

Shades of Gray

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Introduction

"Certain areas or sometimes the whole body would be uncannily shriveled or compressed, and atrocious collapses or disintegrations were common. In the last stages – and death was always the result – there would be a gray-ing and turning brittle..."

-H.P. Lovecraft: *The Colour Out of Space*

Adventure Background

A cabal of mages, led by the Witch King of Acregor, seeks to expand its sphere of influence and power. Not having the military resources to do so openly through conquest, the mages hatch a much more insidious scheme. Through negotiations with a kingdom of evil deep gnomes, they acquire what they believe is a virulent plague from the subterranean world that they call the Gray Death. The cabal unleashes the plague to weaken the people of the Plains of Mayfurrow, where it slowly begins to spread, destroying village after village. The Gray Death can only be stopped by finding and assembling the pieces of the long-lost ancient artifact, the *Rainbow Harp*, to once again play

the ancient magical Song of Life and drive the evil from the land.

A History of the Rainbow Harp

In the first days, an evil came into the world from another plane and ravaged it. This evil entity consumed the vital spirit of life and left behind a cold gray husk neither dead nor alive. This gray predator spread across the land threatening all who dwelled there. Aelbwyyn, the First One, Lord of the Skies and Malunas, Lady of the Ever-changing Face, Mistress of the Moon (see Appendix Four: New Deities for more information on this pair) wept and sang a song of sorrow for their creation.

Their firstborn, the Ontogshorsai, or people of the forest (see Appendix Two: New Monsters for more details), took up this song as a celebration of life. In doing so they imbued the song with powerful enchantments. The Ontogshorsai noticed that the song kept the evil at bay, but they were not strong enough to take this Song of Life to the source of evil by themselves.

New Disease: The Gray Death

This disease leaves those who are infected as mindless plague ghouls whose flesh has faded to a dull gray in color. However, the deep gnomes have misled the cabal. What they gave to the cabal was not a plague in the normal sense, but a hideous parasite summoned from Hades.

The Gray Death

Infection: Injury or Inhaled (see description)

DC 12

Incubation: 1-3 hours

Damage: 1 pt./hour Constitution and 1d4/day Wisdom

Description: The Gray Death is a parasitic infection from Hades. It slowly saps its victims of will and fortitude until they die and rise again as plague ghouls: undead carriers of the disease. If a plague ghoule bites a living creature, the creature must make a DC 12 Fortitude save or become infected. When a plague ghoule's body is killed/destroyed it disintegrates into a gray mist, which dissipates in one round. Anyone within five feet of the ghoule when it dies has a chance of inhaling the mist and becoming infected; they must also make a DC 12 Fortitude save to avoid becoming infected. Once infected, incubation takes 1-3 hours. When the Gray Death

takes effect, victims will suffer one point of Constitution damage every hour and 1d4 points of Wisdom damage each day until the Gray Death is cured or the victim succumbs to the disease. Anyone whose Constitution reaches 0 will die. One day later such victims rise again as plague ghouls. A victim whose Wisdom reaches 0 first will have no will and no way to resist the progression of the disease.

Victims of the Gray Death slowly have their hair and skin turn gray in color. This effect begins almost immediately upon infection. To cure the Gray Death, a *bleed* spell must be cast on the victim before *remove disease* is cast. This will allow the victim to get a second Fortitude save to overcome the infection. If the victim is cured, Constitution and Wisdom damage will heal normally. If the victim fails the second save, there is no hope. All who die from the Gray Death will rise again as plague ghouls one day later, unless the body is completely destroyed before then. A *bleed* spell cast upon the corpse will delay the reanimation for one day, this can be done indefinitely i.e. *bleed* can be cast on the corpse 1/day to prevent the victim from rising as a ghoule. Anyone who dies from the plague who is *raised*, *resurrected*, or *reincarnated*, will still be infected, but is allowed another save. *True resurrection* allows a +4 circumstance bonus on that save. Other means of resuscitation grant a +2 circumstance bonus.

The situation was desperate, and the Ontogshorsai decided to put aside their rivalries and seek aid from the other children of the gods. They called a meeting of all the first races who came together to stem evil's tide.

The children of Barator, the Crafter and Master of the Forge (see Appendix Four: New Domains and Deities) labored long and hard to create an instrument to play this song and strengthen its magic. The dwarves forged a near-indestructible harp of mithril, adamantine, and gold, while the gnomes crafted five chromatic strings for the heart of the harp and its source of magic. Each of the strings was a single color of the rainbow (green, yellow, red, blue, and violet) and carried a powerful dweomer. The Ontogshorsai crafted the completed harp from these pieces.

Humans were given the most arduous task – to carry forth the harp and play the song to the very source of the evil that plagued the land and end its threat.

First among the humans was Riordan, the Singer of Tales. His mastery of song and strength of valor were second to none. Three other humans gathered round Riordan and his cause. The mage Acregor was powerful, quick-tempered, and ambitious. His lust for life gave him the will to see this quest through to its end. Serelay, the beautiful and mysterious monk, balanced Acregor's impetuosity with her steady presence and deep insight into the ways of the world. Guarding over them all was the stalwart Merrill, brave and true. Fueled by his love for Serelay, which was doomed to be perpetually unfulfilled because of her vows, he swore to see all of his companions through safe and sound.

Together they would seek to drive the evil from the land, but the task would not be easy. As a final gift, Aelbwynn, Malunas, and Barator sent forth with them an agent of celestial harmony, Nerith the Coatl, to serve as a guide and bring them to the source of the evil. After several arduous adventures and harrowing escapes, they arrived and Riordan sang the Song of Life to drive evil from the land. In so doing, Riordan was touched by the song and granted immortality. The other companions too were given the gift of extraordinary life spans, but were not immortal.

Nerith warned that this was but one victory in an eternal struggle to stem evil's tide. As a reminder for the need for vigilance, Riordan removed the five chromatic strings from the harp and gave one to each companion. Each took the string with them as they departed and headed their separate ways.

Nerith took the green string for safekeeping and chose to stay in the mortal realm, eventually settling on a small tropical island; legends of his presence echo in its name, the Isle of the Blessed Serpent. Over the centuries, Nerith's efforts spawned a race of serpent

men who dwelled upon the isle. In the ensuing centuries, these Inphidians were lured into the worship of Set, captured their former benefactor and took the string into their possession.

Serelay took the yellow string and established a monastery for her order outside the growing city of Northgate. The monastery flourished under her guidance as she lived to the ripe old age of 211. Other abbots and abbesses guided the monastery for centuries, until one of their own betrayed them, and sacrificed the order to the cult of Orcus, Lord of the Undead. The cult now operates a secret Temple of the Night out of the ruins of the monastery and the sewers of nearby Northgate. The cult now has possession of the yellow string.

Merrill took possession of the red string. This brave warrior established a stronghold on the coastal plains, upriver from Northgate. Sitting at the mouth of the delta, this site became an important trading port, and the coastal city of Varagost grew around Merrill's stronghold. Merrill himself died within months of Serelay's passing. The city continued to flourish for about a century afterwards, but it was destroyed in the elemental fury of a freak storm, and the coastal plains were flooded. The ruins of Varagost now lay in the heart of a great swamp along the coast. Somewhere in those ruins lies the red string.

The mage Acregor took the violet string into his keeping. He traveled north into the mountains, and finding a defensible position near a narrow pass, he established a stronghold. This tower became the heart of a small nation that bore his name. Though long lived, Acregor envied Riordan's immortality. As Acregor's death approached, he became bitter and fearful. He announced the succession of his son to the throne of Acregor and retired to his tower to pursue arcane research. Coming across a foul ritual, Acregor found the answer to his impending death; choosing instead to embrace undeath, he became a lich. His foul corrupting influence twisted his son, and Acregor became the true power behind the throne of the Witch King. He holds the violet string, and fears the power of the harp, knowing that it can destroy what he has become and forcing him into death's embrace. He has striven for centuries to ensure that the harp can never be reassembled.

Riordan kept the blue string, along with the harp itself. He traveled back to the kingdom of the dwarves and presented to them the harp as a gift and a reminder of the need for unity and vigilance. He traveled north through the mountains to the great enclave of the gnomes, and presented to them the blue string that they had crafted as a similar reminder.

The harp remains to this day in the dwarven hall at Abad Durahai, but the blue string was lost centuries later when the gnomish enclave fell to Calilas the Ice Queen, a powerful white dragon who took the string