

The Infernal Gauntlet

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The Infernal Gauntlet is a high-stakes dungeon encounter designed for 4-5 players of Level 4. Trapped by the enigmatic “Architect of Despair,” players must navigate a series of deadly rooms, each testing different skills and attributes. From solving puzzles under pressure to battling shadowy doppelgängers, survival requires ingenuity, teamwork, and courage. The gauntlet culminates in a desperate final challenge where players must balance strategy and sacrifice to escape.

Read Out Loud:

"The moment you awaken, you are greeted by suffocating darkness and the sensation of cold, unyielding stone beneath you. Before you can gather your thoughts, a deep, mocking voice booms through the void, each word dripping with menace:

'Welcome, mortals, to the Infernal Gauntlet. I am the Architect of Despair, and this will be your proving ground—or your grave.'

A sudden flash of green light illuminates your surroundings. The chamber you find yourself in is circular, with no visible exits save for a single steel door inscribed with runes. The air hums with energy, and the faint sound of grinding gears echoes around you.

'Each chamber ahead will test you. Your strength. Your wit. Your resolve. Survive, and freedom is yours. Fail, and you will find yourself a permanent resident of my masterpiece.'

The door slides open with a hiss. A sense of foreboding washes over you as you step forward into the unknown."

DM Information:

Setting:

The gauntlet consists of six distinct rooms, each with a unique theme and challenge:

1. **The Pit of Precision:** Players leap across platforms while avoiding swinging blades.
2. **The Puzzle of Ten Thousand Lights:** A logic puzzle involving glowing runes.
3. **The Hall of Spikes:** A trapped hallway with pressure plates.
4. **The Flood Chamber:** A rising water room with a puzzle to escape.
5. **The Arena of Shadows:** Combat against shadowy doppelgängers.
6. **The Gauntlet's Core:** A collapsing room with automaton guardians and a lever puzzle.

Enemies:

- **Shadow Doppelgängers (Room 5):** Mimic each player's abilities and stats but with 50% of their HP.
- **Automaton Guardians (Room 6):**
 - AC: 16
 - HP: 30
 - Attack: +6 to hit, 2d8 slashing damage.
 - Abilities: Immune to poison and psychic damage; resistance to bludgeoning and piercing.

Challenges:

- **Puzzles:** Intense brain-teasers that require Insight, Intelligence, and Wisdom checks.
- **Traps:** Dexterity Saves (DC 12-16) to avoid spikes, swinging blades, or drowning.
- **Combat:** Strategic battles where exploiting weaknesses is crucial.

DM Tips:

1. **Pacing:** Gradually increase tension in each room. Use environmental descriptions and NPC taunts to amplify suspense.
2. **Atmosphere:** Play eerie music or describe the hum of machinery and flickering lights to immerse players.
3. **Player Choice:** Reward creative problem-solving and teamwork with minor bonuses or narrative successes.
4. **Foreshadowing:** Drop cryptic hints about the final challenge through environmental clues or the Architect's voice.

Room 1: The Pit of Precision

Introduction: "The moment you step into the room, the door behind you slams shut with a reverberating clang. A rush of air swirls around you as torches flicker to life, revealing a pit that spans the length of the room. It is filled with a churning, bubbling liquid that hisses ominously. The room itself is 40 feet long and 20 feet wide. The far side holds a gleaming metal door etched with the word 'Agility.'

"Floating above the pit are narrow stone platforms, each barely wide enough for a single foot. At irregular intervals, metal pendulums swing, sharp blades slicing the air with mechanical precision. There is no clear way to bypass the pit—no ladders, no bridges, just these precarious platforms."

Challenge Mechanics:

- **Examine the Room:**
 - A Wisdom check or Notice (DC 12) reveals a faint rhythmic sound from the pendulums, indicating a pattern in their swings.
 - Failing the check results in players not discerning the pattern and having disadvantage on their Dexterity Saves.
- **Crossing the Pit:**
 - Each jump requires a Dexterity Save (DC 10) for the first three platforms, increasing to DC 14 for the final two.
 - Failure results in slipping and falling into the acid, dealing 2d6

acid damage per round.

- **Pendulum Blades:**

- Players must time their movement with a Wisdom Check or Notice (DC 12). Failure results in being struck by a blade, dealing 1d8 slashing damage.

Solution: Players must carefully time their jumps, avoid the swinging blades, and reach the other side. Successful traversal rewards them with a hint about the next room.

Room 2: The Puzzle of Ten Thousand Lights

Introduction: "The door shuts behind you as a hum fills the room. The walls pulse with an eerie, shifting glow. Symbols etched into the walls begin to flicker and rearrange themselves. The air feels charged, crackling faintly with latent energy.

"The room is circular, 30 feet in diameter, with the glowing runes covering every inch of the walls. In the center stands a pedestal with a glowing crystal. The only other exit is another featureless metal door, this one marked with the word 'Clarity.'"

Challenge Mechanics:

- **Examine the Runes:**

- An Intelligence Check (DC 14) reveals the runes form a repeating pattern.
- Failure results in players triggering a glyph trap that deals 1d8 radiant damage.

- **Solving the Puzzle:**

- The crystal on the pedestal acts as the key. Players must touch the crystal and recite the rune pattern in order.
- Insight Check (DC 12): Deciphers the correct sequence to touch the runes.

Solution: Players must identify and repeat the rune pattern three times. Once complete, the door opens silently.

Room 3: The Hall of Spikes

Introduction: "The room beyond is dimly lit, casting long shadows on the walls. The floor is a grid of tiles, each appearing identical. Every so often, a faint 'click' echoes as unseen mechanisms whir in the walls. The only exit is a door on the far side of the room marked with the word 'Cunning.'"

Challenge Mechanics:

- **Spotting Safe Tiles:**

- A Wisdom Check (DC 15) reveals faint scratches and discoloration on certain tiles, indicating safety.
- A Disable Traps Check (DC 15) allows players to disable one tile's spike mechanism.

- **Stepping Across:**

- Each step requires a Dexterity Save (DC 13). Failure results in activating a spike trap, dealing 1d8 piercing damage.

Solution: Players must carefully navigate the tiles, using teamwork or tools to ensure safe passage.

Room 4: The Flood Chamber

Introduction: "The moment you enter, the door behind you seals shut, and water begins to gush from hidden pipes in the walls. The room is square, 30 feet by 30 feet, with walls carved with intricate aquatic motifs. The air grows cold and damp as the water rises quickly. In the center of the room is a locked iron grate, and next to it, a series of rotating metal dials."

Challenge Mechanics:

- **Deciphering the Puzzle:**

- Intelligence Check (DC 14): Deciphers which sequence to turn the dials to unlock the grate.
- Strength Check (DC 16): Forcing the grate open if the puzzle is failed.

- **Holding Breath:**

- Constitution Save (DC 12): Avoid suffocation damage (1d6 per round).

Solution: Players must solve the puzzle or use brute force to open the grate and escape.

Room 5: The Arena of Shadows

Introduction: "The room is pitch dark except for a circle of glowing runes in the center. As you step into the light, the air ripples, and shadowy figures rise from the floor. Each one looks exactly like you—same weapons, same armor, same stance. They attack without hesitation."

Challenge Mechanics:

- Shadows mimic player stats and abilities but have 50% of the players' HP.
- **Combat Strategies:** Players can exploit unique weaknesses based on their own abilities (e.g., a fire spell disrupts a shadow with cold resistance).

Solution: Players must work together, strategizing to overcome their duplicates.

Final Room: The Gauntlet's Core

Introduction: "The walls groan as the room shudders violently. Chunks of stone fall from the ceiling, and automaton guardians emerge from hidden panels. In the center of the room stands a large lever marked 'Sacrifice.' The exit door looms on the far wall, but it is sealed tight."

Challenge Mechanics:

- **Pulling the Lever:**

- Strength Check (DC 18): Requires teamwork to pull.

- **Fighting Automatons:**

- Automaton Guardians (AC 16, 30 HP): Deal 2d8 damage per attack.
- Players must hold off the guardians while one group member pulls the lever.

- **The Final Sacrifice:**

- Once the lever is pulled, it requires one player to sacrifice a valuable item to open the door.

Solution: Players must balance combat and solving the lever puzzle to escape before the ceiling collapses entirely.

The Final Victory: Escape and Revelation

As the players complete the final challenge and pull the lever to open the escape door, the grinding sound of machinery begins to fade. The floor beneath them trembles, then steadies. A moment of eerie silence fills the room. Finally, the door swings open, revealing a blinding light that makes the players instinctively shield their eyes.

Read Aloud:

"The air grows warm as the door creaks open. The bright light floods your vision, and you step forward cautiously, hearts pounding. Suddenly, you find yourselves standing in a lavish, over-the-top throne room decorated in the gaudiest way possible: velvet curtains embroidered with gold, chandeliers dripping with crystals, and tapestries that depict... yourselves? Yes, there you are, immortalized in a hideous artistic style, triumphant in your journey through the gauntlet.

Sitting on a throne of what appears to be wriggling, live snakes, is a rotund figure in a garish sequined robe. His face is concealed by an oversized mask shaped like a leering jester, though his eyes glint with delight. He rises, slow-clapping in the most sarcastic way possible."

The Architect's Speech:

"Bravo! Bravo, my dear contestants! You've done it! You survived the Infernal Gauntlet. You laughed in the face of acid pits, shadowy foes, and drowning! Well, some of you laughed. Others... cried a little, if I'm honest."

He throws his arms wide, stepping down from the throne.

"But I digress! You've proven yourselves not only worthy of survival but also of my finest treasures and, more importantly, my eternal gratitude... or mild respect. Same thing, really."

The Architect gestures grandly, and a treasure chest rises from the floor. It's gilded, absurdly large, and adorned with so many gemstones it's almost painful to look at.

"Within this chest lies your reward. Riches, power, glory... well, riches and power, mostly. And, of course, your freedom! Go forth and tell tales of your heroics, but remember: I will be watching. Always watching. Mwahaha!"

His laughter echoes as the light in the room dims and the players are magically transported outside.

Player Rewards:

1. **Gold and Treasure:** The chest contains 1,000 gold pieces, two rare gems worth 500 gold each, and:
 - A **Cloak of Heroic Resolve:** Grants +1 to all saving throws.
 - A **Blade of the Architect:** A unique +1 longsword that deals bonus psychic damage (1d4) on a critical hit.
 - A **Ring of the Survivor:** Once per day, this ring allows the wearer to reroll a failed saving throw.
2. **Freedom:** The players are returned to the location where they were originally abducted, finding their gear intact, along with an engraved token bearing the words **"Champion of the Architect."**

Campy Ending:

As the players step out into the world, they find themselves in a busy marketplace. A nearby town crier is shouting news to passersby:

"Hear ye, hear ye! The great champions have bested the Infernal Gauntlet! The Architect of Despair declares them... moderately tolerable!"

Villagers turn to stare, and a few even begin to clap uncertainly, unsure if they should cheer. A small child approaches, wide-eyed, and whispers:

"Is it true? You fought shadows and escaped from a room full of spikes? Can I be like you someday?"

Before they can answer, a bolt of lightning crackles in the sky, and a booming voice echoes:

“Remember, mortals, your tale is far from over. I have more challenges waiting... and next time, no treasure!”

The Architect’s laughter fades, leaving the players simultaneously amused, annoyed, and satisfied with their triumph.

Experience and Closure:

Award the players a bonus 500 XP each for completing the gauntlet. Additionally, encourage them to roleplay their newfound fame or infamy as **Champions of the Architect**, setting the stage for potential future encounters with this ridiculous yet dangerous figure.

Further Ideas:

- **Plot Hook:** The Architect of Despair could be a recurring villain, orchestrating other challenges across the campaign.
- **Alternate Ending:** If players succeed, they might discover a map to another dungeon or clues to the Architect’s true motives.
- **Character Impact:** The gauntlet might brand survivors with a magical mark, granting abilities but drawing the attention of the Architect’s followers.

Treasure Ideas:

1. **Room 2:** A glowing crystal (minor magical focus, grants +1 to spell attack rolls for 24 hours).
2. **Room 4:** Waterproof satchel containing a potion of water breathing and 100 GP.
3. **Room 6:** A unique weapon (e.g., the *Blade of Adaptation*, which deals bonus elemental damage depending on the wielder’s environment).