



LIFE IS A LONELY BUSINESS

5 Difficulty
5 Complexity

A standalone encounter for five adventurers

By Corwin Riddle

Life Is a Lonely Business is a standalone encounter designed for five 15th to 17th-level adventurers. In an attempt to solve the puzzle of life and death, a cleric named Alfrenk has breached the thin wall of the Shadowfell, inadvertently releasing ravenous wraiths and restless ghosts. The players must defeat the spirits in both the living realm and the Shadowfell, passing between the two planes during combat.

BACKGROUND

Formerly a crowded city of bustling markets and towering buildings, Vicene now lies quiet and forgotten, left behind by the masses as more profitable trading routes emerged. For those remaining in the city, relocation was never a choice; poverty, sickness, and fear of hunger deterred the weakest residents from travel, and the city turned into a ghost town. The boisterous laughter of crowds were replaced by the hollow echoes of wind and empty streets, the skittering and chattering of vermin, and an almost inescapable silence—for all purposes, the city was dead.

Although most avoided its ghostly streets, others were drawn to them. Arriving in surprising numbers were followers of the Raven Queen, who felt an instant connection with Vicene and those remaining in it; the cold and lifeless town seemed to emanate the inevitability of death and passing on. Temples were erected to the goddess of death, the streets were adorned with her symbols, and as far as the rest of the world was concerned, Vicene and the Raven Queen became inexorably linked.

Death in Vicene comes and goes without emotion, curiosity, or regret; each passing is considered natural and necessary. Those who would delay or fight their demise are scorned, mocked, and often removed from the city, for the Raven Queen would not approve their actions. Each and every life comes to an end how and when it should, the circumstances and timing each demise are unimportant—mere details of the inescapable embrace of death.

Lately, however, death has been embracing the residents of Vicene with startling frequency. Rejecting the Raven Queen

in an attempt to conquer death, a masterful cleric named Alfrenk has discovered an entrance to the Shadowfell, and, hoping to release the souls within, has opened a gate between the two worlds. Unfortunately, the only spirits to pass through were ravenous wraiths, which quickly turned their insatiable hunger toward the souls within the city and growing more powerful with each spirit they devour. If something isn't done soon, the ghost town of Vicene will change once again—this time into a town of ghosts.

GETTING THE PLAYERS INVOLVED

Life Is a Lonely Business can be used as a standalone encounter, or as the basis of an entire adventure. The players could stumble upon the town of Vicene, be sent there to speak with a particular follower of the Raven Queen, or sent for by a resident of the city. Once in Vicene, you can send the players to the encounter with one of the following hooks:

HOOK 1: DETECTING A MYSTERY

Like Alfrenk, Melo Rumley is another mind brought to the city for reasons other than worshipping the Raven Queen. Vicene has long been rumored to have a connection with the Shadowfell, and while curiously investigating the claims, Melo, a clever halfling, discovered Alfrenk and his gate. Too afraid to enter the gate himself, Melo instead watched Alfrenk and took notes of the process.

Once the wraiths started appearing, Melo took off, but his curiosity remained, and he asks the PCs to follow his instructions to cross over to the Shadowfell and back. Once they return, Melo will inspect the PCs and examine them for any effects of the Shadowfell's influence.

Melo's instructions are to touch the crystal orbs and recite a few words of incantation. For the best possible sample, he asks that each PC travel to and from the Shadowfell at least twice each.

Quest XP: 1,200 XP and 4,000 gp if each player crossed over and back from the Shadowfell at least twice.

HOOK 2: SHADOWFALLING

Alfrenk is a tall and spindly human cleric with a twitchy, nervous demeanor. Once he feels he can trust the PCs, he tells them his tale of woe: he wanted nothing more than to defeat death and end pain and suffering, but ironically, by opening a gate to the Shadowfell, he has caused more than ever. Alfrenk thinks the denizens of Vicene could probably defeat the wraiths if they worked together, but the majority of the city's residents are devout worshippers of the Raven Queen and have let the deaths pass without incident—so he's on his own.

Of course, Alfrenk tells the PCs, his first priority is to destroy the wraiths and protect the town, but there are other incentives. Once the mob figures out that Alfrenk betrayed their beliefs and tampered with the Shadowfell, there's sure to be some form of retribution. To hide his involvement, Alfrenk needs to close the gate, located in the basement of an abandoned inn called Shadow's Fall—before the devout mob of followers realizes what he's done. The problem is that the gate is surrounded by dangerous and hungry wraiths, and without some help it's impossible for him to pass.

Alfrenk hires the PCs to head to the inn and clear out all of the wraiths and spirits within, then come back for him so he can follow them back and close the gate without anyone knowing.

Quest XP: 2,800 XP and a promised 20,000 gp for clearing the inn of all the wraiths and spirits.

Shadowy Wraith		Level 17 Lurker
Medium shadow humanoid (undead)		XP 1,600
Initiative +19	Senses Perception +14; darkvision	
HP 110; Bloodied 55		
AC 30; Fortitude 29, Reflex 30, Will 32		
Immune disease, poison Resist insubstantial, 20 necrotic		
Speed Fly 8 (hover); phasing		
⊕ Shadow Strike (standard; at-will) • Necrotic		
+20 vs Reflex; 2d8 + 10 necrotic damage and the target gains ongoing 5 necrotic damage (save ends)		
⊖ Engulfing Darkness (standard; recharge ⓁⓂⓂⓂ) • Necrotic		
+20 vs AC; 3d8 + 10 necrotic damage and both the target and the shadowy wraith cross over to the other plane.		
Combat Advantage • Necrotic		
The shadowy wraith deals an extra 2d6 necrotic damage against any target it has combat advantage against.		
Shadow Phase (move; at-will)		
The shadowy wraith crosses over to the other plane.		
Spawn Wraith		
Any humanoid killed by a shadowy wraith rises as a free-willed shadowy wraith at the start of its creator's next turn, appearing in the space where it died (or the nearest unoccupied space).		
Alignment Chaotic Evil		Languages Common
Skills Stealth +20		
Str 14 (+10)	Dex 24 (+15)	Wis 12 (+9)
Con 18 (+12)	Int 11 (+8)	Cha 24 (+15)

SPECIAL FEATURES

USING THE MAPS

There are two maps, which show the same location. **Map 1** is the normal basement of the *Shadow's Fall* inn, and **Map 2** is the same location, but located in the Shadowfell.

- Place the maps side-by-side, though they should be considered to be taking up the same space.
- Any player or monster can see the other plane and any creatures within it at all times; everything on the other plane appears as a ghostly visage shade or object, but is still visible and recognizable.
- When a player or monster crosses over from one plane to the other, they appear in the exact same square in the next map.
- If there is a creature blocking the square they would appear in while crossing over, they appear adjacent to that spot instead.

CROSSING OVER

The wraiths will often phase between the real world and the Shadowfell, forcing the players to use a crystal orb and cross over.

- A PC can cross over with a minor action while standing adjacent to a crystal orb.
- A PC can only cross over once during each of their turns.

CLOSING THE GATE

Once the wraiths are defeated, the PCs can attempt to close the gate using Shape & Shade's bomb, *The Big Goodbye*. This starts the skill challenge *Closing the Gate*, found on page 5.

Restless Spirit		Level 14 Minion
Medium shadow humanoid (undead)		XP 250
Initiative +14	Senses Perception +14; darkvision	
Binding Spirit aura 1; any enemy within the aura that takes damage from a power that has the necrotic keyword takes an additional 5 necrotic damage.		
HP 1; a missed attack never damages a minion.		
AC 30; Fortitude 26, Reflex 30, Will 13		
Immune disease, poison Resist insubstantial, 20 necrotic		
Speed Fly 8 (hover); phasing		
⊕ Spectral Slash (standard; at-will)		
+17 vs Reflex; 7 damage.		
Shadow Phase (move; at-will)		
The restless spirit crosses over to the other plane.		
Alignment Evil		Languages Common
Str 6 (+5)	Dex 24 (+14)	Wis 14 (+9)
Con 12 (+8)	Int 6 (+5)	Cha 21 (+12)

GETTING STARTED

Regardless of why the PCs decide to enter the inn, read this once they approach the building:

This building has seen better days. Long forgotten, most of the stonework has crumbled, and the broken roof invites in every bit of weather. The wooden door is splintered, hanging by one hinge and easily pushed aside to grant entry. Once inside, a shivering cold overtakes you. Near the back of the room is a stairwell, lit by a faint, flickering green glow.

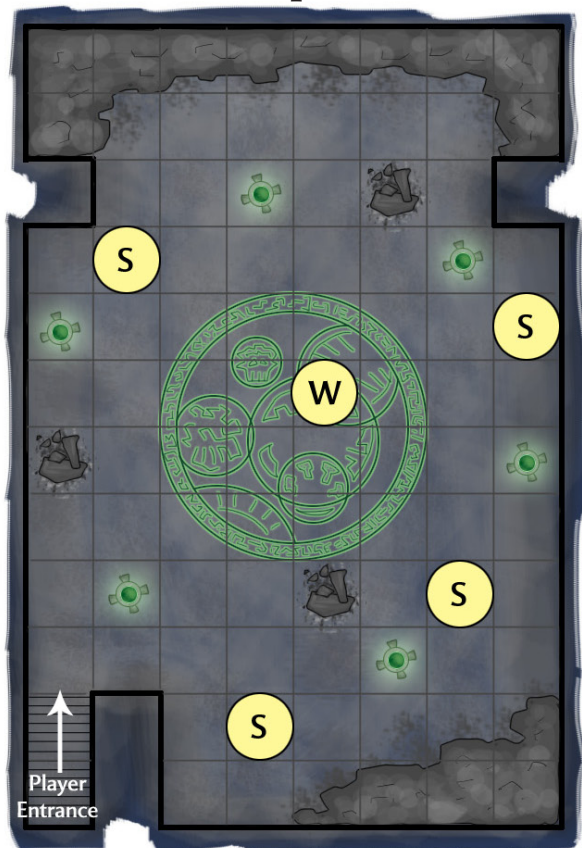
AREA: SHADOW'S FALL

Read this when the PCs enter the basement:

Between the filthy walls and cobweb-ridden corners of the basement lies a runic circle, inscribed into the floor and pulsing with a strange, green glow. Surrounding it are six ornate pedestals, each one crowned with a crystal orb, a green light from within illuminating the nearby area.

As you near the circle, an icy cold breeze enters the room, and the shadowy presence of a wraith and several small spirits come into focus. The room itself seems almost doubled, a pale and ghostly echo of it can be seen out of the corner of your eye. Moving within this shadowy room are two other large wraiths, though their presence is faint and insubstantial—slightly out of sync with this world.

Map 1



Perception (DC 12): The orbs and runic circle are controlling the gate, and appear to give off a strong magical aura.

Arcana (DC 16): The ghostly room and insubstantial wraiths and spirits are currently within the Shadowfell, but the barrier between the planes is extremely thin here.

Arcana (DC 22): The orbs are protected by strong necromantic magic, and cannot be destroyed while the gate is open. Once destroyed, the crystal orbs will lose their energy.

SETUP

3 Shadowy Wraiths (W)

8 Restless Spirits (S)

Two of the wraiths and 4 of the spirits start in the Shadowfell (**Map 2**), when combat starts, 1 wraith will cross over.

FEATURES OF THE AREA

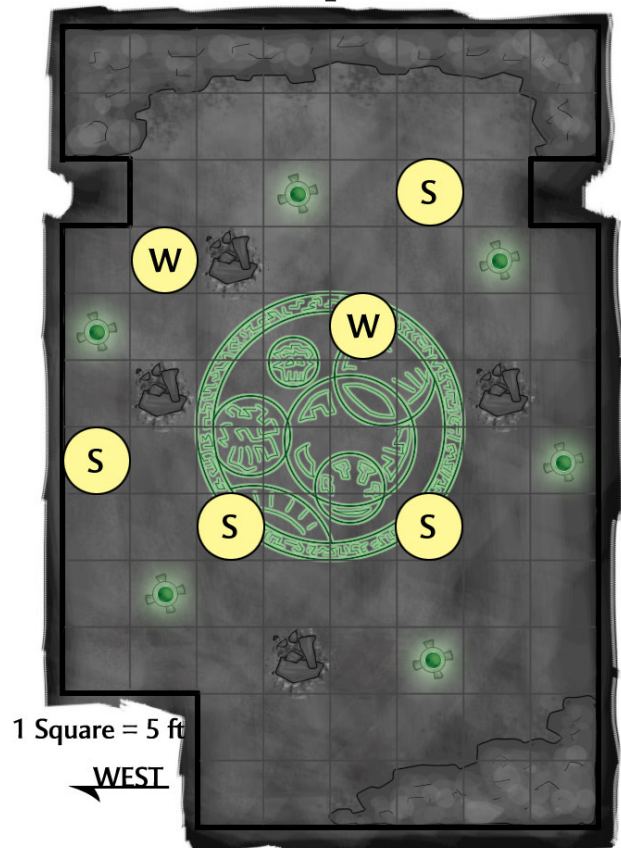
Height: The ceiling is 12' tall.

Illumination: Dim light.

Rubble: There are several piles of stone rubble and broken masonry, which count as difficult terrain to walk over, and can be jumped with a **DC 15 Athletics** check.

Crystal Orbs: Marked as glowing green orbs on pedestals, these are 5 ft' tall. A player attacking one of the orbs will take an immediate 15 necrotic damage.

Map 2



TACTICS

The shadowy wraiths will attempt to isolate PCs with *Engulfing Darkness*, crossing over with an attack or with *Shadow Phase* to switch between **Map 1** and **Map 2** and break up the players. Once a wraith has targeted a PC, it will use *Shadow Strike* and attempt to coordinate with other wraiths or spirits to make use of the extra damage from combat advantage.

The restless spirits will try to make use of their *Binding Spirit* aura, moving adjacent to players that are being attacked by the wraiths to deal extra damage. The spirits will also use *Shadow Phase* to follow, elude, or ambush players by switching between the planes.

Although not incredibly intelligent, the wraiths and spirits will make use of combat tactics to focus fire players, achieve combat advantage, and flee to the other plane when threatened.

PLAYER STRATEGY

The players will need to stay close to the orbs, so that they can cross between planes to assist their allies—the room is small so it isn't difficult to stay within range.

Avoiding the wraith's extra damage from combat advantage can be tricky, and might require the players to bunch up or find corners to avoid a consistent damage increase from all of the enemies.

The only complicated part of the encounter is switching between the planes, so you as the DM need to make sure they understand how crossing over and the maps work!

COMBAT FLAVOR

If you dislike reading powers and effects to your players, give them hints with the following flavor text.

When an enemy uses *Shadow Phase*, read:

The spirit dissipates into a ghostly wisp, moving between the world of the living and the Shadowfell.

When a PC uses a crystal orb, read:

Your body begins to feel light and hollow, and the air leaves your lungs. As you gasp for a breath, you notice the room turning pale and transparent, and the formerly faint images come into focus.

When a shadow wraith uses *Engulfing Shadows*, read:

The wraith reaches out and covers you with what seems to be a tattered cloak, and you feel an icy chill run down your spine as the world turns to black and fades away. When you regain focus, you realize you have crossed between the planes.

When a PC is damaged by *Binding Spirit*, read:

Empowered by the wraith's necromantic attack, the restless spirit emits a strange aura.

CONCLUSION

When the wraiths and spirits are defeated, the PCs should realize that Alfrenk isn't coming and they should go looking for him. If they decide to loiter, they'll notice that the gate seems quiet for the time being, though they do not possess the knowledge to close it.

Upon returning to Melo, he will comically inspect them and fervidly take secret notes, nodding and muttering to himself before rewarding the PCs. When they return to Alfrenk's house, read the following:

The door to Alfrenk's residence has been broken in, revealing several pools of fresh blood. The house has been completely ransacked, and the majority of papers and old books have been tossed into the fireplace, lost forever. As you investigate the area, a strange thumping sound comes from the roof, repeating every few seconds.

The source of the noise is a tragic sight: Alfrenk, battered and bloodied, hangs by a rope from the tree above, his dead body swaying in the wind—his feet colliding with the roof on each swing. Hanging from his neck is a crude wooden sign with words scratched into it in common: "death seeks us all, but finds traitors first."

Inside they will find all of Alfrenk's belongings, including a level 17 magical item and 15,000 gp. Further exploration will show that all of his pertinent notes were incinerated before his death.

If the PCs linger or continue to investigate Alfrenk's demise, have them stumble upon the following hook:

HOOK: GOODBYE

Run by two equally devious gnomes, the eponymous *Shape & Shade Supply Shop* is concerned. Not for the lives of those in Vicene, but for their dwindling profits. It's hard to make an honest gold when your clientele is dropping dead like flies, and they have perishable goods that won't keep. Playing the odds, they figure that their shop will be out of business within a month if they keep losing customers.

To solve their little dilemma, Shape and Shade worked with Alfrenk to create a planar-explosive device, named *The Big Goodbye*, which should seal off the gate to the Shadowfell and keep the rest of those nasty wraiths and spirits on the right side of death. Shape and Shade just finished the device and were waiting to assist Alfrenk, when an angry mob of the Raven Queen's followers broke into his home and strung him up. They did, however, manage to hang on to some of Alfrenk's notes for closing the gate, and offer them to the PCs.

If they're interested, Shape and Shade will hand over the *The Big Goodbye*, along with the instructions for closing the gate, and offer a reward if they're successful.

Quest XP: 1,200 XP and a level 18 magical item for successfully closing the gate.

SKILL CHALLENGE

If the players accept the quest from Shape and Shade, continue with the following skill challenge once they return to the inn:

CLOSING THE GATE

Though Alfrenk is gone, his notes are quite clear and should provide enough information for closing the gate to the Shadowfell with Shape and Shade's planar-explosive.

Setup: For the PCs to successfully close the gate to the Shadowfell, they will need to follow Alfrenk's notes for activating *The Big Goodbye*, chanting incantations while fending off spirits and necromantic energy.

Level: 16

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

Primary Skills: Arcana, Perception, Insight, Athletics, Thievery, Religion (no maximum successes for any skills).

Arcana (DC 24; must be used for at least 3 successes): You follow Alfrenk's instructions, reading the correct incantations to activate and sustain the planar-destroying energy of the bomb.

Perception (DC 20): You decipher a key diagram or important phrase within Alfrenk's instructions, allowing the group to change and adapt.

Insight (DC 20): You spot a mistake within the logic of the instructions, correcting it seconds before the incantation must be read.

Athletics (DC 20): You hold the bomb steady in the center of the runic circle, using your strength to fight the necromantic energy attempting to repulse it.

Thievery (DC 20): You notice a part of the runic circle has been chipped away, and quickly scratch in the missing piece, giving your group's incantations full potency.

Religion (DC 20): You summon the power of your god to drive back any spirits attempting to hold the gate open.

Secondary Skills: History, Endurance, Streetwise (no maximum successes for any skills).

History (DC 13): You recall a helpful magical phrase that weakens the assaulting spirits or bolsters the concentration of your allies. Add a +2 bonus to an ally's primary skill check.

Endurance (DC 13): You concentrate on one of the crystal orbs, letting your lifeforce assist your allies in pushing back the vengeful spirits. Add a +2 bonus to an ally's primary skill check.

Streetwise (DC 13): You recognize shorthand within Alfrenk's instructions, allowing an ally to quickly interpret the necessary incantation. Add a +2 bonus to an ally's Arcana check.

Success: *The Big Goodbye* fades away, entering the Shadowfell and turning into a ghostly version of itself. Suddenly, it erupts, and a flash of light encompasses the room and both planes. When the room dims once again, the shadowy echo of the other plane is gone.

Failure: *The Big Goodbye* begins to shake, corrupted by the attacking spirits and necromantic energy, before exploding in a fiery mass of magical energy. The gate remains open. Each player loses 2 healing surges.

ADJUSTMENTS

If you like this encounter but aren't sure how to fit it into your campaign, here is some advice:

We have too few or too many players:

For every player below or in excess of 5, subtract or add two restless spirits. For every two players below or in excess of 5, subtract or add four restless spirits and one shadowy wraith.

We aren't the right level:

The shadowy wraith and the restless spirits are based on level 16 and 17 wraiths which can be leveled up or down in the **Monster Builder**. Just add in the ability to switch between planes.

It's too easy:

If the players are not having any trouble with the wraiths, then 1) have the spirits and wraiths employ some advanced combat tactics, preparing an ambush in one plane and having a wraith pull a player into a location surrounded on 4 sides, or 2) limit the number of times a player can switch between planes, or change the minor action to a standard action. Also consider giving the wraiths regeneration 5 or 10.

It's too hard:

If your players are having a difficult time with the wraiths, or can't quite figure out how crossing over works, you can 1) explain in detail how the orbs and planes/maps work, forgetting all immersion, or 2) dumb down the wraiths and spirits, and have them avoid teaming up so much—I'm not a fan of fudge, but it's better than a TPK sometimes.

I don't get the two maps thing:

Imagine that both maps occupy the same space, but are in parallel dimensions or something. When a creature or player crosses over, note the square they are on in Map 1, and place them on that exact same square (or adjacent to it if it's occupied) in Map 2. Easy!

They don't want to help followers of the Raven Queen:

Then throw a spin on it and have Alfrenk directly opposing their rule, trying to undermine the Raven Queen by defeating death and rendering her obsolete. The players can be doing it for other reasons, too: helping Alfrenk in his personal troubles, or preventing the wraiths from gaining power and moving on to other cities.

We want to play a full adventure:

The forgotten city of Vicene is full of encounters waiting to happen, and confrontations between the followers of the Raven Queen and the outside world. The angry mob that killed Alfrenk could have been set on him by a powerful NPC of the city, using the goddess of death's ideals to keep control of the population. But as usual, take what you like and dump the rest!



↑ 1A 2A
1B 2B

Map 1A →

Here's a to-scale map, just print, cut out, and rotate the pieces. They go together like this (the arrows all face NORTH):



Map 1B
→



Map 2A
→



1 Square = 5 ft

WEST
←

