INTROCASO

James Introcaso is the lead designer of Roll20's Burn Bryte RPG, writer of the Gold-ENnie-winning blog World Builder Blog, author of multiple best-selling products for the Dungeon Masters Guild and DriveThruRPG (including My Dad's Monster Manual and Invasion from the Planet of Tarrasques), and coauthor of seven official Dungeons & Dragons books. He has worked with MCDM, Wizards of the Coast, Roll20, D&D Beyond, Kobold Press, and many other great game companies.

James lives in New Jersey with his wife, Bonnie, and their dog, Lilo.
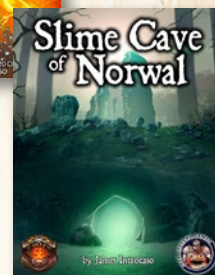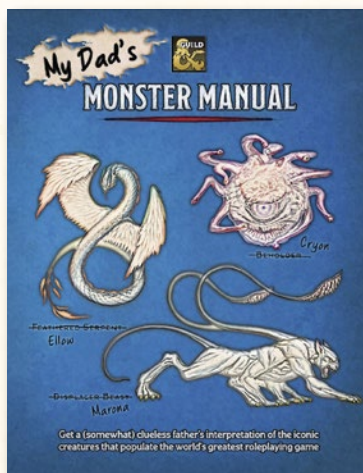
MICHAEL E. SHEA

Mike Shea is the writer for the website Sly Flourish and the author of Return of the Lazy Dungeon Master, the Lazy DM's Workbook, Fantastic Adventures, Fantastic Adventures: Ruins of the Grendleroot, and a number of other books. Mike has freelanced for a bunch of RPG companies, including Wizards of the Coast, Kobold Press, Pelgrane Press, and Sasquatch Games. He's been playing RPGs since the mid '80s, and writing for and about RPGs since 2008.

Mike also happens to be the son of Robert J. Shea, author of the '70s cult science fiction novel Illuminatus! He lives with his wife Michelle in Northern Virginia, USA.

OPEN GAME LICENSE

Everything Leads to This...

Fantastic Lairs is a book of twenty-three capstone boss encounters for the fifth edition of the world's most popular fantasy roleplaying game. Featuring challenges for characters from 1st to 20th level, these lair encounters give you everything you need to fit them into your own campaign, including evocative artwork, beautiful full-color maps, memorable monsters, guidelines for world-building, inspiration for lead-in and follow-up adventures, and fully playtested boss encounters.

Whether you're looking for a unique boss monster and a climactic encounter to run as a fun, high-stakes one-shot adventure, or as a point of inspiration around which to build a longer adventure—or even an entire campaign—*Fantastic Lairs* is an indispensable resource for any GM.