

Dream sequence: A visit to a local wise man, shaman, et cetera for a simple purpose becomes more dangerous – or at least meaningful – when it prompts a hallucination or vision of some kind. In this vision three separate paths are shown: in one, the character stands with friends over a great seal of stone, each person clutching a magical artifact, a small golden locket. In the second vision, only a few are there, and the seal is wetted with blood. The third vision shows slaughter and chaos at the hands of a great demon.

Meeting: Each person who experienced this vision is sent by their wise man to a specialist in visions of the future, an ancient shaman who lives in a stone house on a hill of wood in the midst of a vast plain. The shaman tells each one to wait as they arrive in order, until the entire group is assembled. Then he has them go into a trance together in which they walk in the spirit world.

An attack: The spirit walk takes them only a few minutes of time, but as they come back into this world they find that a week or more has passed in the real world. The small stone cabin that they were in is now sacked. The shaman is dead, his body laid out on the floor. Scorch marks dot the walls and ceiling. Camping just outside the cabin is a band of goblins led by a Blue.

An event: The characters must make their way across the plains with only goblin's stew to sustain them. While this isn't the worst, it is somewhat complicated when they arrive at the border of town to find that they are not allowed in: reports have placed a dangerous skin-stealing beast about town, and the city watch cannot be sure that it is not hiding in the party. Where the creature came from no one knows, but the city is on lockdown until it is found, slaughtered and brought back.

A revelation: The skin-changing beast carries on the inside of its hide the story of its life. Marked there in bits and patches are the things the players need to know. It was created first by a terrible demon, a marshal of the nether realms. From there a witch summoned it to wreak havoc on the countryside and inspire fear among the villages. The object which controls it is still in the possession of the witch, or would be if she had survived. Thereafter follows a list of the skins it has worn: a deer, a dog, a huntsman, a guardsman, a witch, a great cat-like beast and finally the warrior who slew the great beast. The object that the witch held is a **golden locket** that is warm to the touch and cannot be opened.

An attack: Inside the town, the characters hear rumors and stories about the past month, things that they'd missed during their privation at the shaman's hut and the subsequent spirit walk. For a time, things had been getting better in the kingdom: the mad old king had died, and his successor was brave, smart and well-liked. Trade had increased, a peace treaty brokered with the neighboring kingdom, and all seemed well. Alas, things have taken a turn down: an attack on the neighboring kingdom, harsh taxes and levies, the seemingly staged trial and killing of a once-loyal duke. People are afraid to go out, the royal guard has been swollen and taken over by mercenaries and brigands, and thieves walk the streets in broad daylight. The players feel the brunt of this as they are assaulted one night by a band of muggers and footpads. Their leader exhibits strange powers and infernal inspiration. When slain, the **golden locket** on his chest is revealed to be almost identical to the witch's: gold, unopenable, and warm to the touch. Someone is stirring up trouble, and they're

related to these necklaces. Asking a wise man named Arteus about them reveals that they are signs of the great demon's favor, and likely contain a small piece of his dark soul in each. They deliver infernal blessings to those evil enough to use them, though they taint and corrupt the soul as well. Which demon this is, it is difficult to say.

An event: The town is in dire straits in terms of brigands and bandits, but there's an easy fix for that. The mayor and town council decide to secede from the kingdom, effectively just stopping paying taxes and not letting the royal guard in the gates. However, another problem must be dealt with from the inside out: the thieves' guild is powerful enough that the guards can do nothing about them. The Beggar King and his Court need to be excised from the city, the Guild must be shut down and the top level of the Catacombs that house it locked and barred from entry.

A betrayal: The town council pushed the mayor into making the decision to secede, which many citizens saw as a good choice. Alas, the citizenry is not always aware of what's going on in the outside world, and did not realize that the town couldn't survive by itself – at least not comfortably. When pressed about his decision, the mayor has pointed out that it was largely Councilman Sturgis' idea. Well, last night the mayor was found dead, and Councilman Sturgis has taken power. He somehow paid off the entire town guard, has bought the remaining thieves in the town, and now rules with an iron fist. His first action was to declare martial law, and he then stated that to live at all the town would need to declare war on the next village over for their resources. He's purchased a squad of mercenaries to do just that.

An attack: The golden locket seem to send out a curious call of their own in the night, attracting a half a dozen of the undead to rise up and attempt to take them. The innkeeper and cook are killed, the door knocked down and the characters assaulted by these foul moving corpses. Leading them is a small, winged creature with red skin and horns. The little winged creature himself wears yet another of the **golden lockets**. Arteus helps to identify the winged creature as an imp, and the moving corpses as revenants from the catacombs beneath the city.

An event: The town is not yet finished with its troubles, and won't be for some time. The well is poisoned soon after war is declared, and townsfolk begin dying in droves. The sick begin to fill the infirmaries and soon the town is in a panic – the sickness, once caught by a person, spreads like the plague from human to human. The court physicians are struck down by the plague just as the other townsfolk are, but a wise woman from the town comes forward to offer a cure. The bark of a particular tree can be made into a very potent remedy that will save many lives. The trouble is that the tree is guarded by an old and fiercely territorial creature, which must be killed or driven off.

An event: Upon curing the disease, the town is much better off and able to get back on their feet. Alas, it is not yet time to rest. The people begin to call for the new mayor, Sturgis, to step down or else answer for his crimes. His senseless war and strongarm tactics have landed the town into deeper trouble than they would have ever been in if they had just followed the whims of the now-mad king. Sturgis wants to make a fight of it and holes up in his castle with his bought guards

outside. The people need champions, and those champions are the players. Sturgis, like his allies in the fight against goodness, bears a **golden locket**, as the players will discover when they get to him.

An attack: With the town council back in power, the citizens are able to rest, and show their gratitude by the only means they know – the heroes will pay for nothing in the town, be it food, drink or lodging. In the finest inn of the town though, trouble awaits. A small cadre of demons and other creatures of ill repute clamber up from the basement and light the inn on fire. As the heroes run from the building, the demons assault them.

An attack: Arteus is able to identify a few of the demons that were in the fight at the burning inn as liege servants to Merugon, a terrible and old demon that hides mostly in the shadows. His influence is surely felt throughout the realm, and if it is him he won't stop until the kingdom is in ruins. Merugon likes to be near centers of power, and so will likely be in the capitol of the kingdom, as near to the king as he can be. Arteus says that he will go there to advise the king of his danger, if the king is not already beyond saving, and tells the heroes that they would do well to go too. On the road the traveling party is assaulted by a group of bandits that are not quite as they seem. On closer inspection the bandits are revealed to be a few cultists and their minions, backed up by gnolls and goblins.

A betrayal: Reaching the capitol city brings the nastiest shock of all. Arteus brings them to a shady little bar whose owner he says he knows. There, the band is threatened by a group of ghoulish cultists. Arteus explains that a person can only carry one locket at a time, and so he needed dummies to carry the rest, as his companion cultists in town were all wiped out. Alas, it is now time for the heroes to die, and Arteus' lord Merugon to rise to prominence. Fighting ensues. In the aftermath, Arteus is shown to have been in possession of the fifth **golden locket**.

An event: The city is miserable. Its people are downtrodden and beaten, many of them aware that the king is completely insane. Unfortunately, the mercenaries and bandits care only for gold, which the king is handing out to anyone who supports him. A few freedom fighters help to keep the spirits of the people up, but generally fail miserably. The leader of the group approaches the heroes after their scuffle with Arteus and his compatriots, and asks if they will help the city. The rebels think that the king's insanity is due to his new and troubling advisor, a vizier from a far-off land that appeared shortly before the king's madness grew. The rebels want the heroes to capture him – killing him if need be.

A revelation: The vizier is, in actuality, a demonic specialist of an ancient order of holy men. He has been tracking the demon Merugon's movements, and followed him here to the capitol city. Soon after arriving he began work on a great seal to trap Merugon, in the basement of his home. Should Merugon ever be brought there and enough of his soul interred in the seal itself, the demon would be trapped. What constitutes enough of his soul would be, say, five lockets' worth.

An attack: The vizier, alas, does not live long. Soon enough he is assaulted by the legions of hell and falls easily. The heroes are likewise attacked by a mixture of the undead and the infernal. The vizier's blood is smeared across an entire room in taunts and curses, and the heroes are able to survive just

barely. At this point the town is aflame in quarters, the mad king laughs on his throne and the general populace is in a state of panic.

An event: The king calls for his vizier. Finding him deceased, he demands that those found nearby be brought to him. The nearest ones at the time of his death were the heroes, and he begins a mock trial which will doubtless end in their execution for the murder of his beloved friend. When confronted with the fact that there is a demon on the loose and the monsters from the nether regions were the ones that slew his companion, the king laughs and reveals that yes, he knew. He's been mad for rather a long time, and has quite begun to enjoy it. He no longer fears Merugon's whispers, but embraces them. His guard, all cultists, are assigned to kill the party, as is the executioner (an undead monstrosity) and the king himself (little more than a bag of skin filled with worms and poison).

The finale: The death of his chosen vessel is enough to bring Merugon from hiding, and he crawls out of the worm-filled sack that was once the king. His appearance is heralded in fire and brass horns, and he begins to idly chase the heroes, confident that he will defeat them. Of course, if he is killed he is simply banished back to the hells for a century and a day, and will return in due time. Should the heroes manage to lure him to the vizier's home, though, all they must do is place each locket inside the stone vault of the seal and close it, and Merugon will be drawn along with them, locked in the dungeon for as long as stone can maintain.

Merugon (Devil)

Size/Type: Large Outsider (Evil, Extraplanar, Lawful)

Hit Dice: 14d8+84 (147 hp)

Initiative: +5

Speed: 40 ft. (8 squares)

Armor Class: 32 (-1 size, +5 Dex, +18 natural), touch 14, flat-footed 27

Base +14/+24

Attack/Grapple:
e:

Attack: Spear +20 melee (2d6+9/x3 plus slow) or claw +19 melee (1d10+6)

Full Attack: Spear +20/+15/+10 melee (2d6+9/x3 plus poison) and bite +14 melee (2d6+3) and tail +14 melee (3d6+3 plus slow); or 2 claws +19 melee (1d10+6) and bite +14 melee (2d6+3) and tail +14 melee (3d6+3 plus slow)

Space/Reach: 10 ft./10 ft.

Special Fear aura, slow, spell-like abilities, summon devil

Attacks:

Special Damage reduction 10/good, darkvision 60 ft., immunity to

Qualities: fire and poison, resistance to acid 10 and cold 10, regeneration 5, see in darkness, spell resistance 25, telepathy 100 ft.

Saves: Fort +15, Ref +14, Will +15

Abilities: Str 23, Dex 21, Con 23, Int 22, Wis 22, Cha 20

Skills: Bluff +22, Climb +23, Concentration +23, Diplomacy +9, Disguise +5 (+7 acting), Intimidate +24, Jump +27, Knowledge (any three) +23, Listen +25, Move Silently +22, Search +23, Sense Motive +23, Spellcraft +23, Spot +25, Survival +6 (+8 following tracks)

Feats: Alertness, Cleave, Combat Reflexes, Power Attack, Weapon Focus (spear)

Environment: A lawful evil-aligned plane

Challenge 13

Rating:

Treasure: Standard coins; double goods; standard items

Alignment: lawful evil

Mergon is about 12 feet tall and weighs about 700 pounds.

Combat

Merugon prefers to fight only when doing so serves its mission, but it never hesitates to attack when it deems a battle necessary—or likely to end in its victory.

Merugon's natural weapons, as well as any weapons it wields, are treated as evil-aligned and lawful-aligned for the purpose of overcoming damage reduction.

Fear Aura (Su)

Merugon can radiate a 10-foot-radius fear aura as a free action. A creature in the area must succeed on a DC 22 Will save or be affected as though by a fear spell (caster level 13th). A

creature that successfully saves cannot be affected again by the same Merugon's aura for 24 hours. Other devils are immune to the aura. The save DC is Charisma-based.

Spell-Like Abilities

At will—chaos hammer, confusion, mirror image (DC 20), fly, ice storm (DC 19), greater teleport (self plus 50 pounds of objects only), persistent image (DC 20), unholy aura (DC 23), wall of ice (DC 19). Caster level 13th. The save DCs are Charisma-based.

Regeneration (Ex)

Merugon takes normal damage from good-aligned weapons and from spells or effects with the good descriptor.

True Seeing (Su)

Merugon continuously uses true seeing as the spell (caster level 14th).