



FORTRESS OBLIVION

Adventure Overview

Fortress is set in Robert E. Howard's mythic Hyboria. PCs start out in the company of notorious Zuagir raider **Yafar Al-Wazim**. Depending on their moral flexibility, our heroes are either Yafar's captives or his new, hard-bitten recruits. The group is forced to take shelter at night in an abandoned Mughal-style fort near the Turanian border, after a vicious *haboob* sandstorm blows across their path. Several raiders know of the fortress's evil reputation for being haunted, but facing choking death, Yafar orders them through the gates.

The fortress is indeed haunted. Its original inhabitants, seeking a new well after their first ran dry, sunk a shaft into a ruin of Pre-Acheronian antiquity, deep beneath the foundation. Doing so released a terrible guardian: a **Formless Spawn** of Tsathoggua. The cunning, protean creature killed and digested the garrison one by one, until the survivors fled in terror. Now the Formless Spawn waits in its well for unwary travelers, disguised as a pool of rancid water.

PCs soon discover that another group has had to seek shelter in the fortress. After a merchant's bodyguard goes missing, accusations fly . . . and as tension runs taut, the Spawn's oozing form closes in to ensure this fated stopover is the heroes' last!

The Approach

Yafar's band of Zuagirs have had a hard week in the deserts of eastern Shem, with little to show for their efforts. If the PCs start out as captives, then Yafar took them at dear cost: most of his raiders have been killed. Only the faint hope of ransom in a nearby city, or failing that, a good price at the slave market, is keeping the heroes alive. PCs have their hands tied behind them with strong silken cords. Their weapons and other equipment are kept in a bundle atop one of Yafar's spare horses. Players can spend a Hero Point to have a dagger or a similar small item concealed on their person, but being bound, they won't have ready access to it.

The other starting option assumes the PCs have thrown in their lot with the Zuagir chieftain. In this case, Yafar's group has been depleted enough by a recent failed caravan raid that he is willing to take newcomers. The PCs have yet to prove themselves in his eyes, however, and he does not completely trust them.

Either way, there is only Yafar, his second in command **Salil**, and 1 Zuagir (rabble) per PC left in the little band.

Just as the sun is setting for what promises to be a cold desert night, a veil of grayish-brown dust, hundreds of feet high, appears along the horizon. A haboob! Anyone familiar with the desert knows open exposure to such storms can be fatal. As luck would have it, the silhouette of a ruined Turanian border fortress juts from a nearby hill, promising shelter. However, Salil recognizes the structure and warns that demons roam within its walls.

"Better to pit our luck against rumors of djinn," Yafar says, "than choke on the

certainties of wind and sand. We make for the fortress at once!"

Haboob

In the spirit of contrariness, non-captive PCs may want to try and erect shelters of their own, or take precautions like winding a scarf around their mouths and trying to brave the storm. Let them. Yafar will curse the heroes for fools as he rides away.

Once fully engulfed, PCs have to make a Strength roll every minute or take d3 choking damage. Using a scarf or similar precaution gives them a +1 on the roll. Additionally, anyone who doesn't shut their eyes tight has to make a Hard Strength roll per minute to avoid blindness from the scouring sand (permanent on a Calamitous Failure). The storm will kill any mounts. If feeling kind, you may allow blinded, half-suffocated heroes to eventually stumble into the fortress, after the expenditure of a Hero Point apiece.

The Courtyard

A hard ride brings the group to the fortress's gates just as the storm comes crashing around them. One gate hangs by a single bronze hinge—there is no portcullis—allowing access to the courtyard beyond. Once inside, the fortress's steep walls provides good protection against the elements, though occasional gusts of gritty sand blow down. Just past the gate is a 60' well that has gone bone-dry.

Along the western wall of the courtyard lie the dilapidated remains of stables. The raiders will be surprised to see these are occupied, by five camels loaded with baggage! A check of the saddlebags shows they are stuffed with valuable trade goods: casks of oil scented with sandalwood, and saffron and turmeric from Vendhya.

Yafar's loot-starved men immediately set about arguing who gets what. Scimitars are drawn, despite Yafar's attempts to assert order. It looks like a free-for-all is about to erupt, when a terrified shout echoes from deeper within the fortress.

The Inner Bailey

A second gate, also open, leads to this smaller enclosure. PCs following the shout will come upon the bailey, empty except for a naked scimitar lying on the flagstones. A well-fortified, two-storied keep stands nearby.

The sword belonged to the bodyguard of avaricious Turanian merchant **Bakr Faiz**, standing in the keep's doorway, his face ashen beneath a jeweled turban. It is Bakr's shout the group has just heard. Crouching behind him is a dark-haired, dark-eyed young woman wearing a veil and modest camelhair robes; a Zamorian wanderer named **Yeva**.

Bakr is surprised at the sight of fellow refugees from the storm. After he has a chance to calm down, he explains his small camel-train sought shelter here when he spotted the haboob forming. Some thirty minutes earlier, he sent his bodyguard out to check on the camels, and now all that remains is his sword (the Formless Spawn strangled him as soon as he left the keep and flung his lifeless body over the walls).

Suspicious by nature, Bakr will not see his bodyguard's sudden disappearance and the arrival of Zuagir brigands as a coincidence. However, he is not in a position to make accusations. Instead, he invites the group inside the protection of the keep, which has a stout iron door that can be barred, and offer to share his ample supply of date wine. Yeva remains quiet behind her veil, giving the PCs inscrutable glances.

A second well was dug in the northern section of the bailey. This one was not widened; the shaft is only about 3' in diameter and winds slightly. Some 40' below a pool of water can be glimpsed (this is actually the Formless Spawn). It will not reveal its presence at this point, if possible. Anyone observing the well can conclude that a body thrown down it would become wedged in the shaft, instead of falling into the pool.

If the PCs later re-inspect the well, they'll find the water has disappeared . . .

A Long Night

What happens next depends on the PCs reactions to events. *Fortress Oblivion* is intended to play out like a horror movie, with the Formless Spawn picking off the hapless visitors as they find various reasons to leave the safety of the keep (which isn't really safe--the Spawn can ooze under the door or pour itself through the many arrow-slits any time it wants). The storm lasts all night and into early morning, providing plenty of time for everyone to get themselves killed.

There are two additional keyed areas: the **Ghost Tower** and the **Ancient Shrine**, which the PCs may or may not explore, depending on the course of events. At some point, the

Final Confrontation with the Spawn should occur.

Below is a potential timeline for events:

+ The Zuagirs get roaring drunk on Bakr's wine, with the exception of Yafar.

+ **(If the PCs are captives)** Yeva takes advantage of the situation to surreptitiously slit the bonds of one or more PCs. She is not doing this out of altruism, but the hope PCs will protect her if the situation gets ugly (which it soon will).

+ A wine-emboldened Salil accuses Yeva of giving him the Evil Eye. He snatches off her veil, revealing her Zamorian features. This is proof enough to the Zuagirs they have a witch in their midst. A rough search of her clothing produces another piece of damning evidence: a small poppet, topped with human hair. The poppet (which an incredulous Bakr will exclaim) resembles the missing bodyguard. (Yeva really *is* a witch, though she made the poppet to try and ensorcell Bakr's bodyguard as a lover, not kill him).

+ Tearful, Yeva tries to throw off suspicion by claiming she saw a ghostly figure in the northernmost tower, just before the bodyguard left to check the camels.

+ Yafar, a skeptic, wants to investigate the tower. None of his men are feeling up to it. Yafar asks PCs to accompany him (if not captives). Otherwise, he leaves by himself and does not return to the keep. He may be found wandering the courtyard sometime later, insensate and gibbering (see Ghost Tower for details).

+ Salil tries to sneak out of the keep so he can steal the most valuable trade goods from Bakr's camels. One or more other Zuagirs may accompany him. They are all

killed by the Spawn, to the accompaniment of blood-curdling screams.

Basically, any time someone leaves the relative safety of the group, the Spawn gets them, slowly whittling down their numbers. If the PCs do leave the keep to investigate the Ghost Tower, then some, or all of the group left behind may be missing when they return.

Ghost Tower

This hexagonal fortification is the tallest tower in the fortress. Approaching it, the PCs will be struck by feelings of dread; the hairs on their nape prickle, and shadows here seem oppressively dark. A staircase leads to the upper battlements, enclosed by a minaret with arrow slits. The storm whistles just outside.

Once in the upper chamber, any light-sources possessed by the PCs suddenly flicker and dim. A white-limned figure appears: a tall man with a commanding mien, wearing a breastplate and a turban-wrapped helmet. Seemingly oblivious to the PCs, he paces the tower, pausing every now and then to peer out an arrow slit. Then--his eyes widen with shock, and his hands fly to his throat. He's being strangled, though by what is not clear. His eyes bulge from their sockets, his face pales, and finally, in his last moments, he looks at one of the PCs and manages to whisper "*The well . . . the well,*" before vanishing.

This was the former commander of the garrison. Like many ghosts, he feels compelled to reenact the circumstances of his death. His final words provide a clue for the PCs about the Spawn.

If using the optional Fright Check rules (see **Appendix B**), witnessing this spectacle requires a Hard (-1) Mind roll. Yafar, a heretofore staunch skeptic, becomes temporarily insane. The Zuagir's leader will gibber and draw his sword at shadows for the remainder of the night. If left alone, he wanders off . . . and we all know what happens to crazy people who wander off in haunted ruins, don't we?

Ancient Shrine

Perhaps prompted by the ghost, PCs may investigate the 'new' well in the inner bailey. On this occasion, it appears just as dry as the old one (the Spawn is currently elsewhere). PCs can climb down by bracing themselves against the uneven rock walls. The temperature drops inexplicably as they descend. At 50' the narrow shaft opens onto a small chamber made of mirror-bright black stone. This is an ancient, Pre-Acheronian shrine. Cave-ins have sealed it off from the larger ruin (unless you want to expand on this portion of the adventure). Strange, incomprehensible glyphs have been carved into the walls, and a large, sigil-inscribed brass bowl set upon a tripod occupies the center of the room.

This bowl was the original resting place of the Formless Spawn. If the GM wishes, it can be used to try to magically entrap the creature in lieu of slaying it (see below).

Final Confrontation

At some point, the Formless Spawn becomes tired playing cat and mouse, and will reveal itself for a climactic battle. Ideally, this should be after most, if not all, of the NPCs have been killed. If the PCs have holed up in the keep in the vain belief it will protect them, the protean ooze takes great joy as it seeps under the door, flaring

suddenly into a pseudopod-flailing mass! Witnessing this requires a Tough (-2) Mind roll, if Fear Check rules are being used.

The heroes have a real fight on their hands. Only fire or magic will permanently harm the Spawn. The sandalwood oil from Bakr's camels is probably their best weapon; it burns easily, causing from 1 to 3d6 LB of damage the first round (depending on how much is used), and roughly half that on the second, when it burns out. A swung torch does d6L damage, but Strength bonuses don't count, since it's only the fire doing any real harm.

Magic affects the Spawn normally. A sorcerer PC who suggests trying to use the brass bowl from the shrine against the creature will spontaneously recall a spell of abjuration that could entrap it inside (don't you love freeform magic systems?). This would be on the order of a Second Magnitude spell, of Tough complexity, and requiring several rounds to cast, meaning the rest of the PCs will have to keep the ooze busy before the sorcerer gets to roll.

Optionally, Yeva can try to cast the abjuration spell, but only if no magic-using PCs are available (and the fight is not going well).

Conclusion

The haboob dissipates by late morning. Surviving PCs can try to head for Zamboula to recoup, or deeper into Turan. Just living through an encounter like this is reward enough, but if the GM wants to give out treasure, Bakr may have a small fortune in gems on his person. Like a living being, the fortress seems to watch the PCs as they ride away into the desert . . .

Appendix A: Supporting Cast (in order of appearance)

Yafar Al-Wazim, Zuagir Chieftain

Attributes

Strength 1
Agility 0
Mind 1
Appeal 2

Combat Abilities

Initiative 1
Melee 2
Missile 0
Defense 1

Lifeblood: 11
Villain Points: 2
Protection: 0
Weapons: scimitar, d6+1

Boons/Flaws

Inspire
Desert Born
Skeptic*

Careers

Nomad 1
Bandit 3
Merchant 0
Noble 0

*penalty die when confronted by the supernatural

Yafar obtained the status of chieftain only after years of scheming. Short, bandy-legged, and balding, what he lacks in physical appearance he makes up for with sheer command presence. Unlike most nomads, he scoffs at the supernatural, believing only in what he can see and hear. This pragmatic trait will prove his downfall.

Salil, Yafar's Right Hand Man

Attributes

Strength 2
Agility 0
Mind 0
Appeal 0

Combat Abilities

Initiative 0
Melee 2
Missile 0
Defense 0

Lifeblood: 8 (Tough)
Protection: 0
Weapons: scimitar, d6+2

Boons/Flaws

Fearsome Looks
Greedy

Careers

Bandit 2

Wiry, with steel-gray hair and an extensive network of scars, Salil has advanced through blind obedience to Yafar, though his propensity for greed gets him into trouble. He is friendly only towards Eastern Shemites; other nationalities are openly scorned.

Typical Zuagir

Attributes

Strength 0
Agility 0
Mind 0
Appeal 0

Combat Abilities:

Attack: +0
Damage: scimitar or bow, d3 (as rabble)
Defense: 0
Protection: 0
Lifeblood: 3

These raiders are all that's left of Yafar's men after several recent blunders, and their morale is fading. All are classed as rabble.

Bakr Faiz, Turanian Merchant

Attributes

Strength 0
Agility 0
Mind 1
Appeal 1

Combat Abilities

Initiative 1
Melee 0
Missile 0
Defense 1

Lifeblood: 6 (Tough)
Protection: 0
Weapons: dagger, d6L

Boons/Flaws

Detect Deception
Greedy

Careers

Merchant 2

Trim, wearing perfectly-tailored robes and a bejeweled turban, Bakr specializes in small-scale (though valuable) trade with Vendhya. A born haggler, he is skilled at reading the voices and faces of prospective clients. He and his bodyguard Massoud were headed towards the city of Al Azir when they discovered a lone Zamorian woman wandering the desert, and allowed her to accompany them.

Yeva, Zamorian Mystery-Woman

Attributes

Strength 0
Agility 1
Mind 1
Appeal 0

Combat Abilities

Initiative 1
Melee 0
Missile 0
Defense 1

Lifeblood: 6 (Tough)
Arcane Points: 6
Protection: 0
Weapons: dagger, d6L

Boons/Flaws

Attractive
Lustful

Careers

Thief 2
Sorcerer 0

Yeva grew up on the mean streets of Arenjun, a thief among countless other thieves. Her beauty brought her to the attention of a certain hedge-magician who practiced his arts in the shadow of great Yara's tower. After the tower inexplicably fell one night, Yeva's master disappeared, and she has been searching for him since. Yeva has curling dark hair, a beautiful but cruel face, and large, violet-hued eyes.

Formless Spawn of Tsathoggua (Large Creature)

Attributes

Strength 4
Agility 4
Mind 1

Combat Abilities:

Attack: +4 pseudopod (x2), or +4 engulf
Damage: d6H + special, or 2d6 + special
Defense: 2
Protection: special (see below)
Lifeblood: 20

This cunning, intelligent mass of non-terrene protoplasm was originally summoned and bound by pre-Acheronian sorcerers, who charged it to protect several important artifacts (now missing) in the shrine chamber. Previous upheavals and cataclysms sealed the chamber off, but when the well-shaft from the Turanian fortress penetrated the chamber, several key glyphs that had been keeping the Spawn bound were destroyed. The creature was free to glut its millennial-old hunger.

The Spawn acts as a crafty hunter, preferring to take its prey one by one, when isolated. It can fit its entire form into masonry cracks or receptacles that would seem too small to accommodate its mass, a trick it likes to use to attack from ambush. If optional Fright Check rules are being used, first witnessing the Spawn's otherworldly form requires a Tough (-2) Mind roll. The creature's mercurial flesh resists conventional attacks (weapons tend to pass right through), though fire, magic, and acid do damage as normal.

In combat, the creature can extend two pseudopods up to '50 to attack, either to strike or constrict (d6H damage on subsequent rounds after a successful attack). A PC caught in a pseudopod's grip can attempt to escape with a modified Strength roll (PC's Strength – the Spawn's Strength of 4) or sever the offending limb by dealing 4 or more points of damage in a single blow. Severed pseudopods fall to the floor and 'swim' back to the main body without causing LB damage to the Spawn. It can also attempt to engulf a single opponent, inflicting 2d6 damage per round following a successful attack. The engulfed character takes a penalty die on all actions and can try to escape as per a constricting pseudopod. Note that the Spawn can only engulf one character at a time.

Appendix B: Fright Checks

Fright Checks provide additional gravitas to encounters with the supernatural (especially in fantasy worlds where 'monsters' are not common). For PCs, the main effect of a failed Fright Check is to cause dramatically appropriate hesitation.

A Fright Check entails a Mind roll, + modifiers for how terrifying the encounter is. A PC can add +1 for every rank of Barbarian career possessed. The *Fearless* boon obviates the check.

If failed, the PC automatically loses initiative and takes a penalty die on all actions until they make a successful roll against the object of their fear (e.g. an attack roll, another Mind check, etc.), thereby 'overcoming' their terror. Spending a Hero Point also bolsters courage and allows the Hero to shrug off the effect.

A Calamitous Failure result means the Hero has been badly shaken and freezes for d6 rounds (or retreats, if the player prefers).

Appendix C: Fortress Map

