

EXQUISITE AGONY

A GUIDE TO HELL AND THE DAMNED

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1:	
WELCOME TO HELL	3
The Root of Evil	4
The Dark Lord Rises	4
Finding Hell	5
Gaethira	5
Tarterian Gates.....	6
Fuming Trench	6
Hell Revealed.....	6
Boundless and Pervasive Horror.....	6
Hellish Terrain.....	6
Notable Locations	7
Hellish Happenings.....	10
Escaping Hell	13
Hell's Denizens	14
Diabolus.....	14
Greater Devils	14
Devils.....	16
Monsters	16
The Damned.....	16
Outsiders	16
Rewards and Discoveries	16
Corrupted Objects	17
Temptation and Corruption.....	17
Diabolical Objects.....	17
Hellish Relics.....	20
Creatures of Hell.....	22
Angel.....	22
Behemoth.....	23
Bogie	23
Butcher.....	24
Cambion.....	24
Chimera	25
Devilkin.....	26
Gargoyle.....	26
Gaunts	27
Hogman	27
Ifrit.....	27
Incubus/Succubus.....	28
Lemure	29
Malebranche	30
Serpahim	30
Shedim	30
Termagant	31
Tormentor	32
Zeboul	32
CHAPTER 2:	
WITH ALL MY HATRED	33
The Path of the Third Prophet.....	33
The Pilgrims	33
In the Footsteps of a Saint.....	36
The Pilgrimage.....	36
Holy Sites.....	36
Aftermath	39
CHAPTER 3:	
HELLBOUND CHARACTERS.....	40
New Story Complications	40
New Marks of Darkness.....	40
Worshipping the Devil	41
Cambion	41
Apostate.....	43
Diabolist	44
Witch Hunter.....	44
Diabolical Spells.....	45
Curse Spells	45
Enchantment Spells	45
Fire	45
Forbidden.....	46
Illusion	47
Protection	47
Song	47
Spiritualism	47
Theurgy.....	47
[INDEX.....	48

Sample file





welcome to hell!

From pulpits and street corners, doomsday preachers shriek about the horrors awaiting those who walk in darkness. The druids, roaming the lands under their protection, whisper prayers to the Fair Folk to keep the dark ones at bay. Even the witches use symbols to ward against the attention of the malevolent spirits, those fallen faeries known as devils.

Every religion, large and small, claims there exists a place of punishment, a great repository where the souls of the damned face suffering beyond description at the hands of fiendish tormentors. This place has many names, such as the Darkness Below, the Nether World, the City of Graves, or Torment, but most know this place as Hell.

Hell would not exist without mortals. It is a place of purification, where souls stained by evil can find release from their burdens through the cruel ministrations of the warped faeries living there. The process of purification does not come easily but involves extraordinary pain; thus, the devils have amassed a wide range of torture techniques for this purpose.

Hell is also the staging ground for the devils' efforts to corrupt souls in the mortal world. In this place sustained by great magic, devils can draw power to tempt mortals, to bestow on them wondrous gifts in exchange

for ownership over their souls. Devils find mortals' rapid descent into darkness hilarious—even more so when it hurts other people. However, as much as they enjoy ruining mortals' lives, devils depend on them for survival. Should mortals ever pass from the world, so too would the devils. For this reason, devils have a keen interest in the present troubles blighting Urth. The Demon Lord's shadow reaches even into the bowels of Hell, and its denizens stand ready to contribute to the struggle to save the world.

Exquisite Agony lays bare the secrets of Hell and its inhabitants, offering GMs new inspiration for creating adventures and campaigns that explore themes of corruption and redemption, take groups into the depths of darkness, or test the player characters' ability to resist the power Hell offers. As with other sourcebooks, you'll find a mix of story and mechanics to support these goals. Players can also find more options at the end of this supplement, including a new ancestry, a selection of new paths, and new spells.

Since the material in this book injects a heavy dose of evil into the game, it might not be appropriate for all groups. Be sure to consider carefully before you introduce these options into your game.

THE ROOT OF EVIL

In the years of legend after the genies went mad, but before the faeries withdrew from the mortal world, something strange happened on Urth. Animals evolved, innovated, and built on the knowledge of their predecessors. The faeries recognized that the great speed of their development came from an eternal essence housed within the temporary and fragile bodies of those ancestors to humans. When those creatures died, their essence slipped free from the meat to find a place in a newborn body.

For the faeries, death is final. There is nothing beyond it. But for mortals, death was only a transition, marking the passage from one life to the next. With no end to the number of lives they could experience, mortals had nothing to fear from violence, sickness, or mishap. They would be born again into new bodies, recalling all their previous lives. As evidenced in their rapid development, mortals learned from their mistakes and avoided making them again. Many faeries believed they might one day come to dominate the world, overpowering and enslaving the immortals.

The great fey, including Titania the Faerie Queen, Oberon, and others, came together and used their magic to fashion two realms to house the souls loosed from mortal bodies. The first was the Underworld, a place of shadow and long silences created to trap souls before they could assume new bodies. In this gloomy realm, the imprisoned souls would grow numb and forget the lives they left behind. Only when nothing remained of who they once were, would they be freed to find new lives as the wheel of life dictates. The second realm was Elysium, a paradise set aside for the souls of exceptional people, individuals too valuable to be recycled or too dangerous to risk their return with even some of their memories intact. Thus began the cycle of birth, death, and eventual rebirth all mortals face, and so it has remained the long years since.

The decision to create the Underworld and Elysium was not unanimous, however. The most outspoken critic was Diabolus, the Lord of Seven Flames. He despised mortals both for their potential to transcend the faeries' achievements and for the true immortality their creators (whether the genies or something else) had granted to them. Diabolus felt the steps his brothers and sisters had taken did not go far enough; souls could always refuse to descend into the Underworld and linger in the world as spirits, recalling their lives with perfect clarity. Diabolus proposed that the great fey should present themselves to mortals as gods, to set themselves above them and rule over them. More importantly, he demanded a more rigorous purging of the souls' memories: eradicating their past lives through torment, driving them mad with pain until they knew nothing but suffering.

As convincing as the Lord of the Seven Flames could be, he failed to shift the others to his way of thinking.

Some, such as Titania, could not countenance the suffering of innocent souls, while others, such as the Horned Lord, wanted nothing to do with ruling mortals or settling their petty disputes. The great fey set aside Diabolus's plan and moved forward with the decision on which most of them agreed.

THE DARK LORD RISES

Undeterred by their rejection, Diabolus took steps on his own. He adopted a mortal form and moved among the tribes of the first people, planting the idea that there were gods in the world, among the fair folk of the wood, amid the stars, and everywhere else. Through his efforts, cults formed to venerate the Horned Lord, Father Death, and even the Maiden of the Moon. The early days of these fledgling religions were steeped in blood and violence as various factions fought against each other, offering sacrifices in blood and treasure to the beings they exalted and feared. Within those religions came schisms, factions born from disagreements between members of the same faiths. These groups turned against each other, driven by the certainty that they alone had apprehended the truth. Arguments turned violent and communities were torn apart by the fighting. Diabolus watched it all, pleased by the chaos his meddling had created.

What the fey lord did not expect was how mortal belief interacted with the field of magic enveloping the world. Through faith and prayer, mortals channeled power into the great fey, whose power grew until they became nearly what mortals believed them to be. The effects were considerable, in some cases causing terrible transformations. Thanatos, who oversaw the Underworld, became Father Death, a skeleton with eye sockets burning with blue flames and swaddled in darkness. The Horned Lord became a terrifying figure, the embodiment of wild animals and the natural world. The damage Diabolus had wrought was done, and the great fey feared that if they confessed they were not gods, the mortals would turn against them and their kind. So to quell the fighting, the "new gods" gathered the leaders of the various faiths, teaching them the secrets of the lands and how to use magic. Their apostles were named druids, who went on to establish the religion known as the Old Faith.

The great fey, having brought peace to the land, withdrew from the mortal world. They fashioned the hidden kingdoms into which they and the faeries who served them retreated. As the fey began to disappear from the world, Father Death, Revel, and the World Mother confronted Diabolus on the slopes of Mount Fear. They accused him of contravening the compact they had made, turning mortals against one another and staining their souls with darkness. They demanded



that he quit the mortal world for good and leave mortals to their fates as the great fey had all agreed. Diabolus refused. He threatened to reveal his hand in the creation of religion, which would not only cause even more chaos, but would also strip the great fey of the gifts they had gained from their mortal servants.

To convince Diabolus to go, Father Death offered him the souls stained by darkness, to do with as he wished. The World Mother offered to set aside a place within the mortal world for himself and those faeries who wished to go with him. And, after Diabolus still refused, Revel offered a tithe of souls with which those faeries would be able to replenish their numbers. Having extracted these vows from the great fey, Diabolus at last agreed and took with him a great host to the realm bestowed on him by the World Mother. There he became the Devil, the Lord of Lies, and has remained for the long years since, overseeing a vast and terrible kingdom, surrounded by a ghastly horde that has grown warped and corrupted by a hideous appetite for evil. These twisted faeries are the devils, who exist to spread misery, hate, and suffering, and they are always seeking to fill their coffers with the souls of the damned.

FINDING HELL

Souls stained by evil deeds find Hell easily enough. They sink through the Underworld and tumble into the darkness below. For the living, traveling there usually involves magic, though there are other ways in. Hell has three known entrances in and around the continent of Rûl. One stands within the settled lands, another is far from civilization, while the last lies at the bottom of the Nyxian Ocean.

If it were up to the devils, anyone seeking Hell could find it. However, the faeries, the various cults, and others have hidden the entrances.

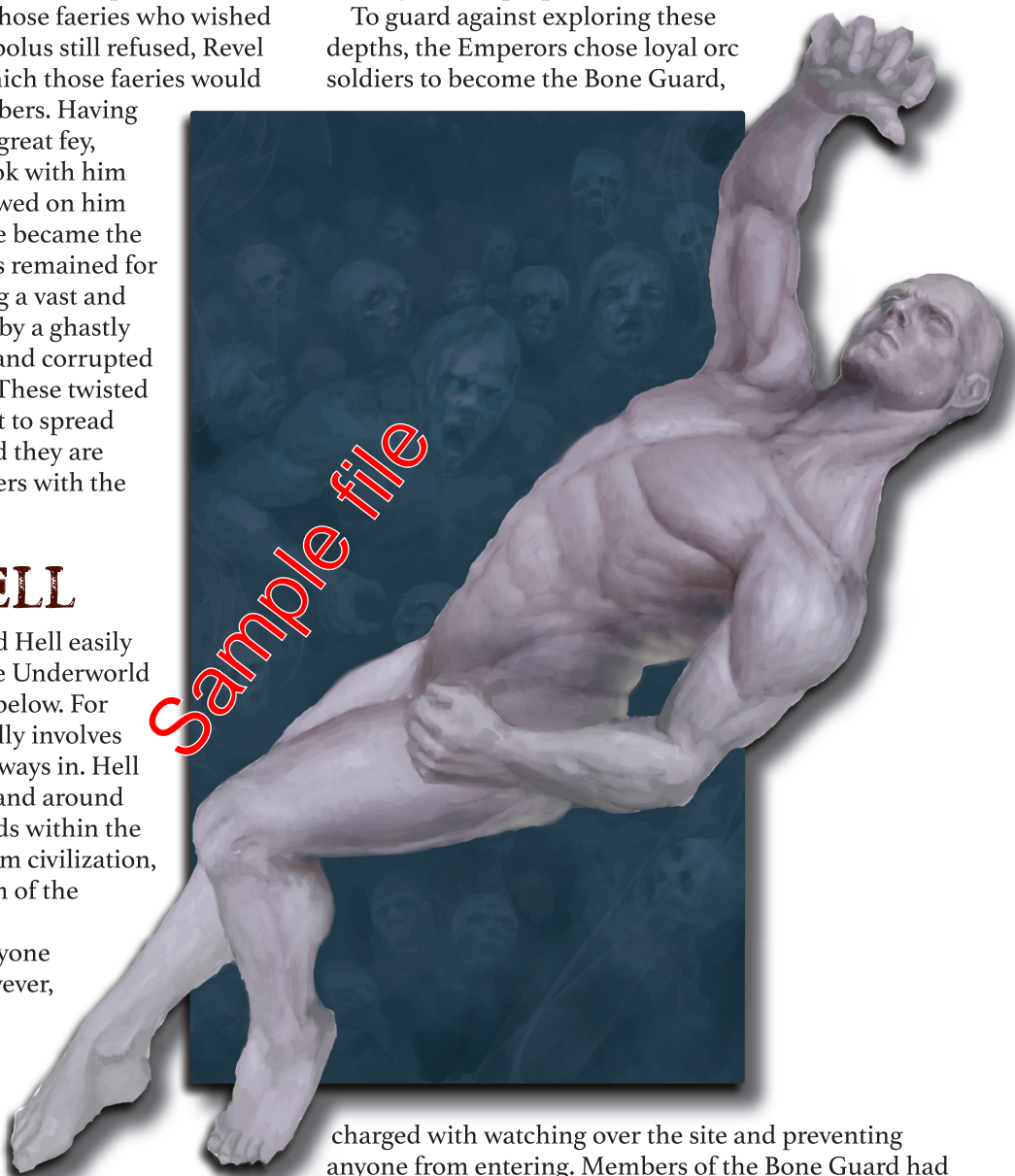
GAETHIRA

One entrance of Hell is hidden under the Empire's capital city, Caecras, and it drew the Witch-King of Gog to choose that location as the seat of his dark reign. He treated with the vile fiends regularly for forbidden knowledge, magical power, and their aid in expanding his influence across the continent. He honored the darkness in return by constructing a terrible cathedral overtop the hill that marked the entrance.

Although the Kalasans, with the aid of other peoples, shattered the Witch-King's tyrannical rule, remnants

of those dark times remain. The ruins of the ancient Cathedral of Hate stand atop the heights of Harrow Hill, which rises at the center of the city, not far from the Emperor's palace. Only a few broken walls and strange, unsettling statuary remain of the once terrifying structure that crowned the hill, but underneath, the tunnels riddling the hill remain intact, leading to sealed vaults and gloomy chambers painted with ghastly scenes hinting at their purpose.

To guard against exploring these depths, the Emperors chose loyal orc soldiers to become the Bone Guard,



charged with watching over the site and preventing anyone from entering. Members of the Bone Guard had their eyes gouged out, eardrums pierced with hot nails, and tongues torn from their mouths, all to prevent them from being beguiled by the devils of the hill. Now, with the last Emperor dead and King Drudge seated on the Alabaster Throne, the Bone Watch has been dissolved and what has come to be known as Gaethira stands unprotected.

A single staircase descends into the heart of the hill and ends at a round vaulted chamber, ringed with statues depicting mutilated and maimed people in

postures of supplication toward a pit in the center of the floor. Archways lead off to bone-strewn passages and other chambers. Tendrils of sweet-smelling incense rise from the hole in the floor. Its walls bear images of naked men and women, perfect in every way, gesturing for those above to join them.

Anyone who steps off the edge slowly descends into the gloom. Even in the dark, the walls and the beautiful forms remain visible, but as one descends, they gradually distort, their kind, sweet features hardening into mockery and open hatred. The perfect bodies become twisted and corrupt, mingled with parts of animals, bearing raw, open wounds, and worse, until the pit delivers the traveler to Hell. Once having stepped into the pit, there is no way to arrest the fall or to ascend. There is only down.

TARTERIAN GATES

Nestled between two active volcanoes in the northwestern arm of the Firepeaks is a great cave, secured by an iron gate some 10 yards tall. Impaled faeries hang from the top of the gate's pointed bars, their mewling cries filling the air. The path leading up to the gates is paved with skulls, with one in every dozen or so animated by dark magic to chatter and hiss at passersby. Ravens watch from the rocks, beaks wet with blood and eyes gleaming with uncanny intelligence.

The gates swing open when approached by a mortal, causing blood to rain down from the twitching bodies above. The path beyond winds down into darkness, from which issue faint screams, laughter, and the roar of distant flames. Anyone who passes through the gates and turns back sees, instead of an exit, a leering face painted on a wall of stone blocking the way out. Efforts to break down the wall only attract devils to greet the newest arrivals and haul them into the depths.

FUMING TRENCH

Krakens, sea dragons, and frequent devastating storms are enough to keep most sailors from traveling the Nyxian Ocean and have, in part, impeded settling the shores of the Endless Steppe. Much of the troubles and the sinister atmosphere hanging over the body of water originate far below the waves, from a gouge in the sea floor known as the Fuming Trench. Its exact location is uncertain, and knowledge of it comes only from divination and communing with powerful devils, but the chasm is believed to be an entrance to Hell.

The trench continually vomits great, billowy clouds of sulfur in which swim strange and otherworldly horrors. Nothing lives nearby, and the sand for miles around has an unhealthy yellow color, not unlike that of dried pus. A traveler who swims through the murky depths and down into the trench eventually emerges from one of the many fetid pools dotting Hell's surface.

HELL REVEALED

Hell is a place of endless fear and suffering, a poisonous place infested with immortals who have turned their backs on their kind and now revel in the darkness staining their hearts. Hell spreads across the inside of a great hollow sphere buried deep within Urth. The World Mother, who created this place for Diabolus, hung a roiling ball of fire called the Unsun at its center, so the light of its infernal flame would lay bare all the wickedness here. Hell's landscape is as tortured as the souls condemned to dwell here. In many ways, it resembles deserts and badlands found in the mortal world, but everything bears the indelible stain of corruption, smeared with the filth of its inhabitants and blighted by its master's dark power.

No matter the way taken to Hell, whether the journey was voluntary or not, visitors appear at seemingly random locations. No entrance leads to the same place twice; a trip through the Tarterian Gates might terminate at the foot of the Osseous Spire the first time and leave the traveler clinging to a corpse in the center of the Mucus Sea the second.

BOUNDLESS AND PERVERSIVE HORROR

Hell is an awful place to experience, with sights, sounds, odors, and sensations that strain the mind until it shatters. When a creature that is not a devil first sees Hell, it must make a Will challenge roll with 1 bane. On a failure, it gains 1d3 Insanity. Regardless of the success or failure of the roll, the creature is not subject to the place's horrifying effects again until it completes a rest. Each time the creature completes a rest in Hell, it must make the roll again, but does so with 1 boon. After it gets three successes, it is no longer subject to Hell's horrifying nature.

HELLISH TERRAIN

Hell boasts a diverse landscape of jagged mountains, sinister forests, bulbous hills, and parched badlands baked by the relentless Unsun. The terrain resembles what might be found in the mortal world, but this familiarity belies its dangers. Malice bleeds from everything here, from the twisted trees that claw and catch on a traveler's clothing, to the sighing curls of mist that slip free from cracks in the ground, down to the pebbles that always seem to find their way into shoes or boots to make each step painful. This place is anathema to the living and the dead, its unspeakable torments made all the worse by the hostility of the land.

This section describes dangerous terrain that is unique to Hell. For more examples of suitable terrain, see the *Tombs of the Desolation* supplement.

