



# An Army of Darkness


Heat surged through Nalix's arms and down his body. His pink skin, which had only hours before been pocked with dark patches, now burned to scaly blackness. When the fire finally subsided, he hoped his hellish transformation was complete. But it had only just begun. Before he could catch his breath, pain shot through his back, doubling him over. He felt his spine lengthen and bend forward, and blood pounded into his eyes, blurring his vision. Even in this haze, he could "see" the heat rising from his watching master's form. Hadn't he served him well? Hadn't he done everything asked of him?

"Why me?" he screamed, as the pain wracked him, but the words wouldn't form; they came out as a grunt, drawing laughter from his master. With great effort, Nalix focused his red, tear-stained eyes on the nebulous form before him and pled silently for mercy, as his failed voice could not. His pleas went unanswered; his master reveled in Nalix's transformation.

The pain ... the horrendous pain ... it grew worse, and his toes elongated, splayed, and burst through his soft leather shoes. His hands followed in form, and sharp claws tore out of his fingertips. Then horns ripped through his skull, and a spiked tail grew behind him.

When his frame finally stopped shifting, the apprentice that was Nalix was no more. But strangely, unlike the other students before him, he held onto his mind and will. Those others had only one thought, one purpose: to serve their master, the man before him, as a god, unto death. Nalix's only thought was to stay alive. But Nalix knew all too well the fate his master's failures met; he would pretend to be a success. He knelt and bowed his head, praying all the while that this false god would soon be dead.

## Overview

 This adventure is designed for four to six characters of 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> level. It emphasizes investigation, infiltration, and diplomacy; players who do not enjoy hobnobbing or finessing their way through tight situations may not find the adventure to their taste, even though combat opportunities exist.


The main action revolves around a small town called Solanton, the town's temple to the sun goddess Solyera, the nearby village of Grimm's Thorp, and Grimm Thorpe University. You can easily substitute a town that already exists in your campaign world for Solanton, which is the starting point of the adventure. The time required to play this scenario varies depending on how long the player characters are willing to spend socializing. If the players enjoy roleplaying of this kind, a GM could easily spend an entire game session at the fundraiser ball held by the university. Also, as there are many places to explore and people to gather information from, it is suggested that the adventure be played in at least two to three sessions; good stopping points are after Chapter One and Chapter Four.

Long after the adventure is over, Grimm Thorpe University can be a useful, long-term part of your campaign world. A GM could easily develop a party of novice characters from the school's student body, or current characters may decide to become faculty members or regents there, involving themselves further in university politics.

## A DARK EXPERIMENT

Situated a mile north of the town of Solanton, and on the outskirts of the village of Grimm's Thorp, Grimm Thorpe University is a small school for scribes, alchemists, and wizards. The university's current chancellor, Charles Cavanaugh, has a keen interest in transmutation magic, and in the last year has begun practicing his magic and alchemy on problem-causing students sent to him for disciplinary action.

At first, these "test subjects" were merely given small doses of potions to discover their side effects, but soon Cavanaugh's deep interest in transmutation magic made him wonder if permanent physical changes could be achieved through these alchemical elixirs rather than with magic.

 His preliminary attempts at creating a permanent, alchemical transformation mixture proved ineffectual, lasting no longer than normal *alter self* or *change self* spells — a far cry from his goal to reproduce the effects of the *polymorph other* spell.

His tests didn't achieve his desired result until Ferocass, a dwarven trader Cavanaugh had dealt with for some time, brought him an odd black stone, almost charcoal-like in appearance and texture. Ferocass told him that the denizens of the realms beneath the earth called it "shadow stone," for those who were unfortunate to drink water tainted with it soon transformed into creatures of chitinous darkness.

The stone intrigued Cavanaugh, who took it back to his lab and shaved some off into an unknowing apprentice's drink. Just as the dwarf had said, the stone's properties soon took effect and the student developed dark splotches upon his skin within four hours of consumption. When the student brought the rash-like discolorations to Cavanaugh's attention, Cavanaugh convinced him to imbibe an antidote (a more potent mixture of the shadow stone, actually). Within three days the student had completely transformed into a black, scaly creature with a tail, claws, and nightmarish red eyes. Cavanaugh immediately imprisoned the creature and watched it carefully for the next several weeks, waiting for its transformation to revert; it didn't. It did show signs of a diminished mentality, however, and ultimately went insane, but it never once returned to its original form.

Cavanaugh eventually killed the creature, but his interest in the stone was fueled. He then set out to design a more stable alchemical mixture that would maintain the subject's sanity and a certain degree of its intelligence; but one that would make the creature a more pliable, loyal servant. Several months and test subjects later, he succeeded in perfecting the mixture. He christened the resulting creature a

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nightling, and went on to create several more, using purchased orc slaves as test subjects instead of students, as he knew that more disappearances could attract unwanted attention to his project.

While his initial interest in creating these creatures was purely scientific, he soon sought to build a nightling army. After all, he had two perfect breeding centers for his plan: the university and the village surrounding it. And the real testing ground for his army lay only a mile away: the temple of the sun goddess Solyera.

## CAVANAUGH'S PLAN

The day of Grimm Thorpe University's annual fundraiser ball marks the second day of Cavanaugh's plan to create a nightling army to destroy the Temple of Solyera. He needs seventy-two hours bring his plan to fruition — the time it takes his improved elixir to entirely transform his victims. His plan is to unfold as follows:

### DAY ONE: THE DAY BEFORE THE BALL

The night before the ball, at about 11:00 p.m., Cavanaugh sends Graves, his hired assassin, to poison the well that serves the village of Grimm's Thorp. He contaminates it with a small barrel of the transformation elixir.

That night Graves also kills Alton Lorock, a professor of necromancy at Grimm Thorpe University and mayor of Grimm's Thorp village, because the professor discovered Cavanaugh's nightling project and threatened to reveal the details of it at the ball.

### DAY TWO: THE DAY OF THE BALL

At the ball, Cavanaugh sends his assistant Jaylin Vaas to ask the high priestess to stop at the village the next morning to investigate the nature of the strange disease the populace has acquired.

### DAY THREE: THE DAY AFTER THE BALL

The high priestess of Solyera and her entourage will bring the donated proceeds from the fundraiser ball to the university on the morning after the ball; this has been the case for the previous two years. As the high priestess and her entourage travel toward the village just before dawn, Graves, a contingent of bandits, and several nightlings attack and kill the clerics of Solyera, and kidnap the High Priestess Giorna Kal and an underling priest named Cobain. The university's stolen donations are then taken into hiding in the tunnel areas beneath Cavanaugh's manor to be used to fund the chancellor's plan.

Graves poisons the campus well upon his return. Cavanaugh has already stored barrels of clean water in his manor house to avoid affecting himself, his allies, and his family. If the visiting alumni, regents, and PCs should drink the water, they, too, become soldiers in his plan; see Appendix IV for information on the nightling "disease".

## DAY FOUR: THE DAY OF THE NIGHTLINGS

Assuming Cavanaugh meets no interference — and with the most powerful clerics of Solyera imprisoned or dead, he doesn't expect any — the villagers will complete their transformation into nightlings on the night of day four.

## DAY FIVE: THE NIGHTLING ATTACK

In the early morning hours following the transformation of the villagers, Cavanaugh's assassin Graves will lead the new nightlings on a full-fledged attack of the Temple of Solyera at Solanton.

However, several things happen the evening of the ball to complicate this plan, and later the nightlings are sent to hunt down Cavanaugh's apprentice Gelrin, who has stolen his notes, and kidnap the anchorite Juliana who was witness to his death. When the PCs begin to uncover Cavanaugh's plot, it's up to them to defeat Cavanaugh and his nightlings before they gain control of the temple.

## ENTER THE PLAYER CHARACTERS

It is important to the scenario that the characters attend Grimm Thorpe University's annual fundraiser ball, a social gathering during which the administration begs for more funding from alumni and other benevolent supporters. This year's ball is especially important; it marks the university's 300-year anniversary. It is at this function that the characters meet some of the key personalities of this adventure.

The ball is held at the Temple of Solyera, which is situated outside the walls of Solanton; however, most of the adventure takes place in the village of Grimm's Thorp and on the campus of Grimm Thorpe University, both of which lie a mile north of the temple and town. Information on the temple and the deity Solyera is presented in Chapter One; if Solyera does not suit your campaign, replace her with your campaign's primary sun god. The village and the university are detailed in Chapters Three and Four.

Several avenues for getting the player characters involved are suggested below. If none of these suggestions prove suitable to your campaign, feel free to create a new entrance for the player characters.

- Sven Sorensin, a silk merchant of considerable wealth, hires the party to escort a large sum of money to the Grimm Thorpe University fundraiser ball. While his business duties prevent him from attending the function, he is very grateful to the university for taking in his unruly son, Korliss Sorensin, improving the young man's disposition and providing him with an occupation to fall back on. He requests that his 5,000 gp be taken to the temple where the ball is being held, and that the PCs personally present the money to the school's chancellor and thank him for the work he has done with Korliss. For their efforts, the characters will be paid a total of 500 gp. This hook relies on the characters being of well-known