

A FREE CREATURE KEEPER · LONG ISLAND DUNGEON MASTER

THIRSTTHORN

It cannot move, it cannot chase you, and it will take the whole party if one person crawls.

CR 3 · levels 2 to 5 · one stat block, a d20 and a d12 · SRD 5.1

A free CR 3 plant that cannot move, cannot chase you, and will take the whole party if one person crawls.

THE WHOLE IDEA

A thirstthorn grows in a ring around real water, in country where real water is the only thing anybody is looking for. It is not disguised and it is not an illusion. The shade is shade, the pool is a pool, and the only way in is a three-foot tunnel through the stalks. The plant never lies about anything. It just charges.

Here is a monster that has never once had to hunt anything.

From four hundred yards out a thirstthorn reads exactly as what it is, which is shade and green stalks and the sound of a pool moving in the middle of them, and every word of that is true. The water is there. The water is good. The plant grew around it on purpose and has been waiting ever since for somebody thirsty enough to take the last twenty feet on their hands and knees.

That last twenty feet is the monster. A Medium creature goes into the tunnel at half speed with both arms out in front and a sword it cannot swing.

I have been running games for 30+ years and the traps my players still talk about are never the ones that lied to them. They are the ones that told the truth and charged for it.



WHY IT IS WORSE THAT IT CANNOT MOVE

Speed 0 looks like a weakness on the page. At a table it does something almost nothing else does: it hands the entire decision to the players and then refuses to help them make it.

A wolf pack is a thing that happens to a party. A thirstthorn is a thing a party does to itself, in order, out loud, with everybody watching. The stand is green. The shade is real. The water is audible from thirty feet out. The tunnel is three feet wide and twenty feet long, and the mount roster says how many days are left. Every one of those is on the table before anybody touches anything.

You do not have to push any of that. You only have to describe the shade honestly and then wait.

And when it goes wrong it goes wrong in the most useful way a fight can go wrong, which is that half the party is in trouble and the other half is standing in the open air twenty feet away with a clear view of the tunnel mouth and no way to get to anybody. The rescue is the encounter. The fight is just the reason the rescue is happening.

WHERE THEY GROW, AND WHY THERE IS ALWAYS ONE MORE

Thirstthorns need two things and they are the same two things every traveller needs, which is why the map fills up with them in exactly the places a party wants to walk.

The first is water that persists: a seep at the foot of a rock shelf, a spring in a wadi that runs three weeks out of the year and stays damp the rest, a cistern somebody cut into stone four hundred years ago and stopped maintaining three hundred years ago. A thirstthorn cannot make water and cannot find it at a distance. It grows where a seed happened to land on ground that was already wet, and the ones that landed anywhere else died in a week.

The second is traffic. A stand that nothing ever walks past starves politely and goes brown in a season, and the stands that survive are the ones sitting on a route. **Every thirstthorn in your world is on a road, a stock trail, a caravan line or a pilgrim path, because that is the only kind that lives long enough to be a problem.** They are not out in the empty country. They are exactly where the map says to go.

Which means a region with thirstthorns in it has a particular geography, and you can hand your players that geography in one sentence from an innkeeper. The good water on this route is guarded by law, by a garrison, by a toll, by a family that has held it for six generations and will sell you four skins at a price that makes you angry. The unguarded water is unguarded for a reason. Everybody local knows which is which. Nobody local has ever written it down, because out here the map that tells you where the free water is would be the most valuable and most dangerous object anyone owned.

Give the party a guide who knows, and then take the guide away from them, and you have three sessions of travel that runs itself.

WHAT IT COSTS A PARTY OVER A WEEK ON THE ROAD

Run the thorn as a creature and you get one good fight. Run it as a fact about the country and you get a week, and the week is where this thing earns its place.

Days one and two, before they ever see one. Somebody in town mentions them. Not as a warning, because locals do not warn each other about weather, but as an aside: *the water at the Elbow is fine, do not stop at the green one before it.* The aside has it backwards. The Elbow is the thorn stand; the green one before it is clean.

Day three, the first stand. They find one that is already dead. Burnt out, two seasons back, black hollow stalks standing in a ring around a pool that is now open to the sun and half evaporated and full of grit. Somebody did this. Whoever did it destroyed the water they came for, and left the ring standing as a marker, and everybody who has passed since has understood the marker perfectly. Let the party stand in that and work out what it means.

Day four, the choice. A live one. Full green, deep shade, audible water, and the tunnel. Now their skins are low enough that the arithmetic is real, and you say nothing at all.

Day five, if somebody crawled and lived. The party has water and one member has a set of puncture wounds in a pattern that does not look like anything else, and for the rest of the leg every local who sees those marks reacts. Not with fear. With a flat, unimpressed recognition, the way people look at a man with a rope burn across his palm. *You went in one.* That is a scar with a local meaning already attached to it.

Day six, if somebody crawled and did not live. They are carrying a body across country where the ground is too hard to dig and there is nothing to burn that they are not already carrying. Say nothing about that either. The problem is in the open and it does not go away.

Day seven. They come over a rise and there is another one, and it is green and it is in the shade and they can hear the water from here. Watch what the table does now. The first thirstthorn is a monster. The second one is a campaign.



HOW TO RUN IT

1. **Describe it honestly and do not editorialize.** No sense of wrongness, no unnatural stillness, no smell of old blood. It is shade and stalks and water, and it looks like the best thing that has happened all week, because it is. The False Oasis check exists to reward a character who has heard of these. It does not exist to save a party from their own thirst.
2. **Make the tunnel a commitment, out loud, before anyone enters.** Three feet wide, twenty feet long, a Medium creature squeezing at half speed. Say the terms plainly while the character is still outside. Terms stated before the squeeze are terms. Terms stated after it are an argument.
3. **Let the first round be nothing.** The crawler reaches the pool and it is a pool: cool, clean, waist deep, moving slightly. Give them a full round of that. Let them drink. Let them call back down the tunnel that it is fine. The thorn does not open until something is fifteen feet in and lying down.
4. **Grapple first, damage second, and never the other way round.** The tendril hits for six and the escape DC is 13, and neither number is the point. The point is that the Grappled condition lands on somebody already squeezing and already out of reach of the three people shouting at him. Blood Drain then runs at the top of every one of its turns and heals the plant by exactly what it takes.
5. **Play the outside half as its own scene, because it is.** Reach 10 feet, Speed 0, one Medium creature at a time in the tunnel. A second character can go in and be eaten alongside the first. A character can cut at the stalks, which

is slow and mostly useless. A character can go up over the top, which works and takes time. Or somebody reaches for a torch.

6. **Make them say the fire out loud.** Fire is the answer. Fire also destroys the water, cooks the pool, and turns the one drinkable thing in forty miles into a hot grey soup nobody is putting in a skin. The party can win this fight any time they like, at the exact cost of the thing they came here for. **That is the design. Do not soften it, and do not invent a way to have both.**
7. **Let the corpse be a place.** A burnt thirstthorn stands there black and hollow and safe, a ring of dead stalks around an open pool that will be drinkable again in about a month. Every party that comes after inherits it. If your players ever come back down this road, put them in the ring they made, and let them camp in it.

THE STAT BLOCK

THIRSTTHORN

Large plant, unaligned. A vampiric trap-plant. Challenge 3 (700 XP).

AC 13

HP 40 (9d8)

Speed 0 ft.

STR 16 (+3) DEX 6 (-2) CON 16 (+3)

INT 1 (-5) WIS 10 (+0) CHA 3 (-4)

Blindsight 30 ft., passive Perception 10

VULNERABILITIES AND RESISTANCES

Vulnerable to **fire**. Resistant to **piercing** and **slashing**: the stalks are hollow and a blade goes through them without finding anything.

DRAWN TO

Warm blood. It grew around the water so that the thirsty would come to it.

FALSE OASIS

From outside the stand it reads as shade and open water, because it is shade and open water. A creature with reason to be suspicious can spot the trap with a **DC 15 Wisdom (Perception)** or **Intelligence (Nature)** check before entering.

CHOKING TUNNEL

The only path to the pool is a three-foot tunnel through the stalks. A Medium creature squeezes through it at half speed.

THORN TENDRIL

Melee Weapon Attack: +5 to **hit**, reach 10 ft., one target. Hit: **6 (1d6+3) piercing damage**, and the target is Grappled (escape DC 13).

BLOOD DRAIN

At the start of the thirstthorn's turn, each creature it has Grappled takes **5 (2d4) necrotic damage**, and the thirstthorn regains that many hit points.

THE HEART-CLUSTER

Hit points are the heart-cluster at the pool edge. That is the only part of the stand that dies.

A DELIBERATE OUTLIER

Forty hit points is low for Challenge 3 and that is on purpose: this is a **glass cannon** sitting behind two resistances. Piercing and slashing are the damage types a party brings by default, and the plant heals 5 a round off every creature it is holding, so the honest hit-point number in play is a good deal higher than the one printed. Bring fire and it dies in two rounds. Bring swords and you are there all afternoon.

TACTICS

It does not chase, because it cannot. It waits, and it punishes greed. The water at its heart is real and that is the horror of it. Fire ends it fast. Hacking at hollow stalks barely works, and every round somebody spends hacking is a round somebody else is being drunk.



WHO IT IS FOR, AND WHAT IT COSTS

Levels 2 to 5. Every budget below was re-run at the encounter calculator rather than estimated, and the numbers are printed here so you can check me.

The budget line. Target band **levels 2-5**. One thorn: **raw 700, adjusted 700** at the single-monster multiplier of 1.0. Two thorns: **raw 1,400, adjusted 2,100** at the two-monster multiplier of 1.5.

- **One thorn, four 2nd-level characters:** 700 adjusted against thresholds of 200 / 400 / 600 / 800. A **Hard** encounter, and the version I like best, because at 2nd level the party genuinely cannot afford to lose the person in the tunnel.
- **One thorn, four 3rd-level characters:** the same 700 adjusted against 300 / 600 / 900 / 1,600. **Medium** on paper and rougher in practice, for the reason the budget cannot see: the squeeze means the party never brings its whole action economy to bear.
- **One thorn, four 4th-level characters:** 700 adjusted against 500 / 1,000 / 1,500 / 2,000, which is **Easy**, and at that point the fight is not the encounter any more. The choice about the fire still is.
- **Two thorns, four 5th-level characters:** 1,400 raw at the two-monster multiplier of 1.5, so **2,100 adjusted** against 1,000 / 2,000 / 3,000 / 4,400. **Medium**. The calculator warns that a two-monster figure assumes both are present from round one, and here that warning is answered by the creature itself: both stands are rooted, neither one can arrive, and there is no second wave.

It needs no new subsystem and no house rule. Grappled, a Constitution save, and an Athletics or Acrobatics check to break free are the whole of the machinery.

And it is not only a desert creature, although the desert is where it is at its meanest. A thirstthorn works in a flooded mine where one shaft has clean water, in a siege where the only untainted cistern is outside the wall, and in deep woodland where the party has been drinking from a river for two days and finally finds a spring.



THE WITNESS

If you want one person in the region who can tell the party the truth, use **Jorunn Calder**, who finds water for a living. She walks ahead of caravans reading the ground, and she is very good, and a thirstthorn is the precise shape of her own success with something living in the middle of it. She has been wrong exactly once. She will not tell the party which time it was, because she does not talk about it, but she will point at a stand from half a mile out and say *not that one* and then wait to see whether these particular strangers are the arguing kind.

Her line, the first time somebody tells her they are just going to have a look: *“So did he.”*

D20: WHAT IT HAS ALREADY DRUNK

A thirstthorn is always full of something, and what it last fed on is the single most useful thing you can decide before the scene starts, because it sets the tunnel, the tells at the mouth, and what the party is standing in when it dies. Roll once when you place a stand.

None of these is loot. Every one of them is a condition the plant is currently in.

ROLL IT OR PICK IT

D20 WHAT IT HAS ALREADY DRUNK

- 1 **Nothing, for a long time.** This stand is starving. The stalks are thin, the shade is patchy, and the tunnel is wide enough to walk into stooped. It will take the first thing that comes and it will take it fast, and a starving thirstthorn opens at the tunnel mouth rather than waiting for the pool.
- 2 **A caravan's lead ox, three weeks ago.** Fat, slow and enormously green. The tunnel has narrowed to barely three feet because the stalks have thickened. It is not hungry, which means it waits for the second person in rather than the first, and there is a picked ox skull at the pool edge in plain sight.
- 3 **Something that was already poisoned.** The pool is fine. The plant is not. It attacks on a delay, misses more than it should, and any creature that spends a full round watching before entering notices the tendrils twitching out of time with each other. Treat it as having disadvantage on its first attack.
- 4 **A rider and not the horse.** The horse is still here, alive, hobbled twenty feet out in the open, thin and calm and utterly uninterested in the shade. The horse is the only moving thing in the clearing, and ten minutes is exactly as long as the thorn needs.
- 5 **The last four people who tried to burn it.** There are four separate scorch marks on the outside of the stand at four different ages, and the newest is a month old. Whatever they are doing wrong, they are doing it from the outside. The stand is thick enough now that a torch at the edge does nothing.
- 6 **Rain.** There has been weather, the seep is running high, and the pool is up over the lip and spilling into the sand in a dark fan twenty feet long. The plant is slack and slow and much less interested. It attacks only what comes all the way to the water, and a party that fills skins from the overflow can leave without ever meeting it.
- 7 **A snake with a nasty reputation.** The tendrils carry it now. The first creature Grappled takes the normal damage and must also make a DC 13 Constitution saving throw, taking 4 (1d8) poison damage on a failure and half as much on a success. Once only. After that the stand is clean.
- 8 **A child's donkey, and the child got away.** There is a village six miles from here that knows exactly what is in this stand, has known for two years, and has said nothing to any traveller because the water is the reason anybody stops and the stopping is the reason anybody trades. Somebody in that village will not meet the party's eyes.
- 9 **A creature much bigger than it.** The stand is deformed. One whole side is collapsed outward and there is a gap in the ring a Medium creature can walk through upright without using the tunnel at all. The plant knows the gap is there. It has been waiting for somebody to use it.
- 10 **Two seasons of small birds.** Barely anything. It is alert, quick and mean, and the stalks are studded with small dry bodies the birds' own weight could not shake loose. Anyone who looks at the stalks before entering gets the whole story for free and does not need a check for it.
- 11 **A surveyor with a full satchel.** It drank him and kept the rest. The satchel is in the pool, waterlogged and legible, and it holds a working chart of every reliable water source for two hundred miles. That chart is worth more than the adventure it is sitting in, and the party has to go in and get it.
- 12 **Its own neighbour.** There were two stands here. The bigger one grew across the gap and drank the smaller one over a year, and the dead ring is still standing twenty feet off, hollow and safe and perfect cover. Start the fight with that dead ring already on the map.
- 13 **A courier, last week, and the horse went on.** Somewhere ahead of the party on this road is a horse with an empty saddle and a sealed bag, and somebody is waiting for what is in that bag. This is the row that turns a monster into three sessions.

D20 WHAT IT HAS ALREADY DRUNK

- 14 **Salt water.** The seep went bad and the plant has been drinking it anyway. It is dying and it is furious. Give it 10 fewer hit points and let it fight to zero with no interest at all in whether it survives, because it will not. The pool is undrinkable and looks perfect.
- 15 **Fire, once, and it healed.** There is a band of black scarring at knee height all the way around the outside and new green growing straight out of it. The party can see, before they commit to anything, that somebody already tried the obvious answer here and it was not enough. Doubling the fire is the correct response and somebody has to think of it.
- 16 **A pilgrim who is still alive in there.** Four days in, Grappled, conscious, at 2 hit points, and quiet because he stopped shouting on the second day. He is audible from the tunnel mouth if anybody stops talking and listens. Everything about this encounter changes and none of the numbers do.
- 17 **More than it can hold.** The pool is red at the bottom and the whole stand smells like a butcher's yard in summer. Nothing is hidden and nothing needs a check. A party that walks away from this one has read the situation correctly and should be told so.
- 18 **A wagon, and the people walked.** There is a stripped wagon frame in the ring with the stalks grown through the spokes, and the wagon was full when it stopped. Whatever was in it is in the pool, under two feet of water, and its outline is visible from outside the ring.
- 19 **The garrison's water carrier.** This stand is within sight of a manned tower, the tower knows, and the tower's standing order is to let it stand because a thirstthorn on the free road is the reason everyone pays the toll for the guarded well. Somebody up there is watching the party through a glass right now.
- 20 **Nothing at all, because it has only just arrived.** This ring is one season old, the stalks are waist high, the tunnel is not a tunnel yet, and the entire thing can be killed in an afternoon by four people with hand axes and no risk whatsoever. Nobody has, because nobody comes this way any more, and the reason nobody comes this way any more is the problem the party actually came here to solve.

D12: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THEY BRING FIRE

Fire is the answer and fire is expensive, so it deserves its own table rather than a sentence. Roll when the first real flame reaches the stalks, or pick the one that hurts most.

ROLL IT OR PICK IT

D12 WHAT THE FIRE DOES

- 1 **It goes up like paper and it goes up fast.** The whole ring is alight in two rounds. Anything still inside the tunnel makes a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw, taking 7 (2d6) fire damage on a failure and half as much on a success, and the pool is ruined.
- 2 **The stalks scream.** Hollow tubes full of hot sap. It is a noise nobody at the table was ready for, it carries for a mile in flat country, and by morning something has come to see what made it.
- 3 **Only the windward third catches.** The plant takes the damage, loses a quarter of its reach, and goes on fighting from the green side. The party now has a burning wall between them and the tunnel mouth.
- 4 **It burns and the water is fine.** The seep is deep and cold and the ash floats. Give them this one sometimes. A table that has been told all week that fire costs them the water should occasionally find out that the world is not a machine for punishing them.
- 5 **It lets go of everything it is holding.** Every creature it has Grappled is released at once, including the ones nobody knew about. Two bodies and one live pilgrim come out of the stalks on their own.
- 6 **The smoke fills the tunnel first.** Anybody inside is blind and choking before the fire reaches them. Heavily obscured, and a creature that ends its turn in there makes a DC 13 Constitution saving throw or takes 3 (1d6) poison damage from the smoke.
- 7 **It burns out at the roots and stays standing.** Dead in eight rounds, upright for years. The ring becomes a landmark, and the party has just put a permanent thing on the map that other people will steer by.
- 8 **Green wood, and it barely takes.** A rain-fat stand does not want to burn. One torch is nothing. It takes oil, or a spell, or twenty minutes of patient work by somebody who is not currently being drunk.
- 9 **The fire spreads outward instead of inward.** Dry scrub for a hundred yards in every direction, and the party's own camp is in it. The plant is the least of anyone's problems for the next ten minutes.
- 10 **It turns out there were two.** The second stand is forty feet away and its ring was hidden by the first. The fire reaches it, it opens, and now everybody is looking the wrong way.
- 11 **It burns beautifully and the pool boils.** Actually boils, for the better part of an hour, and the steam is the first clean shade anybody has stood in for six days. Bitterly funny and entirely useless.
- 12 **Whoever lit it is still holding the torch in a three-foot tunnel.** The character who solved the problem is now the character in the worst position in the encounter, and they did it to themselves on purpose. Give them the save, and give them the moment.



Compatible with fifth edition and with most things that are not. Portions derived from the System Reference Document 5.1, © Wizards of the Coast LLC, licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC-BY-4.0). Thirstthorn and Jorunn Calder are original content © Long Island Dungeon Master, free to use at your table and in your own work under CC BY 4.0.

THE GREEN ONE ON THE HORIZON

One page for the table

WHAT YOU CAN SEE FROM HERE

Shade. Green stalks in a ring maybe sixty feet across. Water moving somewhere inside it, loud enough to hear from where you are standing. No bodies, no bones, no smell, nothing wrong.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE FROM THE EDGE

One gap in the stalks. Three feet wide, about twenty feet long, and it goes all the way through to the pool. A person can get down and go in. A person cannot get down and go in holding a shield.

WHAT IT COSTS TO GO IN

1. You move at half speed.
2. Attacks against you have advantage. Your own attacks have disadvantage.
3. Nobody can come past you. The tunnel takes one person.

WHAT THE WATER IS

Real. Cool, clean, waist deep, moving slightly. It is the best water anyone has seen in six days and there is more of it than you can carry.

THREE THINGS YOU ALREADY KNOW

1. Fire works on plants.
2. Fire also works on water, in the way that ruins it.
3. Whoever is in the tunnel when somebody decides is the one who finds out.
