

INTRODUCTION

Remember the golden days of role-playing, when adventures were underground, NPCs were there to be killed, and the finale of every dungeon was the dragon on the 20th level? Well, those days are back. Dungeon Crawl Classics feature bloody combat and intriguing dungeons. Each adventure is 100% good, solid dungeon crawl, with the monsters you know, the traps you fear, and the secret doors you know must be there somewhere.

Citadel of the Corruptor is designed for five characters of 7th to 8th level. While the characters can be of any basic class, a party able to cast area-of-effect spells and knowing the Endure Elements ritual has the best odds of surviving. See the “Scaling Information” section for ways to tailor this adventure to your group’s unique style of play.

ADVENTURE SUMMARY

The heroes, seeking shelter from a storm, arrive at an isolated fort to find it sacked and its defenders slain. Those responsible — dwarven agents of the villainous Mountain King — are still in the area with captives and a terrible weapon they’re ready to unleash on the cities of the North... unless the heroes stop them!

GAMEMASTER’S SECTION

ENCOUNTER TABLE

To help the GM prepare, we have included a quick reference table showing all encounters at a glance. Loc — the location number keyed to the map for the encounter. Pg — the module page number that the encounter can be found on. Type — this indicates if the encounter is a trap (T), puzzle (P), hazard (H), skill challenge (S), or combat (C). Encounter — the key monsters, traps, or NPCs that can be found in the encounter. Names in italics are noteworthy NPCs. EL — the encounter level.

SCALING INFORMATION

Citadel of the Corruptor is designed for 5 characters of 7–9th level. The module, however, can be easily modified for parties of different sizes or levels. When adjusting the module to suit your game, consider the following suggestions:

Weaker parties (6th level lower): For area 1–2, remove five Groot laborers, three Blooded, two White Slayers, and subtract –1 level from the totem beast. For area 1–4, subtract –1 level from the Fangbrothers and dire wolves. For area 1–5, subtract –1 level from the knightly ghosts. For area 1–7b, remove one Blooded and subtract –1 level from Naal.

For area 2–1, subtract –1 level from all creatures. In area 2–2, subtract –1 from the Perception and Thievery DCs for the trap; also subtract –1 from its attack and damage. For area 2–3, remove one bugbear. For area 2–6, remove two ogre menials. For area 2–9, subtract –1 level from Lord Ablair.

Adjust the treasure accordingly.

Stronger parties (9th level or higher): For area 1–2, add one Groot laborer and one White Slayer, and add +1 level to each White Slayer and the totem beast. For area 1–4, add +2 to the Perception DC regarding the water tower and increase its damage by +1; double the number of Fangbrothers, and add +1 level to the dire wolves. For area 1–5, add +1 level to the knightly ghosts, and add one knightly ghost; add +2 levels to the grief wraiths. For area 1–7b, add three Blooded to the area (have them come from the Kitchen with Naal), and add +1 level to Naal.

For area 2–1, add +1 level to the trained boars and +3 levels to the dwarves. In area 2–2, add +1 to the Perception and Thievery DCs for the trap; also add +1 to its attack and damage. For areas 2–3, add +1 level to the draft boar, the bugbears, and the nighthound whelp, then add an additional nighthound whelp. For area 2–9, add +2 levels to Lord Ablair and add in another Throneguard.

Adjust the treasure accordingly.

GETTING THE PLAYERS INVOLVED

The adventure begins with the characters arriving at Fort Frostbite. The adventure presumes the party is there to deliver supplies, but the GM can devise an alternate plot hook or adapt one of the following:

- The party is stationed at Fort Frostbite, and has just returned from an extended patrol to find it sacked! With their friends dead, the PCs set off on a mission of vengeance.
- The garrison at Fort Frostbite could use a few good men. Earn high pay amid the natural beauty of Mount Runhode! Come work at the top of the world! Only the hardy need apply!
- The party is on Mt. Runhode on their own business, and seeks out Fort Frostbite for shelter from the impending leysahrid.
- The party has been hired by Lord Macreed to deliver supplies to Fort Frostbite. They would be well paid for traveling through such hazardous territory.
- News of the ruin being investigated by Antiquary Bennins has reached the ears of the adventurers. Perhaps they want to loot it for relics and lost wealth, or perhaps they have nobler intentions and want to assist the learned man.

BACKGROUND STORY

Five years ago, one of the city lords of Ul-Balhar, Lord Macreed, grew worried about a large orc tribe in the Ul-Dominor mountains, the Groot. His scouts found an empty keep on Mount Runhode that had been built and abandoned by a fallen dwarven clan, the Tannheim (see *DCC #54: Forges of the Mountain King*). Lord Macreed claimed the keep, and had it refitted to become Fortification XXXI.

A human knight, Sir Gars Ree, and his small company claimed the honor of this harsh vigil, and jokingly refer to their keep as “Fort Frostbite.”

PLAYER BEGINNING

The adventure begins with the heroes arriving at the sacked Fort Frostbite. Start the adventure by reading the following, paraphrasing as necessary to match the plot hook used:

The trek up Mt. Runhode to Fort Frostbite has been grueling. This winter is harsh, stirring the savage Groot tribe of orcs and drawing out ekkjavetr, terrible frost hags, from their rime-crusted caves. The cackles and screeches of the crones echo through the lonely mountain peaks, triggering avalanches and frightening away game.

As you approached the fort, your situation grew even more dire. Miles to the south, back along your trail, a twisting column of air with a black heart has formed... a leysahrid, or tearing storm. The supernatural storm will be upon you in three hours, maybe less... already the wind stirs, and even at this distance, you can hear the howls of the ekkjavetr as they ride the tearing storm.

ENCOUNTER AREA 1 FORT FROSTBITE

Fort Frostbite is on Mt. Runhode, the second-highest peak in the Ul Dominor range. The heroes, traveling on foot, are assumed to be acclimated to the high altitude, and are not required to make Endurance checks.

The fort is nestled in a natural hollow, with a half-scallop stone ceiling arching overhead like an amphitheater shell. The Tannheim dwarves sculpted the ceiling to depict various industrious activities, but the artwork has been worn away by the brutal wind and winter, and few have had the skill to restore them.

One feature remaining is a great inverted stone spire that depends from the scallop-shell ceiling. It is designed to direct snowmelt and rain runoff to a water tower placed beneath it.

The Groot orcs are aware that the leysahrid is coming, and they intend to shelter at their new “home,” Fort Frostbite. Note that the Groot in Fort Frostbite are only a small fragment of the whole tribe, and the totem beast is not their only — or largest — such creature.

AREAS OF THE MAP

Unless otherwise noted, there are no light sources burning or active in Fort Frostbite. It is assumed to be broad daylight as the adventure begins, but that changes as the leysahrid draws close.

Unless otherwise noted, all interiors have 7-foot-tall ceilings.

It requires a DC 25 Athletics (climb) to scale all exposed, worked surfaces of Fort Frostbite, which have a thin layer of ice, or DC 20 for the interior surfaces. Scaling the cliff beneath the fort requires a DC 20 Athletics (climb) check. As noted on the map, it is a 125-foot drop from the cliff.

Area I-I Outside the Main Gate

As the party approaches this area, read or paraphrase the following:

Moving ahead of the coming storm, you travel a mountain trail. To your left is the sheer face of Mt. Runhode, and to the right a 125-foot drop... fortunately the path is more than 70 feet wide.

Rounding a bend, you find yourselves at the southern entrance of Fort Frostbite. At last!

Two squat towers stand athwart the gatehouse. One blends into the living face of Runhode and the other stands at the very edge of the precipice. Each tower has a single ring of arrow slits about ten feet off the ground. The walls shimmer slightly under a thin patina of ice, and the growing wind whips the tower-and-snowflake banner of Fortification XXXI.

THAT GUY

There is always That Guy who says, “Wow, looks dangerous and everyone’s dead. I’m outta here.” Later on, after the party has liberated Fort Frostbite, That Guy might say, “Hey, whatever took this fort is tough and I want no part of it. I’m outta here.”

Hopefully your party doesn’t have *That Guy*, but if it does, and he wants to leave, there are a few things you can do:

- Point out that there’s no going for help; the party is it. Anyone in need of help will be long dead by the time they return with it.
- Remind him of the approaching storm. The party needs shelter, and a Commune with Nature ritual confirms there is no shelter other than Fort Frostbite in the area. Don’t be afraid to hit the party with the storm; it’s included in this module for that reason.
- Fleeing Fort Frostbite leaves the dead unavenged. The spirit of Sir Ree could haunt the party until they slay Lord Ablair. This haunting could take the form of denying the heroes extended rest due to nightmare-tossed sleep or a ghastly apparition that condemns them as cowards (at the worst time possible).
- Although they don’t realize it, the party not acting now allows Lord Ablair to deliver the tested mindfilth poison to the Mountain King, who begins using it in a campaign of conquest. When the authorities realize the party was also in the area and came back alive, the party’s honor, courage, and true loyalties may be called into question.

MAJOR QUEST

Avenge Fort Frostbite (Level 6, XP 1,250)

While the party may be motivated by curiosity, pious outrage, or concern for Childa rather than vengeance, the outcome and methods are the same. To accomplish this quest, they must:

- either use *Speak with Dead* (area 1–2), read the *Logbook* (area 1–7C) and/or the *Statement* (area 1–9), or somehow otherwise learn the backstory
- at least attempt to rescue Palmo Kelark (area 1–9)
- save Childa Bennins (area 2–5)
- kill or capture Lord Ablair (area 2–9)

If the heroes accomplish this goal and explain what happened to the authorities, they can expect a reward (the details of which are left for the GM, but could include money, magic items, or some kind of promised aid).

Something is amiss... the front gates are open slightly, and no guards challenge your approach.

A thick, smoky smell lingers in the air (although you spy no grayish plumes snaking over the twenty-five-foot walls). There is no sign the gate was forced or the battlements assaulted.

Near the door with a DC 17 Perception (listen) check:

(passive) *You hear a shuffling sound, like something walking, and then a grunt... maybe a word, maybe an animal noise.*

(active) *You hear a footstep, then some creature speaks aloud (Orc: "Nothing here, either.")*

Development: Give the party Handout A. When the party can see into area 1–2, paraphrase the read-aloud text, revealing only what they actually have line-of-sight to.

Note that the *levitate* spell only allows a creature to move 4 squares (or 20 feet) off the ground, not enough to see over the walls.

The portcullis indicated on the map is lowered. The lever that raises or lowers it is in the square marked "X" in area 1–3 (as is the other lever that operates the portcullis in Gatehouse B). The portcullis provides cover. Heroes can hack it down, lift it, or attempt to squeeze through it; only one hero can use aid another to help a hero lift the portcullis.

Portcullis: 120 hp; AC 4; Fort 12, Ref 4; Lift (Strength) DC 26; Squeeze (Small creature only) Acrobatics (escape) DC 18.

Lifting or hacking it down draws the attention of the orcs in area 1–2, but those orcs are distracted by searching, so it's possible to sneak into the lower bailey.

Area 1–2

Lower Bailey (EL 10, XP 2,428)

As the party approaches this area, read or paraphrase the following:

The triangular lower bailey of Fort Frostbite is nearly 100 feet long by 60 feet wide; at the far end, you see the northern gatehouse. Its doors seem to be missing and the portcullis is down. Five towers reinforce the walls ringing the courtyard; four are identical to the two you saw outside, but the last is 50 feet tall. You know from your discussion with Lord Macreed's men that the large tower, which is topped by a frost-covered crane, connects the upper courtyard to the lower.

The back half of the fort, beyond the main tower, is actually inside a huge cave. An artificial stalactite hangs from the carved ceiling of this cave... a snowmelt collection point.

Near the far gatehouse is a depression of some kind, about 15 feet long, like a shallow trench. South of the depression is a jumble of boxes, smashed chests, emptied drawers, and much of the material once kept in these containers. It looks like at least part of the fort has been ransacked, which would explain the pile of smoking, charred bodies just inside the gatehouse. You can't be sure, but the remains of a dozen corpses, possibly human, maybe some elves, are in there.

Several scrawny orcs in crude rags sift through the bodies, loot, and trench as if looking for something. A burly warrior-orc, his face marked by bright red warpaint, lounges in hide armor against the wall of the northeast tower.

Read or paraphrase the following as reinforcements appear:

A war whoop goes up from the orcs, and it is answered in kind from all around you. You hear the thumping of heavy feet as more burst from the central tower and from beyond the other guardhouse. Most wear nothing but rags, but some are warpainted like the warrior, and a few are marked with white pigment on their faces and hands... these wield greatclubs.

Read or paraphrase the following as the totem beast appears:

Suddenly the roar of a massive beast echoes in the courtyard, "Grooooooooot!" The surviving orcs cheer, and the northern gatehouse goes dark as a giant creature tries to squeeze into the courtyard. It is a titanic, bear-like monstrosity with the head of a snow owl. Frost lingers on its fur, and its exhaled breath is a flurry of snow.

A DC 19 Perception (listen) check (add +2 during combat) within 5 feet of the "depression" hears:

(passive) *For an instant, you think you hear a faint cry, but you're not sure from what direction.*

(active) *At the edge of your hearing, you hear a voice calling out for help. It sounds like it comes from beneath your feet.*

Development: The lower bailey is all most visitors see of Fort Frostbite. Access to the upper bailey is normally gained through the main tower (areas 1–3) or using the crane lift.