

# The Servants of Decay

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Humans and demihumans alike pride themselves on their power and sophistication, as if they were the very pinnacles of creation. Their religions and philosophies reinforce this arrogant notion, fueling belief in their mastery of nature. Certainly some take a more balanced view, namely that they are stewards of nature and should guard it and protect it, for anything that affects the natural world may eventually affect them as well. Ultimately, even this view speaks more about the self-importance of humans and demihumans than it does about their proper respect for the awesome power of nature.

Worse still, it betrays a fundamental ignorance about the true order of things. For while many beings recognize that nature can be as violent as it is gentle, as destructive as it is nurturing, few suspect that it hides a darker force inimical to both mortals and gods. Few realize that what they call “nature” is but the mask worn by an ancient reality – Preternature – whose mind-rending power once reigned supreme in the cosmos and may do so again one day.

Those who realize the truth are a strange lot. Equal parts geniuses and madmen, they believe that the preternatural world can – and will – reassert itself and in doing so will wipe away the petty accomplishments of humans and elves, dwarves and halflings. There is no escaping this fate. The best that intelligent beings can hope for is to embrace the destruction that Preternature will inevitably bring, for true safety can only be found in accepting one’s insignificance in the face of this reality, which predates even the gods themselves. Those who accept this fate are known as the Servants of Decay and represent a threat unlike any seen in untold millennia.

## Among the Servants

The true origins of the Servants of Decay are lost to history. This is not because the Servants have attempted to hide their origins – although they have – but because they are a truly ancient cult. Some Servants, such as their leader Mailcon, have implied that the group even predates the present age, being vestiges of a time before the gods reshaped the ancient preternatural world according to their wishes. During this bygone time, the world was not as mortals now know it, and neither were the creatures that inhabited it. Instead of the familiar beasts and animals that exist today, there was an entirely different class of creature – the preternaturals.

The preternaturals existed in what the Servants consider to be a simpler time, when the competing moralities of narrow-minded deities and the limited comprehension of mortals did not interfere with the natural cycle of birth, growth, decay, and death. The preternaturals had no need for the trappings of civilization and readily accepted that

all things must pass away. They reveled in the decay and destruction of all things, for they saw in them the potential to give birth to newer and greater things. To the preternaturals, this is the way of the world. Nothing – neither gods or mortals – could stand in its way.

The gods and their worshippers tell a very different story about Preternature’s ascendancy, namely that those times were replete with destruction and a lack of concern for the well-being of individuals. They were dark times and the preternaturals were worse than the beasts of the wild, rabid creatures suffused with chaos and amorality – utterly alien in their nature and outlook. The preternaturals stood in the way of the gods’ efforts to remake the world for the benefit of their mortal faithful and had to be destroyed. Even the most evil of the gods recognized this fact and joined with their benevolent brethren in wiping out all traces of Preternature and its servants.

Or so they thought. Seemingly victorious, the gods used the defeated Preternature as the “template” on which they rebuilt the world according to their own designs. They twisted and warped it into a reality suitable for mortals and anchored this new reality with the gift of civilization, whose power to inspire and uplift further weakened Preternature’s hold. The preternaturals then retreated to hidden places, the forgotten nooks and crannies of the cosmos. Yet, like a poorly executed palimpsest, traces of the old reality can be seen amid the gods’ work, creeping in where civilization has little sway, and it is from here that the Servants of Decay plot its downfall.

The Servants believe that only by hastening decadence and decay can mortals hope to achieve the enlightened perfection that the preternaturals enjoyed in their day. A central premise of the Servants’ beliefs is that the original order of reality, Preternature, is neither good nor evil and that this fact “frees” them from the constraints imposed by mortal or godly morality. Strength, power, and ultimately enlightenment come only through an emulation of nature’s uncaring and sometimes brutal lessons. Once one has accepted these truths, it becomes possible to rend the veil that separates the present illusory reality from the true one the Servants are fighting to restore.

## The Superstructure of Reality

The preternaturals exist now – as they always have – in a place that few gods admit exists, and yet it does. Underlying the cosmos in all its variety is Preternature, older and more alien than mortals can easily comprehend. This reality underpins what people commonly call “nature” without realizing that they use the term incorrectly, for the truly natural world is not the ordered structure the gods have imposed but the amorphous, chaotic madness of Preternature.



Preternature exists just beyond the perception of mortals. If one has not been taught how to seek it, one cannot see it or its denizens. Yet, it surely exists, lying beneath the placid and orderly surface of the everyday world. Many ordinary objects have reflections in the preternatural world and vice versa, creating a strange bond between the two realities that even the gods could not destroy, try as they might.

This bond manifests itself in nexuses, invisible and incorporeal doorways that connect the two realities. Preternatural creatures freely use these nexuses to pass between worlds while on their incomprehensible activities. Because of the peculiar relationship between the two realities, travel in the preternatural world proceeds faster than travel in its ordinary counterpart, although it does not seem so from its perspective. Only when mortals return to their own reality do they realize that they have traveled 7 miles for every 10 minutes they traveled in the preternatural realm. Unsurprisingly, the Servants of Decay use nexuses as a convenient way to move both quickly and covertly over great distances in the ordinary world.

Such travel is not without its complications. For one, recognizing nexuses is a difficult matter if one has not been taught to do so. Most inhabitants of everyday reality can sense nexuses only with great effort.

A successful Spot check (DC 40) reveals the presence of a nexus if the character is within 30 feet of the dimensional doorway. Spellcasters may apply their ranks in Knowledge (Arcana) and Knowledge (The Planes) as a synergy bonus to the check. Otherwise, only *true seeing* reveal its presence (lesser spells like *see invisible* are inefficacious).

More frighteningly, the composition of Preternature produces ill effects in creatures from ordinary reality, devouring their minds and souls.

For every 10 minutes a creature remains within the preternatural world unprotected, it must make a Will save (DC 20) with a Wisdom modifier or lose 1d4 Wisdom and 1d4 Intelligence temporarily. When either the creature's Wisdom or Intelligence is reduced to 0, it is consumed by the preternatural world's alien energies and ceases to exist permanently. Not even a *wish* or *miracle* can restore the creature to existence.

Because mortal understanding of Preternature is so rare, only eccentric sages and scholars know the few spells or magic items that can protect a creature against its soul-devouring nature.

While within the preternatural world, characters can see and interact with any creatures they encounter there. This means that preternatural creatures' natural invisibility and incorporeality are negated for the duration of a character's time within this alternate reality. The character can see into ordinary reality to a limited extent, but it appears hazy and indistinct. Sight and hearing into the normal realm are limited to 30 feet. While in the preternatural world, the character cannot interact with ordinary reality in any way, including attacking or casting spells. However, the character is likewise intangible to ordinary creatures that do not have a specific power that grants them the ability to interact with the preternatural realm.

## The War against Civilization

The Servants of Decay exist to break down the barriers that prevent Preternature from re-asserting itself. The greatest of those barriers is the gods' greatest gift to mortals – civilization. Broadly defined, “civilization” is any type of orderly mortal progress, including belief in the gods, arcane magic, and cities. Each of these and a hundred other elements weakens the power of Preternature, rendering it less able to impinge upon ordinary reality. Civilization is likewise a balm against decay. By providing a structure that transcends the lives of any single living creature, civilization transmits values and beliefs from one generation to the next. This forever traps mortals at a certain level of advancement, limiting their options and their ability to grow. Therefore, the Servants seek to undermine civilization as the means to free mortals from stagnation and initiate the next stage in their growth.

One might think the Servants' hatred of civilization would make them powerful among elves, dwarves, and other long-lived races, but that is not the case. Although long-lived races are often bastions of civilization and order, they tend toward stagnation. They neither grow nor decay, remaining forever trapped at a certain level of development. Humans, on the hand, are restless and dynamic. Moreover, humans are widespread and powerful, controlling more outposts of civilization than even the elves – which is why the Servants court human assistance. It is humans who stand against the ravages of nature, in defiance of Preternature.

Consequently, the Servants work hard to recruit humans to their cause. To date, they have had the most success among rural dwellers, particularly those who live close to the land, like farmers. These humans are more likely to be open to the idea that civilization has served mortals poorly. Over time, these rustics are initiated into the deeper mysteries of the cult, by which time they are totally devoted to its cause. Yet, it is city-dwellers who hold the greatest interest to the Servants. They need the assistance of urban humans, if they are to infiltrate and undermine civilization successfully.

### What's Their Alignment?

Throughout this section, the Servants of Decay are presented as “beyond morality,” having no concerns about the ethics and philosophies of mortal society. They claim Preternature has no need for such narrow concepts. So, what does that mean in terms of their alignment?

The GM may choose to adopt one of two solutions. The default position (which is used throughout this section) is that the Servants belong to several different alignments, depending on their most common actions, with the most common being Neutral and Neutral Evil. For example, a Servant who regularly infects crops with disease as a way to wage war against civilization would

probably be Neutral Evil while one who simply recruits farmers might be Neutral. In the default position, alignment is a purely descriptive element of the character rather than a prescriptive one. It stems from *how* a character acts rather than *why* he acts that way.

Another option is to presume that the Servants have no alignment. Being devoted to an uncaring reality, they transcend notions like good and evil, law and chaos. In this option, they are immune to spells like *detect chaos/evil/good/law* and *protection from chaos/evil/good/law*. This is an unorthodox solution, but it does emphasize the Servants' alien nature and defiance of the bounds of ordinary reality.

Of course, the GM has final authority on this matter. He should make his decision based on the needs of his campaign, as well as how he views the question of what alignment represents.

## The Power of Civilization

As noted earlier, many creatures and objects within normal reality often cast “reflections” within Preternature. Cities and other large settlements cast some of the greatest reflections of all. These reflections inhibit the ability of the preternatural world to impinge upon the ordinary world. No one, not even the Servants of Decay, knows precisely why, although theories abound. The most convincing is that cities generate a metamagical aura of stability and orderliness, which is so at odds with the chaotic nature of Preternature that it impedes its action. This theory is borne out by the fact that nexuses never form within the boundaries of cities, as well as other effects detrimental to the Servants.

Chief among these is that large centers of civilization possess Preternatural Resistance that must be overcome if a preternatural creature or Servant is to use any of its supernatural abilities, including spellcasting. This Preternatural Resistance functions as a type of “magical armor class” versus preternatural magic and creatures. To overcome the Preternatural Resistance, a Servant or creature must make a caster check (1d20 + caster level) against a DC determined by the number of people in the settlement who do not follow the ways of the cult.

### Preternatural Resistance Table

Settlement Population	Preternatural Resistance DC
10-100	5
101-500	10
501-1000	15
1001-2500	20
2501-5000	25
5001-10,000	30
10,001-20,000	35
20,000+	40

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