

CLAWS OF TYRANNY

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A **TROLL** IS usually a brutish lout, little better than a green-skinned, clawed ogre that can recover from nearly any wound. It seems bred to kill and consume, and its urge to hunt and its appetite for flesh never ends. Worse is the troll predilection for eating humanoid prey—trolls like to play with their food, and humanoids often play rough. Few trolls ever rise above the barbaric troll nature, but those that acquire any sort of actual skill in war are truly frightening monsters.

What if such a war troll chose to conquer rather than ravage? How would it go about subjugating its territory, and what would its base of operations look like? What might it demand from a cowed populace, and how might it use its temporal power? Envisage a small fortress and village controlled by such a monster, with citizens of common races under its brutal rule. Heroes such as the PCs live to end such evil, but how to do so without doing as much harm as good?

This scenario is intended for 11th-level PCs.



NAPINA AND VENDUUL

Even in the days of the empire, Napina was a remote rural community. Its position on a broad lake in the foothills also made it a prosperous fishing, logging, and mining settlement, with a mix of races to call it home. The village's industries were important and successful enough for it to have a local lord, a nice wall, a keep, and a substantial garrison.

When the empire fell, local nobles were left on their own, unless they had strong allies nearby. Life in Napina still went along normally for a few generations after the fall of Nerath. Just this winter, a warrior from an influential family, one Hargus Mensaline, captain of the militia, got it into his head that he could

seize power in the village. Lady Eva Napina, then the ruling noble, refused to acquiesce to the demands of the rebel faction. War ensued.

Mensaline then made a severe error in judgment. He hired a small squad of trolls to aid his rebels. The rebels quickly proved victorious, but the troll leader, a Bane-worshipping war troll named Venduul, cunningly discerned that no one left alive could oppose his rule in Napina. Venduul and his trolls killed Mensaline and Lady Napina, and they took control of Napina soon after. With springtime waxing in Napina, Venduul now has plans to use the village and its fortress to gather an army to conquer nearby lands in Bane's name.

NAPINA

A sizeable village located on the borderlands and ruled by trolls, Napina is a community in need of some help.

Population: 500; another 200 or so live in the countryside and wilds around the village. Most of these have been rounded up and forced into the village proper. The people are mostly human and dwarf, with a smattering of other races.

Government: The war troll Venduul rules Napina.

Defense: Ten trolls defend Napina, and Venduul has replaced typical village guards with subjugated ogres and allied ettins from the nearby mountains. The trolls also have worgs and bears. They can force a muster of 50 militia warriors from among the townsfolk.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

Venduul's evil plans might reach the ears of heroes in one of a few ways. Which one you use depends on how much information you want the characters to have at the outset of the adventure.

Nightmares: Sonja Arctur, priestess in a local temple, has had dark nightmares of late. Her dreams show her an army marching out of the forested hills under Bane's foul banner. Confirmation of her portentous visions came in the form of a *sending* from the priest of Napina, Alain Fletcher. Sonja says the message was, "Serving the traitor Hargus Mensaline, trolls have slain Lady Napina, and taken the village and keep. Their war troll leader worships Bane. Please send aid." Sonja petitioned the local baron for help, but he is unwilling to send troops to protect the far-flung village. So the priestess has turned to the heroes for help—at least to discover more information for a possible military strike.

Tales of War: Corkary Merrimar, an injured halfling, stumbled into town a day ago. He hails from a halfling clan that resides in the wilds near Napina. He reports that a civil war recently occurred in the village—a warrior named Hargus Mensaline tried to take power from the rightful noble, Lady Napina.

Mensaline involved trolls, including a war troll. Those trolls appeared to have free reign when Corkary fled, for they roused the halflings and forced most of them into the walled village.

A Merchant's Woes: A few merchants who traveled to Napina from a distant trade town have not returned. Anders Fim, a representative of one of the merchant organizations in the town, hires the characters to investigate the road to Napina, suspecting brigands or worse. Anders knows that travelers on the old trade road leading past Napina are used to the dangers of the wilderness trek. However, more run-ins with monsters than are normal have been reported lately. It has become apparent that monstrous humanoids and other nasty beings are on the move around the village for some reason. Anders doesn't know that trolls have overrun the village, so the PCs have a surprise waiting at Napina's gates.

INVESTIGATION

PCs can make Streetwise or History checks to learn more about Napina's current troubles.

DC 16: Napina has always been a prosperous town, due to mining, logging, and fishing. It has had a military force disproportionate to such a small settlement. A noble house that has the same name as the village has ruled in Napina for generations. The current ruler is Lady Eva Napina, although her son Gregor is old enough to rule.

DC 21: Hargus Mensaline III is a noble in all but actual title. The Mensaline family owns a mine and logging operations in Napina. Its line extends from a warlord of Nerath, also Hargus, who might have been knighted had the king not died. The Mensaline family has a reputation for bucking under the authority of Napina's rightful nobility.

Mensaline family members have always had a lot of pull in Napina's military affairs.

TROLLS

A successful Nature check can tell PCs more about trolls, as detailed in the Troll entry of the *Monster Manual*.

Venduul



WILDERNESS ENCOUNTERS

Venduul's soldiers patrol around Napina, so the party might encounter trolls well before coming within sight of the town walls.

Social Encounter: These trolls are inclined to kill and eat intruders. They're fearless fighters. Perhaps, if severely wounded and successfully intimidated with the threat of fire or acid, one of them might reveal more information about Napina. They can also be fooled into revealing Venduul's name, usually coupled with a threat or the war troll's inevitable campaign of terror and conquest. You can play this by ear, or create a skill challenge to simulate the foregoing options.

Combat Encounter: As noted above, trolls encountered in the wilderness are inclined to kill and eat humanoids they discover wandering the area.

Elite Patrol (Level 13; 4,200 XP): Though a troll himself, Venduul knows that most of its kindred are not usually motivated enough to follow monotonous commands such as patrolling the forest for intruders. Thus many of the war trolls elite forces are commanded by bestial humanoids who possess slightly more self control, if ever just so slightly. The war troll has made contact with a den of ettins in a mountain valley to the west. In return for physical aid, the war troll sends along booty and live captives.

- ◆ 3 trolls (level 9 brute)
- ◆ 1 worg (level 9 brute)
- ◆ 1 ogre warhulk (level 11 elite brute)
- ◆ 1 ettin spirit-talker (level 12 elite controller)

Like most ettins, the spirit-talker that commands this patrol rolls initiative twice, gets two turns during a round, and has a full set of actions (standard, move, minor) on each turn. Its actions rarely vary from the tried-and-true formula of using its first turn to invoke a *curse of shattered bone*, and its second turn to club the cursed target.

The trolls and the ogre warhulk take commands from the ettin, moving into flanking positions and taking other clever combat actions at the ettin's urging. Even if their foes are using fire or acid, the trolls do not retreat when bloodied, as long as the spirit-talker remains in the combat. A troll does flee if bloodied and it takes fire or acid damage once the ettin falls.

The worg fights until bloodied, then it uses its 8 speed to flee. It flees toward Napina, and if it makes it to the city, it provides news that powerful troll foes are nearby.

ENTERING NAPINA

From the old trade road, Napina looks like a well-to-do village, with thick stone walls, and fine stone and timber houses. A stout keep overlooks the town, and a tower-flanked gate provides the settlement's main entry point. It might be here that the PCs first learn that something is amiss within the town. At the gate, a small party meets all comers—Tamor the reeve and guards.

Perception (DC 21): Scorch marks and missing stones mar the thick walls of Napina here and there, as if the city has recently withstood an attack.

TAMOR THE REEVE

Tamor is Venduul's spokesman to the people of Napina. He's afraid that any interference with Venduul can bring dire consequences for Napina's citizens. Furthermore, Tamor's family lives in the castle with Venduul. They are slain if Tamor fails or angers the troll warlord in any way. Thus, Tamor is just too scared to act against Venduul. Rumor in Napina has it that he's getting rich off the misery of his fellow villagers. That's false, but Tamor has turned over dissidents that have come to his attention. Such insurgents end up on display in crow's cages at the keep or in Venduul's stewpot, so Tamor isn't exactly

innocent. He is miserable and would throw his lot in with the heroes if he thought they might win. His duplicity makes for a potential point of conflict if the PCs do emerge victorious in Napina—some Napinans might be out for Tamor's blood after the troll threat is removed.

AT THE GATE

The characters have to talk to Tamor, who is backed up by troll guards and other monsters waiting within the tower's gatehouse. Venduul is arrogant, so he's content to let travelers willingly enter Napina. All entrants must pay tribute to the troll lord, and leaving Napina isn't as easy.

Tamor greets visitors as follows:

An older man dressed in fine clothes emerges from the gates. He says, "Welcome to Napina, travelers. I am Tamor. What brings you to our village? Know that Lord Venduul might consider your petition for entry in return for proper tribute to his greatness." Five scale-clad soldiers with halberds, and with full helms covering their faces, flank the opening in the village wall behind the man.



Tamor

Proper tribute for those of the PCs' apparent wealth is 250 gp or something of equal worth. However, providing tribute is only the first step PCs must take to gain entry if they don't wish to fight or sneak in.

SKILL CHALLENGE: TALK THEIR WAY IN

Paying the tribute counts as one success in the skill challenge. This challenge is an example of how negotiations with Tamor might go rather than a script you should strictly follow. It's based on the Negotiation sample skill challenge on page 76 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*.

Setup: After Tamor says his piece, the skill challenge can begin.

Level: 8.

Complexity: 3 (requires 8 successes before 3 failures).

Primary Skills: Bluff, Diplomacy, History, Insight, Intimidate, Nature, Perception.

Perception (DC 21): You notice village folk wending their way toward the keep in the distance, all carrying various valuables. Crow's cages hang near the keep gate—with prisoners or corpses inside. Large, hunched warriors guard the path to the citadel—trolls! It might be a deadly choice to start a fight here, since it could bring the village's monstrous rulers down on you. (Success here doesn't count toward the success of the challenge, but it does open up a History check.)

Insight (DC 21): Tamor's smile appears strained, like he's sorry to see you—sorry for you. The man himself looks ill rested. He glances nervously toward the guards and the doors in the gatehouse wall. You know that Lord Venduul must compel Tamor to this task, which Tamor is sorry to perform. Intimidation won't work on this fellow—he fears Venduul, whom he believes is more dangerous than you. Tamor might believe that you've come to serve Venduul—or since he appears to be an unwilling partner in this evil, you might shrewdly let him know you plan to fight

Venduul. (Intimidate checks made against Tamor result in an automatic failure. Bluff might pull you through. Only one Bluff check counts toward success.)

Diplomacy (DC 21): If a PC asks who Venduul is, Tamor hems and haws about him being the lord of Napina. A success at this check causes Tamor to reveal that Venduul is “the great troll warlord of Napina, and smiting fist of Bane.” (Success here opens up a Nature check. It can occur only once.)

Nature (DC 16): Trolls don't rule Napina, or they haven't until now. History shows that they don't usually conquer towns—they ravage and despoil. (This success opens a History check. It can occur only once.)

History (DC 21): The trolls of the mountains around here aren't numerous, but they are unusual. While they're vicious brutes, they have a warrior tradition and a respect for the god Bane. They could have learned these ways from any number of sources after Nerath's fall. This Venduul must style himself a conqueror. Maybe he's gathering forces in Napina. Maybe you could pretend to be such potential allies. (This success can lead to a new Bluff check. It can occur only once.)

Bluff (Convince Tamor you come to work for Venduul; DC 23): You begin to convince Tamor that the troll lord might want to see you as potential allies. He doesn't look happy, but he starts to agree. A soldier leans in to speak to the reeve. (This opens a second Perception check and Insight check.)

Bluff (Let Tamor know, without alerting the guards, that you'll oppose Venduul; DC 26): Tamor appears to understand your true purpose here. He cheers up slightly. A soldier leans in to speak to the reeve. (This opens a second Perception check and Insight check.)

Perception (DC 21): When the soldier whispers to Tamor, you catch sight of his yellow-orange skin. He speaks in a gruff voice. Although he speaks in Common, he says a couple words, probably insults, in Goblin. He's reminding Tamor that you should pay

tribute and probably be disarmed. These soldiers are hobgoblins. (This doesn't count as a success in the challenge, but it opens another Nature check.)

Nature (DC 16): Sometimes hobgoblins serve as mercenaries to nongoblin lords. It's rare that good-hearted folk resort to such brutal soldiers. Hobgoblins respect strength and military skill. (Intimidate checks made against the soldiers might work, convincing them they'd rather let you pass as potential allies than fight you.)

Insight (DC 21): It's clear Tamor believes you to be strong warriors—perhaps Lord Venduul needs such warriors more than monetary tribute. Or maybe Tamor would like to see you pass through with your weapons, perhaps to oppose Venduul. The soldiers backing Tamor up appear on edge. They eye you sharply, intermittently tightening their grip on their polearms. Although Tamor can't be cowed, these fools might back down. (Intimidate might work as per Nature above.)

Intimidate (DC 23): The soldiers appear to think opposing you would be a bad idea—Venduul might want you as allies after all.

Success: The characters gain passage through the gate without a fight, without having to be disarmed, and perhaps without paying tribute. If the party was particularly successful and convinced Tamor it would oppose Venduul, the reeve might carefully point them to the village inn, Three Pines, to freshen up before going to see Venduul. He then sends them more information about the town, the keep, Gregor Napina, and troll warlord.

Failure: The party has to pay tribute, leave, or fight. If failures outweigh successes, they might have to disarm before entering Napina—or the soldiers at the gate attack.

Combat Encounter: If the diplomatic skill challenge fails and PCs insist on entering even without tribute, it's a fight.

Gate Guardians (Level 12; 3,515 XP): The illusion of Tamor's control collapses as trolls and other monstrous creatures burst into view from behind the gates, screaming for blood.

- ◆ 5 hobgoblin warriors (level 8 minion)
- ◆ 4 trolls (level 9 brute)
- ◆ 1 quickling runner (level 9 skirmisher)
- ◆ 1 oni mage (level 10 elite lurker)
- ◆ Tamor, human lackey (level 7 minion)

Tamor attempts to move clear of combat; he doesn't fight, even to defend himself. Treat the five hobgoblin warrior minions as human lackeys for the purpose of Tamor getting a +2 to his defenses; the hobgoblins have been commanded to see to Tamor's safety.

The hobgoblins probably only last the round necessary for the trolls to roll into action, slashing and clawing their way over the party like an unstoppable wave. As with the trolls of the elite forest patrol, these trolls do not flee if they are bloodied by fire or acid because they are under the command of an oni mage.

The oni mage turns invisible before it enters the fray, then positions itself for the best possible usage of *freezing blast* and *lightning storm*; it tries to hit the most PCs and as few of its allies as possible. This oni mage stays in the fight until it has reached 40 or fewer hit points, at which point it flees.

The quickling runner uses *fey shift* to attack the weakest-looking player. It uses its *quick cuts* power to slash in and out of melee, relying on its high AC to dodge opportunity attacks. Once bloodied, the quickling attempts to flee to the center of town to warn Venduul about the invaders at the gate; this is the quickling's primary role here.

If the PCs defeat the guards and spare Tamor, he explains the power Venduul has over him, and pleads with the characters to save his family. He also reveals the existence of the old mine on which the keep is built, and he might know of a secret entrance the PCs could use to gain entrance without using the front door.

INTO THE KEEP

Trolls guard the drawbridge entrance to Napina's keep. Beyond that is an inner courtyard and the gate into the keep proper, which trolls and worgs watch. Venduul's choice troll lackeys and other monsters prowl around the keep, sometimes killing for no reason other than pure nastiness.

AUDIENCE WITH VENDUUL

Venduul sits in the great hall by day to accept tribute from his subjects and give his despotic edicts. He also judges those who oppose his rule or otherwise break his laws. Venduul keeps the castle in better shape than one might expect for a troll, but he sits on his high chair like a barbarian chief—surrounded by his wealth. (Some of Venduul's treasure here is made up of mundane goods and excess money that can and should be returned to the villagers.)

The hall has a great fireplace, around which Venduul has erected a horrifying execution station. He puts some of those who defy him in crow's cages, but an ogre thug butchers or boils alive all others. Blood spatters the wall and floor here, as a grim reminder. The ogre regularly throws scraps to Venduul's pet bear, Gorm.

The open pit of the old mine shaft the keep was originally built over yawns behind Venduul's throne. See the Great Escape under the combat encounter for more on this gaping hole.

Social Encounter: The PCs can't remove Venduul from power by using words. Still, if they talked their way into the city with diplomacy or tribute, they can come before the troll lord to size him up and gather intelligence on the dangers of the keep. Flattery, lies, and bribes go far. Venduul might buy false oaths of fealty. He could offer macabre mirthful respect to someone bold enough to try to intimidate him—as long as the threats aren't too offensive. If anything, Venduul is confident in his own power. If pressed by

clever characters, he reveals that he keeps the rightful lord of Napina prisoner, in case he needs the "whelp" in the future.

You can play this by ear, or create a skill challenge to simulate the foregoing options.

Combat Encounter: PCs who do not wish to deal diplomatically with the strangely intelligent war troll find an opponent more than happy to cross weapons with them. However, a party of five 11th-level PCs might wish to gather a few NPC allies before daring to take on an adversary as potent as Venduul; remind your players of the power Venduul must wield through NPC intermediaries if your players appear to be traipsing unthinkingly to the slaughter.

Court of the War Troll (Level 14; 5,300 XP): Once combat begins, Venduul screams out a horrifying, bloodcurdling battle cry, summoning his court, which in addition to regular trolls includes a dire bear pet, an ogre warhulk slave, and a witch troll confidant.

- ◆ 3 trolls (level 9 brute)
- ◆ Gorm, dire bear (level 11 elite brute)
- ◆ 1 ogre warhulk (level 11 elite brute)
- ◆ 1 troll witch (level 12 controller)
- ◆ Venduul, war troll (level 14 soldier)

The dire bear and ogre warhulk hang back until the troll witch can use her skin-flaying *ravenous teeth* power, then charge forward. The dire bear tries to grab its prey after making a successful claw attack, then crush what it holds. The ogre warhulk (and the trolls for that matter) take their cues from both Venduul and the witch troll. Even if their foes are using fire or acid, the trolls do not retreat when bloodied, as long as either Venduul or the troll witch remains.

The troll witch begins with *ravenous teeth* if she can target three or more foes. Every round she uses her minor power *flesh for eating* against a new foe, signaling to her kin that the specified foe has been magically tenderized for troll teeth. The same effect also opens foes to being controlled by their panic with

fear of teeth—the troll witch directs dominated foes to attack their allies. The troll witch prefers to remain outside melee if possible. However, to help Venduul and the other trolls with her *burnsalve* aura, she must move to within 2 squares of a troll ally who has taken fire or acid damage.

Venduul puts aside all his pretensions of being a ruler when the fight begins. He charges the closest player and uses *sweeping strike* liberally. His greatsword allows him to make opportunity attacks against all foes within 2 squares of him.

The Great Escape: Venduul is a savage fighter, but he's cannier than the average troll. If things appear to be going badly for him, he takes advantage of the old mine shaft he had his servants uncover in this chamber. The mine shaft is a vertical 100-foot (20 square) drop whose bottom is lined with poisoned spikes. An old iron ladder also provides rickety access down one side of the shaft. Any creature falling takes 10d10 damage from the fall, 5d10 damage from the spikes, and ongoing 5 poison damage (save ends, but the virulence of the poison gives a -2 penalty to each saving throw attempt). Venduul eschews the ladder and leaps, knowing that even if he is reduced to 0 or fewer hit points, he'll stand back up the next round, and flee into the many tunnels that give off the shaft. Foes attempting to follow him can choose to take the slower ladder, or leap after and face the poisoned spikes at bone-breaking velocity.

The mines beneath the keep and town are extensive. In addition to leading to the dungeon where Gregor Napina is kept (see below), other tunnels lead, after many winding ways, to a cave mouth far beyond Napina (PCs might have even gained entry in this fashion, having learned of the entrance from Tamor if they spared his life). If Venduul escapes, he marks the players as his personal enemies. They see him again one day soon.

Troll Witch		Level 12 Controller
Large natural humanoid		XP 700
Initiative +8	Senses Perception +10	
HP 124; Bloodied 62; see also <i>troll healing</i>		
Regeneration 10 (if the troll witch takes acid or fire damage, regeneration does not function until the end of its next turn)		
AC 25; Fortitude 25, Reflex 22, Will 24		
Speed 7		
⚔ Claw (standard; at-will)	Reach 2; +16 vs. AC; 1d10 + 4 damage.	
➤ Flesh For Eating (minor; at-will)	Ranged 10; +16 vs. Reflex; the target takes 1 point of damage, and any time a troll deals damage from a melee attack against the target for the remainder of the encounter, the target takes an additional 1d6 damage.	
➤ Fear of Teeth (standard; recharge ⚡; ⚡) ⚡ Charm, Fear	Ranged 10; targets an enemy affected by <i>flesh for eating</i> ; +16 vs. Will; the target is dominated (save ends). A troll witch can dominate only one creature at a time.	
⚡ Ravenous Teeth (standard; daily)	Close blast 5; targets enemies only; +16 vs. Fortitude; 2d8 + 5 damage, and the target is dazed (save ends).	
Burnsalve ⚡ Healing		
A troll within 2 squares of the troll witch (excluding itself) regenerates normally at the beginning of its turn even if it took fire or acid damage any time since its last turn.		
Troll Healing ⚡ Healing		
If the troll witch is reduced to 0 hit points by an attack that does not deal acid or fire damage, it rises on its next turn (as a move action) with 10 hit points.		
Alignment Chaotic evil	Languages Common, Giant	
Skills Endurance +16, Insight +10		
Str 18 (+10)	Dex 15 (+8)	Wis 9 (+5)
Con 20 (+11)	Int 12 (+7)	Cha 18 (+10)

GREGOR NAPINA

In the castle's dungeon (accessible through the mine shaft in Venduul's throne room, or through winding tunnels from an exterior entrance), Gregor Napina languishes under heavy guard. Although young, he is a good man who would do just about anything to protect his citizens from Venduul. If the PCs release Gregor, they can learn secret ways through the keep.

Gregor is sure to reward the heroes for liberating Napina, and he might employ them further to take the fight to the remaining trolls and other monsters in the nearby mountains.

NAPINA'S RESISTANCE

For an added twist, you might throw in Valerya Mensaline and her resistance fighters. These rebels against Venduul don't have the strength to oppose the troll regime directly, and they probably have contact points within Napina but a base outside the village. They have a reason to ally with the PCs, but also a reason to betray the characters. Val could provide distractions for the assault on Venduul. However, she might want to finish her father's dirty work by killing Gregor Napina and taking power in the town. Perhaps she doesn't, but the possibility of such treachery is revealed to the PCs for an added bit of paranoia. How Gregor and Valerya get along when Venduul is gone is for you, the DM, to decide. 🌀

About the Authors

Chris Sims started out working for small d20 companies in 2003, then landed a freelance editor gig for Wizards RPG R&D. Wizards finally got annoyed enough by his constant applications to hire him as the *Duel Masters* editor in 2005. From there, Chris wheedled his way into RPG R&D as an editor, and finally became a story designer after masterminding a few choice assassinations. His credits include *Monster Manual V*, *Secrets of Sarlona*, *Rules Compendium*, and the *Eberron Survival Guide* (thanks, Logan!).

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