

ACERERAK'S CHALLENGE

Use this page as part of Encounter S1: Perilous Archways, pages 63–65. The characters have a chance to decipher Acererak's second message in the aftermath of their encounter with the sword wraiths.

As he did in the Garden of Graves, Acererak has fashioned a verse—part goading, part warning—for those would-be heroes who gain access to the Shadow Tomb. However, this poem is not in written form, and the players will need to think carefully to discover it.

A dead silence hangs across the chamber, interrupted only by the steady dripping of black ichor from the chains above.

Perception Check (only for characters who state their specific intent to listen in the chamber)

DC 11: *As you listen, the steady dripping reveals itself as a regular pattern.*

DC 18: *The regular dripping of necrotic essence is some sort of code.*

The pattern of the dripping repeats approximately every two minutes, allowing the characters to easily record it. Once they do so, a DC 18 Intelligence check allows the numerical message to be decoded.

ACERERAK'S MESSAGE

Like the poem found in the Garden of Graves (and the works known to players familiar with *Tomb of Horrors* or *Return to the Tomb of Horrors*), the message from Acererak is both a challenge and a warning. Like the original Tomb of Horrors, the Shadow Tomb is designed not just to kill adventurers, but to first push them to despair and madness. By doing so, Acererak maximizes the energy he gains by consuming their souls.

Thoughtful characters can glean the following information from Acererak's message.

- Acererak fears that those who discovered the Garden of Graves have learned his identity. Many of the defenses of the Shadow Tomb are fashioned after the Tomb of Horrors, but have been altered to trip up those who know the lore of the original Tomb. (While the characters shouldn't have this knowledge, your players might. . .)
- None of the archways in Encounter S1 exit that area. However, every second archway (the "even[-numbered] false gates") teleports a

character to the Blind Devourer that is the true exit.

- Acererak's warm welcome to those who hunt him is genuine. However, the feast hall (Encounter S2) features deadly tapestries containing the souls the demilich has consumed.
- The fall of necrotic rain in the black well (Encounter S3) hides the real door the characters seek.
- The keys necessary for the characters to access the Shadowfell engine are hidden across planar boundaries in Encounter S4 and Encounter S5.
- Acererak counts on the loyalty of the undead guarding the boneyard bridge (Encounter S6). However, the characters discover that the demilich's servants respond to respect as well as fear.

ACERERAK'S MESSAGE

The change in tone from the poem in the Garden of Graves (and the connection between these first lines and that earlier verse) can be noted with any Insight check. Though the need to prove his superiority still consumes him, Acererak hopes to intimidate the characters into giving up their pursuit.

*When wisdom failed, you made your choice
But will you journey back or forward now?
If the deeds of the past have led you astray
Then shun white if you can*

*For the known will betray
And the blind must lead*

*Where even false gates show the way.
You seek my power with heroes' hearts
But do you earn the fate you made?
I welcome you with fire and cheer*

*Hang all your heroes' masks of fear
In galleries of time betrayed.*

*The shroud of night is the door you seek
But ere you find it, you will fall—
Condemned to seek outside the veil;*

The keys you steal

*Beyond your reach in distant halls.
You will not win the dread respect
Of those who paid the final price—
The Shadow Tomb's last sacrifice. . .*

Or does that sacrifice stand here

*Who hears this heroes' prophecy?
With fool's heart and fearless ear*

*The signs you were too late to flee
That bound your screaming souls to me.*