Return to the Caves of Chaos

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The Caves of Chaos adventure kicks off D&D® Next playtesting for several reasons. For one, it's a classic. Veteran players from across the editions have likely heard of *Keep on the Borderlands*, and we expected many to have played through it at least once. This familiarity, we hoped, would make it easier for our Dungeon Masters (DMs) to prepare and run the playtest adventure, and we also hoped that the familiarity would allow DMs to focus on the mechanics and relationship between the player characters (PCs) and the challenges the adventure presents.

Second, and more importantly, *The Caves of Chaos* marks a return to an adventure style that we have not embraced in years, except in setting products such as *Hammerfast*. Rather than presenting carefully tuned encounters in a linear fashion, we wanted to provide an open-ended adventure that DMs could use to tell their own stories. With *The Caves of Chaos*, DMs can adapt the location for whatever narrative they have in mind.

By now, you have probably run the adventure at least once, and you might be itching for something more. We will present additional adventures and locations for your playtests to explore, but the stories in *The Caves of Chaos* need not be over. A place as big and as dynamic as this sinister valley can play host to multiple expeditions.

If you're interested in running further adventures in the caves, you can use this document to spark ideas and plots that will bring adventurers back to unearth new treasures and defeat deadlier monsters.

Evolving Chaos

Adventurers exploring the Caves of Chaos likely made several forays into the caves. They might have kicked down doors, destroyed the occupants, looted the bodies, and moved on to the next cavern complex. Or the player characters might have made alliances with the denizens, turning the tribes against each other to distract the occupants long enough to accomplish the PCs' larger goals—disrupting the balance, destroying the Shrine of Evil Chaos, rescuing prisoners, and so on.

Each foray into the caves leaves the caves changed. The various tribes and factions adjust to external threat, replacing careless guards with more cautious ones. Unless the PCs wipe out a tribe completely, hunters, gatherers, and raiders return to find that their caves have been plundered and sacked by enemies. Dim-witted humanoids might lash out against rival tribes (such as the orcs and gnolls), while cunning ones might treat with neighbors, inspect tracks, or even use magic to deduce who the interlopers were. Regardless of what action the surviving tribes take, they will be prepared for the PCs when they next visit. Here are some suggestions for you.

Alliances

A tribe that has come under attack and has surviving members will likely forge an alliance with neighboring tribes friendly to them. One or two strikes against the caves can cause bands to unite (the orcs in B and C, for example) or the various goblinoid denizens (the goblins, hobgoblins, and bugbears) to work together. Allied factions post guards outside cave entrances, set traps around the area to alert them to trespassers, and reinforce their lairs with new tribe members recruited from the surrounding countryside.

Enlisting Personalities

When faced with a significant threat, the humanoid tribes enlist aid from the more powerful personalities found in the caves, such as the dark priest, the medusa (if freed), the minotaur, and the ogre. Of the four, the ogre is the most likely creature to join forces with the humanoid tribes, and it tries to become their ruler. The minotaur has little interest in leading the tribes, though it will throw its weight behind the other factions if its own life is threatened. The medusa, on the other hand, will establish herself as queen of the caves the moment she breaks free. She petrifies chieftains and assumes control over the tribes, one at a time, until she takes over the region. Finally, the dark priest aids the humanoid tribes only against a dire threat to his own efforts: building an undead army.

The cult of chaos and evil raises dead humanoids, turning them into skeletons and zombies to reinforce depleted tribes. Eventually, the undead will outnumber the living. At this time, the dark priest intends to use the undead to destroy the remaining living occupants of the area, then animate the dead so that he can begin the march toward the Keep on the Borderland soon.

Veteran Humanoids

A few conflicts with rival tribes and the player characters give the humanoids greater experience. You can expect a few encounters with a tribe to produce veteran warriors. You can improve any humanoid creature the PCs have fought by making the following changes:
- ✦ Increase the creature's hit points by 5.
- ✦ Increase the creature's weapon damage for all weapon attacks by 1.
- ✦ Increase the creature's XP value by 25.

New Arrivals

The Caves of Chaos are a single location in a much larger and more hostile environment. Humanoid tribes infest the surrounding forest and readily move into the caves the PCs have cleared.

To add more of a threat to the area, assume a cave stands empty for 1d6 + 1 days. After this time, 2d4 + 2 humanoids, chosen from the *Bestiary*, scout out the area and 3d10 + 5 more humanoids join them 1d3 days later. When stocking these caves, think about the creatures you chose. What do they want? What relationship will they have with the other denizens? Do they have any natural allies or enemies? Do they have any connections to the previous inhabitants? How do they see civilization's push into the Borderlands? Coming up with answers to these questions will help you portray the new arrivals in a manner that's consistent and fits into *The Caves of Chaos*.

Reinforcements

The surviving tribes reinforce their caves with savage humanoids recruited from the surrounding countryside. You can assume they replace fallen members at a rate of 1d3 every couple of days. Tribes that have taken severe casualties might seek out more powerful allies. Goblins might recruit hobgoblins and bugbears. Kobolds might team up with the orcs. Orcs are certainly going to recruit

ogres to help their cause. If the player characters are 3rd level or higher when they return to the caves, be sure to add more powerful foes, whose total XP is equal to about half the XP for the locations described, chosen from the creatures described in the *Bestiary*.

New Stories

Rather than just let the new monsters settle in caves vacated by previous tribes, you can also introduce new stories to prompt the player characters' return. Revenge is a strong motivator. Surviving humanoid bands might muster a large army to sack the nearby Keep on the Borderland. After the siege, the PCs might return to the caves to confront more powerful and more numerous foes. Alternatively, you can hang plots on the various tribes who survived the PCs' initial forays. The kobolds might steal a dragon egg, thus enraging the dragon, and driving the PCs to find, recover, and return the egg to its mother. The Shrine of Evil Chaos could succeed in raising an undead army and spread darkness across the countryside until the PCs defeat them. Reread the locations and think about how these factions might behave after the balance has been upset, then come up with logical motivations for what might happen next.

In addition to these rough ideas, you can adapt either one of the following plot seeds to expand the adventure.

Plot Seeds for Expanding the Caves

You can add new caves to the Caves of Chaos by creating new passages that lead to chambers deeper within the surrounding hills. Or, you can link the caves to a new map. The caved-in passage at room 51 is a perfect place for expanding the adventure. Perhaps this tunnel leads down deep into the earth, where even more hideous monsters lurk. Orcs, goblins, bugbears, undead, and more could populate the chambers below, giving the adventurers new challenges and access to greater treasure.

Gold Fever

Not long after returning to the Keep on the Borderlands, an expedition of dwarf miners arrive and seeks an audience. They explain that the so-called Caves of Chaos belonged to the dwarves in

ancient times and were mined long ago for gold and precious stones. The dwarves heard about the PCs' success and enlist them to serve as escorts for their journey to the caves and to get their assistance in re-opening the mines in exchange for a percentage of what the dwarves dig up.

Upon returning, the PCs find some of the caves have new inhabitants–likely new orcs. After some desperate fighting, the PCs regain control over the caves. The dwarves explain that all the caves were once mines, but they know of a specific place that their ancestors caved in to prevent their foes from claiming their treasure. If this doesn't spark the PCs' memories, they might need to explore the passages once more until they come to room 51. Along the way, the adventurers might encounter a gelatinous cube, more humanoids, and other creatures of your choosing.

The dwarves, upon finding the caved-in passage, start work. It takes a few days before they reopen the passage. The dwarves descend, and the first few days go well: they find silver, gold, and a few gemstones. After that, though, strange things start happening. Miners go missing. Weird odors waft up from below and screams echo through the tunnels. Investigations into the mines take the PCs to a crypt the dwarves have opened accidentally. Wights and other undead spill out from the shadows to feast on the living PCs, leading to a desperate battle that could see the PCs and the dwarves retreating back to the surface until they can destroy the evil they have awoken.

While contending with the undead, the PCs have to deal with humanoids and other monsters moving into the Caves of Chaos to settle in vacated passages. Orcs, trolls, ogres, and worse could arrive singly or in small groups to further harry the PCs.

The dwarves won't leave until they first recover 1,000 gp worth of gold ore and then not until they can seal the passage once more lest their hated enemies get their hands on the gold. The entire enterprise takes about a week, so the PCs will have their hands full fighting monsters and protecting the dwarves until these stubborn miners get enough gold to slake their thirst for treasure.

Dire Consequences

As described earlier, new monsters move in to replace those slain by the adventurers. Surviving tribes spread out, recruit new members, and cause mischief in the surrounding lands. Even if the PCs wipe out all the inhabitants here, a sinister darkness stirs and awakens to cast its shadow across the countryside.

The dark cultists who built and maintained the Shrine of Evil Chaos believed that the site was perfect for their unholy temple based on visions from their foul, unspeakable master. What they did not know was that the temple sat on top of a rent between the Material Plane and the Negative Energy Plane. The dark power leaking into the world fueled the dark magic the cultists used to animate and control their undead servants.

Defeating the cultists and sundering the altar halted their wicked designs, but it did nothing to stop the seepage from spreading out and polluting the other caves. The adventurers' success against the other humanoid tribes gives this foul energy plenty of fodder for animation, and over the next week or so, the dead rise up, hungry for living flesh.

The zombies attack the other tribes, killing some and causing their victims to rise up as undead. These creatures then spread out into the surrounding countryside, attacking caravans, farmsteads, and anything they can catch. Survivors flee for the Keep on the Borderlands, where they report attacks by indefatigable and terrifying goblins, gnolls, and the like. These survivors state that they do not believe these creatures can be killed because the monsters have horrific wounds and do not respond to pain. So once more the Lord of the Keep dispatches the adventurers to deal with the threat.

You can run this adventure almost as written by simply replacing many of the living creatures with zombies. Small and Medium zombies more or less fight with the same abilities. The zombies spread out across the valley, so the PCs have to carve a path through the undead to find the source that is animating dead. You can also keep some tribes who survived the PCs' initial attack alive to give the PCs allies against this new threat.

The adventure ends when the PCs return to the Evil Chapel (room 55) and consecrate it (using the spell consecrate) to a god of law and good. Although the spell lasts for only 8 hours, it is long enough to repel the negative energy and allow the fissure to the other plane to heal itself.

You can use the following statistics to reflect Large zombies of ogres, trolls, and so on.

Zombie Hulk

Neutral Large animate (undead)
Initiative -1
AC 12
HP 6d8 + 12 (39)
Str 14 (+2)   **Dex** 8 (-1)   **Con** 15 (+2)
Int –   **Wis** 10 (+0)   **Cha** 1 (-5)
Space/Reach 5 feet/5 feet
Speed 20 feet (can't hustle)
Melee Attack slam +5 melee (1d8 + 2 bludgeoning)
Special Traits darkvision 60 feet; resistant to bludgeoning damage; immune to disease, necrotic damage, paralysis, poison, and sleep; can't be charmed or frightened
XP 250

Zombie Plague

For a little more tension, you could make some or all the zombies carriers of the zombie plague. Replace the slam attack with a bite. The attack deals the same damage, but the type changes from bludgeoning to piercing. In addition, a living creature bitten by a zombie must immediately make a DC 12 Constitution saving throw. On a failed saving throw, the target is infected with the plague.

   While infected, a creature regains half the number of hit points through natural healing (magical healing is not affected). Each hour, the creature must succeed on another Constitution saving throw. If the creature succeeds on three saving throws, he or she recovers. If the creature fails three saving throws, he or she dies and rises 1d4 hours later as a zombie unless the corpse is decapitated or burned.

   A creature that dies while infected also rises as a zombie 1d4 hours after death, unless its corpse is decapitated or burned.