



a DOZEN STRANGE ENCOUNTERS

BY PHILIP REED

Not all encounters must be the typical “you meet a wizard” or “there are seven goblins” events that we’ve seen played time and time again over the decades. At times, it is up to you, the gamemaster, to remind the players that their characters are adventuring in a world of make believe, fairy tales, and the fantastic. It is for those times that I have created **A Dozen Strange Encounters** . . . some of which may be too strange for even your campaign world.

As with other entries in this series, I have designed each encounter so that it fills a single page. This makes it easier for you to print only the specific encounter that you need for your next game session.

Over the years I have written RPG supplements, I have been driven by the words of David “Zeb” Cook from his foreword to the 2nd edition **Dungeon Master’s Guide**.

“Add, create, expand, and extrapolate. Don’t just let the game sit there, and don’t become a rules lawyer worrying about each piddly detail. If you can’t find the answer, MAKE IT UP! And whatever you do, don’t fall into the trap of believing these rules are complete. They are not. You cannot sit back and let the rule book do everything for you. Take the time and effort to become not just a good DM, but a brilliant one.”

Even today, decades after I first read that paragraph, I try to never allow the game rules to restrict my imagination. I hope that you do the same and go wild.

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anatomy of an encounter

1. Each encounter includes a single illustration to help set the mood.
2. A title, to help set the mood.
3. An opening block of text that may be used as read aloud text when using the encounter during your game session. Or, if you prefer, text that you will rework to better suit your personal style.
4. The encounter description, which is freeform and very open to interpretation. My goal with each and every encounter described within these pages is to provide you, the GM, with a fanciful and unusual encounter to toss at the party when you wish to shake up their world. Most of these encounters are useful only a single time and should not be repeated.



2a STRANGE PROTECTOR

Despite the gigantic size of the creature, you and your friends feel as if you are safe under the gaze of the monster. Its glowing eyes stare down on you as it clicks its powerful legs against the forest floor. An eerie glow comes from somewhere within the beast.

The party encounters a giant spider, a monstrous creature that radiates magical power. Before they can move to attack the monster, each of them feels a sudden sense of peace and calm and then the spider “speaks,” its words echoing in their minds even as the world around them darkens and grows silent.

“I mean you no harm. I am Krocuto, protector of these woods, and your promise to pass without disrupting or damaging the trees and creatures of this forest are all that I ask of you. Do you swear to walk through this forest and leave all untouched and unharmed?”

Krocuto is an ancient guardian, a magical construct that was brought into existence centuries ago when the woods were young. Created by the ancient elves of the forest, Krocuto has lived within these woods for years, doing all that it can to protect the land and guard against those who would wish to kill the forest.

If they question the spider’s history and motive, Krocuto tells the party that his place is as a defender and protector and he would give his life to save even one tree or one deer that calls the forest home.

If the party agrees to his wishes, Krocuto provides them with a mental map – projected by magic into each of their minds – of the path through the forest that will allow them to get through the woods in half the time it would take without the spider’s assistance. This magical map fades from their memory within hours of leaving the forest.

While in the woods, so long as they do not damage the forest and its creatures, the party will be completely safe from any natural attacks. Unnatural attacks, though, such as from bandits or monstrous humanoids, are still very much a possibility when exploring the woods.

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USING THE ENCOUNTERS

The important thing to remember about all of the encounters that follow is that they are not fleshed out, complete adventure locations and events. Every single encounter includes just enough information to trigger your own imagination; it is my wish that as you read through all these encounters, you find yourself overwhelmed with ideas of your own. Each one is a snapshot stolen from my own imagination . . . and now we need for you to take these fragments and transform them into scenes that your players will never forget.

For additional inspiration when taking the encounter ideas that follow and making them your own, I highly recommend grabbing a scrap of paper or a journal and writing down every idea that comes to mind as you read the words I’ve provided.

Then, once you’ve got all of your thoughts in place, grab a 3 x 5 index card – or open a note file on your phone or tablet – and string concepts together one piece at a time to form a sequence of events that take my ideas and, with work, make them your own.

For example, in the encounter shown above, I’ve presented a magical spider that is protecting a forest. While reading through the encounter, you may ask “are there other protectors?” If the answer is yes, are they also spiders? If not, what other form of magical construct may have been created to guard *this* forest from harm? And, for that matter, why is this forest being protected? What did the elves wish to truly guard when they placed the spider – and perhaps other defenders – in the forest? Is there a great artifact hidden in the forest?

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a swordsman in need

He stands before you, sword at the ready and eyes as steady as his sword arm. The man peers at you from behind his cascading hair, a thin smile forming as he recognizes you and your friends as potential allies against the forces of evil.

It isn't all that uncommon to meet someone else when traveling between towns. The land is filled with travelers – merchants and missionaries, adventurers and adversaries, any one of which could be in the same area as the party at any time – and a random encounter with others is a staple experience of fantasy RPGs.

It is during one such chance meeting that the party encounters Taeral Leoeth, an elven warrior with a purpose. Upon their meeting, Leoeth asks the player characters for their assistance in confronting a great evil that has murdered his companions and stolen their possessions.

"I am in need of your assistance, my friends, to right a terrible wrong and to stop evil from continuing its destruction of those of our chosen profession. My friends have gone, murdered by the villain, and I am unable to deliver the deserved justice alone. If you join me, and I believe that you will, I swear to you that whatsoever treasures we may find will be yours. I wish only to see the monsters put to death as punishment for their attacks on me and my companions."

If they choose to join Leoeth in his pursuit of justice, the elven swordsman thanks them and tells the tale.

"Last night, as we were making our camp and preparing to rest, we were assaulted by a foul mage and his trio of companions: powerful flesh golems who moved swiftly and obeyed each of the mage's commands. I only escaped death because I was felled by one of the brute's punches; they must have thought I were dead for when I woke, much of our gear was gone and my friends were all dead. I buried them earlier today, and now I wish to track these servants of evil and stop them."

A ranger or accomplished woodsman can track the mage and his flesh golem allies easily enough; the golems aren't exactly known for their subtlety and stealth. The group have killed others since last night – a farmer and his wife, a few unsuspecting goblins – and the party eventually tracks them to a cabin deep in the woods. The mage and the golems are recovering from their night and day of brutal murderous thieving.



WORLDS COLLIDE

One moment, the sky is a calm blue and as average as any day can be. The next instant, clouds swarm as a new world appears above your heads, unbelievably close and filling far too much of the sky. This is a new and unexpected development.

Either because of the conscious action of a spellcaster or an accident of nature, the world's understanding of reality is completely upturned when another planet suddenly appears in the once-worldless sky. Regardless of what caused the strange event, you can be certain that the appearance of a new world will have an impact on everyone on both worlds.

A Wizard's Evil Magic

The other planet was summoned by the casting of a long-forgotten spell that produces a mirror of the spell's target. Typically, the spell cannot affect anything larger than a man, but this time around the spell was amplified by an artifact that the wizard found several years ago. A book, one filled with arcane secrets, gave the wizard the guidance and instruction necessary to produce a mirror copy of the party's own world.

A Planar Disaster

The destruction of a planar gate on another world tore the cosmos, instantly drawing the once-connected worlds so close together that dragons and other great winged beasts may now fly between the two planets. The worlds are so close together that they disrupt the weather and tides of both planets; nothing is as it once was.

What Happens Next?

Anything the gamemaster wishes, of course! Perhaps the adventurers are contacted by a secret cabal who wishes to hire the group to break the connection between the worlds. If they can read a provided scroll while deep within a specific volcano on their world, the other planet may be transported back to its original place in the cosmos.



THE CITY FROM ANOTHER WORLD

Far from the civilized lands, in the deepest wastelands where naught but monsters are known to roam, you spot a gleaming city in the distance. The sky shimmers with magical energy around the city, leaving little doubt that you have entered another world.

As a storyteller and gamemaster, I am saddened to admit that it took me several years to recognize the promise and wonder of planar adventuring. My mind was so wrapped up in the tropes and trappings of dungeon adventuring that it took me decades to understand that planar adventures allowed for strange, fun events.

With this encounter, the party discovers a bright and pristine city that does not belong. Regardless of their memories and maps, a new city now stands where there was once nothing but unsettled wilderness. What manner of magic could have crafted an entire city where once there stood nothing of value? It is possible that the city is an illusion, yes, but it is more entertaining for all if a planar event brought this city from another world.

Temporary Situation

The connection between worlds remains open only for a short time, giving the party a chance to explore the city . . . and the risk of being forever trapped in a new world. They have 1d4+1 hours to visit the city before the planar rift closes and the city returns to its world.

Permanent Visitor

The city is now forever a part of their world, meaning that the adventurers are the first from their existence to encounter whoever lives within this city from another realm. Do they seek to claim the title of ambassador, getting involved in the politics of the land, or do they instead gain as much knowledge and wealth from the city as possible before moving on to the next adventure?



THE UNEXPECTED GATE

While traveling between towns, you and your companions see a strange glow off the road, somewhere in the forest. Investigating, you soon discover a rocky, unnatural clearing where a giant gate hovers silently in place, calling you to adventure.

Planar gates are strange things. They may be natural, arcane connections between worlds that were created during the earliest days of the cosmos, or they may be constructs brought into existence by powerful mages who devote years of life to building a particular gate. Regardless of their origin, planar gates are special and the location – and secrets of operating – such a gate are a treasure all their own. Who knows what adventure and opportunity awaits on the gate's other side.

There is a third type of gate, a naturally occurring scident that forms when great magic comes into conflict. At a brutal, devastating battle in which high-level spells and powerful magic items were used, a spark of arcane energy suddenly ignited, unleashing a fury unlike any the party has witnessed before. It is possible the event inflicts damage to the battle's survivors, bolts of lightning arcing out from a single location.

When the strange storm of magical energies plays out, there stands a gateway between worlds. This newly-formed gate is impossible to see through; peering into the gate, all the party sees is a swirling mass of color that refuses to reveal what lies on the opposite side.

Stepping blindly through any planar gate, let alone one that was borne out of conflict right before their eyes, is a risky undertaking that few are willing to commit to without preparing some manner of safeguards.

Are the adventurers brave souls who will willingly go from one fight to the unknown, or will they make note of the new gate and go about their business, choosing to leave the unknown alone? Regardless of their decision, the formation of the gate unlocks a new pathway in your campaign world and someone – either PC or NPC – is likely to take advantage of the opportunity.



CASTLE SHADOWSTRIKE

Sharp, jagged thorns and vines grow together into a thick mass, slowing your journey as the landscape twists and turns from the green life of the forest to a dark, dying unlife that is far too evil to be natural. In the distance, a castle awaits you and your friends, the spires as dark and menacing as the terrain that surrounds it.

The ancestral fortress of Staprix Ehibin, accomplished spellcaster and warrior, Castle Shadowstrike is a place of despair and evil, a fortress unlike any other in the land. Ehibin's people, the long-deceased Eaters of the Arcane, constructed the castle centuries ago through both magic and the work of prisoners; it is unknown how many hundreds of unfortunate prisoners and slaves were buried beneath the castle during its construction.

It is unlikely that the adventurers simply stumble across the castle, though that is a possibility if the GM is feeling particularly cruel. In such a case, they find what appears to be an crumbling and destroyed dungeon complex that is populated by slimes, insects, and minor dungeon beasts. Ehibin is not one to confront intruders immediately, instead hiding in a tower and watching the action by means of magical items and spells. He only engages with the adventurers if they enter his private tower or he feels they are a threat to his private studies.

In Search of a Book

Rather than a "random" encounter, it is more likely that the adventurers are searching for Castle Shadowstrike. They have been hired by a competitor of Ehibin to infiltrate the castle and claim one of the wizard's spellbooks. Their patron, one Khalid Felix, is also an arcane spellcaster and he seeks an understanding of one of Ehibin's more powerful, stranger spells.

Felix offers each member of the party 10 gold in advance for the journey, plus an additional 50 gold to each if they return a specific book to him. The book in question is small, roughly two hands wide and three hands tall, and will be recognized by the ornate and decorative bat that is sculpted into the book's hard covers.

Of course, Ehibin does not wish to lose his spellbook, so he will mount a defense when his home is attacked. The adventure will not be an easy one for the players.



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mage's sanctuary

Lightning flashes, blue sparks igniting in rapid succession and illuminating the sky in a strange, magical glow. A tall, menacing tower is at the center of the electrical storm, the bolts seeming to originate from the uppermost windows of the structure.

The mage who once called this tower home, Adelis Vupan, died many years ago, leaving behind a home that is well-protected and difficult for strangers to explore without fear of death. When the party stumbles onto the tower, likely in an open field far from any towns or other civilized settlements, the first thing they notice is that lightning constantly lashes out from the uppermost floors of the tower; the land immediately surrounding the tower is blacked, singed by the magical lightning blasts that show no signs of stopping.

If they dare approach the tower, there is a slight chance every round that they are within a few hundred feet of the tower that a member of the party will be struck by lightning. If they survive the bolts, they find that the only door at ground level is locked; it will take an expert at picking locks to get inside this tower.

What is Inside?

The tower may be a traditional dungeon, allowing the party to explore floor after floor as they combat whatever creatures were left in the tower before the wizard's death. Or, possibly, the tower is still an active workplace; Vupan only faked death long ago so that she would be left in peace to continue her wizardly studies.

If Adelis Vupan still lives, she will not appreciate the adventurers entering her tower uninvited. Vupan is a powerful mage, easily capable of wiping out the party if she so wishes, but she instead may choose to enlist their aid in tracking down supplies she needs to continue her wizardly pursuits. If they bring her the supplies she needs, and promise to keep her secret, she pays them well and thanks them for their assistance.

meteor strike



The sky turns bright as fiery rocks fall from the heavens, smashing and shattering the landscape. Everywhere around you, fires start and spread, the flames threatening to kill anything that survives the terrible destruction of the cosmic rain of stone.

Best set at night, a meteor strike can range in size from a single falling object to a storm of dozens of meteors dropping from the sky and making the area immediately around the player characters a hazard for so long as the cosmic stones continue to drop.

A Single Meteor

Such an object can be one of any number of things. A few possibilities include:

- Cosmic stone, consisting mostly of an iron that comes from far beyond this world. It may prove valuable to weaponsmiths who use the cosmic iron to craft powerful swords.
- A gemstone, as large as a man's head and very, very valuable. Perhaps it broke free from a larger mass that is orbiting the world; if so, anyone who can claim that orbital object will be insanely wealthy.
- A recognizable object, such as a chest or a suit of armor. The meteor is a magic item that has fallen from the heavens.
- The corpse of an unrecognizable creature from deep space. The beast's body will be of interest to scholars and mages alike; it is possible that parts of the body may be used as arcane spell components by some mages.

A Meteor Shower

A number of items, most often many instances of the same sort of thing. These burning, falling objects are usually rocky chunks that cause damage; a large meteor could completely destroy a home or castle if it strikes with enough impact.

During the Fall

If it is a single object, the party is likely to see the meteor strike somewhere in the distance; the item is of no threat at all.

On the other hand, a meteor shower can be dangerous. If the meteors strike the area the adventurers are in, they may have to dodge the cosmic objects; a single meteor striking a PC could lead to death.

After the Fall

Regardless of what fell from the sky, it will be valuable to someone. And the party will not be the only ones who witnessed the event. Is it a race to claim whatever treasure has fallen from the stars? Will the adventurers find the meteor first, or will they have to fight others to capture the item . . . and then sell it in the nearest city?



ACCURSED SUMMONING

You hear chanting in the distance, an ancient arcane tongue calling forth something that is best unknown. Rushing to witness the spectacle, you and your friends reach the forest clearing just in time to see a man vanish in a glow of light as tentacles rip through the sky, a cosmic entity invading your world for doubtlessly nefarious reasons.

The party is too late! The chanting they've heard – amplified by unspeakable magic so that the wicked words echoed across the forest, pushing the woodland creatures into hiding – comes to close seconds before they are able to take action.

In the sky overhead, a dark mass of tentacles forms, crossing into the world from some other plane of existence. The beast flings its tentacles outward, the action shredding branches and leaves from the tallest trees of the forest.

Just what is happening? Here are a few ideas.

An Unstoppable God

The ritual summoned an evil god and signals the end of everything that the party knows and loves.

A Gash Between Worlds

The unidentified and vanished chanter opened a portal between this world and another, allowing this horrific monster access to the party's world. The monster is a mindless, otherworldly beast only seeking to murder as many lives as possible. It is large, yes, but it can be harmed by traditional weapons and by magical attacks.

A Horrific Illusion

Everything – the beast in the sky, the man who summoned the creature, even the summoning itself – is an illusion. An arcane spellcaster is using the illusion as cover to mask another, unrelated action. By bringing the illusion into existence on the outskirts of a small town or a village, the spellcaster distracts the town's inhabitants . . . as his friends steal some unknown item.



THE ARCAINE FIRESTORM

What at first looks as if dawn is coming from a strange direction, and at the wrong time, soon shows itself as a raging firestorm; the horizon is transformed into a line of flames. Within moments, the fire grows closer until the heat has you and your friends sweating as if it were noon on the hottest day of summer. What evil is this?

One of the most destructive encounters described within these pages, the arcane firestorm is a wave of magic that sweeps over the world, setting much of the planet on fire and killing millions. This is an apocalyptic event, one best reserved for either the closing of a campaign or the birth of a new world; perhaps you use this as less of an encounter and more of a back story, in which case you may state that the arcane firestorm wiped out all life on the world.

Survivors Rebuild

Under this scenario, the adventurers are some of the only survivors after the apocalypse. Perhaps they were underground, exploring a dungeon, when the event roared across the world and wiped out most of the life. It is now up to the party, along with whatever other survivors that they may find, to rebuild the world. But if they survived, what else beneath the surface still lives?

A Magical Assault

The arcane firestorm was created by a cabal of wicked wizards who seek to murder life and claim whatever treasures remain as their own. Can the adventurers find these wizards and stop them before they summon a second firestorm and attack another region?

A Limited Event

Rather than a global disaster, the arcane firestorm is limited to one region of the planet. If the party is in the area of effect during the accident, they may hide within the caves and caverns of a nearby dungeon, or maybe they wait out the event in the sewers of a large city. Regardless, when they emerge from hiding they find that much of their surroundings are burned beyond recognition and all surface life has been eradicated. There may be treasures to discover, but most objects on the surface world will have been erased by the magical destruction.



an UNREACHABLE castle

For three days now, as you march across the land, you've seen the castle in the distance. It appears on none of your maps, and your knowledge of the area tells you nothing of the existence of a castle. What manner of sorcery brings forth this mirage?

This ghostly, unusual castle constantly lies just out of reach of the party. Regardless of their speed or direction, the castle remains at a consistent and constant distance from them, as if the castle were moving at a rate that would ensure that they can never reach it.

Those who make a successful Arcane Knowledge or Bardic Lore check recognize the event as an ill omen, a sign from unknown powers that something evil is coming. Even if the party is unsure of what is happening, some of the group have a bad feeling about the situation and are on guard against the unknown.

The castle remains within sight for 1d4+2 days, visible during the day as a shimmering fortress that seems to change shape and appearance with the intensity of the winds. At night, all they can see are the castle's lights and, at times, the dark form of the walls and towers of the ghostly object.

For as long as the castle persists, the party suffers from a cursed luck that makes their lives more difficult. The exact manner of the curse is left to the imagination of the gamemaster, though here are a few ideas:

- All attack and damage rolls made by the adventurers suffer a -1 penalty.
- There is a 10% chance that any arcane or divine spells cast by the party fail to take effect; the spells fizzle and fade when cast.
- The adventurers act as magnets – for so long as they can see the castle, the evil creatures of the immediate area drawn to the party. Double the number of random encounters the party must deal with.
- The gear carried by the group wears and breaks without warning. Arrows shatter. Swords snap. Shields split in two. If something can break it seems as if it will, though the party knows not why.



DO NOT ENTER

Your march across the desert is interrupted when you spot an arch made of trees that have intertwined. The archway hums with power as lightning arcs and lances outward, striking the ground near the unnatural structure.

The arcanoroot trees of the deep desert are a natural, if bizarre, growth that are prized in the construction of weapons. The trees' sap is a magical elixir that makes the arcanoroot wood tougher than that of many other hardwoods and, additionally, bestows a magical bonus to attacks made with weapons crafted from the tree.

In rare instances, two or more of the trees grow near each other and, over time, unseen magical forces bind the closest trees as they grow taller and taller, until two or more of the trees form a natural arch. When this happens, there is a small chance that the melding of the arcanoroot trees will spontaneously create a planar gate that is capable of allowing passage from this world to the demiplane of Bark. Any who elect to use the arcanoroot gate to enter the demiplane of Bark will have to find their own way back to this world; not a single such arch has ever served as a two-way gate between worlds.

If the adventurers stumble across such a gate while traveling the desert, a successful Arcane Knowledge or Bardic Lore check means that they are aware of the natural phenomenon, including the fact that the wood is valuable. How they choose to use this information is left to the players to decide; the adventurous will use the gate while those who value gold will likely collect some of the wood to sell to a weaponsmith or craftsman.

Of course, it may be that the party is searching for arcanoroot trees when they find the gateway. A skilled woodworker or weaponsmith may have gained knowledge of the rough location of a copse of such trees in the desert and offered to pay the adventurers to recover some of the wood. Cutting the trees with traditional tools is impossible; only magic blades may cut the tree. Collecting fallen limbs is the easiest way to gather the magical wood.