

# DESIGN NOTES: ADVERSARY ROSTERS

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by Justin Alexander – September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020

MARCH21 ROSTER	
ENCOUNTER	LOCATION
March21 Fireteam	Patrolling Top Level
March21 Fireteam	Area 3
BlackThorn	Area 6
March21 Fireteam	Area 6
Stanley Clayton	Area 7
March21 Fireteam (sleeping)	Area 8
John + March21 Fireteam	Area 9

Adversary Roster from [Infinity: Quantronic Heat](#)

[Adversary rosters](#) are one of the essential tools in my GM's kit. In 2016, I wrote that I considered them my greatest "secret weapon":

*They allow me to run dynamic scenarios of considerable complexity on battlefields that can easily sprawl across a dozen areas with a relative simplicity which still leaves me with enough brainpower to manage varied stat blocks and clever tactics [...] permanently disrupting the staid rhythms of "kick in the door" dungeoncrawling in your campaign. Adversary rosters are also a great way for running stealth missions, heists, and covert ops.*

Of course, I have no interest in actually keeping them secret. Since writing [that essay](#) in 2016, I've introduced them to an even larger audience through my remixes of [Dragon Heist and Descent Into Avernus](#); taught them as an essential tool in the [Infinity Roleplaying Game](#) core rulebook; and used them prominently in [Over the Edge: Welcome to the Island](#).

I'd first mentioned the concept of the adversary roster here on the Alexandrian all the way back in 2011, referring to them as a "[monster roster](#)" and using *G1 Against the Giants* as an example of how they could be used. But by that point I'd already been using them for years.

While discussing this history with Robb Minneman on [Patreon](#), I ended up delving into my old game notes in an effort to figure out when I'd first used adversary roster: I knew that *Against the Giants* had actually been one of the earliest rosters I'd developed (which is one of the reasons I'd used it as the example in my 2011 post). And I also remembered using them in *Forge of Fury* around the same time.

As I sifted through my notes, though, I discovered (or, I guess, *re-discovered*) a far more nuanced development process. Adversary rosters are, in many ways, such a simple concept that one might think they would have sprung full-blown from the brow of Zeus. That was even more-or-less how I remembered it happening.

So I thought it might be interesting to take a detailed look at the actual development process to see how this concept evolved.

## THREE DAYS TO KILL

Around 2000-02 I was running (or attempting to run) three D&D 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition campaigns:

- *The Quest of the Seals* was a fetch-quest campaign using a mixture of original and published adventures. I launched the campaign with John Tynes' [Three Days to Kill](#) (Atlas Games).
- *Freeport* was a heavily modified version of Chris Pramas' [Freeport Trilogy](#) (Green Ronin), placed at the northern tip of the Teeth of Light (a chain of islands in my home campaign setting) and studded with some island-hopping adventures.
- *The War of the Giants*, was a campaign I wanted to run that would start with [G1 Against the Giants](#), but rather than transitioning to drow-related shenanigans, it would have instead escalated into a full-scale humans vs. giants war on the northern frontiers. (This never really got off the ground and didn't progress beyond *Against the Giants*).

If you're familiar with the history of D&D, then you'll know that *Three Days to Kill* and *Death in Freeport* were the first two third-party adventures published for 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, both being released on the exact same day the *Player's Handbook* was released. It's not really a coincidence that my first two full-fledged 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition campaigns launched with those scenarios: I'd scooped them up at Gen Con 2000.

In terms of how adversary rosters developed, *The Quest of the Seals* was the most important of these campaigns.

I've talked previously about how John Tynes, in *Three Days to Kill*, boils down [the essential elements of a raid-type scenario](#). As noted in that discussion, part of a raid-type scenario is that "the defensive forces should be designed to respond as an active opposition force." This is what that looked like in *Three Days to Kill*:

As for the Sect, they've sent three acolytes along to make the deal; Carsten, the head priest, isn't about to risk his neck by venturing into the wilderness. Plus, he can always claim that his ambitious assistants tried to set up this deal without his knowledge, a plausible enough explanation given the nature of the Sect. Stats for the acolytes appear on page 13.

All told, then, there are thirteen people at the villa, three of whom have spells. The PCs are outnumbered, but they have the advantage of surprise, some magic of their own, and hopefully some good planning as to how they'll make the assault.

Six of Lucien's men are outside on watch at all times, using a rotating schedule. Their positions are marked on the inside cover map and they stick to those positions pretty well unless trouble erupts. Lucien remains inside with three of his men and the three acolytes. The group has

fourteen horses, all of which are tethered behind the villa in the horse pen. Two men venture down to the river four times a day to retrieve buckets of water for the horses and the men. (The fourteenth horse is used by the acolytes of the Sect to transport the Bone Mirror, discussed later.)

Lucien and the acolytes spend their time drinking and talking. If the PCs do nothing, then the negotiations go well and a deal is struck.

Both groups go to sleep after dark. The guards sleep and watch in shifts, always keeping six men awake and reasonably alert; the three men off duty sleep in the servants' quarters. At night the guards on duty keep a small fire stoked in the patio fire pit, with ample wood at hand to raise the flames if they need light, as well as torches and lanterns. By night, Lucien sleeps in the master bedroom and the acolytes sleep in the easternmost bedroom, all on the upper floor.

Now, this is not an adversary roster. But what it *does* do is separate the bad guys from the room key and, once again, emphasize that they're going to be actively moving around the place.

When I prepped the adventure, I created a cheat sheet for the villa:

### Locations

Cultists: Lounge, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor – then Dining Room once the meeting starts

Lucien: -- then Dining Room once the meeting starts

Lucien's Men: 6 are standing guard around the villa. 1 is moving around inside. 2 are sleeping in the Servant's Quarters.

Horses (14): Penned out back.

### Schedule

1. Once per day, two of Lucien's men go down to the river to fill buckets with water.
2. Six men are always awake and guarding the villa; the other three tend to spend their time off sleeping.
3. At night: Six on guard. Lucien (large bedroom, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor) and the acolytes (lounge) sleep. A large fire is kept going on the front patio.
4. Once the meeting starts (noon of the day the PCs should arrive), it will be two days before a deal is reached.

### Security

Windows: Glass-paned. Swing open on hinges. Easily smashed and entered.

Doors: Lock, but only have a DC 12 to smash open. Only a DC 10 to pick lock.

Chimney: Would be big enough for someone to go down. Climb at DC 10, plus a Move Silently at DC 15 not to be heard throughout the whole house.

You can see that this is also not an adversary roster: It's just a brief summary of the information from the module. When I ran the adventure, though, I *really* liked this: I liked the dynamic foes. And I liked having this information all on a cheat sheet that I could easily reference.

## THE SUNLESS CITADEL

*Three Days to Kill* ends with someone (probably the PCs) accidentally opening a portal to Hell. For the purposes of my campaign, I basically upped the ante on this. As I noted in the campaign journal:

*Behind you, the Blood Temple crouches upon the side of the mountain, pulsing and screaming into the night. A fiendish red light floods the heavens, obscuring the pale stars which shine down upon your retreating forms. The maw of Hell has been opened, and if there is a power which can shut it... you do not know what it might be.*

*The Quest of the Seals* was, in fact, a quest for the three seals required to shut the portal to Hell: I placed one in *The Sunless Citadel*, another in the *Forge of Fury*, and the third in a homebrew module called the Monastery of Light. I then positioned these locations at opposite ends of my campaign world, so that the PCs would have to criss-cross the map on their epic journey.

But I digress. The important bit is that the next adventure on the docket was *The Sunless Citadel*.

And in my prep notes for *The Sunless Citadel* there's this page:

## KOBOLDS

15 – Meepo = Pahl  
16 – 3 kobolds in each of these rooms  
19 – 3 kobolds  
20 – 3 kobolds, 24 non-combatants  
21 – 6 kobolds, Yusdrayl  
23 – 3 kobolds

Total Kobolds: 26 kobolds (including Pahl and Yusdrayl)

## GOBLINS

32 – 2 goblins  
33 – 4 goblins  
36 – 4 goblins, each (x3)  
40 – 4 goblins, 3 hobgoblins  
41 – 4 goblins, 5 hobgoblins – Durnn, Grenl, twig blight (go-between from Durnn to Belak)

Total Goblins:

43 – Balsag  
47 – 8 goblins  
49 – 4 goblins

Reinforce only if things are going very badly and the PCs draw back. (Durnn has to request Belak's help, and he's leery of doing so.)

Now, this looks a lot like an adversary roster. But this is only partly true. Do you see the entries for "Total Kobolds" and "Total Goblins"? That's because this was actually a worksheet for tracking *casualties*.

See, *The Sunless Citadel* is occupied by a clan of kobolds and a clan of goblins at war with each other. As written, this conflict is kind of a cold war (with the kobolds occupying one set of rooms and the goblins occupying a different set of rooms). But I wanted to make this an ACTIVE conflict, with the goblins and kobolds actively feuding, raiding, and fighting. The casualty sheet was designed so that I could track this in real time.

This becomes even clearer with some stuff I designed for the group's second session in the Citadel. The PCs had allied with the kobolds and fallen asleep in a side chamber. I decided to launch the second session with them being awakened by a major goblin raid on the kobolds.

I actually prepped the outcome of the entire fight if the PCs didn't involved. This was sort of like [prepping a scenario timeline](#), but mostly misguided because it continued far past the point where the PCs were likely to intervene and change everything. (On the other hand, it was really four separate timelines – one for each room which had been assaulted – so this was mitigated somewhat: If the PCs intervened in Area 15, for example, I could use the timeline to easily keep track of what was happening in other rooms. Looking back with 20+ years of experience with 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, though, it would have made a lot more sense to reduce the number of rounds involved here by at least a third.)

#### Round 0

Hallway – 6 goblins, 4 kobolds  
Area 15 – 4 goblins, 3 kobolds (Pahl is hiding in area 16 off of this room)  
Area 19 – 6 goblins, 11 kobolds  
Area 20 – 2 goblins, 3 kobolds (plus 24 non-combatant kobolds)

#### Round 5

Hallway – 1 kobold dead.  
Area 15 – Goblin carrying two apples will escape down the passage to area 4.  
Area 19 – 1 goblin dead  
Area 20 – 1 kobold dead (the last guard)

#### Round 10

Hallway – 1 goblin dead.  
Area 15 – 1 kobold dead, 2 goblins dead.  
Area 19 – 1 kobold dead, 5 goblins pull back through the easternmost southern hallway  
Area 20 – 5 kobolds dead

#### Round 15

Hallway – 1 kobold dead, 1 goblin dead; 5 goblins from area 19 appear  
Area 4 – Goblin carrying apples starts climbing rope to get out of citadel  
Area 15 – 1 goblin dead (all goblins dead)  
Area 19 – Queen's guard is regrouping  
Area 20 – 5 kobolds dead

#### Round 16

Hallway – 5 goblins from area 19 attack flank of remaining 2 kobolds. Simultaneously, the 2 surviving kobolds from area 15 will attack the flank of the 4 goblins who remain in the hallway here.  
Area 19 – Queen and 5 kobolds retire to area 22. 5 kobolds move to area 20.  
Area 20 – Same.

#### Round 20

Hallway – 3 kobolds dead, 1 goblin dead  
Area 20 – 2 kobolds (non-combatants) dead, 1 kobold dead, 2 goblins dead

#### Round 23

Hallway – 1 kobold dead, 1 goblins dead (heroic last stand). 5 kobolds from area 20 appear along the north hallway.  
The remaining 7 goblins will retreat through area 15 and back into their territory.

I concert with this timeline, I also had a more specific casualty tracker:

	<u>Kobolds Dead</u>	<u>Goblins Dead</u>
Hallway		
Area 15		
Area 19		
Area 20		
<b>Aftermath</b>		
Area 15	– If any of the kobolds here survived, they'll report that a goblin scurried down the hall to area 4.	
Area 20	– If the goblins had time to start slaughtering innocent kobolds, their bodies will be strewn here. <b>Soundtrack:</b> The Eldest Halls – Track 2-6	
Area 19/22	– Queen will emerge once the coast is clear, and go to area 20 to comfort her people.	

In practice, that cheat sheet listing the locations of every goblin and kobold in the place did result in me beginning to haltingly use it like a proto-adversary roster (moving goblins and kobolds around to reinforce various areas), but the concept hadn't fully gelled yet.

## THE DEPTHS OF RAGE

As the PCs left *The Sunless Citadel* and headed west towards *The Forge of Fury*, one of the adventures they had along the road was "Depths of Rage," a scenario from *Dungeon Magazine* #83 by J.D. Wiker that I combined with some material from Carl Sargent's *Night Below* campaign.

Wiker's "Depths of Rage" is a really cool scenario where the PCs delve into a goblin lair and then, when they're at the deepest point of the dungeon, an earthquake hits and causes large parts of the dungeon to collapse. Now, with the dungeon completely transformed, the PCs need to crawl back out!

So this is a really cool, dynamic dungeon where the key entries and monster locations shift pre- and post-quake.

*Night Below*, on the other hand, includes notes in its key about how the monsters will dynamically react to the PCs' presence and attempt to alert monsters in other locations (and also how the current location will be different if they have been previously alerted). For example:

### 5. Thief Guards

[...]

If the *wyvern watch* at area 4 goes off, alerting them to the presence of intruders, Tinsley slips away towards area 10 to alert the fighter guards in the lower caverns (area 12), while Caswell hides behind one of the many columnar rocks.

I kind of combined these two ideas in an effort to make the dungeon even more dynamic and reactive. What I ended up with was an adversary cheat sheet that looked like this:

AREA 3 – 12 goblins.

**Surprised.** 2 will run to area 5. 10 will attack. Listen checks in Area 5 (DC 10).

**Alert.**

Round 1 – 10 to Area 1. 2 to Area 5.

Round 5 – 4 from Area 5 move up to boulders, where they will snipe, then retreat to Area 5.

Round 10 – 4 from Area 5 will be ready to enter from Area 4. Will attack PCs' flank when time comes. Snipers will turn around and attack

Round 13 – 4 goblins from area 5 enter.

AREA 4 – 0 goblins.

**Surprised.** Empty.

**Alert.** (from area 1 surprise)

Round 10 – 4 from Area 5 will arrive, ready to move to Area 3.

**Alert 2.** (from area 3 surprise)

Round 5. 6 goblins from area 5 arrive, proceed to area 3 for flanking.

Which was... interesting.

No, not really. I mean, it worked. The adventure was great. But trying to program my prep notes like a computer game was a terrible idea – pure [contingency prep instead of tool prep](#).

The last thing I prepped as part of this adventure, though, was a tracking sheet. Basically just a list of every area in the scenario so that I could actively track which goblins were where as a result of the various Alerts being triggered:

<p><b>GOBLIN TRACKING SHEET (WESTERN CAVES)</b></p> <p><u>Area 1</u></p> <p><u>Area 3</u></p> <p><u>Area 4</u></p> <p><u>Area 5</u></p> <p><u>Area 6</u></p> <p><b>GOBLIN TRACKING SHEET (EASTERN CAVES)</b></p> <p><u>Area 8</u></p> <p><u>Area 9</u></p> <p><u>Area 10</u></p> <p><u>Area 11</u></p> <p><u>Area 12</u></p> <p><u>Area 13</u></p> <p><u>Area 14</u></p> <p><u>Area 15</u></p> <p><u>Area 16</u></p>
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When I'd filled out this tracking sheet, what I had, of course, was something that looked a lot like the proto-adversary roster from *The Sunless Citadel* (i.e., Area 16 - 4 goblins), with the key difference being that this had been specifically developed to move the goblins around.

You'll also notice that I had chunked the dungeon into sections: the Western Caves and the Eastern Caves. This was a natural division in Wiker's design of the caverns, and breaking the goblin forces into these two separate chunks I kept each chunk to a manageable level of complexity.

# THE FORGE OF FURY

Which bring us, finally, to my prep notes for a radically expanded *Forge of Fury*. It's here that all of these ideas gel into the adversary roster. It looked like this:

## **ADRAK:**

The adrak have been here nearly two hundred years. The Spider Gods knew that one of the ancient seals had been placed under the protection of the dwarves of Khundrukar. When Khundrukar fell to the Black Horde, they dispatched their servants from the Western Wastes. The true adrak, like the true adrag, have always been charged with the protection of ancient sites.

Essein (Essein's Shadow)

8 Adrak Sorcerers

20 Adrak Rogues

20 Adrak Fighters

25 non-fighters (women and children in Area 18)

## **ADRAK STARTING POSITIONS:**

AREA 15: 1 Adrak Fighter

AREA 16: 5 Adrak Rogues, 5 Adrak Fighters, 2 sorcerers

AREA 17: 10 Adrak Rogues, 4 sorcerers

AREA 18: 5 Adrak Rogues, 5 Adrak Fighters

AREA 19: Essein, Essein's Shadow

AREA 21: 10 Adrak Fighters, 2 sorcerers

Following in the footsteps of the goblins & kobolds of *The Sunless Citadel* and the east & west caves of "Depths of Rage," you can see that I've chunked *Forge of Fury* into factions. This, obviously, is the adrak faction.

You can see that I'm still including a separate list of everyone in the faction. I did this for the purpose of tracking casualties, just as I had done in the previous two adventures. (Shortly thereafter I realized I could just track casualties directly on the area roster so that I wasn't trying to do double-entry bookkeeping in the middle of a session.)

You might also note that I was indexing by AREA instead of by ACTION GROUP. (Compare to the roster from *Quantronic Heat* at the beginning of this article.) This is really a legacy of how the adversary roster evolved out of a traditional dungeon key (i.e., I'm literally going through the module and listing all the monsters in Area 15, then all the monsters in Area 16, etc.) and it persisted in my notes for many years even when I wasn't adapting published adventures.

Reviewing my other campaign notes, it looks like I made the swap around 2009, probably as part of the [In the Shadow of the Spire](#) campaign.

(Why is the swap important? Conceptually it puts the focus on the adversaries you're actively playing rather than the area they're currently in. More importantly it makes it A LOT easier to use advanced techniques like variable areas, patrols, and the like. It also makes doing roster updates easier. See [Art of the Key - Part 4: Adversary Rosters](#).)

In any case, the pay-off for these adversary rosters in *Forge of Fury* was immediate and *spectacular* at the table: Things kicked off with a truly epic siege as the PCs sought to break through the goblin defenses at the Mountain Door. After getting through the door itself, the PCs were able to strategically test the goblin defenses, while the goblins were able to move their reinforcements around.



Later, the PCs became trapped in the depths of the dungeon, cut off by the movement of enemy troops on the levels above them. You can read the conclusion of those adventures in [\*Tales from the Table: In the Depths of Khunbaral\*](#).

The whole thing remains one of the coolest and most memorable dungeon adventures I've ever run, and the experience immediately cemented the adversary roster as a technique for creating awesome games. Having run hundreds of sessions since then using adversary rosters, I have only become more convinced that this is the case.