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UNDEAD LORE

The lot of man—to suffer and to die.

—Alexander Pope

BEINGS OF fear and horror, undead are animate reminders of death's inevitability. Lurking, lurching, and always hungry, undead are drawn to the heat of the living. Liches, skeletons, zombies, and even more fearsome shambling monstrosities shudder with ungainly grace after meals of blood and souls. And once a vampire has drained the life of a victim, it exhibits the most horrifying ability of all: The shell of its victim animates, turning into another of the walking dead.

Indeed, undeath can be visited upon anyone, no matter his or her moral standing in life. A kindly servant killed by a vampire lord could rise anew as a ravenous monster that considers her former friends as nothing more than food. Does a flicker of her personality still lurk somewhere beneath that all-consuming blood thirst? Some say no, that energy originating from the Shadowfell animates the body without any hint of its owner's soul or spirit. But for some kinds of undead, the original spirit might be present within the corpse, thereby posing difficult questions about life, death, and the afterlife.

Despite their unholy hunger, undead can remain animate for centuries on end, even if locked away from all light or sustenance. In this fashion, undead remain threats long after living guardians and mundane traps in ancient citadels molder to nothing. Undead are touched with shadow, and necromantic magic sustains them. Some have walked the world for millennia.

This chapter covers the following topics:

- ◆ **Origins:** How undead are created, from those who choose their fate voluntarily to unwilling victims.
- ◆ **Physiology:** A detailed study of the creatures' diet, propagation, and senses.
- ◆ **Outlook and Psychology:** How the undead see the world.
- ◆ **Society:** Even though most undead are not social creatures as we normally understand the word, they do have tendencies that apply to interaction between themselves and with each other.
- ◆ **The Shadowfell:** The connections between the undead, the Shadowfell, and the Raven Queen.

AMELIA STONER





Sample file

ORIGINS

Theories abound regarding the origin and creation of undead, from the hushed tales told by simple peasants to the exotic research performed by sages and wizards. None agree, and only one fact is certain: Undead exist in the world and have since time immemorial. Their numbers are vast, and their motivations are often an enigma.

The origin of undead can be traced back to a time eons ago, when the primordials thrived before the first foundations of the world were even a rumor. Immortal in the sense that they knew no age and withstood any hurt, these were beings of manifest entropy. They coveted mastery over all the cosmos.

The cosmos was young in this age, and the detritus remaining from its formation still swirled in the void. From this cast-off stuff of the universe's emergence into being, the world coalesced (with the primordials' aid), and with it, echoes of the world. One of these echoes was bright and fey; the other was darker and ominous, though both thrummed with strange and unexpected power. The primordials witnessed and helped birth the Feywild and the Shadowfell.

Then the gods made their presence known, both through indirect influence and purposeful design. The gods, too, wished to make their claim on creation. Their interference enraged the primordials, and soon the two forces of creation were at war.

In these earliest days, souls shorn of their bodies simply departed the cosmos, taken to a place beyond all reckoning. When the primordials first crafted the world, they had little regard for the fate of souls. But some among them recognized soul power as a potent force, and they hungered for it. These entities stopped up the passage of souls. With nowhere to go, many souls were either consumed by primordials that had a taste for such spiritual

fare, or, finding no further road or final purpose, sputtered out and dissipated, gone forever. Others persisted, becoming undead.

The gods also recognized the potential of souls, and one of their own established himself as the guardian of a new realm of death. There souls would gather after death, either having been chosen to join the gods in their dominions or passing on, as before, to an ultimate unknown fate. In this way Nerull—and later his successor, the Raven Queen—became the guardian of the dead.

POWERS OF DEATH

All deities have some influence over death and dying when their worshipers are involved, but two gods—and one demon lord—have a specific interest in undeath.

The Raven Queen controls death and destiny and therefore has some authority over undeath, though like so much else about her, her purpose in allowing some to linger while others pass on is inscrutable. Her attention to the undead is most noticeable when she decides to forcibly end the existence of a souled undead that she believes has cheated fate.

Vecna, the god of magic, necromancy, and secrets, pursued undeath as part of his rise to godhood. To him, undeath is one of many tools that can be employed in the unending search for knowledge and secrets. Mindless undead interest him only insofar as they can be used as guardians or servants. Vecna finds favor among the intelligent undead, especially those that have an interest in the necromantic arts.

Orcus, Demon Prince of the Undead, commands legions of the unquiet dead. He would like nothing more than to seize the Raven Queen's power, but his power can only maintain a dead form, not manipulate death itself. Orcus plots ceaselessly to overthrow the Raven Queen.

DEATH AND THE AFTERLIFE

After the death of the body, a soul lingers in the world for a few days or even longer, and during that time the body can be returned to life with a powerful enough ritual. The soul of a hero is particularly likely to remain, determined even after the death of the body to hold on just a little longer. Other souls immediately depart, slipping into the Shadowfell and flashing across its dim expanse like falling stars. Even then, a soul can be called back to life with the proper ritual, such as Raise Dead. The vast majority of souls that are not called back flow through the gates of the Raven Queen's abode, and from there pass beyond the cosmos . . . to where, even the gods cannot say.

A favored few souls are called by their gods after death to serve in the god's dominion. Some (the exalted) are

selected because of the great deeds they accomplished in life in support of that god's ideals, whereas others (the damned) might be selected for punishment, because they were subjected to a curse, or because these individuals sold their souls when they were still living mortals.

Devils and other foul creatures also crave the souls of mortals. Such creatures sometimes hunt the Shadowfell, looking to gather bodiless souls, but rarely with any success. Only exceptional effort allows a living creature to affect a bodiless soul in any fashion whatsoever, and even great devils lack this ability. Thus, these creatures have learned to arrange for taking mortal souls into custody while those souls yet inhabit living bodies. An individual who makes a deal with a devil usually comes to this sort of end.

THE NATURE OF UNDEATH

Death isn't always the end, even for creatures that have no great destiny. The characteristics that define living creatures create many possibilities for continued existence, or at least the appearance of it. Through various machinations of fate or intent, a creature can remain in the world after its death as a plague on the living—or something more.

SOULLESS UNDEAD

Sentient living creatures have a body and a soul, the latter of which is the consciousness that exists in and departs from the body when it perishes. A body's "life force" that drives a creature's muscles and emotions is called the animus. The animus provides vitality and mobility for a creature, and like the soul, it fades from the body after death. Unlike the soul, it fades from the body as the body rots.

If "revived" in the proper fashion, the animus can rouse the body in the absence of a soul. (This phenomenon is what makes it possible for creatures that were never alive, such as constructs, to become undead.) In some cases, the animus can even exist apart from the body as a cruel memory of life. Such impetus can come from necromantic magic, a corrupting supernatural influence at the place of death or interment, or a locale's connection to the Shadowfell. Strong desires, beliefs, or emotions on the part of the deceased can also tap into the magic of the world to give the animus power.

Most undead, even those that seem intelligent, are this sort of creature—driven to inhuman behavior by lack of governance of a soul and a hunger for life that can't be sated. Nearly mindless undead have been infused with just enough impetus to give the remains mobility but little else. Sentient undead have a stronger animus that might even have access to the memories of the deceased, but such monstrosities have few or none of the sympathies they had in life. A wight has a body and a feral awareness granted by the animus, but no soul. Even the dreaded wraith is simply a soulless animus, deeply corrupted and infused with strong necromantic energy.

The Shadowfell most often serves as the source of this impetus. In the Shadowfell, bodiless spirits are common, as are undead. Something within this echo-plane's dreary nature nurtures undead. This shadowstuff can "leak" into a dying creature as that being passes away. It can be introduced by necromantic powers or rituals. Or it can be siphoned into areas strongly associated with death, pooling there.

UNDEAD WITH SOULS

Some undead retain their souls after the death of the body. Rituals allow this sort of transformation. A potent destiny or vigorous enough strength

of will sometimes enables (or forces) a creature to transcend death. Undead that retain their souls are more powerful and more dangerous than their soulless counterparts, having at least some access to the powers they had in life. Such undead are autonomous and as unpredictable as any other free-willed beings, though evil or selfish individuals are the most likely to seek immortality through rituals that lead to undeath.

Sentient ghosts are the most common of the undead that retain their souls without resorting to necromantic rituals. They have a purpose that fetters them to the world, even if it's only to spread misery or wreak vengeance. Death knights, liches, mummies, and vampires are created by rituals or processes that tie the soul to an unliving form. Similar creatures could be created in different circumstances. Such diversity among undead reflects the fact that death touches every part of existence.

UNDEAD GENESIS

When most living creatures think about how undead come into being, they connect the origin of undead with the animation of a dead body. That said, undead are actually "born" in a variety of ways.

SINS OF THE SOUL

Powerfully evil acts resonate with such force that they can ripple across dimensions and open cracks in reality, permitting malevolent entities to escape into the mortal world. These entities seek out corporeal flesh, in particular the recently vacated vessels of the damned. Once inside the host, these spirits corrupt the animus, granting the corpse a semblance of life.

An evil, perverse, and intelligent creature can be reborn into undeath when the influence of the animus revives the memories of the vessel's previous host, although the soul of the creature is not present—these sorts of undead are just particularly wily animus-driven undead.

At other times, atrocious deeds call dark spirits into the cadaver of the newly deceased, leaving the original soul intact. Sometimes, good souls can be trapped within their bodies, to be slowly turned to evil as the depraved spirits corrupt the soul.

Even the living can be "infected" by undead spirits. The spirit possessed template on page 219 can be applied to living creatures whose bodies host undead spirits.

TAINTED BY EVIL

Sites where evil creatures lair or where evil artifacts are stored can act as strong catalysts in the creation of undead. Undead so created are usually mindless animate corpses. Sometimes they are more powerful, soul-bearing undead whose spirits were corrupted

while they lived in an area of tainted ground, and thus the creatures fell directly into undeath when their bodies succumbed.

Though some believe that some kind of fell power energizes animate creatures, it is more accurate to say that the animus or spirit resident in a walking corpse provides an undead creature with the requisite motive force for movement, and perhaps enough additional force to talk and even reason, and—most important—enough animation to prey on other creatures.

Dark deeds conducted by others can serve as a trigger for unlife, especially if such deeds accrue over months or years in one particular location. Such an area, more than any other, is worthy of the term “tainted by evil,” though the religious-minded sometimes call such areas unsanctified ground.

Tainted areas can eventually affect living beings as well. The tomb tainted template on page 219 can be applied to living creatures that have been tainted by unsanctified ground.

LIFE DRAIN

Some effects can drain the “life force” or “life energy” of living creatures. This is usually reflected in the game as target creatures losing one or more healing surges. While some beneficial effects can be purposefully triggered by a player character in return for spending a healing surge (healing hit points, for instance), when a foe causes another creature to lose a healing surge, it is usually modeling life drain of some sort. For example, atropals, bodaks, and wights have powers that deduct healing surges. It's entirely possible that particularly foul rituals might also drain life in this fashion, especially those that require elaborate preparations and components. Life drained in this way is eaten and gone for good, transferred to another living creature to extend its life span, or utilized to empower some other effect or device.

When a living creature is drained to death by evil agencies, the husk of the body becomes a shell that is particularly susceptible to the influence of unlife. When an undead creature is responsible for draining the life force from a living creature, the creation of a new undead from the dead flesh is not assured, but the door is certainly open for unclean spirits to move into the recently evacuated house of the body.

SHAKE THINGS UP

In your campaign, you can violate PC expectations every so often to great effect. Here's something you might try: Introduce a nonevil undead creature into your campaign. When the PCs are next set upon by a horde of zombies, aid them with a rescue by an intrepid paladin. Only in the full light of morning is the dry, withered flesh and the skeletal form of their savior revealed.

More powerful undead siphon more life force than less powerful denizens of the grave. A wight devours the life force of living creatures to assuage its hunger for the soul it has lost and can never retrieve. Wraiths have a similar thirst for mortal souls, using the resulting energy to spawn their dreadful progeny. Similarly, vampires drain life-giving blood from their victims to satisfy their unquenchable hunger (in this instance, the blood is the physical medium for transferred life force).

The vampire lord template (*Dungeon Master's Guide* page 181) is one example of an undead created by life drain.

VILE CONTAGION

Some undead carry diseases and infections that they pass on to creatures they attack. The most widely known of these maladies is mummy rot, which progressively damages its victims with necrotic energy until they succumb.

A few particularly abhorrent undead carry a powerful contagion that, when transferred to mortals, causes them to weaken and die at an alarming rate, rising as undead in a matter of hours unless a cure is rapidly administered. Once a creature is infected in this manner, little can be done to save him or her from becoming undead.

The infected zombie template on page 217 can be used to create undead that spread such contagion.

PURPOSEFUL REANIMATION

Some obsessed knowledge-seekers pursue the spark of life too far, and thereby discover the dark fruits of undeath. They seek death's secrets because of their fear of death, thinking that if they can come to understand mortality, their fear will be extinguished and their survival assured. Those who tread this road to its conclusion sometimes embrace death completely, and do not become so much immortal as simply enduring. Spellcasters who adopt this existence are commonly known as liches. Most find to their sorrow that to forsake all the pleasures of life while continuing to exist is a fate worse than the absolution of true death.

Sometimes undead are created when corpse parts are sewn together to form a great amalgam of death. Then, when the composite corpse is touched with lightning and the proper reanimation ritual performed, an undead creature rises, its mind rotted but its flesh strong with the animus of several beings. Such creatures share some external visual similarities to flesh golems, but are different in ability and origin.

The lich template (*Dungeon Master's Guide*, page 179) presents rules for creating new liches. The blaspheme on page 134 provides several examples of “sewn together and animated” undead.

The physiology of the undead is typically divided into two categories: insubstantial entities without physical form such as specters and wraiths, and corporeal horrors such as wights, vampires, and zombies. Whether corporeal or insubstantial, undead do not feel the world around them like the living do.

Most undead (whether corporeal or not) have several physiological attributes in common, including darkvision, immunity to disease and poison, resistance to necrotic energy, and vulnerability to radiant energy.

All undead were once living beings, in that they had a soul. Soulless constructs do not and cannot become undead.

BODY, SOUL, AND ANIMUS

Most sentient creatures have a body, and most also possess a soul. The true nature and origin of the soul is subject to much debate, but most people can agree that, at the very least, the soul is synonymous with a creature's consciousness, and upon the death of a creature, it departs.

Every creature's soul is unique to it but apart from it, capable of granting the creature sentience (as opposed to the natural workings of the creature's fleshy organs). Souls are immortal; they exist prior to birth and beyond the death of a creature's body. When a creature's seat of consciousness departs (streaking across the Shadowfell), that creature dies, sooner or later.

Without its soul, a body immediately begins to die, despite the animus that pumps blood and preserves physical memory. The animus is also a connection between the body and the soul that allows a creature's physical and spiritual aspects to act in concert.

Most undead, including many intelligent ones, lack the soul that departed upon their body's initial death. These undead are driven to inhuman, bestial behavior because they lack the moral compass that served them in life; now all that remains is a decaying body and an animus driven by needs unfiltered by conscience. Many of these undead have an insatiable hunger for living creatures.

A few undead retain their souls. Except for ghosts, it is unusual to run across an undead creature that retains its soul without having prepared for that

eventuality prior to the creature's death. Such is the case for a lich, which expends vast resources to perform the ritual that binds its soul to its body forever. Even when a lich's body begins to rot, the soul remains. For this reason, liches and other undead that retain knowledge of the powers they commanded in life are rightfully feared.

UNDEAD ANATOMY

One unifying trait defines all undead creatures—they were previously alive, and most lived in bodies of blood, flesh, and bone.

DECOMPOSING BODY

Though it can seem sudden, death is more a process than an event. It begins when the heart ceases to beat or the lungs cease to breathe. First the brain shuts down, then other organs, and finally, the skin dies.

At the moment the body is fully dead, decomposition begins. Unanimated corpses suffer stiffness within a half-day of death, which slowly fades over the next three days. Most of the "living dead" exhibit this stiffness in their movements, to a greater or lesser extent, for the duration of their undead existence.

When life flees, so does a body's ability to fend off parasites and insects. Within weeks, corpses both animate and mundane swarm with maggots, the hatched larvae of various types of insects. At the same time, the flesh begins to rot, releasing various effluvia into the body cavities of the corpse, as well as vile-smelling gases.

After this point, the process of decomposition of a mundane corpse and that of an animate undead diverge. The animus that gives false life to the undead arrests the complete decay and collapse of the physical body. With the decomposition process halted, most undead appear as half-rotted corpses.

Some undead can naturally suppress or mask this unpleasant fact of unlife, and others are able to use magic to accomplish the same. But most face a long existence of ongoing rot. From the moment of their animation to unlife, their bodies slowly but continuously undergo the biological process of decomposition.

In vampires, decomposition can be halted altogether with a steady influx of fresh blood. Due to a

UNDEAD POWER SOURCES

Some necromancers use the arcane power source to fuel their magic, while others call upon the power of shadow to effect their dim miracles. Still others animate undead by the power of the divine, calling on fell gods to raise legions of bound wraiths to their will.

Some undead are born as a result of sheer force of will. These rare individuals staved off the afterlife by harnessing the great power of their soul (or ki). Rarer still, other undead abominations call upon the great psionic powers of the mind to cheat death.

vampire's nocturnal nature, its skin is typically very pale unless it has recently fed. Some vampires apply flesh-colored powder to their skin in an attempt to pass as human. Similarly, ghouls can put off further decomposition by the regular intake of recently living flesh.

Insubstantial undead do not decompose, but their appearance is sometimes hazy and half-realized, giving them a tattered or rotted appearance. This is especially true of those that were created from the corpses of victims killed by extreme violence or from corpses already partly rotted.

SENSE ORGANS

As with other predatory creatures, undead have senses sufficiently sensitive to locate their prey, and in some cases, these senses are enhanced.

Vision: An undead's vision works in a manner similar to a living creature's eyesight, especially in creatures that have unrotted eyes. The animus that animates the undead stimulates the decomposing organs. In most undead, necromantic energy provides further enhancement, allowing them to see even in complete darkness. Creatures whose physical eyes are completely rotted can instinctively mimic the appearance of natural eyes, which can manifest as glowing points or orbs of light within the undead's eye sockets.

Scent and Hearing: Undead can hear or smell their environment to some extent, either through necromantic stimulation of the remaining organs originally used for that purpose, or by instinctively mimicking structures that accomplish the same function. However, many undead function reasonably well without these senses, and the energy of animation provided by the animus might fade over time. As such, most undead possess very poor smell and hearing. On the other hand, vampires and ghouls have very acute auditory and olfactory senses enhanced by their state of undeath.

Taste: The animation of undeath permits certain undead, primarily those with tongues such as ghouls and vampires and other undead that physically feed on the living, to savor the flavor of their prey. Though the urge that drives these undead to feed upon the living is an unholy compulsion that can't be denied, the ability to taste a screaming victim adds to the undead's feeding experience.

Touch: Undead have limited ability to process physical sensation, since nerve receptors throughout the body remain dead after reanimation. Those that have some sense of touch retain only a crude approximation of a real tactile sense. Similarly, undead are unlikely to experience pain of any kind. In battle, mindless undead do not even notice that their bodies have been severely damaged, and they continue to attack until they are physically unable to do so.

CIRCULATORY SYSTEM

In a living creature, the circulatory system is responsible for dispersing oxygen and essential nutrients throughout the body. The heart, the lungs, and a complete system of blood vessels facilitate this process.

Most undead do not employ their decaying cardiovascular systems. The heart of a corporeal undead typically lies in its chest cavity as a shriveled husk, with no ability to circulate blood throughout the body.

Vampires and ghouls are notable exceptions to this rule; they can kick-start their circulatory systems into action upon feasting on mortal blood. This reaction temporarily negates the pallor of their skin and starts their hearts beating once more in their chests.

RESPIRATION

Undead have no biological reason to breathe, and as such have no need for a functioning respiratory system. This is not to say that undead cannot breathe. Many use their respiratory systems to speak, though they require only gross movements to force air through their rotted larynxes.

DIGESTIVE SYSTEM

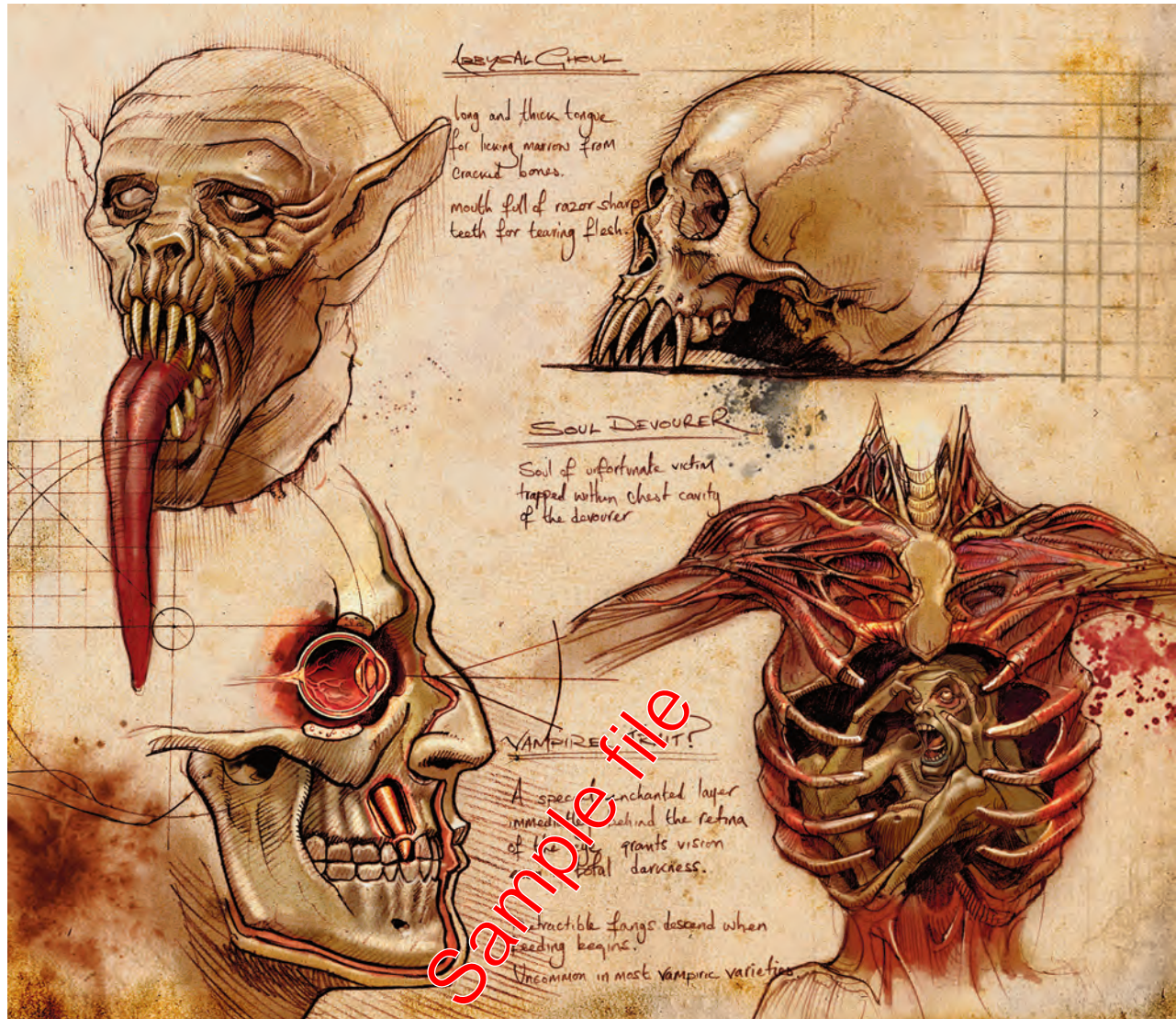
Undead that do not feed have no digestive systems. Those that feed on living flesh retain many aspects of a living creature's digestive tract, including a stomach where various nutrients are extracted. However, this process is somewhat mediated by the creature's unnatural nature, and even without all the complicated processes that occur in a living creature's stomach, a brain-eating zombie or a blood-sucking vampire gains the benefit it seeks from the substance it eats . . . though never enough benefit to satiate it.

Some kinds of undead feed on "life force" or even the souls of living creatures. These undead obviously do not require a digestive system; they directly

INSUBSTANTIAL UNDEAD

Insubstantial undead lack bodies composed of physical substance and have no vital areas, and thus take half damage from all sources. However, despite being insubstantial, undead such as wraiths and ghosts still have senses that operate after a fashion as do those of corporeal undead. In truth, an insubstantial undead's body mimics the anatomical

details of corporeal undead. The animus of an insubstantial undead forms a quasi-real body and uses it to interact with the environment much as a corporeal undead does. Thus, despite its filmy appearance, an insubstantial undead can touch, taste, speak, see, hear, and smell as well (or poorly) as a regular undead creature might.



metabolize a living animus or soul, changing it into motive energy.

OTHER CHARACTERISTICS

Whether devilish fangs, grasping talons, or an aura of fear, many undead are enhanced by bizarre physical traits and supernatural abilities.

Fangs: Elongated fangs are a common trait among undead that have inescapable cravings. Some undead, most notably vampires, have retractable canines that extend when they feed.

Claws: Corporeal undead experience rapid nail growth following mortal death. Some ritualistically sharpen their fingernails and toenails into lethal claws. The fingernails of vampires have a glassy appearance.

Tongue: A few varieties of undead have preternaturally strong and lengthy tongues. Ghouls and their kin are the most iconic of this kind, though some claim that the barb-tipped tongue of the viscera devourer is the most repulsive.

Special Abilities: Undead possess a multitude of creepy and lethal abilities. Some can change form (the vampire's *mist form* power and the bodak's *spectral form*), incapacitate their victims (the ghoul's *claws attack* and the spirit devourer's *spirit rupture*), or deliver rot and decay with a single touch (the mummy rot spread by all mummies and the zombie-spawn plague propagated by infected zombies).

METABOLISM

The concept of metabolism and a creature animated solely by necromantic magic have little in common. Living creatures have a metabolism, in the normally understood sense. Undead do not. That said, some undead feed on the living. Though such feeding might be crude and in no way impart growth to the undead, the fact remains that the mere act of eating implies a metabolism of sorts.

When a living creature eats, it breaks down food in some sort of digestive process that not only provides nutrition, but as a secondary effect of its life processes produces heat (even in reptiles, though

these primitive creatures are unable to regulate their own internal temperature). One of the many noticeable characteristics undead do not share with living creatures is the generation of internal warmth. Without life processes that give off heat as a by-product, undead are cold to the touch—“cold as the grave,” as the saying goes. Undead are comfortable in (make that “oblivious to”) a wide range of temperatures that would make living creatures uncomfortable and even kill them with extended exposure. While undead can’t withstand supernatural cold or heat any better than living creatures can, they can linger for years in windswept arctic grottos or sun-baked desert tombs.

DIET

The majority of undead are capable of continued existence for months, years, or even longer without eating. However, many undead crave the life force, flesh, or blood of the living, and a few actually need to feed (even if infrequently) to maintain their hideous unlife, or at least to satisfy their addiction (as might be the case for “diet dependent” undead). On the other end of the spectrum, a wide range of undead neither require nor crave to feed on anything at all, and merely coast through the years on the charge of necromantic energy that initially animated them.

Intelligent undead who crave life force, flesh, or blood sometimes make a game of feeding. They construct elaborate dramas involving unsuspecting soon-to-be victims—all the better if the dénouement of such games devolves suddenly into screaming terror.

Undead feeding requirements can be broken down into three categories: not required, inescapable craving, and diet dependent.

Not Required: Many undead have no requirement to feed and continue to exist solely through the original impetus provided by their animation. A few undead that fit this category include bodaks, death knights, dracoliches, flameskulls, and phantom warriors. Many other undead also belong to this category.

Inescapable Craving: Several types of undead could likely do entirely without flesh or blood morsels to see them through. However, the curse of their unlife inflicts upon them an inescapable craving. Denied, such a craving can transform even sentient undead into mindless, raging beasts. After the raging hunger is satisfied, the craving dissipates to a tolerable level, at least for a while.

If their hunger is denied too long, sentient and mindless undead alike allow their craving to drive them into the open or into tactically questionable attacks.

Undead that fit this category include devourers, ghouls, wraiths, and wights.

Diet Dependent: Some sages who study the nature of undeath, the Shadowfell, and necromantic energies of animation claim that, in truth, no undead is actually diet dependent. Instead, the few undead described in stories who seem to lapse into torpor if they are not supplied with life force might actually merely be severely addicted to their food source. So addicted, in fact, that when denied the sustenance they crave, they weaken, or at least appear to do so. However, no matter how enervated such creatures seem to become by lack of feeding, they cannot be “starved to destruction.” This fact is taken by the sages described earlier as proof that no undead is, indeed, actually diet dependent. And it’s quite true: A fresh infusion of its preferred food apparently always brings the creature back to full strength, or so the stories all relate.

Undead that fit this category come in many shapes and varieties, but almost all of them are some kind of vampire.

REST AND RECOVERY

Undead do not sleep, but (as is true of the living) they must take an extended rest to recovery daily abilities and a short rest to recover encounter abilities. Mindless undead not engaged in combat are assumed to be taking a rest unless they have been commanded to perform some other activity.

VULNERABILITIES

Though undead enjoy many resistances to dangers that trouble living flesh, they too have their vulnerabilities.

Weapons cut through animate bodies as readily as through living flesh, and even insubstantial undead are dispersed by repeated swings of a blade or a hammer.

Since undead are at home in the shadows, radiant energy is often more dangerous to them than to most other kinds of creatures. Vampire spawn are something of a special case in this regard—although they are not vulnerable to radiant energy, they can be hampered or even destroyed by direct exposure to sunlight.

SELF-PROPAGATION

Several varieties of undead can create new unliving progeny. Taking a broader view, undead self-propagation might be regarded as an infectious disease: It is nasty, it is easily spread, and it kills its hosts. Of course, a plague of this nature is far worse than any common disease, but the cure is little different—eliminate the source of infection, and you eliminate the malady.

The most dangerous and powerful undead are intelligent beings (which, fortunately for mortals, are a small minority of all undead). Some of these creatures became undead by choice or through repeated evil acts; others attained this state as the result of attacks by other undead or chance encounters with dangerous magic. Regardless of how they came to be undead, all of them now think very differently from the way they did in life. Their minds have changed as much as their bodies.

NECROMANCY AND MORALITY

Civilized folk consider creating and controlling undead to be acts of evil. Only a few argue that the practice of necromancy is not inherently malevolent by nature. Indeed, they claim that many rituals deemed “good” or holy, such as Raise Dead, employ necromantic aspects in their performance. However, these protests seem more academic than authentic. For instance, the Raise Dead ritual, though it interacts with the dead, does not animate corpses to unlife. Likewise, of all the undead fashioned through necromantic ritual and chance, the vast majority are indeed evil. Someone who claims that undead are at heart unaligned might be hiding something.

That said, if considered in isolation and without context, some undead are not necessarily evil. Mindless undead in particular have no moral leanings one way or the other. But in truth, agencies willing to dishonor the remains of living creatures by animating them into walking corpses are usually up to no good.

But as with every rule, exceptions exist. Everyone has heard tales of apparitions that warn the living of hazards and impending disasters. Epic stories speak of skeleton armies marching up out of crypts in besieged cities to snatch away children and bear them to safety. Whether such creatures acted of their own accord or were compelled by an unseen controller’s magic, none can say.

UNDEAD SPIRITUALITY

Most intelligent undead are self-serving egoists with little regard for divinity. Though Orcus claims the mantle of Demon Prince of the Undead, his desire for absolute control over his subjects limits the number of worshipers that willingly serve him. Undead arcanists pay lip service to Vecna, primarily out of a desire to gain his secrets. On the other hand, undead that have souls steer clear of the Raven Queen. She seems uninterested in corpses animated by residual animus, but she takes a dim view of undead that cling to souls that rightly (as she sees it) should have fallen to her for judgment.

UNDEAD MENTALITY

When discussing the psychology of the undead, it is first necessary to distinguish between the three sorts of undead minds.

Mindless Undead: The simplest kinds of undead, such as skeletons and zombies, have no psychological traits. These beings are mindless creatures capable of no more thought or emotion than a clockwork mechanism.

Soulless Undead: Creatures such as specters, wights, and wraiths are soulless beings that retain only remnants of the minds they had in life. They can be exceedingly cunning, and some can freely draw upon their living memories. However, these undead have been irrevocably changed by their transformations. Lacking souls, they are perpetually filled with a tormenting hunger for their lost souls, a hunger that can only be sated by devouring living creatures. These undead hate the living in part because they possess souls that the undead lack.

Some of these soulless undead are little more intelligent than cunning animals, whereas others retain the same intelligence they had in life. In either instance, their minds are far more focused than before. These undead have only two desires: to survive and to devour the living. They have no thoughts, emotions, or plans that do not involve attempting to satisfy these two drives. The most intelligent and strong-willed of these undead can make complex plans, but these plans consist of nothing more than ways to insure a continued supply of mortals to feed their hunger.

Soulless undead retain memories of their previous loves, passions, and interests, but these are little more than distant remembrances. Even the strongest feelings now have little more than a passing faint significance. Occasionally, one of the soulless undead might pause to stare at something that fascinated it in life or might allow a former loved one to go free rather than devouring him. However, such actions are rare. Most soulless undead will devour one of their children as readily as they would a stranger or an enemy. Except on rare occasions when they are driven by memories of their former lives, the psychology of these undead is that of a ravening, ever-hungry monster that kills because its hunger can never be sated and because it hates all life—especially life that reminds it of its former existence. These undead have no culture or society, they create no art or literature, and they ultimately care about nothing other than their hunger.

Undead with Souls: In vivid contrast, the few kinds of undead that retain their souls, such as death knights, liches, mummies, and vampires, are intelligent beings that retain all the passions and mental complexities they possessed in life. These creatures

are dangerous and cunning foes, and on rare occasions even more dangerous allies.

Some are driven by desires that approach the intensity of the soulless undead's need to kill, but these desires do not utterly control their behavior. For instance, although vampires hunger for the blood of the living, this hunger is not the center of their existence. For many, it is simply a need that must be met, and they continue to focus their attention on many of the same passions they had when alive.

Because their undead state eliminates many of the distractions of life, both positive and negative, undead that retain souls can be exceptionally careful and patient planners.

TAINTED MINDS

Whether an undead is mindless or sentient, the mere state of undeath twists and transforms the creature's consciousness. In the case of soulless undead, this transformation is terrible and obvious. If transformed into a wraith, even someone who devoted his life to caring for children would feast upon those he once protected. At best, such beings might decide to pursue other prey to spare a former loved one. However, if other prey is lacking, the creature always chooses to attempt to slake its hunger.

The transformation of undead that retain their souls is far more subtle. A former comrade can talk with a vampire or a lich about adventures they shared when they were both alive, and the undead might display the same feelings as it did in life. However, undeath gradually alters these beings' perspective. Since they are no longer among the living, undead feel considerably less concern for the things and people they once cared for most. Their morals shift. They might still value friends or family members, but snuffing out the life of a random stranger ceases to be abhorrent, because they place no value on life. Ultimately, these undead cease to care about anyone or anything except for themselves and whatever agenda drove them to seek undeath in the first place. If an undead that has a soul did not choose undeath, revenge becomes one of its goals, even extending to those not responsible for its condition.

SEPARATION FROM LIFE

At their core, undead exist in opposition to life. The act of becoming undead, whether voluntary or not, separates them from the world of the living. Some hate the living and regard them as prey. Even undead that have souls and feel no need to consume the living regard breathing beings as lesser creatures whose wishes and desires are laughably shortsighted, even childlike.

This separation derives from the fact that the various pleasures and discomforts that living beings experience on a constant basis do not affect the undead. They do not feel chilled on a cold winter day

or comfortable before a warm fire, and they have no ability to appreciate a fine meal (unless it is a screaming, blood-spurting meal). They are outsiders to the world of living sensations. Some undead envy the living their pleasures, but most consider these pleasures to be needless distractions.

Undead that feed upon the living experience an even greater degree of separation. For them, humans and other mortal creatures are food. Their presence makes the undead hungry. Even those undead that attempt to hold onto their humanity find that their living companions and loved ones viscerally register to them as walking, talking meals. This separation can be an interesting source of conflict for PCs who are temporarily transformed into predatory undead.

SINGULAR DRIVES

Part of becoming undead involves letting go of the concerns of the living. Mortality is by its nature a hectic state in which individuals are constantly at the mercy of various physical and psychological drives. Many of the undead feel various sorts of unnatural hunger, but few experience any compulsion other than this singular drive. The remainder of the troubles and distractions that plague the living vanish, leaving intelligent undead with a calm and terrible patience. If absolutely necessary, they can outlast mortal foes. Plans that require years or decades to complete seem far more reasonable to beings that can exist for thousands of years.

Over time, intelligent undead that possess souls become exceptionally focused on one or two specific goals. Some seek political power and attempt to rule over vast numbers of subjects, either as an unliving sovereign or as a secretive and undying power behind a mortal throne. Others become obsessed with learning ever more powerful magic and obtaining artifacts. To some, such magic is merely a means to attaining a specific end, but for others, powerful artifacts and rituals are desired because they allow their users to bend reality and demonstrate an unrivaled command of magic.

A few undead seek knowledge of a broader sort above all else. Over decades or centuries, they painstakingly assemble lore that interests them, such as the histories of lost and forgotten kingdoms. Because undead are so long-lived, those who retain their intelligence can gather lore that would otherwise be lost to the ages. Scholars given to the study of lore are thus drawn to particular undead, in hopes of learning something of previous ages. Such study sometimes leads those scholars to consider for themselves the lure of eternal existence, unfettered by death.

Other undead are collectors that relentlessly accumulate beautiful and unique objects of various sorts. However, the aberrant nature of their unlife taints even these desires. Like other undead, they care for little beyond their passion, especially not the wishes