



# Character Themes: Black-Hearted Knave

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Illustration by Kerem Beyit

Glory, gold, and power are powerful temptations, and no shortage of talented individuals willingly pit their abilities against the world's most dangerous monsters and brave the dungeon depths to gain them. Many adventurers take up their professions out of a moral obligation to drive back the darkness and to protect civilization against ruin. Some seek personal gain, preferring to go their own ways rather than to align themselves with an ethical force. Others are touched by darkness and twisted by evil, and these individuals have a self-serving ambition that enables them to commit atrocities similar to or worse than that of the monsters and villains they fight. *The Book of Vile Darkness™* introduces several character themes to help you construct player characters who are tempted or touched by evil. This article adds the black-hearted knave to their ranks.

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## BLACK-HEARTED KNAVE

*"Of course I'm out for myself. If I don't look out for me, who will?"*

Personal gain motivates the black-hearted knave. Scoundrels of the highest order, these cunning, untrustworthy villains exploit, betray, and deceive, having little concern for the people they hurt and the lives they destroy. Knaves encompass a wide range of characters, from the charlatan foisting colored water off as a cure for ills to the charming rake who steals hearts and purses in equal numbers. Turncoats, bandits, and public figures might be knaves in secret, masking their true intentions behind facades.

One does not make a career of double-crossing and exploiting people without risking consequences. Rather than advertise their villainy, many knaves go to great lengths to stay above suspicion. A good disguise

is sometimes all a knave needs. Fabricating a history, adding possible relations, and becoming established in a community gives the knave freedom to pursue his or her goals. Others work their trickery by being exceptional liars. A ready story and a convincing manner can divert a skeptic's attention elsewhere.

Black-hearted knaves don't put down roots. No matter how many safeguards they have in place, a simple gaffe or a glimmer of recognition by a prior victim is all it sometimes takes to expose a knave for what he or she truly is. Adventuring provides a knave with a ready excuse to move from place to place. Between expeditions, he or she works schemes in whatever town or hamlet that has the bad fortune to serve as a host to the knave. Then, before anyone grows the wiser about what has been done, he or she moves off, drawn toward the next dungeon and adventure.

## Creating a Black-Hearted Knave

The black-hearted knave lurks among almost every people and culture. The selfishness and cruelty required to become a black-hearted knave are in no way unique to any class or race; such peculiar villainy owes its origin to some terrible circumstance that set the individual on darkness's path. An ordinary man or woman might turn to skulduggery after being used by another villain in the past, thus becoming embittered and cynical. A hard life on the streets can corrupt one's good intentions and stain a soul with darkness.

Most knaves benefit from strong personalities. Witty or menacing, inspiring or magnetic, they manipulate people around them. The talents of the bard make such characters eminently suited to become black-hearted knaves. Not only do they have the requisite charisma, but they can supplement their devious nature with manipulative spells to ensure that people around them behave as they wish. Rogues also

possess skills and exploits that are perfect for expressing and reinforcing the knave's preferred methods.

Other characters can also do well as knaves. Fey pact warlocks and enchanters incorporate magic into their techniques whereby they bend minds to their wills. A power-mad sorcerer might sacrifice others to hoard magical knowledge and baubles, while a disgraced knight or paladin could use a knave's techniques to make his or her way in the world after some public shame. Regardless of class, the black-hearted knave character theme is probably an inappropriate option for good or lawful good characters and should be limited for use by unaligned or evil characters.

## Starting Feature

You are a villain who lies, cheats, and steals from anyone you can. Alliances are worthwhile only for as long as they benefit you, and the moment you can gain a greater advantage, you set them aside. *Treacherous advantage* demonstrates just how far you go to get the upper hand when your life is on the line.

**Benefit:** You gain the *treacherous advantage* power.

### Treacherous Advantage

### Black-Hearted Knave Attack

*Shoving an ally into danger creates a distraction so that you can move into an advantageous position.*

**Encounter ♦ Martial, Weapon**

**Standard Action**      **Melee 1**

**Primary Target:** One ally

**Effect:** You push the primary target up to 2 squares, and he or she grants combat advantage until the start of your next turn. You then shift up to half your speed and make the secondary attack.

**Secondary Attack**

**Secondary Target:** One creature

**Secondary Attack:** Highest ability modifier vs. AC

**Hit:** 2[W] + your highest ability modifier damage, and the target grants combat advantage until the end of your next turn.

**Level 11:** 3[W] + your highest ability modifier damage.

**Level 21:** 4[W] + your highest ability modifier damage.

## CHARACTER THEMES

Your character's theme is a career, calling, or identity that describes who he or she is in the world. Just as race and class create basic definitions about who your character is, theme adds a third character component to help refine your story and identity. Consider the black-hearted knave, for example. You might be a charlatan who peddles snake oil to unsuspecting commoners. Or you might be a dashing scoundrel who charms fair maidens and steals their fortunes. Your theme encompasses several possible stories within the same broad concept.

For information on using themes as part of character creation and rules for how to gain and use theme powers and features, see "Heroes of Nature and Lore" in *Dragon* 399.



## Additional Features

### Level 5 Feature

A little truth can make a lie go a long way. Rather than spout an utterly outlandish claim, you pepper your falsehoods with just enough truth to make your deception believable.

**Benefit:** Whenever you would make a Diplomacy check or an Intimidate check, you can instead make a Bluff check with a -2 penalty.

### Level 10 Feature

You do not always have the time to construct an elaborate ruse to mislead your victims. Sometimes you have to think fast.

**Benefit:** You can use a minor action in place of a standard action when making a Bluff check to gain combat advantage or to create a diversion to hide.

## Optional Powers

The more you indulge your duplicity, the more tricks and techniques you learn to help you make your way in the world. You can make the best of your situation and leave the danger to those fighting at your side.

### Level 2 Utility Power

No one knows the consequences of exploiting others better than you. Enemies abound, and the only way to stay alive is to stay out of reach.

#### Flee Peril Black-Hearted Knave Utility 2

*When the enemy gains the upper hand, you waste no time making good your escape.*

**Encounter ♦ Martial**

**Immediate Reaction Personal**

**Trigger:** An ally within 5 squares of you is hit by an attack.

**Effect:** You shift up to half your speed.

### Level 6 Utility Power

You have to protect yourself, so you put yourself first in every situation. *Surprising betrayal* helps you escape a dangerous predicament by forcing an ally to face the threat on your behalf.

#### Surprising Betrayal Black-Hearted Knave Utility 6

*You shove a nearby ally into an attack's path so that you can slip away unscathed.*

**Encounter ♦ Martial**

**Immediate Interrupt Melee 1**

**Trigger:** A creature hits or misses you with a melee or a ranged attack.

**Target:** One ally

**Effect:** You and the target swap positions (the target slides 1 square, and you shift 1 square). The target is hit or missed by the attack, instead of you.

### Level 10 Utility Power

You have accumulated more enemies than you know what to do with. You can't outrun them all, so a little trickery can help when they invariably catch up to you. *Duplicitous evasion* helps you turn aside an enemy's attack so it hits a far more deserving target.

#### Duplicitous Evasion Black-Hearted Knave Utility 10

*You duck behind another creature to escape an attack, leaving it to fend for itself.*

**Daily ♦ Martial**

**Immediate Interrupt Personal**

**Trigger:** An enemy makes a melee or a ranged attack against you while you are adjacent to at least one other creature.

**Effect:** You gain a +4 power bonus to all defenses against the triggering attack. If the attack misses you, you can swap positions with an adjacent creature other than the triggering enemy (the creature slides 1 square, and you shift 1 square), and the enemy repeats the attack against that creature.

### About the Author

**Robert J. Schwalb** has contributed design to or developed nearly two hundred roleplaying game titles for DUNGEONS & DRAGONS®, Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay, A Song of Ice and Fire RPG, Star Wars RPG, and the d20 system. Some of his more recent work for Wizards of the Coast can be found in *Book of Vile Darkness* and *Player's Option: Heroes of Shadow™*. He's also a regular contributor to both *Dragon* and *Dungeon* magazines. For more information about the author, be sure to check out his website at [www.robertjschwalb.com](http://www.robertjschwalb.com) or follow him on Twitter (@rjschwalb).

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