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ALCHEMICAL IMBALANCE

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GOBLINS ARE WICKED and grasping, and despite their stature, they lack some of the cowardice that other small humanoids display. Worse still, they're cunning and inventive, as well as perversely resourceful. They know and use dark sorcery and cruel equipment. The expansion of civilization has driven them to the borderlands, but goblins covet the territories occupied by friendlier folk, and they crave the wealth and decadence offered by wrongful conquest and theft.

What if the nasty ingenuity natural to goblins allowed an unusual leader to rise among them? How would his knack for alchemy and black magic shape his plans? How would he use his powers to direct his avaricious people, and how would he help them gain an advantage over benevolent folk? What would need to be done to stop him? Who would take on that task?

This article is aimed at helping you construct an adventure for 3rd- to 4th-level PCs.

BILE SPIDER TRIBE

The Bile Spider goblins were once little different than any other. They huddled in caves and mounted minor raids to supplement their supplies. Without attracting enough notice to be worthy of smiting, they led their nasty lives on the far-flung outskirts of anything that

could be called civilization. They honored the war god Bane by subjugating lesser tribes, taming monsters, harassing travelers, and practicing black arts.

Among these arts is a long tradition of alchemical practice among the tribe's magicians. In the past, the Bile Spiders used these techniques to give themselves edges in battle, poison foes, and create instant gouts of flame without magic. But the practice of alchemy has evolved to a new height among these goblins.

A talented hexer named Ziguarz has risen to prominence among the Bile Spiders. After spending years toiling deep in the carved caves that serve the tribe as a lair, Ziguarz managed to come up with foul alchemical agents that can alter goblins, their pet

spiders, and other creatures into terrifying fighting beasts. Using his formulas, Ziguarz seized power from his weaker kin, becoming chief of the tribe.

Bile Spider warriors vie for the "honor" of using Ziguarz's formulas. They use their newfound strength and viciousness to expand Bile Spider territory, and the tribe is now large. It includes numerous monstrous creatures not often found among mere goblins, and it integrates barbaric bugbears.

Tribal scouts and warriors search far and wide for materials for Ziguarz's alchemy. The tribe is outgrowing its territory. Ziguarz has discovered that his techniques are improved by the use of materials harvested from other sentient beings. He has turned his





eyes toward civilized lands, wondering if his altered soldiers can lead the tribe to greater conquests. He also desires enough slaves, human, elf, dwarf, or otherwise, to fuel his malevolent research.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

As the Bile Spiders grow bolder, search wider areas for reagents, and take prisoners for Ziguarz's new line of study, they're unlikely to remain unnoticed for long. Any or all these might be hooks to attract heroic attention. This section uses locations set in the Nentir Vale, which is described in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*. You can replace them with locations from your own campaign if you wish.

Vanished Caravan: A small caravan was lost on an old trade trail through the wilderness from Nenlast. Travelers that have passed that way report seeing signs of a battle on the road, but little debris and no bodies were apparent. No member of the merchant party appears to have escaped the mysterious attack.

Missing People: A local herbalist named Velma appears to have been snatched in the night from the outskirts of the borderlands village of Nenlast. Her home was carefully looted of all her reagents and supplies. The same night, livestock and a farming family disappeared, with signs of foul play.

Goblin Skirmishes: When coming to trade in Nenlast, Tigerclaw barbarians of the Winterbole Forest report clashes with goblins. Although goblins aren't unusual in the forest, these particular goblins are fierce, sometimes strangely deformed, and they often take prisoners or leave blood-drained corpses.

Alchemical Mutant Rampage: A misshapen rage drake rampaged through a lumber camp near Nenlast a few days ago. It had Dwarven runes inscribed and burned into it, but the language appears to be a mystical form of Goblin. A spider of unusual size and coloration attacked hunters in the Winterbole Forest at about the same time.

INVESTIGATION

Depending on the hook, the PCs can look into the problem in a variety of ways. Here, skill challenges help simulate investigation. When characters make skill checks in response to a series of changing conditions, with success or failure being uncertain, they're in a skill challenge. See the *Dungeon Master's Guide* for more on skill challenges.

VANISHED CARAVAN

It's easy enough to find the site at which the caravan was attacked by asking around (Streetwise DC 10). The place is littered with signs of battle.

Setup: For the PCs to discover goblins were behind the attack (the Bile Spider goblin tribe in particular) and from which direction the attack came, the PCs must spend time searching the battle area for clues and putting together the pieces.

Level: 3.

Complexity: 1 (requires 4 successes before 2 failures).

Primary Skills: Nature, Perception, History.

Perception DC 20: PCs look for tell-tale clues about the attackers in the detritus of combat. First success with this skill opens up the use of the Nature skill. PCs find broken weaponry, footprints, and a crude iron emblem that looks like a spider.

Perception DC 15: Second success with Perception shows the direction from which the attack came, and to where the attackers retreated (the same direction).

Nature DC 18: The characters can attempt to identify the kinds of creatures that leave a particular size of print behind and the kind of weapons. First success with this challenge opens up the use of the History skill. The footprints are probably goblin and spider, and the weaponry is of goblin make, which means the spider emblem is also likely one used by goblins.

History DC 15: A PC suddenly puts two and two together—a tribe of goblins called the Bile Spiders has been around for some time and it is located in

the Nentir Vale. It's unlike the Bile Spiders to be so daring. Success on this check provides general information about the Bile Spider and their role in your campaign's past.

Success: The characters know where to go to find the Bile Spiders goblin tribe. The tracks of the raiders lead into the Winterbole Forest.

Failure: Even a partial failure still lets PCs know from which direction the attackers came and went.

MISSING PEOPLE

Asking around reveals Velma was odd but liked. She had many friends and no enemies (DC 10 Streetwise check). PCs easily learn where to find Velma's home. This skill challenge is provided for Velma's house, but a similar challenge at the farmstead reveals a gruesome clash with goblins and animals, and the tracks of the raiders, which lead into the Winterbole Forest.

Setup: For the PCs to discover that reagents good for alchemy and poisons were taken from Velma's home, that goblin tracks litter the area, and that there was little struggle, the PCs must spend time searching the residence and thinking about what they find.

Level: 3.

Complexity: 1 (requires 4 successes before 2 failures).

Primary Skills: Arcana, Heal, Nature, Perception.

Perception DC 20: Characters look for telltale clues in Velma's house. One success allows a PC to find sticky crimson material—is it blood? This opens up the use of the Heal skill.

A second successful Perception check shows signs that Velma was subdued while sleeping, tied with rope (bits of cut rope remain), and dragged away. Muddy footprints of small feet in crude boots lead into, around, and back out of the house. The direction the interlopers departed from the house toward the Winterbole Forest is discernable. This Perception check also opens up the use of the Nature skill.

Heal DC 18: Is the spilled red material blood? Success opens up Arcana skill—no, it's not blood. It's something artificial. Moreover, there is no other sign that Velma was injured.

Arcana DC 20: The dried material is a common alchemical reagent used in mild poisons. Looking around the house reveals that Velma had a supply of alchemical reagents, but they are mostly gone. Little seems disturbed; however the creature that removed the reagents took care to remove them delicately.

Nature DC 18: The PCs can attempt to identify the kinds of creatures that leave a particular size of print behind: Goblins!

Success: The characters know goblins entered the house and probably took the reagents specifically when they took Velma.

Failure: Even a partial failure still lets PCs know from which direction the attackers came. The tracks of the raiders lead into the Winterbole Forest.

GOBLIN SKIRMISHES

A few successful Streetwise checks can lead the party to the right Tigerclaw barbarians. Use the previous examples and the entry on skill challenges in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* to design one of your challenges for this investigation.

A negotiation skill challenge involving Diplomacy, Insight, History, and Nature can gain enough information from the barbarians to point the party to a skirmish site and identify the goblins as Bile Spider folk. Tigerclaw barbarians are taciturn and don't like strangers, so the PCs have to earn their trust. The characters can investigate the skirmish area using Arcana, Nature, Heal, and Perception. They discover a slain and deformed goblin, and his body reveals that he was altered by a toxin or foreign substance. The site also has tracks.

ALCHEMICAL MUTANT RAMPAGE

The bodies of the misshapen beasts can be examined like the body of the goblin in *Goblin Skirmishes* above. PCs can do legwork among the woodcutters in the lumber camp or talk to the hunters who survived the spider assault.

Use the previous examples and the entry on skill challenges in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* to design one of your challenges for this investigation.

Either is a negotiation skill challenge involving Diplomacy, Insight, History, and Nature. It can reveal the Bile Spider connection and lead the characters into the Winterbole Forest. The rage drake can be tracked easily.

GOBLINS

A successful Nature check can tell PCs more about goblins in general, as detailed in the *Goblin* entry of the *Monster Manual*. History can be used to learn more about the Bile Spiders in particular.

WINTERBOLE FOREST

Venturing deeper into the Winterbole Forest while seeking the Bile Spider goblins is risky. In any case, tracking the Bile Spider raiders to their lair is a simple skill challenge that can lead to encounters in the Winterbole Forest and eventually to the Bile Spider lair.





Setup: The PCs must track the prints back to the raider lair.

Level: 3.

Complexity: 1 (requires 4 successes before 2 failures).

Primary Skills: Perception.

Perception DC 20: Characters try to follow the tracks through rough forested terrain. Four successes lead them to the lair entrance, but a failure gets PCs off track and potentially triggers an encounter.

Success: The characters discover the entrance to the Bile Spider's cavern lair after a day of travel.

Failure: The PCs spend the day wandering the forest without finding the Bile Spider lair. They also run into trouble. Once they deal with the combat encounter described below, they can attempt the skill challenge again to reacquire the tracks and discover their true goal.

Each additional failure doesn't necessarily indicate a new random encounter, though it could at your option. Reuse the encounter provided below, or better yet, substitute a few monsters of similar level from the *Monster Manual*. Feel free to use anything that

a goblin tribe with weird alchemical resources might control.

Combat Encounter: The first time PCs go off track and fail the skill challenge to track the goblins back to the lair, they run into trouble.

Reagent Seekers (Level 3; 775 XP): The mad goblin alchemist Ziguarz sends his minions to search the forest. One altered skullcleaver forms the nucleus of a small group of creatures that roam the forest in search of reagents. The skullcleaver is deformed, bloated, and occasionally burps green gas.

- ◆ Altered goblin skullcleaver (level 3 brute)
- ◆ 2 goblin warriors (level 1 skirmisher)
- ◆ Deathjump spider (level 4 skirmisher)
- ◆ 2 goblin sharpshooters (level 2 artillery)

The altered skullcleaver possess the *alchemical breath* power (see below), in addition to its normal abilities. It uses *alchemical breath* as its very first action, then rushes into battle. It fights to the death, but the other goblins might flee, leading the characters back to the Bile Spider lair.

Other altered creatures encountered in the course of this adventure might have *alchemical breath* as an additional power.

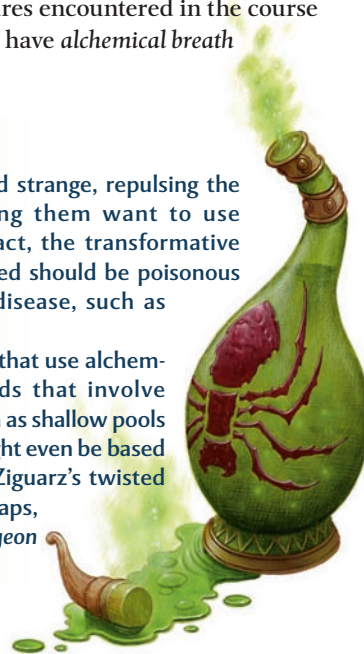
THE HAZARDS OF ALCHEMY

Ziguarz's work is described as alchemy. This means you should feel free to give the goblins a few bizarre devices that act like very minor magic items but aren't. See the kobold slinger (*Monster Manual* 168) for some examples. The Bile Spiders have access to deathjump spider venom, and you can use that as an example of other poisons you can create. If you have access to *Adventurer's Vault*, use level-appropriate alchemical devices from that book.

The powers described in this article go a ways toward reinforcing the alchemical take on Ziguarz and the Bile Spiders. By adding descriptive elements, such as deformities that have no actual mechanical effect, you add to the feel of the Bile Spiders. These gob-

lins should seem vile and strange, repulsing the PCs rather than making them want to use Ziguarz's formulas. In fact, the transformative agents Ziguarz has created should be poisonous to the PCs or cause a disease, such as mindfire or slimy doom.

You can include traps that use alchemical devices and hazards that involve alchemical pollution, such as shallow pools of mixed agents. They might even be based on magic traps but use Ziguarz's twisted formulas. For more on traps, see Chapter 5 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*.



Alchemical Breath

Altered Attack

Green smog reaches like a living tendril toward its target. The smell is horrendous.

Encounter ◆ Arcane, Acid

Standard Ranged 10

Target: One creature

Attack: Constitution vs. Will

Hit: 1d6 + Constitution modifier acid damage, and ongoing acid damage equal to Constitution modifier (save ends).

BILE SPIDER CUSTOMIZATION

When constructing the Bile Spider lair, consider the following monsters in addition to goblinoids. Modify fire creatures to deal and resist acid damage instead.

- ◆ Shadowhunter bat, fire bat (*Monster Manual* page 27)
- ◆ Fire beetle, tangler beetle (*Monster Manual* page 30)
- ◆ Cavern choker (*Monster Manual* page 42)—depicted as an altered goblin
- ◆ Guard drake, spitting drake, and rage drake (*Monster Manual* page 90)—use the rage drake sparingly, and depict it as a bloated alchemical brute.
- ◆ Ochre jelly (*Monster Manual* page 202)—depicted as a weird alchemical ooze, maybe with hints of goblin features
- ◆ Rats, especially the dire rat (*Monster Manual* page 219)
- ◆ Blazing skeleton (*Monster Manual* page 235)—use sparingly
- ◆ Deathjump spider, bloodweb spider swarm (*Monster Manual* page 246)—use the bloodweb swarm sparingly
- ◆ Zombies, especially the corruption corpse (*Monster Manual* page 274)—depict as alchemically altered undead goblins or bugbears

BILE SPIDER LAIR

Once PCs reach the goblin caves, you can use a variety of different map types for terrain. Some of the caverns are natural, while the Bile Spiders have carved others.



Social Encounters: Characters can try to Bluff or Intimidate their way into the Bile Spider lair by overcoming a level 3, complexity 3 negotiation skill challenge. Pretending to be emissaries bearing reagents or news of an alliance with other evil forces is the surest way to succeed in this. The guards usher successful PCs to a goblin underboss (*Monster Manual* 138), where another successful negotiation could see the characters to Glax. This is a dangerous gambit, because only the savviest negotiators can avoid violence at that point, and they find enemies on all sides.

Combat Encounters: The way the PCs try to gain entrance to the lair determines the number of encounters they are likely to face. If they try to fight their way directly in or find a secondary entrance and sneak in, they end up facing Bile Spider goblins and their minions before the venturing deep enough to find Ziguarz. Here is one example.

Bile Spider Checkpoint (Level 3; 825 XP): At some point, the PCs have to fight their way past a hardened checkpoint surrounded by goblin living areas. While doing so, they attract the attention of goblins living in the nearby areas, who rush to attack.

- ◆ 1 *altered* goblin hexer (level 3 controller)
- ◆ 1 *altered* needlefang drake swarm (level 2 soldier)
- ◆ 2 goblin sharpshooters (level 2 artillery)
- ◆ 2 goblin warriors (level 1 skirmisher)
- ◆ 4 goblin cutters (level 1 minion)

The hexer, one warrior, and sharpshooters enjoy cover behind a low barricade made of stacked rubble and debris, while the drakes swarm over the barricade. The second goblin warrior and the cutters arrive from nearby rooms at the start of the second round. The warriors chuck their javelins, then fall back if one or more characters pass the barrier. The hexer and sharpshooters stay behind the barricade to launch attacks. The drake swarm attacks the first character within reach.

IMPORTANT CHARACTERS

The leaders of the Bile Spiders are the most dangerous foes the PCs face in this scenario.

GLAX, BILE SPIDER WARCHIEF

The “boss” of the Bile Spiders, Glax ascended to her position with Ziguarz. A bloodthirsty bully with a penchant for eating those that dare oppose her, Glax serves as Ziguarz’s military commander. She is placed to lead any major operation the Bile Spiders might one day undertake. Right now, she coordinates units of goblins that venture abroad to collect reagents and harass Bile Spider enemies, such as the Tigerclaw barbarians.

Social Encounter: Glax is bellicose, boastful, and bullying. Only slightly less egotistical than Ziguarz, she’s smart enough to realize that the goblin alchemist should be allowed to make important decisions about the Bile Spiders. He has powers beyond Glax’s reckoning. It’s better to serve than to end up like the Bile Spiders’ former chief. But Glax is even more prone to using aggressive and bloody means to solve her problems.

Glax assumes a diplomatic stance toward non-goblin intruders only if one of her underbosses brings such interlopers to her in peace. By using Bluff, Insight, Intimidate, and Religion to succeed on a level 4, complexity 4 skill challenge negotiation, the PCs can continue a diplomatic ruse. Diplomacy checks result in automatic failures during this skill challenge—Glax hates honeyed words, which she takes as a sign of weakness. Religion can be used to discern, by observing the decorations and idols in her lair, that Glax is a pious servant of Bane. She respects others who respect her god. The goblin warchief also respects those who seem strong and bold, hence she pays heed to successful Intimidate checks. Insight can be used to gauge these facts, as well as to observe that the PCs on the road to failing the skill challenge can

gain victory by having one of the party members duel Glax’s bugbear warrior or Glax.

If the PCs suitably impress Glax with religious and warlike talk, by succeeding in the negotiation, she’s willing to send them on to Ziguarz. Her underboss guides the PCs deeper into the Bile Spider lair.

Combat Encounter: If PCs find they must fight Glax, 3rd- or 4th-level PCs discover she and her berserkers are fierce adversaries.

Glax’s Brute Squad (Level 5; 1,150 XP): Glax commands several dozen goblins and bugbears, but she keeps her favorites nearby at all times. Of these, Glax keeps the most able with her most hours of the day. She doesn’t trust Ziguarz enough to allow any his altered goblins into her personal force. Should any creature displease Glax, her ego demands nothing less than that creature’s quick and messy eradication.

- ◆ Glax, female goblin level 5 skullcleaver savage berserker (see template, *Dungeon Master’s Guide* 180)
- ◆ 2 goblin skullcleavers (level 3 brute)
- ◆ Bugbear warrior (level 5 brute)
- ◆ Bugbear strangler (level 6 lurker)

Combat with Glax and her brute squad is one of howling violence, goblin oaths of doom, and slaver-ing bloodshed. The brutes lay into the PCs from the outset. Glax and her servants might take minor actions to lick blood from her weapons and engage in other inhuman displays, including a savage coup de grace. They use *goblin tactics* to maneuver into flanking positions, until they become bloodied and totally lose it. Only the bugbear strangler is at all cautious, starting from hiding if she can and waiting until she has a choice target to *strangle* before engaging fully.

ZIGUARZ, BILE SPIDER KING

Ziguarz is a black-hearted and devious goblin who is drunk with accursed magic and newfound power. He’s vain, arrogant, and paranoid, and he’s willing to sacrifice any of his underlings for any purpose he

deems worthy. He's also willing to torture, maim, and kill to continue to expand his powers.

Social Encounter: Ziguarz is loud, depraved, fop-pish in a goblin way, pompous, and prone to random violence. He's willing to listen to flattery and accept bribes. The goblin alchemist is insane enough to believe that other evil forces might seek his aid.

If the characters made it this far peacefully by posing as emissaries, Ziguarz can be fooled into listening to them. By using Bluff, Diplomacy, Insight, and Arcana to succeed on a level 4, complexity 4 negotiation, the PCs can pose as emissaries from another evil force. Intimidate checks result in automatic failures during this skill challenge, since Ziguarz considers himself above petty threats. By promising alliances and trade, the characters can pump Ziguarz for information on his plans and even be allowed to leave the Bile Spider Lair in amity.

During negotiations, PCs can discern through Insight that Ziguarz's main weakness is the arrogance formed during his dramatic rise to prominence among the Bile Spiders. This overconfidence has led him to allow his warriors and freed experiments to attract attention before the Bile Spider tribe is ready to face tough opposition. He dismisses suggestions that he should be more careful with an amused wave of his hand. Insight also quickly tells the characters that this is in part because Ziguarz's experiments

Alchemical Juggernaut

Altered Utility

With the sound of breaking clay and a billow of bilious green smoke, you warp, your eyes smoke and then flare with an emerald flame, and your skin glistens with a green sheen.

Daily ♦ **Acid, Arcane, Polymorph**
Minor Action Personal

Effect: You can spend a healing surge and gain regeneration 5. Until the end of the encounter, all of your attacks deal extra acid damage equal to your Constitution modifier (minimum 1).

INSIDIOUS GOBLINS

Goblins are often depicted as pesky rabble, incompetent savages, and comic relief. Sinister goblins, maybe with a little black humor thrown in for spice, seem more fun to me, though. After all, a goblin murders, steal, and even engages in cannibalism if it has a reason to do so. It is devoted to dark spirits and evil gods, whom it serves out of fear. The terror and suffering of others is inconsequential, even desirable, to goblins as groups and individuals. A goblin takes what it can, from wealth to power.

Good examples of this type of goblin can be found in literature, movies, and Dungeons & Dragons. The goblins of *The Hobbit* and the *Lord of the Rings* are great examples of evil and selfish goblin behavior, although one might use them as an example of hobgoblins as well. Although most of the goblins from the 1985 Ridley Scott film *Legend* were just goofy, the goblin Blix is a fine example of how the worst goblins should be—wicked, selfish, and grasping, but cowed by superior force. Monte Cook also introduced truly depraved goblins in the *Goblins of Ao-Rach* in *Book of Vile Darkness*. The Bile Spiders are direct descendants of Monte's degenerate goblins.

have made him unhinged, probably due to a mix of toxic agents he has accidentally ingested and unthinkable transformations he has witnessed.

Combat Encounter: If swords are drawn against Ziguarz, 3rd- or 4th-level PCs find they have a serious fight on their hands.

Mad Goblin Alchemist (Level 6; 1,475 XP): The mad goblin alchemist Ziguarz is not so mad as to go anywhere without his personal coterie of alchemically animated undead servitors. Moreover, Ziguarz has a few tricks of his own. The zombie hulk is the previous Bile Spider chieftain that Ziguarz supplanted, then reanimated and “improved” with his terrible alchemical knowledge.

- ♦ Ziguarz, male *altered* goblin level 6 hexer demagogue (see template, *Dungeon Master's Guide* 178)
- ♦ 1 goblin skullcleaver (level 3 brute)
- ♦ 1 clay scout (homunculus, level 2 lurker)
- ♦ 2 *altered* deathjump spiders (level 4 skirmisher)
- ♦ 1 *altered* zombie hulk (level 8 brute)

When a fight beckons, Ziguarz covers his allies and the PCs with a *vexing cloud*, then uses an action point to use *stinging hex*, *blinding hex*, or *alchemical breath*. The skull cleaver and zombie hulk hurl themselves at the PC party's front line. Deathjump spiders use *death from above* to deliver their deadly attacks.

Ziguarz tries to stay adjacent to his skullcleaver bodyguard, using *lead from the rear* to transfer damage to the skullcleaver. Once Ziguarz is bloodied, his *alchemical juggernaut* power comes into play. The goblin alchemist uses *clever escape* (a demagogue power) to escape when the battle turns sour. He believes that if he is struck down, he will return even stronger than before from one of his hidden alchemical crèches (maybe he's delusional, maybe not—it's up to you). 🌀

About the Authors

Chris Sims started out working for small d20 companies in 2003, then landed a freelance editor gig for Wizards RPG R&D. Wizards finally got annoyed enough by his constant applications to hire him as the *Duel Masters* editor in 2005. From there, Chris wheedled his way into RPG R&D as an editor, and finally became a story designer after masterminding a few choice assassinations. His credits include *Monster Manual V*, *Secrets of Sarlona*, *Rules Compendium*, and the *Eberron Survival Guide* (thanks, Logan!).

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