

A WAGER FOR MIGHT

Otherworldly power can be retrieved from the unseen pathways across the planes. But it comes with a ruinous cost. One that can render you insane!

On the Art of Planar Binding

Delve Level 7 (4,500 XP)

10 gibbering mouthers

SETUP

FOR THOSE INVOLVED in arcane studies and the practice of the magical arts, the temptation to dabble into the mighty field of study they call high-arcana is too strong to avoid. It is such a promise of power that few can let it remain in darkness. The path, at first, appears to be simple. One must only study and practice, and learn alchemy and transmutation. Mages get the impression that a steady progress and learning curve awaits them in the strange alleys of high-arcana. Alas, it is not that simple. It is a deceivingly perilous path that hardens the heart and breaks the soul. What must be done to progress is a terrible test for the mind and body. Many of those mages lose their lives on the unfortunate wager for might.

THE STUDENT OF MADNESS

THE PLANE OF madness is a source of fear and fascination for mages and scholars. A powerful spellcaster named Sebastian Brie dedicated decades of his prosperous life to studying it. According to him, with a properly adjusted device, the right enchantments, and a strong mind, he would be able to summon heralds from the plane of madness. What nature these creatures would have he ignored, but it did not matter. Sebastian's foul objective cared not for these messengers. He would magically bind them to a device in his laboratory and then distill their planar power into a substance he dubbed the Void Extract. A concentrated philter that would contain the power of the many desiccated planar entities.

The device was built from scratch in Sebastian's underground laboratory and lair. It took him five years to build it and test it carefully for its first use. Drunk with ambition, Sebastian cast his summoning spell. The amorphous, tentacled creatures that stepped forth from the portal gibbered maddening commands into the mage's brain. Sebastian underestimated them; he was not strong enough to withstand the lunacy in their presence. In a bout of derangement, Sebastian activated the device while standing in the transmutation circle.

THE CORRUPTED PHILTER

WHEN SEBASTIAN BRIE activated the device, it stole away the life energy of three gibbering mouthers and the hapless wizard. Their combined essences were distilled into a vial of corrupted Void Extract. The strange mixture is fatal to drink but could be used as a focus for arcane experiments and binding rituals (see **Conclusion**).

ADVENTURE HOOKS

ON A LARGER, overarching quest, the characters require access to a theoretical substance that can aid them in defeating a mighty foe. A mentor or ally is the source of this knowledge: A substance known as Void Extract has powerful magical properties that can protect them against extraplanar threats; it can also be used as a weapon.

The characters must spend 1d4 weeks following leads, investigating in libraries, and consulting sages. After this investigation, all evidence points to a small town where Sebastian Brie died in a dangerous experiment about 8 years ago. The locals claim the man was altruistic and helped the townsfolk often. After a thunderous explosion in his laboratory, he was never seen again. Some tried to explore the lair but fell prey to deadly traps.

FEATURES OF THE LAIR

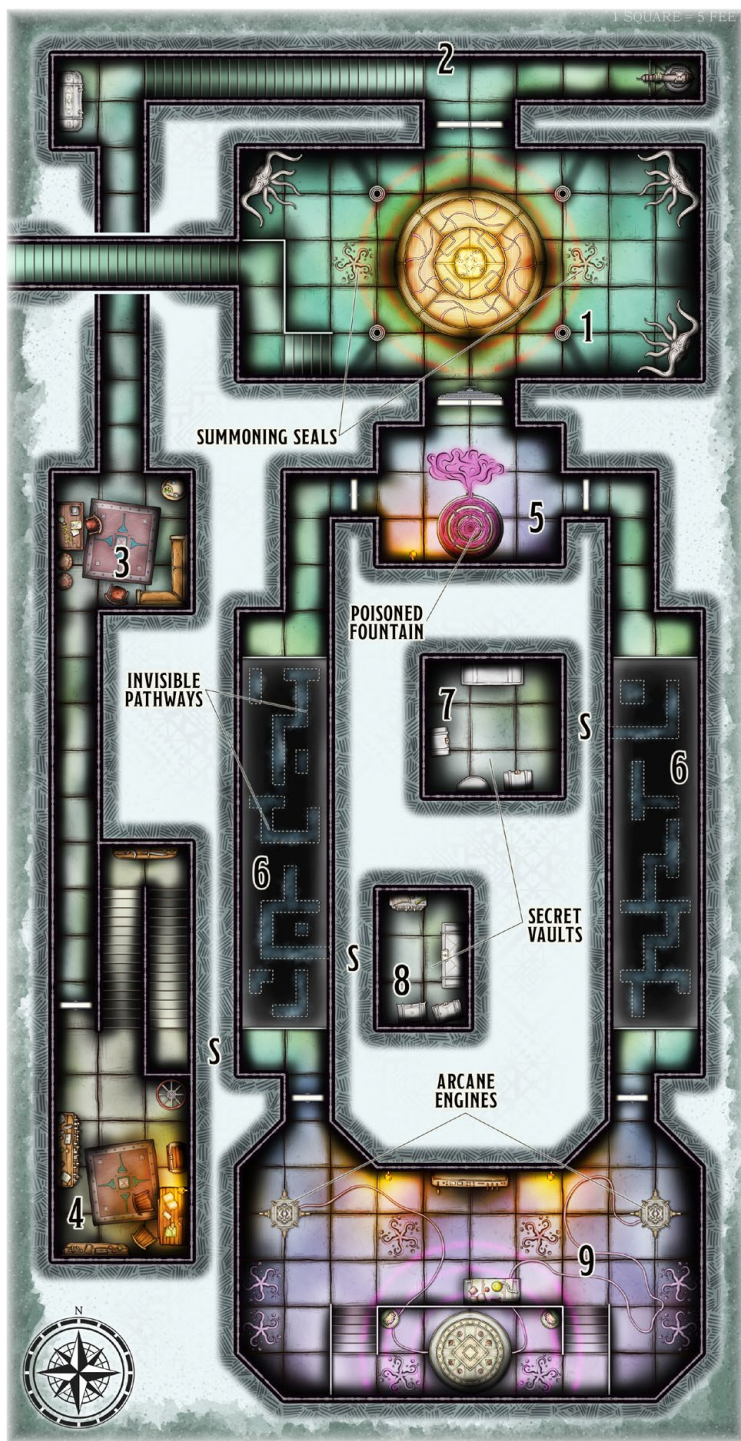
Light. The wall sconces in the lair feature *continual flame* spells. The magic fades in 1 minute if removed.

Locks. All doors are made of soapstone slabs with medium-quality locking devices (DC 15 Thieves' Tools). Forcing open a door causes a foot-wide magical explosion that deals 5d6 fire damage (DC 16 Dexterity / half).

Chamber Ceilings. All areas have 20-foot-tall, flat ceilings decorated with intricate frescoes that depict arcane formulae and never-before-seen constellations.

Arcane Negation. A random-acting, anti-magic field in the lair negates the casting of arcane spells within the compound. When an arcane spell is cast, there is a 1-in-6 chance it fizzles out. Divine spells are unaffected.

Magic Traps. Trap devices in the lair reset once per hour, including the exploding runes on doors. An automated *mending* spell repairs damaged devices too.



1. GRAND ENTRANCE HALL

A long flight of stairs in the mage's abandoned home leads down to a grand chamber with a 15-foot-wide glowing circle surrounded by three tentaced statues.

A fine sequence of runes in the circle can be used with the *circle of teleportation* spell. Stepping on the circle, though, triggers the two summoning seals in the room. A one-way, glittering portal into the plane of madness opens and two **gibbering mouthers** emerge to attack. During combat, the three tentaced statues on the walls take on a quasi-living quality and cast the *confusion* spell centered on a different character (recharge 5-6 each).

2. THE ILLUSORY WALL TRAP

The twenty-foot-long, east path is not visible when the characters come from area 1. A *major image* spell makes it seem covered by a stone wall and produces the sound of steps on the stairs in front of it. The sound is meant to distract the trespasser so that they turn left and away from the illusory wall. When a creature reaches the stairs, the hidden, automated crossbow activates and shoots a bolt aiming at the closest target. The creature takes 8d6 piercing damage (DC 17 Dexterity / half).

Treasure. The coffer at the bottom of the stairs contains a set of rotten robes, a pouch with 350 gp, two *potions of greater healing*, and a blank spellbook.

3. SEBASTIAN'S ROOM

A layer of dust and cobwebs covers the furniture in this ancient bedroom. Despite the long-term abandonment, the room is somewhat welcoming and cozy.

Sebastian lived and worked here. A foldable bed hangs on the east wall. The remains of decayed food lie on the night-table plates. Sebastian's incomplete journal on the desk reveals the following after a 10-minute review:

- The mage was working on a way to create the Void Extract in this underground laboratory.
- The command word for the valve in area 4 is 'Cina'.
- Sebastian was confident that his device could withstand the requirements of such an experiment.
- The last entry was a day before the experiment.

Treasure. 38 gp, a *potion of poison*, a *potion of slipperiness*, and a *wand of detect magic* lie on the desk.

4. SEBASTIAN'S STUDY

The room contains two bookcases, a desk, a wooden chest, and a wheel valve. Sebastian's research, arcane formulae, and documentation on his binding device are on the desk. A spellcaster can review them in 1 hour to understand the workings of the arcane engines in area 9.

The wheel valve causes the invisible pathways in area 6 to glow in the dark. It can only be operated by saying the command word (see area 3). Otherwise, a *dispel magic* spell allows the immovable valve to be used once.

5. THE POISONED FOUNTAIN

A beautiful, three-level fountain pours a bright magenta fluid and produces a fragrance of roses and pines.

When a creature comes within 5 feet of the fountain, all three doors lock and poisonous fumes are released from it. Creatures in the room take 6d6 poison damage per round of exposure (DC 16 Constitution / half). The reinforced doors from area 1 can only be bypassed by a master locksmith (DC 20 Thieves' Tools).

6. THE IMPASSABLE GAPS

The hallway ends and an insurmountable gap follows. The walls are decorated with ancient, flowing elvish runes. The far side is hidden in darkness.

The elvish runes spell an old poem about floating leaves in the wind. There is a path to cross the gap in each area 6. There are invisible, 2-foot-wide, floating sections of stone that can be used to cross south. Crossing without aid is a dangerous proposition. Through trial and error, a creature can use an object to feel its way across. Each 20-foot section requires caution and precision (DC 18 Dexterity). A failure by 5 or more causes a creature to fall. The bottom is 80 feet below, falling creatures take 8d6 bludgeoning damage. Operating the valve in area 4 causes the pathways to glow in the dark. This discovery is not immediately apparent if the characters have artificial light sources with them (DC 16 Intelligence).

7. EAST VAULT

The secret chamber contains several stone chests with bronze locks and a stone coffer. The enclosures are open.

Treasure. Collectively, the chests contain 90 pp, 2,000 gp, 4,350 sp, a black velvet mask stitched with silver thread (25 gp), a silver ewer (45 gp), a *bag of holding*, a *driftglobe*, a *potion of fire breath*, a *potion of resistance* (cold), and a *spell scroll* of *expeditious retreat*.

8. WEST VAULT

The secret chamber contains several stone chests and a single bookshelf packed with scrolls and tomes.

Treasure. The chamber contains 70 pp, 2,150 gp, 3,670 sp, a copper chalice with silver filigree (90 gp), a turquoise jewel box (45 gp), a *+2 shortsword*, and a spellbook with all spells from the archmage statblock.

9. THE BINDING DEVICE

Two tower-like, arcane apparatuses glow in this chamber. Cables connect them to a magic circle on a raised dais. A layer of magenta dust on everything.

Only dust remains of Sebastian and the aberration's corpses. However, a crystal vial on the magic circle contains the corrupted Void Extract. It contains Sebastian's deranged soul (see Conclusion). A spellcaster who reviewed the documents in area 4 can operate the control panel, place a new vial on the magic circle, and activate the device. Doing so, summons eight **gibbering mouthers** to each summoning seal (see map). Defeating them in combat weakens them and allows the arcane engines to function. Upon defeat, their essences are captured and distilled into the crystal vial. If a character stands on the circle when this occurs, they suffer the same fate as Sebastian and ruin the binding experiment (no save). Otherwise, a vial of Void Extract is created.



CONCLUSION

THE CHARACTERS REACH the end of this adventure. They must face the consequences of their deeds.

Successful creation of the Void Extract overwhelms the arcane engines and damages them. They require years of research and work to be repaired. The Void Extract is a campaign item that shall aid them to overcome the planar threats of their home campaign. Thus, the nature of the Void Extract and its effects are left to the GM's discretion. It is recommended that the acquisition of this item marks a mighty change in the campaign.

The corrupted Void Extract is fatal if drunk (no save). However, an arcane spellcaster can attune to it as an arcane focus. It is cursed. Once per day, the caster can cast a spell as if one level higher. 2d6 weeks after, the caster starts hearing maddening whispers from the vial. It threatens to render the mage insane once per day akin to the *contact other plane* spell (DC 15 Intelligence).

A character standing on the circle when the arcane engines power on becomes trapped in a second vial of corrupted Void Extract. Retrieving their soul is almost impossible. Alas, that is an adventure for another day...