

The Order of the Astronomers

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Ceci n'est pas une histoire.

A contrived example of game play

for

GODS & MONSTERS

godsmonsters.com

November 28, 2025

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The Adventure... Begins

The Character Sheets

These are the characters whose adventures you are about to read. Each character is handled by a different player. Each player makes decisions for how that character reacts to other characters and to the monsters, traps, and situations that the character encounters. Each player decides how their character attempts to navigate the world they live in.

In this example, that player is me. I'm using the sample characters from the **GODS & MONSTERS** rulebook to show what might happen during a game of **GODS & MONSTERS**, with footnotes to describe how those things that happen played out in the rules. In some cases, I even describe exactly what the results of the dice were.

In a real game, that player could be you. Unlike most fictional narratives, one of the purposes of this example is for you to explicitly imagine, what would you do differently? Would it be an easy choice? Would success be easy, or a long shot?

The choices the players make also affect how quickly the characters advance. The character sheets that follow are the character sheets from the rulebook examples. Once the game session is over, at the end of this book in other words, you can see what the character sheets look like after the adventure. The character sheets will have changed due to the accumulation of experience points, and also due to the judicious (or injudicious) use of mojo to alter die rolls and to pre-acquire equipment.

The notes will explain more when these things happen.

	<h1>Charlotte Kordé</h1>	
	<i>Level 1 Monk, Good</i>	
●	Charisma: 17 (+3/+2)	Home: Crosspoint
	Agility: 8 (-1)	Age: 36
	Endurance: 10	Height: 5 foot 1 inch
	Intelligence: 12 (+1)	Weight: 93 pounds
	Strength: 9	Experience: 0
	Wisdom: 15 (+2/+1)	Mojo: 11
	Movement: 9	<u>Reactions</u>
	Defense: -1	Perception: 8
	Survival: 5	Evasion: 3
	Verve: 7	Fortitude: 4
●		Health: 4
		Reason: 6
	Fields	Willpower: 8
	Fighting Art +0: Quarterstaff	
	Native Culture +2: Crosspoint etiquette	
	Language Science +1: Anglish, Frankish, Literacy	
	Performance Art +1: Acting	
	Personality Art +1: Demagoguery, Mediation	
	Engineering Science +1: Clockworks	
	Specialties	
	Half-elf species, night vision (-2), move quietly alone (-3), +4 against	
●	mind control and sleep, age at one-sixth normal	

Psychic pool: 1

Telepathic Art +5

Illusion: senses (1, +1); damage (1); independent items (1); targets (1); range (3 yards)

Psychokinetic Craft: +3

Telekinesis: mass (1 pound); motion (1 yd/rnd); targets (1); range (3 yards)

Equipment (carry: 6)

1. 16 shillings, 6 pennies in pocket

2-3. quarterstaff (d6 damage, bulk 12)

Even though I have a good life, I will explore the ruins because I want to meet the Elves.

Charlotte was born in the mountains southeast of Crosspoint to a human mother. She has never met her father, and has only recently begun to realize what her ancestry means—at 36 years of age, she is the youngest-looking of all her friends.

Charlotte believes her psychic powers are from her father's side. She is self-trained. She has been a mentor to Sam Stevens since Sam left the thieves' ring in Crosspoint.

Gralen Noslen

Ordered Good Sorcerer

Level 1

Intelligence: 15 (+2/+1)

Home: Crosspoint

Agility: 12 (+1)

Age: 16

Charisma: 12 (+1)

Height: 6' 6"

Endurance: 12 (+1)

Weight: 217 lbs

Strength: 11

Experience: 0

Wisdom: 9

Mojo: 12

Reactions

Movement: 11

Reason: 7

Defense: 1

Evasion: 6

Survival: 6

Fortitude: 4

Verve: 6

Health: 5

Perception: 5

Willpower: 4

Fields

Fighting Art +0

Native Culture +2: Sorcerer's Etiquette

Language Science +1: English, Latin, Literacy

Historical Science +1: Ancient History

Specialties

Raven familiar: 5 survival, 4 intelligence, 4 charisma, 4 wisdom

Spells

3 spell slots

Spell	Range	Formula	Duration	Cast	Effect area	Reaction
Inscription	touch	WCI	instant	30 min1 spell		none

Equipment (carry: 8)

1. 15 shillings in pouch
2. spellbook (1.2 bulk)

Even though I prefer libraries, I will explore the ruins because I want knowledge no one else has.

Gralen knew he was a sorcerer from a young age. Poe, his raven familiar, has been his friend and confidante since he was eight. Gralen is self-taught. He left home at twelve to study at Illustrious Library across the mountains from Crosspoint. He stumbled, almost literally, across the magical research of a sorcerer who once lived in the now abandoned Illustrious Castle outside of town. He's been daring Will Stratford into going to Illustrious Castle, where he believes more magic can be found.

Sam Stevens

Thief 1, Warrior 0

Agility: 14 (+1)

Strength: 11

Charisma: 14 (+1)

Endurance: 14 (+1)

Intelligence: 11

Wisdom: 10

Home: Crosspoint

Moral code: Good

Age: 20

Height: 5'9"

Weight: 154 lbs

Experience: 0

Reactions

Mojo: 8

Evasion 6

Fortitude 4

Health 5

Perception 5

Reason 4

Willpower 4

Movement 11

Defense +1

Max combat pool 2

Survival 6

Verve 5

Fighting Art +1, weapon fluency, basic weapons, unarmed combat, crossbow, short sword

Native Culture +2, english underworld etiquette

Scaling Craft +1, climb walls

Stealth Art +1, hide, silence

Burglary Science +2, locks & traps

damage

fire actions

range

short sword

d6

2

2

crossbow

d6

2

15

Specialty: multiple archetypes (next: WARRIOR)

CARRYING (CARRY 9)

1. 1 Shilling
2. Short sword, bulk 6
3. crossbow, bulk 14
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.

Even though I'm a sneak, I will explore the ruins because I am on the run from the mob.

Sam was born on the waterfront in Crosspoint and lived on the streets until she was taken "under the wing" of a burglary and child-fighting ring run by the infamous Will Riley (hanged two years ago for the murder of councilman Jim Myers). Charlotte helped Sam quit the ring and get work as a guard for travelers. She met Will through his father's guard company. She avoids the Crosspoint mob.

Will Stratford

Level 1 Warrior, Good

Strength: 15 (+2/+1)

Home: Hightown

Agility: 14 (+1)

Age: 21

Charisma: 9

Height: 6'1"

Endurance: 14 (+1)

Weight: 169

Intelligence: 10

Experience: none

Wisdom: 11

Movement: 12

Mojo: 8

Defense: +1

Survival: 6

Reactions

Verve: 6

Fortitude: 7

Specialties

Evasion: 5

Weapon specialist, Stigmas di Cristos style:

Health: 6

slashing weapons

Perception: 4

Reason: 4

Willpower: 4

Fields

Fighting Art +1: weapon fluency, unarmed combat, longsword

Native Culture +2: Anglish, caravan etiquette

Slashing weapons +1: longsword

Weapons

Damage

Fire actions

Range

Longsword (+3)

d8+2

2

3

Equipment (11 carry)

1. 15 shillings (pouch)

2. longsword (bulk 8)

Combat pool stuff

Pool max: 2

+1 defense: 1 pt

+1 damage: 1 pt

+3 combat movement: 1 pt

+1 attack: 4 pts

+1 quickdraw: 1 pt

+1 act first: 1 pt

+1 lose surprise: 1 pt

Even though my father wants me to run the company, I will explore the ruins because I am friends with Gralen.

Will's father owns a security company. Will works for him as a guard on the leather road, guiding caravans from Crosspoint, across the mountains, to Black Stag. Will longs for more than the back and forth between Crosspoint and Black Stag. He is good friends with Gralen, whom he met while researching the low roads at the Biblyon library.

Hightown Market

Morning's chill lingered beneath the shadow of the High Divide. A gibbous moon hung low above the western forest. A raven circled overhead. Gralen Noslen and Will Stratford stood atop a hill outside of Hightown.* Turning to the south, they watched a merchant caravan turn their horses off the Leather Road toward the makeshift summer town. South of the road, the forest was gowned in the red, yellow, and gold of autumn in west Highland.

Gralen, gangly and pale, stood half a foot taller than Will. Will rested his hand on the hilt of his sword.

"There's nothing south of the road but night trolls... and worse," said Will.

"Somewhere, there's treasure," said Gralen. "And a lot of ancient books. Come on, let's go meet Charlotte and Sam."

"How do you know Charlotte?"

"A lot of people know Charlotte.† I met her last year in Biblyon. I was studying magic, she was studying Elfkind."

"She says," said Will, "that she's going to the Long Lakes. Someday."

"A lot of people have heard her say that, too. And usually after her second drink, she'll add *soon*. But the Long Lakes are a long

* This adventure begins in a town. This is one of the classic adventure sequences: civilization; wilderness; ruin. The wilderness is a barrier between the living and the dead. Sometimes, as here, the adventurers make the journey on their own. Other times they are forced to make the journey through circumstances beyond their control, such as a shipwreck. Ruins can also be adjacent to civilization, such as when a city is built on the remains of an older city, or when a town contains an abandoned haunted house. And sometimes the abandoned city can be replaced with an ancient, lost civilization, contrasting the past with the present.

† When players create characters, it helps a lot if each character knows at least one other character. It avoids the more obvious cliches involved in getting a group together.

ways north. This isn't the time of year to visit the Elflands.”*

Will nodded.

“She’s smart,” added Gralen. “And she can be trusted. How sure are you of Sam?”

“You sound like my dad,” Will replied, “when he hired her. *She’s a mercenary*, he said, *not a caravan guard*. Now she’s been on all summer, he shakes his head and adds, *but a good worker*. He’s surprised she’s reliable. I’m not. I trust her.”

“Her skills are beyond that of your average caravan guard,” said Gralen. “But if you trust her, I do. Those skills will be useful south of the Road.”

“If we go.”

“Come on.”

In Hightown’s market the merchants of Crosspoint east across the High Divide trade with the merchants of Black Stag and Fawn River to the west. There were boxes and crates everywhere. Clothing and other leather goods from Black Stag at the west end of the Leather Road. The odors of apples, and apple cider, mingled with the last root harvest, potatoes, and onions.

Will and Gralen met Charlotte Kordé and Sam Stevens† by the market center. The entertainment wasn’t to the standards of Black Stag, let alone Crosspoint. A crowd gathered around a pair of singers, but most of the merchants talked to each other, making deals, rather than listen to the song. The two troubadours, dark-haired twins, sang in the unmistakable lisp of Great Bend far down the coast. One played a lute; the other, a flute-like whistle.

“This,” said Gralen. “Listen to this.”‡

... so passed Mistoless through Biblyon Town.

* At the beginning of each campaign, the players should “introduce” their characters to the rest of the players, describing what the characters look like and how they act.

† You should expect all sorts of weird character names from your players. Your world should allow the possibility. Here we have a character named after the most influential playwright in the English language, another named after a relatively obscure Chicago novelist, one after a witch on a sixties sitcom, and one after a seventeenth-century French assassin.

‡ Bad poetry is a staple of fantasy adventures.

“South!” he cried, and south he led
his hundred past the Leather Road,
into the deepest forest led
a hundred men to fight for truth,
defend the theories of their Lord.

They marched beneath a waning moon.
Three days marched and many a troll
fell to his army and his sword.
And many creatures long unnamed
were stirred, and fled, Mistoles’s horde.

Things that fly and things that creep
with leather wings and slimy hoof,
feared, and fled, in forest deep
before Mistoles’s armored horde.

The third night out the moon was gone.
Beneath the stars they made their camp.
One by one the stars went out.
A mist roiled in. Cold and damp.

“Mist for Mistoles? An omen good,”
So cried Mistoles’s aide-de-camp.

They built a fire, tall and hot,
and heeded not the omen,
to drive the mist that chilled their hearts,
to dry the damp ‘til morning.

The fire crackled to the sky,
sent fiery ash a-borning,
when from the mist they heard a cry,
a scream, and then a warning.

Groping! Groping in the dark!
The camp was in a turmoil.
Groping! Groping in the wood,
but only for a moment.

The thrashings died, the screaming waned,
and when they counted up their men,
a hundred men were ninety.

At morning when the sun arose
cradled in Elijah's breasts,
it burned the mist away.
And ninety men turned east, and left
the thing that gropes the wood.

They bore due east upon the breasts,
to Christ-at-Anna's hold.
And many songs relate their war,
and many tales are told.

In some they die in forest deep.
In some their thesis prove.
But no song knows the fate of those
Lost to the thing that gropes the wood.

When the singers finished, Gralen gave them a thumbs-up, and tossed them a ship and sword.*

"That's a lot of money for a song," said Sam.

"Ancient truth is worth the silver," he replied.

"It was told us by za last survivor of za battle," said the lutist.†

"What brings you north?"

"Un agzidont."

"Oui, un agzidont wi' a duke's daughter," said the flautist.

He winked his dark eyes at Will. They bowed and left, taking their instruments through the crowd. Will shivered as they walked away.

"What was that all about?" asked Charlotte.

"Mistoles was the last leader of Illustrious Castle before it fell to the night trolls during the Great War," said Gralen. "After

* "Ship and sword" is slang for a silver Crosspoint shilling. On one side is a ship, the other a sword. In game terms, it's a standard silver coin. Some campaigns will use generic "silver coins"; others will have different coins with different exchange rates for every country the adventurers pass through. It's up to the Adventure Guide.

† Bad accents are another staple. Go wild!

Mistoles died and the Order of Illustration retook their castle, the Order slowly diminished. As many of the old orders did, and their castles abandoned. Kristagna, what the song called Christ-at-Anna's, is the castle of their rivals, the Order of the Astronomers. Illustrious Castle is sixty miles north of here, on a cliff above the great walled library of Biblyon. Kristagna is south, in the Deep Forest."

"Supposedly," said Will.

"It's there. The Astronomers haven't been heard from since the Great War, but there's no question they existed."

"The Great War was over a hundred years ago," said Sam.

"There's no way your troubadours heard the story from a survivor."

"Unless they or the survivor was Elfen," said Charlotte.

"Neither of them were Elfen, clearly enough," said Will.

"Perhaps the survivor was."

"There was no survivor," said Gralen. "Not that the singers knew, anyway."

"Then who'd they hear it from?"

"From other singers, probably. Who heard it from other singers, who heard it from other singers."

"If they lied about hearing it from a survivor, how do you know they didn't lie about the rest of it?"

"Maybe they did," said Gralen. "But troubadours always make up some story about how they heard their songs from someone who was there, or even better, that they themselves were there. They're selling a product just like everyone else in the market."

"They probably made up the duke's daughter," said Sam.

"Probably. More likely they ran up too many debts."

"But what did you hear in the song?" asked Charlotte. "You think you know where Kristagna is now."

"There are some books in the great walled library that haven't been read since the war," he replied. "There are clues, but they never fit, until now. If the song is right, we will find the lost castle of the Astronomers by 'bearing down on Isaiah's Breasts'."

"Who is Isaiah and why do we care about his breasts?" asked

* Here, the Adventure Guide has fed Gralen some pre-game information, which Gralen then feeds back to the other players.

Will. Everyone laughed except Galen.

"Isaiah was one of the founders of the Order of the Astronomers. Isaiah's Breasts are two mountain peaks that, from the right vantage point, look like... breasts."

"Breasts to normal people, or breasts to hermit warrior-scholars who haven't seen a woman in years?" asked Sam.

"There's probably something to that," said Galen.

"How far south are the peaks?"

"Three days ride," said Sam. "If the song is right."

"That fits what I've read," said Galen.

"Show me these books," said Charlotte.

"They're in Biblyon. And a lot of the books I really need were lost when the night trolls sacked Illustrious Castle. But what I've been able to find, I have in my notes."

"I want to see your notes."

While Galen and Charlotte returned to Galen's room at King's Inn, Will and Sam continued wandering the marketplace.*

"Pretty amazing that you and Galen both know Charlotte," said Will. "You're from east Highland, he's from west Highland. Crosspoint and Black Stag are six hundred miles apart."

"And never the 'twain shall meet?"

"It's rare enough. Otherwise Hightown wouldn't be necessary as a trading town. Galen knows me from Black Stag, I invite you to join us because you're in my dad's company, you invite Charlotte, and Charlotte already knows Galen. Just seems like a huge coincidence."

"I suppose so. I met her in Crosspoint. I've known her since I was a kid," said Sam. "When I was still homeless on the harbor district."

"Really? How did you meet?"

"I tried to steal an apple from her."

Will stopped walking, and looked at her.

"I was hungry," she added.

"Was this a rich kid/poor kid thing?"

"She wasn't a kid," said Sam. "She was old enough to be my

* When you leave some of the players alone for a bit, it's best to leave their characters together. They *will* talk about their situation, so why not let them do so in character?

mother when I first met her.”

“That’s impossible.”

“She says she’s nearly forty years old.”*

They bargained over some bright red apples, then walked on.

“She isn’t really that old, is she?” asked Will.

He took a bite from his apple.

“Hell,” said Sam. “I’ve known Charlotte for ten years, and I swear she hasn’t aged. She looks younger than I do.”

“Well, maybe not that young,” said Will.

Sam looked at him. He turned away, it seemed to her that he was embarrassed in some way by what he’d said. She couldn’t tell if he was complimenting her or mocking her. She’d been on the streets from seven to seventeen, and her face showed it, pocked and scarred. Charlotte... Charlotte had none of that. Was William making fun of her? William was handsome, and dashing... well... no. William was handsome. But you could always tell what Will was feeling, and he wasn’t insulting her. He wasn’t even complimenting her. He just felt that way, and he said it.†

She decided to accept the compliment. Will had no idea the outburst he’d almost endured.

* In some campaigns, non-humans will be as common as humans. Tolkien had more non-humans than humans, for example. In others, such as in Highland, non-human races will be rare, with the possible exception of those non-human races infringing on human lands. As a half-elf, Charlotte is strange and not well understood.

† Will’s charisma is 9. Sam’s is 14. While Will is, because players can say whatever they want about their characters’ looks, more attractive than Sam, he doesn’t have nearly the interpersonal skills Sam does. How much this plays into character interaction is entirely up to the players doing the role-playing.

The Company of the Lost Stars

They met outside the King's Inn at the end of the day. The inn stood two stories. To its left was a stable, exuding the odor of horses and the stamping of hooves. Across the square, a one-story warehouse lay low and flat. They could still hear the arguments of traders a few hundred feet down the dusty street.

"King's Inn?" asked Sam. "Which king?"

"Is the owner pro-kingdoms?" asked Charlotte.

"Nah," said Galen. "I know the owner. He's faithful to the church. It's his name, Rex King. Hey, did you know his first name means his last name in the Ancient language?"

"I might've heard that before," said Will.

"You don't count, I told you this morning."

"And yesterday morning."

"Whatever," said Sam. "Charlotte, what have you and Galen decided?"

"Let's go up to our private room," said Galen. "I don't want anyone else to hear this."*

...

"So?" asked Sam. "What's your plan?"

"Four days there," said Galen. "Three days exploring, four days back."

Sam looked at Charlotte.

"What's in it for us?"

"Equal shares of any money or salable items we bring back," she replied. "We'll be like a merchant company, but our business will be ruins and our mission statement the lost treasure of the Astronomers."

* Some players are always paranoid that non-player characters will get the treasure first. This is something the Guide can and should work with.

“The Company of the Lost Stars,” said Galen. “Nice ring to it. If we find Kristagna it will be lucrative.”

“I didn’t know you cared about gold,” said Will.

“The Astronomers were sorcerors,” said Galen. “If I can find their notes, I can reconstruct their spells.”

“You’re sure there’s money in the ruins?” asked Sam.

“We’re not sure of anything,” said Galen.

“I am,” said Charlotte. “No one has ever found it; it has to still be there. Unlike Illustrious Castle, stripped bare up north in Biblyon, Kristagna is south of the Leather Road. No one goes there.”

“No one goes there for a reason,” said Will. “Monsters live there. Night trolls, and dragons. And how do we know the Astronomers are gone?”

“No one’s heard from them since the war,” said Galen. “The war ended in cataclysmic year 901.”

“It’s inconceivable that they survived the war but never came to Hightown for supplies,” said Charlotte, “or crossed the mountains to Crosspoint.”

“Further,” said Galen, “they were an all-male Order. After ninety years of no contact with the outside world, they’d be dead one way or another.”

“I’m still unclear on the troubadour twins’ history lesson,” said Sam. “What were the Order of Illustration and the Order of Astronomers fighting over?”

“Knowledge,” said Galen. “Or theory. The old scholastic orders took their science very seriously. Scientific consensus was settled on the field of battle. A theoretical dispute could and often did mean war.”

“That’s crazy,” said Will.

“That’s why most of the old Orders died out,” said Charlotte. “I think the only remaining orders are the Knights of the Thistle and the Knights Caelius.”

“And the Astronomers had money?” asked Sam.

“It will be dangerous taking it,” said Charlotte, “but yes.”

“Okay,” said Will. “I could do this. Enough gold, I could set up my own caravan company, stop working for my dad.”

He turned to Sam.

“You could work for me,” he said.

“If we come back with gold,” said Sam, “I’m never working for anyone again.”

“The moon is nearly full,” said Gralen. “That means good light even at night. We’ll have a full moon in three days, and, while it’ll shift below the horizon at different times, we’ll be back before it completely wanes.”

“Each of us will need food and water to last a week. Water we can replenish in the forest. Food we can *probably* replenish, but bring dry food just in case.”

“And arms,” said Will. “Just in case.”

“I’ll get us a pack horse,” said Gralen.*

Next morning Will and Gralen entered the square first. Will led a small horse. A pair of saddlebags hung over the animal’s back, and a coil of rope was attached to the bags. Will had already belted his longsword on his right side, and a leather pouch on his left.†

Gralen walked beside the horse, patting it on its back. Gralen also wore a leather pouch, tied to the belt of his black leather coat. His coat hung to his knees, and he wore a brown cap pulled low over his forehead.

Charlotte walked with a heavy six-foot staff, a foot taller than her and gnarled to a bulky knob at the top, which, Will thought, looked like as much a weapon as an aid to hiking. She also had a large leather pouch slung over her shoulder. In her left hand she carried a lantern. She hung it from the horse’s saddlebags, and removed several flasks from her pouch and placed them inside the bags.‡

Sam wore a short sword on her side, and a small crossbow slung over her back. She also had coils of a very light rope slung

* Gralen only had 15 shillings, and a horse costs 30. He used one mojo to get 30 shillings, then bought a horse (30s), saddlebags (3s), and dry food (5s), leaving him 7 shillings.

† Will also had 15 shillings. He bought fifteen yards of rope (1s) and dry food (5s), leaving him with 9 shillings for later use.

‡ Charlotte bought dry food (5s), a lantern (8s), five flasks of oil (3d), flint and steel (6d), and a shoulder pouch (1s).

over her left shoulder, and a large pouch slung from her right.*

“To the Company of the Lost Stars,” said Charlotte, raising her staff in a salute to the low moon on their right.

“The company of the daft song is more like it,” said Will.

“But if the song is right about the breasts,” he added a few minutes later, “what about the thing that gropes the wood?”

“I’m not touching that line with a ten foot pole,” said Sam. And then she tapped him on the head with her ten-foot pole. Will turned bright red.† Finding the tall pole uncomfortable to walk with under trees, she tied it to the horse.

An hour later and three miles south, a raven swooped low past them, circled the tip of Gralen’s cap, and rose back into the sky.

Will unslung his crossbow from his back and stuck his foot into the stirrup.‡

“What’s with the cheeky blackbird?” asked Sam.

“It’s a bad omen is what it is,” said Will. He loaded a bolt into his crossbow and raised it toward the bird. Gralen cried, “wait!” and rushed toward him. He gently pushed Will’s crossbow back toward the ground.

“This particular raven is a very good omen,” Gralen said.

“Ah. Sorry about that. Didn’t know it was a friend of yours.”

With the sun still hidden and the air still chilled in the shadow of the High Divide, the company of the daft song walked across the Leather Road and into the Deep Forest.

* Sam used one mojo to get 30 shillings, then bought 15 yards of light rope (10s), thieves’ tools (5s), flint & steel (6d), a quiver (1s) and 20 bolts (2s), a dagger (2s), dry food (5s), and a shoulder pouch (1s).

† At this point, Sam’s player crossed a half-penny from her money—that is, what 0.02 silver coins are in the World of Highland—to have brought along a ten-foot pole. During their first level, characters can “have bought” equipment if it makes sense. After first level, players need to plan ahead more.

‡ And Will’s player used a mojo to gain 30 shillings, then marked off 35 shillings to have already paid for the crossbow and 3 shillings for a quiver and 20 bolts, leaving him with one shilling. He also marked off another mojo to have had *crossbow* in the *Fighting Arts*.

The Deep Forest

At the Leather Road a plank sign pointed west to Black Stag, east to Crosspoint. Below the arrows, themselves carved by some unknown hand decades if not centuries past, someone had scrawled in faded charcoal, “BEYOND LIE DRAGONS”.

Will rapped it once with his knuckles as they walked past, off the wide path that was the Leather Road, and continued south into the forest. The trees were in autumn bloom with leaves of red, orange, and yellow throwing shadows upon their dry and crunching brethren.

“I expected, I don’t know, an earth-shattering kaboom,” said Sam.

“The trees on this side of the road don’t look any different than north of the road,” said Will.

“There is one difference,” said Charlotte. “Nobody’s walked here for a hundred years.”

Will and Galen strolled ahead, their longer strides slowly putting them a hundred or so paces beyond Charlotte and Sam.* The horse followed them.

...

“No one... human,” said Sam.

“Hmmm?”

“No one human has been here for a hundred years. Goblins have been here.”

“And dragons, according to the sign,” said Charlotte.

“What do we do when night falls?”

* Galen’s and Will’s *movement* scores are 11 and 12, respectively. Charlotte’s is 9, making her the slowest of the group. Seasoned adventurers will slow to the movement of the slowest person in the group to avoid splitting up. These are not seasoned adventurers.

“We find a secluded niche in a hill, or a line of shrubbery, to make camp.”

“What if Will or Gralen snores?” asked Sam, and laughed.

“Smother them with a pillow,” Charlotte replied.

“Did we bring pillows?”

“I wish,” said Charlotte.

“You don’t like roughing it?”

“Love it. Walking in the forest, sleeping under the stars. There are wonderful animal trails throughout the forests near Crosspoint harbor.”

“Of course,” said Sam, “we have no goblins—the night trolls—around Crosspoint.”

“We do. But they aren’t bold.”

“Let’s hope the goblins of west Highland aren’t bold either.”

As the sun rose past the mountains, shafts of bright sunlight shone through the trees, throwing up beams of golden dust. Will and Gralen lazily picked occasional raspberries, putting them into their bags or mouths as they walked on.

“I haven’t been this far from my father since I started working for him five years ago,” said Will.

“Your father’s a nice guy,” said Gralen.

“To you. He doesn’t understand me.”

Gralen stooped down and picked up some long grass, and fed it to their horse.

“I mean,” said Will, “we just go back and forth, east and west, Black Stag to Hightown, Hightown to Black Stag. Black Stag to Hightown, Hightown to Crosspoint, Crosspoint to Hightown. For Christ’s sake, he’s been doing it for twenty years!”

“What do you want to do?”

“Start my own guard company. Go down to Great Bend. Or go to the bend without starting my own company. Or, when we go to Black Stag, why not head up the river and see the north country?”

“No money in it, probably.”

“Yeah, that’s what he says. *Everything upriver comes downriver, we don’t need to chase it.*”

They walked on, into the crunching leaves and the golden sunlight.

“I’ve heard there are Elfs up that way,” Will continued. “And

Dwarfs.”

“And little pixies that live in holes and smoke big pipes.”

Will looked back toward Charlotte and Sam.

“Charlotte probably will follow the river someday,” he said.

“Probably.”

“What do you think about Sam?”

“She’s a tough one,” said Gralen.

“I don’t know about that.”

“I mean that literally: she knows what she wants, and she knows how to take care of herself.”

“Everyone knows what they want except me.”

Gralen stroked the horse’s mane once, and it stopped.

“Why don’t we wait for them,” he said. “Probably not a good idea to get too far ahead.”

...

They set up their tent just before nightfall in a small dell nestled in some hills.* They hung their food from the trees. Will built a small fire to drive out the chill.† They ate raspberries, and dried meat softened in water boiled over the fire.

Afterward, Gralen removed a large leather notebook and two smaller books from the saddle bags and sat to reading and writing with a quill pen and a bottle of ink. Charlotte lay back and began counting the stars. Will took his sword and walked through his exercises. Sam watched him as he fought imaginary opponents and blocked imaginary thrusts and slashes.

* As the players gain experience, they will choose better camp sites. A good rain could flood them out, and if they’re attacked they haven’t anywhere to run. Not that such stout adventurers as these would run from danger.

† Will’s player also paid 2 mojo for the field *Survival* with the skill *fire*, because he decided he wanted to be especially good at those sorts of things.

“Can you teach me how to use a real sword?” she asked.*
 Will stumbled forward a bit in a half-finished movement, then looked at her.
 “Uh, sure,” he said. “But... why would you want to?”
 “I’m never going to be the girl who lets someone else protect her.”
 “I noticed that.”
 “As long as we understand each other.”
 “Show me your positions.”
 “My what?”
 “Attack that bush with your short sword.”†
 She hacked at the tall bush he’d indicated.
 “You taught yourself, didn’t you?”
 “Yes, and I did a good job,” she replied. “The tree didn’t lay a hand on me.”
 “You can do better. Put down your sword, and watch this.”
 He slashed across the bush; thrust his sword into it; and twisted, “like around a clock”.
 “These are the three most basic fighting movements. Practice them whenever you can.”
 He handed her his longsword.
 “Yours is heavier than mine,” she said.
 “I’m not touching that line with a ten-foot pole,” he replied.
 “Touché.”
 “So, you know the talk,” he said. “Let’s see if you know the walk. Attack your enemy.”
 He pointed at the now-much-abused bush.
 “Don’t look at your sword,” he said, as she trimmed the hedge.
 “Your sword isn’t going to attack you. Watch your enemy.”

* Sam’s player has already decided that she wants her second level to be a level in warrior. Her specialty is *Multiple Archetypes* so she can take levels in whatever archetype she wants. This exchange is about making it plausible that Sam’s second level will be as a warrior. It doesn’t hurt that Will’s specialty is in fact swords and slashing weapons. There’s no in-game effect to her learning from Will, other than future plausibility if she chooses to take this specialty.

† Some groups won’t like calling weapons “short sword” or “longsword”. They’ll want to use more medieval-sounding names. If that’s you, you can find great names in old books such as Stone’s *Glossary of the Construction, Decoration, and Use of Arms & Armor*, and of course Wikipedia.

“My enemy’s a tree.”

“Always keep your sword moving, even just a little left and right. And pretend that the bush can fight back.”

...

They shared a wide tent*, each in their own bedroll† on the grass. Sam and Charlotte slept on one side, Will and Galen the other. They piled their pouches and packs between Will and Charlotte.

“I went camping like this once when I was twelve with a girl from down the hill in Black Stag,” whispered Will to Galen. “I didn’t get anywhere then either.”

“Watch out for the thing that gropes the wood,” said Sam, and everyone chuckled, even Will.

“I know that monster well,” he replied.

Several hours later, but before the moon rose, Sam tapped Charlotte’s shoulder.‡

“I hear something,” she said. “Just outside our tent. At the tree where we hung our food.”

Charlotte reached around the bags and tapped Will’s shoulder.

“Something’s outside,” she said.

Will tapped Galen’s shoulder.

“The girls are worried about something outside.”

“There’s something out there, you idiot,” said Sam. “We need to check on it.”

Galen lifted the bottom of the tent and peered out.

“It’s dark. There’s some animal by our firepit. A deer or something.”

They heard a sudden noise of branches rustling together.

* Galen used one mojo for an extra 30 shillings, then spent 20 on a tent.

† They each spend 2½ pennies for a blanket.

‡ More experienced adventurers would have set a watch, taking turns staying awake so that they can warn their companions if anything dangerous arrives in the night.

“What was that?”

“The deer ran off. We probably scared it.”

They heard a howl, very close to them.

“Or not,” he added.

Whatever it was, it did not return that morning.*

...

Halfway through the second day, they saw a ring of stones on a small hill rising through low trees. As they drew closer, they saw that it was a circle of columns set into the ground. The columns once held a circular lintel, but the lintel stones were in pieces on the ground between the columns. In the center was a round altar on a smooth black dais. Strange markings were inscribed on the altar, slashes, and straight corners carved into the stone.†

“It looks like writing,” said Charlotte. “Gralen, can you read it?”

“No,” he replied. “But there’s one between Hightown and Biblyon that I’ve deciphered. That one’s a dedication to a king, or god, of the silver hand.”

“And this one says the same thing?” asked Will.

“Who knows?” said Gralen. “Monuments like these lie scattered throughout west Highland. They might be altars to the silver hand, or they might each be dedicated to a different god or king or demon.”

* All encounters do not need to end in a fight. The characters prepared their site well, so ground animals couldn’t get to the food; this means that the wolf came, looked around, and left.

† Putting stuff like this in, unrelated to the adventure, is tricky. You’ll have to gauge how much the other players enjoy it. Some players will spend all day at the standing stones trying to figure out its relation to the adventure. Still, you want to foreshadow other adventures and provide physical evidence of the legends of the past that may provide adventures of the future.

He ran his fingers over the inscriptions.*

“Whatever it is, no one’s using it now,” said Will.

“You hope,” said Sam.

“That I do.”

“Nice view up here,” said Charlotte. “This forest is as wonderful as any back east.”

“Speaking of that,” said Sam, “don’t we have to turn east soon?”

“We should be running into a road,” said Gralen.

“Or see the breasts,” said Charlotte.†

“It might be possible to save time by going kitty-corner to the southeast,” said Gralen. “But it might also get us horribly lost. I’m thinking that on the return trip, after we turn east to the castle, we should be able to go straight north to the road.”

...

On their second night, Sam decided to scout the perimeter of their campsite.‡

“Something’s been following us,” Charlotte had said. “Neither animal nor human.”

Sam stepped quietly through the trees and brush. After a hundred feet they couldn’t see her.

“I hope she’s going to be okay,” said Will.

“Let’s set up camp,” said Gralen.

* Gralen was able to read the other inscription because he has just spent one mojo for a spell called *understand languages*. But he wasn’t expecting to need it in the forest, so he currently has *farseeing* and *mage bolt* memorized. At this point, he also spent 1 mojo to know *farseeing* and another to know *mage bolt*.

† Yes, so now that I’ve mentioned it, this would be a good time for Gralen to use *farseeing*. But when you’re a first-level sorcerer you tend to conserve your spells for more life-threatening situations.

‡ While they’re called thieves, in adventuring terms and especially outside they could also be called *scouts* or even *spies*. It’s only in dungeons and cities that their *lock-picking* and *pickpocket* skills become useful.

...

Sam avoided dry leaves and bright sunlight, kept to shadows and trees large enough to hide her. Within fifty yards of their camp were three human-like creatures half her size, each with splotchy white faces and two fangs hanging over their lips. Sam looked back; from where the creatures were, they could see Charlotte, Gralen, and Will putting up the tent and hanging the food.

Each of the creatures carried spears. One had a short sword of some kind in a rough scabbard by its side.

A red tongue slid out between two fangs and licked deep around its mouth.

...

"They're goblins," said Charlotte, after Sam described the creatures.

"They're waiting to kill us in our sleep," said Gralen.

"And eat us."

"Where are they?" asked Will.

"Don't look at them!" said Sam. "We don't want them to know we know they're there."

"So what do we do?"

"I have a plan. Go behind the tent."

Will moved tentatively back of the tent, then looked back at her.

"All the way," she said, "so they can't see you. Then load your crossbow."

"Why?"

"We're going to ambush them before they ambush us, and we need to do it now before they go for reinforcements. I need you to

cover me.”*

“I should go first,” said Will, “I’m the guardsman.”

“You make as much noise as a herd of cattle. Just cover me with your crossbow, and we’ll be fine.”

He continued behind the tent.

“What about the rest of us?” asked Charlotte.

“One of you go behind the tent and count to a hundred, then follow me. Quietly. Come out ready for a fight when you hear me yell.”

Sam returned to the woods. Will returned from behind the tent, lay his crossbow carefully down by the tent.

“That’s a plan?”

“I need to get closer to be of any help,” said Charlotte. “I’ll follow her.”

She stepped behind the tent and into the forest.

“Pretend to keep working on the fire,” said Gralen, “in case they’re worrying about where their other two suppers went.”

They’d built their fire next to a large rock. Will leaned his sword against it and adjusted some of the logs. Gralen looked up into the sky and whistled once, then looked back to Will.

“Hold still,” he said. “I’m going to make it easier for you to hit from this distance.”†

He spoke for a few seconds in words Will did not understand, then touched Will’s eyes. Will blinked. When he opened his eyes, the world was new. Aspects of the landscape and foliage and animals he hadn’t previously noticed came into focus. He could see veins on leaves ten feet away.‡

“This is incredible,” said Will.

He glanced slowly around the woods.

“I see them,” said Will. “Three of them, just like she said.

* The group has just chosen a leader by default. Some groups will choose a leader through vote; others, like this one, will let whoever feels most qualified take charge.

† A crossbow has a range of fifteen yards. Will is fifty yards away from the goblins. This gives him a penalty of 3 to attack. However, with *farseeing* two of these are negated, for a total penalty of only 1.

‡ The spell’s description only says the character can see things as if they were a third their distance away. Some Guides will treat this as 3X telescopic vision. I like the hypersense treatment myself. It’s all a matter of taste.

Shouldn't we head over there now?"

"It's her plan," said Gralen. "Wait for her signal. We don't want to screw it up."

...

Sam stopped halfway to the goblins, put her feet into the stirrups of her crossbow and pressed down, dragging the crossbow up with one hand while loading it with her other hand, then continued on. After stopping, Sam could hear Charlotte behind her, which meant there was a chance the creatures could, too.*

Stepping out from the cover of the bushes, she aimed her crossbow at who she assumed was the leader of the creatures.

"Now!" she yelled.

Will grabbed up his crossbow, and, pointing it at one of the goblins, walked quickly toward them. Gralen walked alongside. His right hand went into his belt-pouch and brought out a small carving of an arrow.

Charlotte remained hidden as well as she could and approached the creatures, just as all of them screamed, leveled their spears, and charged Sam.

"Fuck!"

Sam pulled the trigger on her crossbow, but the bolt went wild.†

Will fired also; his bolt hit its target and the creature fell to the

* Charlotte is louder than Sam because Charlotte is not a thief. Still, she's probably better at sneaking than Gralen and definitely better than Will. Further, her psychic abilities work best at very close range.

† This was a free attack: they had the goblins covered. So their initial attacks are at +4 to attack and +1 to damage. Sam's player rolled 18 to attack, and even with the cover bonus this still misses.

ground.*

Gralen whistled, and ran toward the fight in a slight circle away from Will.†

Before the goblins reached Sam‡, one of them began spearing at the air looking for all the world as if it were fighting an invisible opponent.§

Sam dropped her crossbow and tried to draw her sword against the remaining creature. Its spear scraped against her leather tunic. She twisted round its attack and, off-balance from dodging the attack, was unable to complete her riposte.**

Will threw down his crossbow and ran toward the fight, drawing his sword as he did.*†

Gralen mumbled an arcane formula and threw his carven arrow

* Will's player rolled 8, hitting easily—not only does he have +4 for having the goblins covered, he has +1 being a warrior and another for being a *Weapon Specialist*, giving him +6. His roll is thus actually a 2. He only rolled one point of damage, but his target only had two—and Will had a bonus of 1 to damage due to having the target covered. The creature failed its health roll and fell unconscious. It isn't dead, because it hasn't gained any injuries.

† Gralen needs to be within thirty yards of his target to use *mage bolt*, and in any case can't use magic in a free attack anyway. But he also doesn't want to get hit if Will decides to shoot again.

‡ Combat has started. From this point on, each side takes turns, called *rounds*. The players roll first for their characters, and then the Guide rolls for the monsters. In the game, everything happens at once—which means it is possible, though rare, for a player character to defeat their opponent at the same time as their opponent defeats them.

§ Round 1, Charlotte: Charlotte attacked one goblin with a visual illusion. Because Charlotte is a monk, her player has the most math to deal with during the game. Charlotte has a psychic pool of six. She used one point to be able to affect one target; four points to give her a range of 24 yards; and one point leftover meant she had to roll her charisma+1 to succeed. Her goblin started with 3 survival and has 2 left. Only the goblin can see the illusion. It costs three verve per round to maintain.

** Round 1, Sam: Sam's player used one mojo to get 30 shillings, and then said she had previously purchased leather armor for 8 shillings. Sam missed her opponent and was speared for three points damage. Because of her specialty and because she has chosen warrior as her next level, Sam can use verve instead of survival to cover damage in combat, so this didn't really hurt her.

*† Round 1, Will: Will is dashing toward the combat at 11 yards per round. He is now 29 yards away.

toward the fight. A burst of light slammed into Sam's opponent.*

A raven swooped out of the sky and clawed at Sam's attacker.†

The goblin thrust its spear at Sam again, drawing blood, but this time she twisted the spear away using her own short sword and followed the spear down to its bearer, slicing across the creature's chest. The goblin fell back, keeled onto the ground, and bled silently.‡

The remaining goblin continued its strange combat with nothing, then stopped and looked around, confused.§

Sam turned from her prone opponent and pointed her sword at the confused goblin.** It tossed its spear away and fell to the ground, whimpering.

Will arrived with his sword ready and no one to hit.

"Great," he said. "We've got a prisoner. Jesus, Sam, are you okay?"

"Fine. I think."

Gralen came up behind Will.

"You were right," she said to him, "about that raven being good luck."

She put her hand to her side, inside her leather armor. It came back tinged red.

"Charlotte, get her back to camp," said Will. "I'll take care of the prisoner."

Will pointed his sword at the goblin.

* Round 1, Gralen: Now that he's within 30 yards of the combat, Gralen cast *mage bolt* and did four points damage against Sam's goblin. Since it started with six survival it now has two.

† Round 2, Gralen: Gralen's raven hit the goblin for one point, bringing it down to one survival. The end is near.

‡ Round 2, Sam: The goblin hit Sam for another three points. That takes care of all of her verve and she's also lost one survival. But she hit her opponent for three as well, and her goblin now has two injuries and is dying.

§ Round 2, Charlotte: Charlotte's illusion did one more point of damage to this goblin in the second round, bringing it to one survival, but at three verve per round she is now down to 1 verve. She could keep going and use survival if she wanted, but that hurts, so for round 3, she let the illusion drop. She was lucky the creature didn't make its reaction against a simple, sight-only illusion.

** Round 3, Sam: She's perfectly happy to not fight if the goblin chooses to surrender. Which it does.

“This way,” he said.

The creature didn’t respond, but it did understand the gesture when Will prodded it with the tip of his sword. He led it at swordpoint back to the campsite and tied it to a tree.

“How bad is Sam?”

“I don’t know,” said Charlotte. “There’s not a lot of blood.”

Will walked over to take a look at the wound.

“It doesn’t look bad,” he said, after a moment, “though I’m no barber. The bleeding has already stopped. Find me some strips of cloth, strips from the blankets if we don’t have anything else. I’ll clean it. Dad taught me how to handle this.”*

Will turned to Galen when he was done and pointed at the goblin tied to the tree.

“We’re going to have to keep a watch tonight,” he said, “to keep an eye on this thing. We can’t let it go, and we can’t just kill it in cold blood.”

“Sure we can,” said Sam.

...

Later, around the fire, Will asked Galen about the legend of the silver hand.[†]

“This is what I read on the stones north of Hightown,” he replied. “The king of the silver hand, the father of kings, ruled a great city, and his brother ruled an underground kingdom. Evil creatures sailed in over the sea, creatures that could hear any word spoken if any wind blew near the speaker. They terrorized the countryside with full knowledge of their enemies’ plans and secrets.

* Will used one mojo to add the *first aid* skill to his *Survival* field. Even if he hadn’t, Sam would be okay—she’s only lost survival and has gained no injuries. But this is the first real damage of the game, and she and Will would be denied a special moment.

† More likely the Guide tells this story through Galen, but there’s nothing wrong with Galen’s player making it up with the Guide’s approval.

“So the king held council with his brother in a cave of no wind, and his brother told him of a dream he’d had: that the invaders could be defeated by forcing them to eat insect mash, insects ground into water. The king must do this himself, for if he asks anyone else to do it, he risks telling it to the wind.”

“So the king mashes insects into a paste?” asked Will.

“And,” said Gralen, “he sneaks into the camp of the invaders and switches their porridge with the mash. They eat it, and can no longer hear the wind speak. The king and his advisors can strategize without being overheard, and they defeat the invaders.”

“That’s disgusting,” said Charlotte. “Wouldn’t the invaders have noticed insect mash?”

“It’s a legend. Strange things happen in legends.”

“And so they lived happily ever after?” said Will.

“Not yet. There was another problem. On each May’s eve, a scream permeated the land, a scream that curdled milk, killed crops, and made women barren. Warriors lost their strength, children and animals grew sick. The sick, animals and people, died. So the king consults his brother in the cave, and his brother says that the screams are dragons in the earth. They can be calmed by giving them strong mead. Every mayday he had his people bury crocks of mead in the earth to lull the dragons.”

“I take it that wasn’t the end of his problems,” said Will.

“Of course not,” said Charlotte. “These things always come in threes if they come in pairs.”

“And they did. The king’s provisions were disappearing. The court would eat a great meal when tribute arrived but the rest would be gone by morning. Then the court would have to go hungry until the next tribute, which would also disappear in the night.

“The king and his court tried to stay awake to discover who was taking the food, but they always fell asleep before morning. When they awoke, the food was gone.

“His brother told him that he didn’t know what or who was taking the food, but that when he felt tired he should bathe in cold water to stay awake. The king followed his brother’s advice, and discovered that a wizard was using magic to send the entire court to sleep. The king jumped out of his icy bath, took his sword, and

beheaded the wizard, and the court was finally able to have breakfast.”

“How long was the king in the ice water?” asked Sam.

“What I want to know,” asked Will, “is who was the brother?”

“That’s a good question. It wasn’t in the inscriptions I deciphered. You’d have to ask the night priests, or the Druids, whoever built the monument.”

“Sleep well, kids,” said Charlotte.

“As long as the mist doesn’t rise,” said Will.

Gralen took the final watch in the early morning, and spent it studying his books to re-memorize his spells.

...

“I’m going to try to semi-interrogate our captive,” said Gralen over breakfast.

“Why,” asked Sam, “did you learn its language in the night?”*

“Sort of,” said Gralen. “The same way I could read the stones north of Hightown, but not the same stones yesterday. Now, I’m prepared.”†

“We need to know how many more there are,” said Sam, “and where they live, I guess. So we can avoid them.”

“We might also ask if there are any breasts nearby,” said Will.

“Funny. But I can’t ask it, I can only listen to it. You want to show it your nipples and see how it reacts?”

“Ask it about castles, to the east?”

“You’re missing the point, but I’ll see what I can do.”

Gralen took a finger-full of stuff out of his pocket, and pinched it between his fingers, releasing a warm, pungent odor. He spoke some words in an ancient language, and ate the stuff.

“What the hell is that?” asked Sam.

* Sam regained one survival for her night of rest. She is now at full survival and, of course, everyone has all their verve back since it restores in full every night.

† Gralen memorized *understand languages* as one of his spells for the day.

“Ginger,” said Gralen, and then he touched the creature on the forehead.*

The goblin flinched; then Gralen began gesturing to it. He pointed east. The goblin spoke again and pointed west.†

The others made their breakfast over the fire. They still had eggs and bacon, though they’d have to start living off hard bread and jerky soon.

“Well,” said Gralen when he was finished, “if you trust it, it lives directly west. There are hundreds—or at least ten handfuls—more of them. Something to the east frightens it. Also, it wants to know when we’re going to kill it, because it wants to kill us.”

Will partially untied the goblin, freeing one of its hands, and handed it some bacon and eggs. It ate as ferociously as it could one-handed.

“You notice he didn’t turn to stone when the sun came up?”

“Maybe it’s a different kind of troll that turns to stone,” said Sam.

“What are we going to do with him?” asked Charlotte.

“Let him go when we get further south,” said Will. “When he’s harmless.”

“He won’t be harmless if we let him go, or he escapes, and he comes back with a hundred more like him,” said Sam.

“We wait long enough to let him go, and he won’t have time,” said Will. “We’re not going back the way we came anyway, right?”

“You’ll regret letting it live,” said Sam.

“If I don’t do things I’ll regret, it’ll be a boring life.”

* Ginger, if you care to look in *Arcane Lore*, is the material component for *understand languages*. That, or mandrake root.

† Gralen can cast *understand languages* and understand what the goblin says, but he can’t speak the goblin’s language.

The Mist

Neither the terrain nor their captive became any friendlier, but any dragons in the wood kept to themselves. On the following day a mist rolled northward around hills and through trees, clouding fern and stream. Before the sun reached its zenith they could barely see beyond the next hill, and by mid-afternoon the next tree. They grabbed blankets from the back of their horse and wrapped them around their shoulders and backs. They moved as ghosts within a grey light.

Their goblin captive continued into the mist only at the urging of Will's sword.*

A raven flew out of the haze and lit on Galen's right shoulder.

"You've got a new friend," said Sam.

"An old friend. She's afraid of this mist."

"It's time we stopped to eat," said Charlotte. "Let's climb to higher ground when we get a chance, and see how far the mist extends."

At the crest of the next hill they saw tall oaks rising out of a cloudy sea, and here and there other hills jutted above the fog as well. A pale sun turned the rolling fog silver, and to the east, at the ridge of the High Divide, two rounded, white-tipped peaks rose above the mountains.

"Isaiah's Breasts," said Galen.

"That puts us ahead of schedule," said Will.

"We move faster than an army."

"We'd move faster without a prisoner," said Sam.†

The mist rose over the hill as they ate, as they discussed their journey and what treasures they might find in the abandoned castle, and soon the mountains and Isaiah's Breasts were veiled in a gauze of ephemeral grey.

"This may be a blessing in disguise," said Charlotte. "No

* You might think they're being kind of mean to this goblin. They are. They believe that the goblin would be mean to them if they gave it the chance. Are they right? That might be a great topic for an adventure.

† Sam is technically correct, the best kind of correct. The goblin has a movement of 8, which is one less than Charlotte's.

goblins or other creatures will see us in this murk.”

Down the hill again, walking onward, the crackling of dead leaves beneath their feet was muffled by the heavy air. Their own feet sounded as if they were far away. Yet they also heard the chirping and screeching of unseen birds and insects, and the cracking and falling of branches at some remote distance.

They walked in silence. There was the perverse* odor of a swamp, of stagnant water and green decay.

Charlotte stopped, and turned her head to the south.

“Did you hear that?”†

“No.”

“What?”

They heard another crack, this one followed by a swish, or a scrape, as if whatever had fallen were dragged away.

“Christ,” said Sam. “What the hell is that?”

“That’s something alive. And it’s been getting closer.”‡

“Ever notice,” said Gralen, “how all legends like ours start with farmers heading into the wilderness?”

“We’re none of us farmers,” said Will.

“Right. A farmer would know what that was.”

There was a loud crack that couldn’t have been more than forty paces away if they’d been anywhere but this sound-deadening mist. Then dragging. And again, a dead and claustrophobic silence.

Then the same noise from the west. A whip-like snap. Will screamed.

A long snake had wrapped itself around him, pinning his arms and pulling him away, or trying to.§ The tail of the snake disappeared into the mist, but it was twenty feet if it was an inch. Gralen stood dumbfounded; Charlotte’s mouth opened, then

* Autocorrect turned pervasive into perverse. I like that. I would definitely keep that serendipitous change for a game description. Just remember that you’ll have to explain it further if the players ask about it!

† “Listen! Do you smell something?”

‡ Charlotte’s player made her perception roll. Monks often will, and if they don’t, they can use mojo, since perception is an archetypal roll for monks.

§ Will took three points of damage, and it all comes from survival because Will was caught by surprise—it isn’t yet combat, so it isn’t archetypal for warriors. He’s okay for now. He has three survival remaining.

closed, then opened; she spoke no words.*

Will scrambled frantically to anchor his feet in the earth as the thing dragged him south.† Sam unsheathed her sword and hacked at the thing where it extended away from Will into the mist. It rippled along its grey and pulsing length. It unraveled from Will—and lashed at Sam.‡

“What is that?” asked Will.

“Don’t talk. Kill it!”§

Another long snake lashed out. Sam ducked under it, and it scraped across her as it whipped past, grey, rubbery, and cold.**

“My god, they’re disgusting.”

“Something big is out there!” said Gralen. “This is just its arm, or a...”

“...a tentacle,” said Charlotte. “Like a land octopus?”*†

Will’s blade dug deep into the nearest flailing tentacle, or

* Everyone except Sam failed their surprise roll. Even though they knew *something* was out there, they still needed to roll because they didn’t know what it was, nor did they know the direction it would attack from, or even if it was something that might attack. It is very unlikely, whatever their imaginations were conjuring, that they expected Tentacles of Unknown Origin. They did get a bonus due to being aware of *something*, of course.

† Round 1, Will: he can’t fight because his arms are pinned to his side and he’s surprised so it wouldn’t do much good anyway. He *can* make strength rolls to avoid being dragged away.

‡ Round 1, Sam: She did five points of damage to it. It decided it better attack whoever is damaging it, and attacks her for 4 points, which come from her verve—her specialty as a soon-to-be warrior allows her to use verve as survival in combat.

§ Fans of Shannara might recognize this scene. It will be difficult to Guide a fantasy role-playing game if you’re not a fantasy fan. Besides giving you an understanding of the genre and what your players want to see, it will also give you adventure ideas. Don’t steal entire novels for your adventures. Mine them for themes and situations. Above all, do not expect players to follow any plot. Trying to force your plot will mean an unfun adventure. Expecting them to follow the plot of a novel is even worse. It might be gratifying to hear them say, *Wow, this is just like Battlestar Galactica! Cool!* But it’s another thing entirely to hear *This is Battlestar Galactica but with horses and lizards and magic. That means this guy is Baltar. We kill him now.* Create situations, not stories. Stories are for the player characters to create.

** Round 2, Sam: she missed, it missed.

*† Charlotte is still surprised, and her player is acting it out.

whatever it was, nearly severing it. A green ichor spurted out.* Gralen flung one of his tiny arrows at the other tentacle, and a ray of vermilion light burst against it.† Both tentacles slithered, whipping, back into the forest and the mist.

“Crap!” said Sam. “Holy crap!”

“Worse than holy crap,” said Will. “Where’s the goblin?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care. Run!”‡

The mist swirled behind them as they fled. Will ran last, as he coaxed their horse to run without panicking.§ The forest behind them exploded in the snapping of whipping tentacles, and again the crack of breaking branches.

They ran faster. They ran until Charlotte couldn’t run anymore**, and then they rested, far away and out of breath, sweating in the cold, with the mist still enveloping them and shadowy trees all around.

“Now we know what everyone was afraid of,” said Sam.

* Round 2, Will: Will made his surprise roll this round, so is no longer surprised. He hit for six points damage.

† Round 2, Gralen: Gralen’s *mage bolt* did four points. This thing is taking a lot of damage. But I’m betting it’s got more and to spare.

‡ Round 3: They run.

§ Will’s player spent one mojo to add *horsemanship* to his *Survival Craft* field.

** If any character runs for more minutes than their endurance, they risk injury. Charlotte’s endurance is the lowest, at 10, so she ran 300 yards per minute for ten minutes. She could have jogged at 200 yards per minute for fifty minutes, or sprinted at 500 yards per minute (250 feet per round) for ten rounds.

The Forgotten Road

The thrashing of tentacles faded behind them as they continued east through the mist. They made camp when they expected night was falling beyond the gray world that enveloped them, when they were tired from walking, when it felt like a day however long it had been since fleeing the unknown creature.

The fog darkened shortly after, and the damp air cooled further. There were no stars, and no moon. No light penetrated the murk. They tried to build a fire but all available kindling was too damp. Will's tinder sparked, once, but the ember would not light the dead branches and leaves they had gathered.*

After a cold meal they huddled together in their tent for warmth, wrapped in blankets, their backs against each other in the night.

A creature screeched above their tent, and another, unless it was a single circling scavenger.

"Another mist monster?" asked Charlotte.

"It could just be an animal," said Gralen.

"I have never," Will said, "heard any animal like that."

It may be that the moon had risen beyond the fog. Faint light cast the palest of shadows on the canvas of the tent, shadows of birds half again as large as an osprey. The play of shapes against the tent sent them slowly to sleep. Will was the last to nod off, and when everyone else was sleeping he peeked under the tent. He quickly drew back and pulled the blanket over his face. The creatures were hard to see in the misty dark, but seemed more like huge fat insects than any bird known to man. Will fell asleep with their burnt pink coloration and eburnean† gossamer wings crawling

* Will failed a very difficult *Survival Craft* roll; his player needed to roll wisdom, +1 for *Survival Craft*, and -2 for very difficult. His wisdom is 11, so he needed to roll 10 or less. He rolled 11. The group didn't try a group roll, because some of the players didn't want a fire that might attract monsters. It did in fact help them go unnoticed in the mist.

† Read More Lovecraft.

through his imagination. He slept fitfully, but he slept.*

When they started out the next morning† they did their best to wring the damp out of the tent.

“I am well past tired of wet clothing,” said Charlotte.

“I thought you liked the wild?”

“I like it because I like to see it,” she replied. “This mist hides everything!”

When they set off, Gralen led them.

“How,” asked Will, “do you even know the right direction?”

“A little bird told me.”

“Can your little bird tell us how far this mist goes?”

Gralen whispered to the raven on his shoulder. It leaped, spread its wings, and faded upward into the fog.

“Nice pet,” said Sam. “Can it do tricks?”

“I’ve only been able to teach it one,” he replied. “Pecking the eyes of smart-asses.”

“Yeah, yeah, Gralen. I wasn’t talking to you.”

The raven returned out of the mist, croaking as it landed on Gralen’s outstretched arm.

“He says the fog only extends a short way further. Probably half a day.”

And by mid-morning the mist had cleared enough for them to see that the path they’d been using was the remnants of a long-unused road. Mostly-buried bits of old paving stones marked where the road had been. Off to the side they occasionally saw round-topped stone pillars engraved with vertical and diagonal lines.

“These are numbers in the Ancient tongue,” said Gralen. “And whatever they’re marking, we’re getting nearer to it.”

After the fifth marker, Gralen counted off on his fingers, and predicted that “we’ll be there by evening, if not sooner.”

* What about the horse? The horse is an NPC, non-player character. It gets forgotten every once in a while, which is probably fortunate for the players. You want to minimize how much you forget—but don’t fuss over it. *You almost never want to re-play a scene because of minor forgetfulness.*

† Another night’s sleep, another survival point back. Will, because he was hit by the tentacles at a point when he could not use verve, had been down 3 points, so he’s now down only 2 points. And everyone who lost verve has it back.

By noon the mist cleared completely. With the welcome restoration of the sun the trees were again red and orange. They heard the natural crackling of leaves beneath their boots, the occasional neighing of their packhorse. They climbed a hill and looked west, back where they'd been, and saw the mist hanging over the trees as if the forest were wrapped in a pallid spider's web.

As they walked further into the afternoon, the far mist became little more than a silver sheen against the leafy western horizon. And when they first saw towers ahead to the east, they could see the mist behind only when they climbed the tallest hills.

Slowly, the towers of the Astronomers grew larger. Slowly the castle became visible between the towers.

...

"My god," said Charlotte. "I thought it was a child's skull. There are dead goblins everywhere."

Half buried in the grass they saw a small skeleton, a fanged skull partially submerged staring up to the sky. And another beyond it. There were fewer trees here, and all around were bleached bits of ancient dead.

"Don't leave the path," said Will, as everyone walked off to examine the skeletons.

"Are all of them goblins?" asked Charlotte.

"Here's a man," said Sam. "Wearing armor."

"And another here," called Gralen. "This was a battlefield."

"Leaving the path never ends well," muttered Will, "in stories."

He followed them off the path just before Sam, furthest from him, stepped out of sight.

"Now we know why the Astronomers were never heard from," she called back.

"Do you think the night trolls took the castle?"

“It doesn’t look like anyone uses this road, human or goblin.”*

“None of these skeletons have been disturbed since they fell,” said Gralen. “And judging by the bones and rusted armor, it must have been back in the war.”

The forest ended at a clearing. The castle stood on a low hill of yellowish grass in the middle of the clearing. Four towers girded it, walls of granite connecting the towers. Another tower rose from the right corner of the castle. They could see the top battlements of the castle’s inner walls beyond the outer defenses. A golden dome covered the left half of the castle. In the middle, next to the dome, an arch of white marble enclosed a great golden clock covered in arcane symbols, moon phases, and the same Ancient numerals that had been on the road markers.

A moat surrounded the hill. The water was low and murky, and a slime of moss and black leaves covered the human and goblin skeletons that filled it. A drawbridge was lowered on the other side, but it was burned, half gone, pointing toward them like a jagged charcoal tongue.

“How do we get across?”

“I am not going in that water,” said Will. “Not with all those dead things.”

“That I can agree with,” said Sam.

“There is just no way.”

“I had no idea,” said Gralen, “what the war must have been like.”

The dead in the moat, jumbled against the walls, laying in the grass around them; the dead, pale as moonlight on mist, if, as the wise tell us, silence is assent, agreed.

* Linguistic note: Charlotte and Sam call them goblins, because they’re from east Highland. Will and Gralen call them both goblins and night trolls, because they’re from west Highland. This is just role-playing. In west Highland, “night troll” refers to goblins, hobgoblins, ogres, and trolls.

Astronomer's Keep

Sam pointed across the skeleton- and algae-choked moat.

“Is that a raft?”*

A makeshift log raft poked above the water on the far shore.

“That can’t be a hundred years old, can it?” asked Will.

“It can’t even stay above water empty,” said Gralen. “Charlotte? Could we build one?”†

“We have the wood, and we have the rope, that’s all we need.”‡

“Hold on,” said Will. “It’ll take half a day to make a raft, why don’t we walk around first and see if there isn’t some other way across? I hate to say I miss being in the mist, but now that we’re in the open I want to be inside those walls before nightfall.”§

“Good idea,” said Charlotte. “Let’s split up and meet in the back. You come with me. Gralen, Sam, go to the left. And don’t wander off!”**

Circling to the right, Will and Charlotte saw another inner tower at the castle’s back, southeast, corner. Behind the castle, on the hill

* Most of what happens in a role-playing game like this happens because the players say what their characters are doing. And most of the time, that’s all. They don’t need to roll dice to decide which room to enter, or how to cross the moat. In this case, Sam’s player asked, “Is there something around here we could use to cross the moat?” The Adventure Guide decided, based on what they know about the area, “not really, there’s an old raft on the other side of the moat, but it’s half sunk in the water.”

† Gralen knows that Charlotte is an engineer, although her interest is *clockwork*, not rafts. She could have, if she’d wanted, add the *boat-making* skill to her *Engineering* field by using one mojo.

‡ Ah, the joys of rope! Don’t leave home without it.

§ It is very easy to forget that the characters are in a different time frame than the players. It will take a few seconds for the Guide to say “Okay. You build a raft.” But without powerful magic it will take the *characters* a lot longer. And more time means more wandering monsters.

** In a movie, one or all of them would certainly end up “wandering off,” getting into trouble for the main character to bail them out of. In **GODS & MONSTERS** there is *no main character*, and it is generally less fun to have the group split into more than one, each doing different things. While the Guide is dealing with one player or set of players, the others are idle. And of course, it also puts the characters in danger. The relevant quote in our gaming circle is “Let’s split up.” “Good idea. We can take more damage that way.”

and against the outer wall, a statue of a bearded man in a flowing robe pointed a long staff over the sloping hill, as if commanding the moat to part.

It did not.

To the left, on the north side, Sam and Gralen found a huge war engine, an attack tower or ramp that must have stood thirty feet or taller in the war, fallen into the moat. It crossed the breadth of the water.

"I can walk across that," said Sam.

"What about the rest of us?" asked Gralen. "I couldn't even begin to scale that mess."

"We tie a couple of lengths of rope to this end, I'll carry them, tie them on the other end—that tree, maybe—and the rest of you can use it for support as you walk across."

Gralen and Sam went back and pulled their rope from the packhorse. When they returned, Charlotte was examining the fallen siege engine; Will was standing atop it, stamping it down.

"Think it'll hold?" asked Sam.

"I think it's worth a try," said Charlotte.

They looped two lengths of rope around a tree, the ends around Sam. She walked across, carefully scaling the vertical sides of the fallen machine using her hands as much as her feet. At places the rotted wood slipped beneath her, but she always found some other part to support her before she fell.*

While Sam extricated herself from the rope, Will and Gralen unpacked what they needed from the horse.

"I hope he's going to be okay," said Will.

"Yeah," said Gralen. "We're going to need him when we get out."

Gralen turned to the raven.

"You can't come either," he said. "Stay out here and watch for trouble. And stay out of trouble yourself!†"

Will shook his head.

"Hey, we all do what we can," Gralen said.

* In other words, she's a thief and she made her *climb walls* roll, in this case at a pretty good bonus. This isn't a difficult climb.

† Gralen's familiar could absolutely have come inside. But Gralen wants his raven to keep an eye out for danger.

Sam tied the four ends of the two lengths of rope to a smaller tree on her side of the moat, one high and one low to match what Charlotte had done.

Gralen crossed first. He stepped slowly, holding tightly onto both top ropes with his hands and trying to keep his feet on the lower rope as much as on the rotten wood. When he stepped onto the inner bank, he sat down immediately on the yellow grass.*

Charlotte took a deep breath and stepped onto the rope, starting it swaying again, gripping the higher rope so tightly her knuckles turned white.†

“Don’t look down!” cried Sam. “You’ll be safer if you relax!”

Charlotte inched her way across, trying to use the siege engine for support. It refused to provide any. She slipped on the wet surface, raised her hands up to protect her as she fell toward the wood, realized she had just let the rope go and tried to grab onto the lower rope, and failed that also. She sank into the water, then scrambled back up clawing at the wooden siege engine. She spit slimy water out, brushed the grime from her face, and spit again.‡ It smelled and tasted of rotting vegetation, like old potatoes or moldy cucumbers.

Gralen and Sam on one end, and Will on the other, pressed down on the foot-rope.§

“Grab onto it!”

She spit murky water again and pulled herself up to the lower rope. Then she went hand-over-hand wading through the water.

* Crossing a rope bridge like this is relatively easy; there’s a bonus of 8 to their agility roll. Anyone with an agility of 12 or higher can do it with no problem. *But the players don’t yet know what the bonus is and they don’t find out whether they succeed until they try.* Since Gralen’s player rolled a 9, it doesn’t really tell them much. He has a 12 agility, so he could’ve made it at any bonus, and even if there’s a penalty of up to 3.

† Charlotte’s player does not know that Charlotte needs a 16 or less to avoid falling into the water, but does know that, with an agility of 8, she’s got the worst chance of succeeding.

‡ Charlotte’s player rolled 18 to avoid falling. Since Charlotte’s agility is 8, and the bonus is 8, she failed: she needed 16 or lower. Fortunately, she succeeded at the much more difficult evasion roll to avoid bouncing her ungraceful skull off something damaging. She fell, but took no damage on the way down. Except to her dignity, which is not a trackable resource in this game.

§ They could have jumped in to save her. Swimming in murk and skeletons...

She kicked a skeleton aside, then another, and another. The bones separated and floated off. When she crawled ashore a dark yellowish-green slime dripped off her tunic and hair.

Will walked across almost as easily as if it were a real bridge.* Charlotte, having done her best to wipe the muck off her face, untied the ropes and pulled them over.

“See? We still have the rope for later.”†

“Next time,” Sam said, “use it.”

The trees here, mostly pines, were smaller, more gnarled than their cousins in the forest, stark and sharp in the afternoon light. Needles scattered brown across the sloping ground.

“Let’s get inside,” said Will.

The four adventurers walked to the broken drawbridge. Will reached out and touched one of the front bridge towers as they went by.

“I half expected it to not be there,” said Will. “This is all so unreal.”

“OooOooOooOooOooOoo,” sang Sam. “Ghost castles.”

“I’ve heard about a ghost castle,” said Will. “Somewhere in the mountains on a high plateau is an ancient castle that appears only on nights of the full moon. It holds great treasures and magic, but anyone who enters to get the treasures and magic never returns.”

“Then how do you know there’s treasure and magic inside?”

“That’s the trouble with campfire stories,” said Will. “You can’t base your life on them.”

“Well, this castle is real enough,” said Galen. “And it’s not a full moon.”

“It is tonight,” said Charlotte.

“I was hoping no one remembered.”

“Full moons are good,” said Sam. “They provide light *and* they make lots of shadows to hide in.”

“Sometimes those shadows seem alive,” said Will.

“Because sometimes they hold people like me.”

The boards of the drawbridge creaked and shifted until they entered the long murder hall in the interior of the castle grounds. More dead men and goblins carpeted the hall; the ceiling had

* Will and Sam are the most agile characters in the group.

† Charlotte’s an engineer, a useful field with ropes and in dungeons.

collapsed. A few beams remained. Will tapped at one of the pillars. A skull fell and shattered on the floor beside him and he jumped forward.

Two tall doors that had once blocked the end of the murder hall lay flat on the ground inside the courtyard. They gazed around again at the remnants of hundred-year-old carnage. Skeletons of man and goblin lay tangled in the grass.

The dome on the castle was black, or grey, depending on the angle of the sun. The gold on the great clock was peeling and faded.

“Not real gold,” said Charlotte. “Looks like paint of some kind.”

“You’re ruining our dreams,” said Sam.

“It’s... that clock,” said Gralen. “It looks like the right time.”

“It can’t possibly still be running,” Charlotte replied. “Even if the goblins didn’t destroy the workings, a clock like that, any clock, needs regular care.”

The castle was built of stone blocks. Two towers stood at the front and back corners on the castle’s right wall.

“Let’s see what the goblins left us,” said Will.

A path of marble tiles, white with red veins, led toward a terrace and two massive wooden doors beneath the clock. Yellow grass poked between the tiles. Some were pushed upward by young trees. In the center of the terrace, inlaid with white marble, a circle enclosed a six-pointed star.

On the left door a faded moon was engraved, on the right, a faded sun. Pale paint remained only where the engraving etched deepest.

The doors scraped against a stone floor as Will pushed them open.*

Their eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness.

* This is where it gets harder to write this as both a story and as an RPG adventure in progress. As a writer, I’d want to skip over a lot of this with only a short explanation. In the game, however, these are all decisions made by the players. Do they go right or left? Up or down? Look in the room or go on to the next? These are all their decisions as players, not mine as writer—there is no writer when a role-playing game adventure happens. There are decisions by the players and reactions by the world.

Inside was a large circular foyer. Great stairs on either side circled up. A domed ceiling was covered in gold and silver constellations, the walls in repeating knotwork. Dust floated in the beams of light that filtered in from behind as they stood at the entrance.

“No skeletons,” said Will.

Charlotte pointed at a broken length of thick wood in two halves on the floor.

“But,” she said, “it was broken into. That bar’s for the door.”

“Can we re-bar it?” asked Will.

She lifted one of the halves with some difficulty.

“It won’t be as strong as it was originally, but one of these should hold against smaller... creatures.”

“Well, katy bar the door and see what, if anything, is still here for us to take,” said Sam.

Will took the bar from Charlotte and forced it through the iron buckler on each door.

“Let’s look upstairs first,” said Gralen.

A barely perceptible whirring noise greeted them when they reached the landing. Charlotte led them out to the battlements. The courtyard below looked even more desolate, more hellish, in contrast to the wild green beyond the outer walls and battle-choked moat.

Charlotte leaned out to look up at the clock.

“It’s definitely keeping the right time. Look at the three hands: one for the sun, one for the moon, and one for the zodiac, I’m sure of it. The middle hand is pointing at the full moon. The zodiac hand is between Virgo and Libra, and the time is the fourth hour, about half past. This is unbelievable.”

“If no one’s bothered it, why wouldn’t it be running?”

“The gears. That’s that whirring noise. They collect dust; they rust; birds build nests above them. The amount of care that went into this clock, compared to the amount of care that did *not* go into the castle... There’s no way the same people built both.”

“Who did, then?”

“Nobody could build this clock. That I know of. The hand for the time is showing the same time a sundial would show. That’s incredibly complicated.”

“The clock’s too big to steal,” said Sam. “Let’s head back in and look for something we can carry.”

“We can come back later to look at the clock,” said Gralen.

“I could spend days on that clock.”

The battlements led right and left. Skeletons of man and goblin leaned between the crenellations. At the end of the left route, the front tower’s door was black. They walked toward it single file, Gralen leading, Charlotte trailing.*

Gralen slowly pushed at the door. Inside were more skeletons, bones tangled together, mostly human, intermingled with armor and weapons. The floor was black with soot and a pale mold grew over everything.

Everyone crowded around Gralen to peer inside.

“My god,” said Charlotte. “Did they all burn to death?”

They stepped inside. Stairs circled the wall leading higher into the tower, and back down to the ground level. A window overlooked the front courtyard to their right. There were two more charred doors next to each other on the left.†

Will poked his sword at one of the skeletons.

“It sure looks like they burned.”

He bent down and gently removed a broken sword from bony fingers. The light phalanges clattered among other bones to the floor. The sword was mostly hilt, with about three inches of blade ending in a jagged break.

“This guy’s sword broke,” he said. “There are markings on it. I can’t understand them.”‡

He handed it to Gralen. The blade was steel, the hilt an odd soapy green. There was no leather on the grip; the green mineral of the ornately-looped guard merged into the tang as one piece.

“This isn’t the Ancient tongue, and it isn’t the Druids. I don’t

* In the game, your group’s *marching order* determines who sees (and takes the brunt of) danger ahead, and who for danger behind. It’s especially important when you’re surprised.

† This is not a normal description for a story. It is a normal description for a role-playing adventure. The Adventure Guide must provide both descriptive and tactical details for the players to use. That will include a lot of directions, either right/left/front/back or north/south/east/west, distances, and sizes.

‡ I’m a traditionalist. I believe that made-up languages enhance the game experience. They’ll be seeing more of this script in later adventures.

know what it is. A private script, maybe, of the monks? Most of the script, or runes, whatever they are, was on the rest of the blade. Do you see it anywhere?"

Will looked among the skeletons near where he'd found the hilt, trying not to break the bones and failing, but found nothing.

"Maybe he broke it somewhere else."

"Why would he bring it to fight, then?"

Gralen slipped the hilt into his side pouch.

The stairwell leading down had been barricaded from this side. The makeshift barricade was laced with charcoal.

"They locked themselves in," said Sam, "and burned themselves to death?"

"Or they were barricaded against someone, and that someone tried to burn them out."

"Christ."

They followed the stairs up, to a slightly smaller room, circular, three windows letting in light. Shutters creaked. Tables lined the walls, filled with papers and flasks. Ash covered everything, and an alchemical odor pervaded the room. Two skeletons were on the floor, tattered and blackened cloth wrapped around their skulls. Gralen picked up one scroll of paper.

"Careful!" cried Charlotte.

The paper crumbled in his hands, pieces and dust fluttering to the floor.

"Damn it!" he said.

"This paper has been open to the elements for a hundred years. There are no librarians caring for this stuff."

Gralen examined the small piece that remained in his hand.

"It's Ancient," he said.

He picked up one of the scraps that had fallen.

"It looks like a recipe. Sulfur, pitch, and," he held the second piece near the first, "quicklime."

"Yum!"

Will looked out the window at the setting sun.

"It'll be dark in a few hours. Unless you think there's something worth finding here, let's go to the other tower."

"Take that flask," said Gralen, pointing to a soot-covered glass filled with a grayish liquid. "I think it's suspended silver. Hardly

piles of gold coin*, but it's a start. I'll come back later and see if I can get these papers without harming them.**†

They walked back down the stairs and across the south battlement. The door to the rear tower was busted open. More bones inside, men and goblin, and the desiccated corpses of small animals and birds. Will poked at one with his sword. It crumbled to dust.

They walked up the stairs. A grayish curtain hung over the entrance to the upper room.

"It's a spider's web," said Will.

He brushed it aside. A similar gossamer net hung across the windows. A tiny bird struggled in the south window, sending wildly swaying shadows across the stone floor. Will took his dagger‡ and cut it free.

"Aren't you the animal lover," said Sam.

Will shrugged.

"It's—"

Something fell from the ceiling onto Sam. She slapped at it with both hands, knocking it away.§ It scuttled, dark and jerkily, back to her. Gralen batted it with his walking staff**, crushing it. Another fell next to him, a black and furry spider the size of a cat. Will and Charlotte tried to maneuver to where they could help, but it was impossible to attack without risking hitting Sam or Gralen.

Gralen tried to crush the second spider, first with his boot and then, thinking better of it, his staff.*† Sam tried to hit it with her

* When you're a looter, you've got to take your treasure where you can find it. It's not all swimming in gold coins and jewelry.

† They're being extraordinarily optimistic about having the run of the castle.

‡ Will retroactively spent the two shillings daggers cost to have always had one. This also required spending a mojo to get 30 shillings, since he was down to just pennies and half-pennies.

§ Sam failed her surprise roll, but Gralen made his. The Guide rolled randomly and the spider attacked Sam. It missed. It needed 11 or lower to hit: a base of 11; Sam's leather armor provides a bonus of 2; large spiders, as first-level animals, have no attack bonus; and Sam had a penalty of 2 on her defense for being surprised: $11+2-2=11$. The Guide rolled 18.

** Gralen paid, retroactively, half a shilling for the staff, and a mojo for the skill.

*† Player: "I'm going to step on the spider." Adventure Guide: "A huge spider? Are you sure that's what you want to do?"

short sword as it bit at Gralen. She clanged her blade against the floor.*

“Gaak!”

The thing scuttled jerkily—but quickly. Gralen jumped away as it bit at him.† He slammed his staff down again, just as Sam did the same with her sword. The spider splattered white ooze across the floor.

“These are the biggest fucking spiders I’ve ever seen,” said Sam.

“What the hell else,” asked Will, “is in this place?”

Charlotte brushed aside some of the webbing with her quarterstaff.

“Something’s glittering over here.”

Two golden heads were on a shelf, studded with jet for eyes and emerald for earrings. The gold atop the heads was pounded into curls for hair.

“That,” said Gralen, “is what else is in this place.”

Will stepped carefully across the gut-splattered floor and took one from the shelf. A book flopped over and sent a cloud of dust into the air.

“Are they solid gold?”

“No,” said Charlotte. “You’d know from the weight.”

“Who are they?”

“Demons? Founders of the order?”

“More important,” said Sam, “how much are they worth?”

“Depends,” said Gralen, “on how much gold is in them.”

“Duh.”

“Sorry, I don’t know.”

She nodded and took the other head from the shelf.

* Combat in **GODS & MONSTERS** is very pulp-oriented. Most novels don’t go into the detail that pulp novels go into when protagonists fight. It’s not as much fun to go all Hemingway and say merely “They got into a brawl.”

† The second spider hit Gralen for one survival point. The Guide asked Gralen to make a health or evasion roll, and Gralen’s player rolled four, successfully avoiding poison. The Guide did *not* tell Gralen’s player that the reaction was against poison, but they’re fighting spiders. I’m guessing he knows.

“Gold is as gold does. We’re going to need bigger bags.”*

Will returned to the window and leaned out. It faced south; to his left the High Divide loomed tall, lit by the low sun.

“Let’s search the first floor for a safe place to rest.”

They circled down the stone stairs, past the second floor of the tower and down again. Skeletons lay heaped on the floor. Sunlight crept in from a partly-opened east door.

“This must have been one hell of a battle,” said Charlotte.

“A last-ditch defense is my guess,” said Will.

Bones cracked under their feet.

“Hey, this guy’s got his hands on something,” said Sam. “Jesus, he’s also got an arrow right through his forehead.”

The skull, where the forehead would be, was shattered and an old arrow lay in it like a wilting flower in a pot.

“He was crawling away. He was trying to push this...”

She shoved the skeletal arm aside, scrawling a line across the ancient dust on the floor.

“There’s a trap door here. It was meant to be secret.”†

She pushed one of the flagstones down. A square section of floor sank slightly. She pushed on the depression. It creaked loudly and flipped down. A stairway carved in dirt led into darkness. She peered into the hole, and then dropped her head into the opening.

“I can’t see past a tiny hallway. But it goes somewhere, and they didn’t want anyone to find it.”

Charlotte lit her lantern and handed it to Sam. Will followed her down the dirt stairs. Charlotte and Gralen followed Will. As their eyes adjusted to the lantern’s light, they found themselves in a tunnel, dug out of the dirt, with stone arches buttressing it.

“Footprints!” cried Charlotte. “And not Sam’s!”‡

“This place can’t possibly have been entered since the goblin wars,” said Will. “The trap door was covered in bones.”

* They are learning that treasure is where you find it. If you’re traveling into uncharted dungeons looking for gold, make sure you can get the gold out. Bags and backpacks are popular means of carrying coins, because pouches don’t hold enough loot. Chests are too difficult to carry, without magic to help.

† One of the reasons you bring thieves along is to find secret doors.

‡ Always a good idea to check for signs of passage *before* you muck up the area with your own footprints and actions.

“It looks like two people running,” said Sam.

“A secret way, and men died to protect it,” said Gralen. “Shall we follow?”

They walked slowly. Sam led them, holding the lantern in her hand and peering carefully at the floor and walls.

“Stop!” she cried. “There’s a trap here. Look at the ceiling, and look at the floor.”

“I don’t see a damned thing,” said Gralen.

Sam traced, lightly, her finger across the dirt floor of the corridor.

“See how there’s a slight depression in the dirt here? Now, look at the ceiling.”

“It’s worked differently here,” said Charlotte.

“I’ll bet my share of those statues it’s set to drop a ton of rocks when we step on the trap.”*

They all peered further down the thin tunnel. The lantern’s light faded into the distance.

“I think it’s an escape route,” said Sam. “If it leads anywhere, it leads out.”

“Perhaps we should explore the rest of the castle, first,” said Gralen.

Charlotte took some chalk from her pouch, and carved a white line on both sides of the dirt corridor.

“So we’ll know where the trap is if we come down here again.”

They returned back up the rough corridor and climbed into the tower. Gralen pointed toward an open door.

“That hallway leads diagonally into the castle. It should lead to the main entrance.”

Their steps echoed through the corridor. There was a wooden door on their left as they entered it, and another, further ahead, to their right. They passed an intersecting corridor and two more doors before reaching the grand entrance. Charlotte dug writing paper, pen, and ink from her pack.

“Those double doors opposite the entrance,” said Sam. “Bigger doors, bigger treasure?”

The doors were intricately carved with interlocking circles,

* Thieves are also useful for finding *traps*. Old paranoid castle-owners fill their dungeons with traps.

bands, and curves, some bands ending in serpent's heads and some circles enclosing many-pointed stars. Tarnished silver lay green inside the engravings. The doors were swollen from dampness and age, and did not open when Gralen pushed them. Will shoved hard against them with his shoulders and forced them open.*

Beyond was a long corridor, a stone wall on the right and a wall of marble arches on the left. The white marble was misted with dust and cobwebs. Everyone stepped back, and looked to the ceiling.

"Spiders?"

Sam peered at the ceiling and into the darkness.

"I don't think so."

She pushed soft strands away with her wooden pole, clearing one of the archways. Cloth lay crumpled beneath the archway. Once dark blue and embroidered in gold stars, the color had leached away. A film of dust obscured what remained. When Sam poked at it a silverfish wriggled off.

"There must have been curtains here," said Charlotte.

Tiny gems lay scattered on the floor around the arches. Everyone stooped to grab as many as they could.

"I think they were woven into the hangings," said Charlotte.

They stepped through the archway. Light shone through tinted glass in the ceiling of a large room, colored beams cutting through dusty air and illuminating dozens of marble columns. Veins of grey twisted and curled across the pale marble.

Dusty beams of light fell upon more skeletons, some armored. There were fewer here than in the tower. It was easier to avoid snapping the bones of the dead as they walked.

At the far corner of the room loomed a dais of black stone. On the stone were three elaborate marble chairs, pure white. A skeleton lay half-draped over the largest, middle throne, parts of it on the floor along with its rusted sword.

Will whispered.

"Was it the king?"

* Gralen tried to open the doors normally; he did not have to make a strength roll to know it was stuck. Will rolled to force the doors, and succeeded. Remember, only one individual roll is allowed for a specific task, and one group roll. It's smart for the best-suited character to attempt any given task.

“The orders didn’t have kings,” said Gralen, almost as quietly, as they stepped among the dusty shafts of colored light.

“All of the skeletons are human,” said Charlotte.

Next to the dais, two great arched oaken doors were partially open. Dirt, grass, and weeds silted through in an arc.

Charlotte opened the door; everyone followed her into a wildly overgrown garden. Bright purple flowers flowed from vines dragging down trees, and the trees drooped purple and yellow trumpets toward the ground. Wrought-iron posts ten feet tall, shaped like writhing serpents, held sparkling crystal birds. The crystals were shaped as if they were swooping toward the garden. Vines and weeds intertwined the wrought iron. It was cooler here, in the shadow of the castle.

“Someone help me get those things,” said Sam. “They must be worth a fortune.”

“How?” asked Will.

“Hold the post steady.”

She climbed a post. A crystal robin lifted easily; beneath it was a candle holder covered in dirty wax.

“Nightlights.”

Sam weighed the bird in her hand, and then replaced it on its post.

“We’ll come back for them later,” she said. “If we drag them around this place we’ll break them.”

She nudged a crystal hummingbird. It spun, sputtering a colorful fountain of light across their faces.

“Let’s go back,” said Gralen after a few minutes, “and try the other hallway.”

They returned to the great ballroom, navigated through the columns and detritus of battle, and reentered the grand foyer. They pondered the many doors leading off the small hallway. Charlotte sketched a rough map of their progress.*

The first door on their left, a simple oaken door that opened outward with some force from Will, revealed stone stairs leading down. The stone walls of the stairway were simpler than the rest of

* Rough maps or intricate, one or more players should try to draw one as you go along, or you will get lost. In some dungeons, getting lost means dying, as you run from one danger into another with no idea how to return to safety.

the castle. Large, grey stones of varying shades were inset into a cement that held them together. Gralen lit the lantern and held it out over the descending steps. Another door at the bottom, wood, and bound with iron, was barred with a thick wooden pole.

“Well?” asked Will.

“The goblins never got past this.”

Zodiac Dungeon

Gralen held the lantern out and led them down the stone stairway. They removed the bar from the doors and tried to push the doors open.

“Something’s still blocking it from the other side,” said Sam.

She pulled a metal file from her pack and squeezed it between the door and the wall.

“I’m trying to lift the bar,” she said, “but I can’t catch anything.”

Will tapped hard on the door. He stepped back, then slammed into it, bursting it open.[†] He almost tripped over debris on the other side, and then discovered what the debris was. Gralen’s lantern illuminated three corpses, their skin stretched dry and papery where it showed through their brown robes. A musty odor permeated the cooler air. Freshly-broken spears were scattered on the floor.

A long hallway ran crossways to the door, circling away from them to the left and right. The walls and floors were set with boulders of granite and dark marble, inlaid with a greenish metal around the rock. The hallway was only five feet wide, but tall, leaving a foot of space above even Gralen’s head. They could see a door to their left and to their right on the inner wall of the arched corridor. There were drawings on the walls, of mountains silhouetted against a night sky.

The door to their left was marked with a carving of the constellation Virgo, lacquered in bright blue, and the walls leading to it were painted with rural fields and then libraries. On their right

* That is, she failed her *Burglary Science* field roll.

† Will succeeded at his strength roll to shatter the spears propped against the doors on the other side; there was only a penalty of three because the spears—that once kept the goblins out—were weakened by age.

the door was carved with the scales of Justice.*

“Right or left?”

“Let’s go counterclockwise,” said Charlotte.

The wall paintings changed from mountains to jousts as they walked, then to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the scales of hell. Golden stars on the door marked the outline of blue scales. The doors of Justice opened easily and silently. Stone stairs led down past the oaken seats of a small auditorium, to a head table flanked by dark marble statues, a woman holding scales on the left and a great crab on the right. The statues were veined with streaks of white and blood-red. Seven high-backed oaken seats, ornamented with stars, were behind the table. There were torch sconces on the walls, each with an unlit torch.

“Is there anything of value here?” asked Will.

“Not unless we can haul away these statues,” said Sam.

“Gralen, you got any statue-hauling spells?”

As they continued down the corridor, the wall paintings changed from hell to the rebirth of cities, man and beast toiling to move stone blocks and raise great monuments to God. A door on the outer wall bore a lacquered carving outlining a rampaging bull, glossy black against the rich brown door. It opened as easily as Justice did, to a room with a huge opaque glass table held by an obsidian bull. The table was covered in maps. Sam found two brilliant red rubies on the floor beneath the bull’s vacant stare.

Will looked at the maps on the table. Their corners cracked at his touch.

“Highland, Biblyon, and Illustrious Castle. It looks like they were planning an attack on the Order of Illustration.”

“There’s no treasure here, and the paper’s brittle,” said Sam.

“It’s getting late,” Will replied. “We need to sleep so we aren’t caught napping tomorrow if we meet more spiders—or something worse.”

“Let’s take a quick survey of the area,” said Charlotte. “The

* In real life, a single lantern probably wouldn’t illuminate this well. In game terms, however, each light source has a simple number reflecting how far they illuminate; within that distance they are assumed to provide normal indoor light. It’s a lot easier than trying to juggle brighter and dimmer and lesser and greater light sources. Lanterns illuminate in a 20-yard radius.

corridor curves. I'll bet it circles back."

The cities on the walls gave way to deserts; whirlwinds stirred up dust, and the devil tempted Jesus with illusory kingdoms from a rock overlooking the desert's desolation. On the inner wall of the circle, a white scorpion raised its tail menacingly against them on the door. Through bars in a window on the door, they could see whips, and a hollow man-shape filled with spikes.

Charlotte marked the constellations on her map as they continued. The desert on the walls turned to battles. War machines carried destruction to castles. Arrows rained on helpless armies. A translucent amber archer on an outer door pointed three arrows to the stars. The door was slightly open, revealing an hour-glass-shaped room with benches, and bows and arrows in various states of repair.

The fighting on the walls gave way to scholars studying, to a monastery at the edge of a serene lake, and then to rocky badlands and sharp mountains. A pink ram bounded from peak to peak on a wide open door on the outer wall. Gralen shone the lantern inside. They saw depths of tattered spider webs. The walls of the thin room or corridor were lined with shelves. There were skulls and skeletal hands barely visible above the webbing on the shelves. An ornate arch, and another just at the edge of the lantern's light, were inscribed with goats and snakes.

"A crypt," said Gralen. "And probably more giant spiders. Close the door."

"We're definitely circling back," said Will.

Badlands turned to streams, and streams to rivers and swamps. Crabs abounded in the water; tiny gnome-like creatures feasted on boiled crab. A lustrous white crab, claws open, marked the oak door on the inner wall. Sam tapped it with her pole; it sounded thick and heavy.

Peasants painted on the wall carried water from rivers to hovels. Aqueducts delivered water to cities. A doorless portal on the outer wall led into dirt and darkness. From the recesses of its twisting hallway they heard bubbling and faint scufflings echoing out on an earthy odor. They moved quickly past. The cities on the walls grew to kingdoms, kingdoms to castles, and castles to thrones where wise rulers dispensed justice. Leo, the stars of its

constellation connected in a ferocious lion, guarded the next door on the inside wall. He was inlaid with gold, his eyes rubies, and on his tail gems of purple, red, and blue.

Charlotte marked it on her map and they moved on, from throne to forest, forest to river, river to sea, and sea to storm, with great monsters in the storms feeding on whale and ship. The storm abated as the painting turned to bays, and waves lapped lightly on shores untouched by war. At the next door, on the inside wall, delicately painted nobility, men and women, pursued their studies in library and field.

From there the painted ocean changed to field, field to mountain, mountain peaks silhouetting stars and moon. An outer door was smashed open; broken spears lay strewn about. It was lacquered with a scratched and chipped ram's horn beneath a crescent moon.

"Back to Aries," said Gralen. Then, "I don't remember Gemini."

"Nor Pisces," said Charlotte. "And that's not all that's wrong. Look at the map."

She drew lines on her map between each of the doors along the inner wall and then did the same to the doors along the outer wall.

"They each form six-pointed stars," she said, "or they would, if there were another door here—" and she finished the star for the inner circle, "and here—" and she finished the star for the outer circle.

"Secret doors in a dungeon," Sam replied. "Now we're talking."

They followed Charlotte's map back around, counting off the zodiac.

"Aries on the right."

"Libra to our left."

"Taurus to the right."

"Scorpio on the left... "

"Sagittarius, right... "

Charlotte motioned them to stop.

"Gemini should be on our left."

* It is traditional to refer to any underground complex as a dungeon. If they open the right doors, they will discover that there are dungeons in this dungeon.

“Lots of twin imagery,” said Gralen.

Behind looming mountains, a twin-faced god stared down from the stars, and a two-headed giant lifted its head, empty eyes staring with pinprick irises.

“There’s nothing here,” said Charlotte. “Sam, do you see anything?”

Sam traced the outlines of the twins and of Janus, and the two-headed giant. She frowned at a symmetric, mirror-image forest in the lake, and then retraced around the giant.

“Here,” she said. “This is the border of the door and the wall.”*

“So how do we get in?” asked Gralen.

“Watch this.”

Sam put her pack onto the floor and dug into it for a long roll of leather. She unrolled it next to her pack revealing several small metal and wooden tools. She chose two fine metal wires and poked them into the giant’s eyes.

They watched Sam work at the wall for a minute, two minutes...

“How long will this take?” asked Charlotte.†

“Patience,” she said. “They really didn’t want us in here. This is like your clock upstairs. It’s the best lock I’ve ever seen.”

“How many locks have you tried to break into?” asked Will.

“Your mama.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind.”

After ten minutes, with Gralen and Will leaning against the wall discussing the merits of various bars in Hightown, and Charlotte

* Because they knew the secret door was there, the Adventure Guide downgraded the difficulty of finding it from *extremely difficult* to *difficult*, which meant no penalty to Sam’s roll. Since Sam’s field bonus in *Burglary Science* is 2, and she’s rolling against her agility—14—to find it, she needs 16 or less to succeed. Her player rolled 17, then bid four mojo to improve her roll. Since she only needed one mojo, she got it; she used that mojo to add the *search* skill to her *Burglary Science* field. And Sam gets 50 experience points as well, for using one mojo to affect a roll.

† The longer it takes to do stuff, such as pick locks, the more random encounters you’re going to see. You don’t want to hurry to the point that you make mistakes, but you don’t want to waste time either.

poring over her map, they heard a soft click. Sam stepped back.*

“Damn. I’m good.”

She took up her pole and pushed the door, then tapped the pole on the floor inside the doorway.

“Careful. Anyone who can make a lock like that can also make dangerous traps.”

Gralen pointed the lantern into the short entrance, five feet long, and the diamond-shaped room beyond. There were two bronze bells, one on the floor either side of the passage, just past the entrance.

“Maybe it’s a temple?”

Sam tapped the bell on the right with her pole. It rang softly. When she tapped the other, it rang as sweetly in a lower tone.

“That’s beautiful,” said Gralen. “But it doesn’t appear to do anything.”

He stepped, slowly, through the short entrance, passed between the bells, and walked into the center of the room.† The walls on the far half of the diamond were lined with counters, benches in front of them. There were quills and inkwells on the counters, and an abacus on each side. A large tapestry hung from ceiling to floor at the far point of the diamond.

“It’s not a temple,” said Charlotte. “It’s a workroom.”

* Sam didn’t want to fail this, so she spent extra time on the attempt. Normally it takes one round to pick a lock (or fail to do so). She took ten minutes, which gave her +2 on the roll. She also has +2 for her *Burglary Science* field bonus. And she’s rolling against her intelligence, which is 11. However, the normal difficulty of picking locks is *extremely difficult* so she has a penalty of 2. She needs 13 or less to succeed—but there’s more here than just the lock. There’s also a trap beyond the door that the key would turn off, and she’ll only catch that if she rolls 11 or less. She rolled 15. “That fails,” the Guide says. “Okay, I bid five mojo.” “That’s enough to succeed. You can spend two mojo to succeed, or four to succeed really well.” “I spend four.” So she both picks the lock and turns off the trap; the Guide does not tell her that’s what she did. She only knows that there were two mechanisms in the lock, one for opening the door and one for something else. Her *Burglary Science* field bonus increases by 4, to +6. And she gets 200 experience for using four mojo on a roll. She now has 250 experience points, which is a quarter of the way to second level.

† It seems heartless, but often one person will enter a room first, especially one you suspect of being trapped. So if there is a trap, only one person will be affected by it. Their comrades can then pull them out, hopefully saving them.

“Maybe they worshipped work,” said Sam, as she walked over to the tapestry. “Or maybe they worshipped this wall hanging.”

The cloth of the tapestry was silky. An image of the castle was woven into it. The moon greeted the sun in its night sky, stars between them in silver. “PRAELUXI ASTRALIS ERUDITIO” was written across the bottom.

“Gralen?”

“Knowledge shines forth from the stars.”

“This tapestry, I’ll bet, would go for a lot of money. It’s too heavy to carry, though.”

“If we keep quiet about this place, we can return with more pack animals.”

“Hey!” cried Sam. “There’s a door behind this! It looks like a safe.”*

At the same time Charlotte spun around to look back at the entrance.†

“Something’s coming.”‡

A dark low shape ambled through the entranceway.

“Holy Christ,” said Sam, “it’s the mother of all spiders.”

Will loaded a bolt into his crossbow and aimed it at the creature.

“That thing is impossible.”

It had a huge, purplish, bloated body two and a half feet thick. Spindly, hairy black legs snapped against rock as it climbed the

* There is always a secret behind the tapestry. Haven’t they ever watched Scooby Doo?

† Charlotte, as a monk, has the best perception in the group. So when the Guide asks them to make a perception roll, they will usually let Charlotte do it.

‡ There are two basic types of rolls in **GODS & MONSTERS**: actions, and reactions. Actions are when the player has their character do something, such as when Sam searches for safes behind tapestries. Reactions are when the Adventure Guide knows that the character might see or hear or otherwise react to something. Actions are usually a lot easier to succeed at than reactions. Actions are rolled against an ability, which means players need to roll less than, on average, 10 or 11. Reactions are rolled against 4, with very small modifiers based on high or low ability scores.

wall.*

Sam readied her own crossbow.

“How much bigger do they get?” asked Charlotte.

They all backed up against the tapestry. The creature scuttled up the wall and into the room. Gralen fumbled in his pouch for his tiny arrows.

The creature looked straight at them. Will and Sam both fired their crossbows. The bolts grazed it; it dropped to the floor but kept scuttling relentlessly toward them.[†]

Will and Sam put their crossbows down and drew their swords. A vile liquid dripped from the creature’s teeth as it snapped at Will’s leg. Will slammed down hard with his sword.[‡] The spider hissed, then lunged again. Sam and Will used their swords as much to keep it back as attack it.[§]

The slaver thing tried again to gnaw Will’s leg. Will sliced through it, severing it at the eyes. It fell to the floor quivering. Its bloated body blurbled and twitched.** Will and Sam both hacked at it until it stopped twitching.*†

“What is this place?” asked Sam. “What else is down here?”

Will shook his head, wiped the goo off his boots and legs, and then off his sword.

“We could’ve used some of those magic bolts, Gralen.”

“We might need them later,” Gralen said. “Sam’s right, we have

* The spiders upstairs were a set encounter: the characters invaded its lair. This spider is a wandering encounter. The Guide rolled it randomly from a list of creatures that might be encountered depending on how long they stay in any particular area.

† Round 1: The spider has 10 survival points. Will and Sam hit it for 3 and 5 points, for a total of 8. It has two left.

‡ Round 2: Will hit the spider for 1 point. Sam missed. The creature missed Will.

§ Round 3: Will, Sam, and the spider all failed their attack rolls.

** Round 4: Will did four points damage against it, and it missed him. It has no more survival and has 3 injuries. It isn’t dead, but it is unconscious.

*† Round 5: Now that it’s unconscious, they get +10 to hit, making it practically impossible to miss, especially Will, who already has +1 for being a first-level warrior and another +1 for being a *Weapon Specialist* with slashing weapons, specifically swords.

no idea what else is down here.”*

“This safe is locked,” said Sam. “Let’s see what’s behind it.”

Will held the tapestry clear for her to work. She examined the lock, selected one tool and then another, carefully twisted and turned a thin blade and wire in the keyhole. She pulled a third tool, inserted it, and with one deft flick of her wrist—

—they all heard a click inside the wall beyond the safe.

“There’s no guarantee I’ve done it right. Everyone stand back, just in case.”†

“Seriously?” said Gralen.

“I need someone to rescue my barely living body when the green poison gas comes out.”

“I don’t like it, but she’s right,” said Will.

They all but Sam stepped back to the bells. Gralen still clutched his tiny arrows, and Will lifted Sam’s crossbow from the floor. He loaded it, and his own.

She pried the safe open, slowly.

“Papers, books, and scrolls. What crappy treasure.”

Sam heard them exhale from across the room. As they walked back to the safe she reached inside and pulled out a scroll.

Thwip.

An arrow flew out and lodged in her leather jacket.

“Shit.”

“Are you okay?”

“It... I feel fine. No pain. That’s not good, is it?”

“It hasn’t gone through your leather,” said Will.‡

“Maybe the mechanism is old?” said Charlotte.

Another arrow bounced against the far wall. They all dived to the side. When no more arrows came out, Sam took her pole and poked around in the safe, careful to stay out of the way of the

* Gralen has enough spell slots for two spells per day. He currently has *mage bolt* in both of the slots, but he’s worried there will be more fights. Saving spells is not a bad strategy, but I hope Gralen would have felt bad if the spider successfully poisoned his friend. First-level adventurers are rarely a match for poisons. As they will soon discover.

† Some say the perfect trap takes effect ten to twenty feet back from the lock, so that instead of the thief it gets everyone else.

‡ She made her evasion roll and the Adventure Guide decided to treat it as having hit but not gotten through, due to the description of the trap as weak.

opening.

Nothing continued to happen.

Charlotte and Gralen began pulling out the papers and reading them, continuing to stand off to the side.

“Most of these are contracts and treaties,” said Gralen. “In Ancient.”

“This one’s English,” said Charlotte. “It’s a contract with Dwarves. For building this dungeon.”

“I broke through a Dwarf lock?” said Sam. “I really am good.”

“I’ll bet Dwarves built the clock, too,” said Charlotte.

“Listen to this!” said Gralen. “In their ridiculously long preamble they forgive the Dwarves for working with their rivals, the Illustrators.”

“What would the Dwarves have built for the Order of Illustration?”

“I don’t know. There’s no dungeon like this in Illustrious Castle.”

“That anyone *knows* about.”

“Before we decide where we’re going next, we should finish where we are right now.”

“Hah,” said Gralen. “A peace treaty with the Illustrators.”

“That worked well,” said Will. “Any peace treaties with the goblins?”

“Holy crap.”

“Seriously? They had a peace treaty with the goblins?”

“No. These are spells. Weird spells. They’re based on the sorcerer Isaiah’s research*, but they go beyond anything he ever taught. One claims to *control dreams*.”

“Oh, sure, that’s useful. Is there one that can kill spiders?”

Sam, Will, and Charlotte laughed, but Gralen shook his head.

“This is completely new. It’s like finding a new animal or... or

* Gralen’s player read the section of the *World of Highland Guidebook* on the history of magic. Or the Adventure Guide relayed that information to him on finding these spells as something that’s common knowledge among sorcerers.

medicine.”*

“I would rather not find a completely new animal either,” said Will, with a glance toward the bloated spider’s corpse.

“What about this?”

Sam handed a short scroll to Charlotte. She and Gralen looked at it. Charlotte frowned. Gralen scratched his head; they both sat down at the workbench.

Sam looked over at Will, raised one eyebrow.

“I don’t know,” he whispered back. “He never acts confused. Even when he is.”

“Her either.”

“It looks like it’s in English,” said Charlotte.

“But,” added Gralen, “it’s complete nonsense.”

“This might mean something,” Charlotte replied, then quoted, “So the four maps to Charon were cured here of war.”

“Yes, but listen to this. ‘He who draws to worlds will knit one toy net. Hinges vow to better hinge, and bar shale. Harm all strange metal, and adhere to the thin hate of the freer sin there.’ What the hell is this?”†

“Let’s take it,” said Charlotte, “and anything else that looks important. Lock the rest back up.”

“Let’s find the secret Pisces room,” said Sam. “You can keep your dream spells. I dream of gold.”

“I’m sure I saw fish on the outer wall,” said Charlotte. “Near the lion.”

Around the circle, they returned past the sea, to the storms and the kraken.

“Here,” said Charlotte. “The eyes of these monsters are the stars of Pisces.”

Sam examined one of them, pressed it in, and then the one next to it.

* There are three ways to get new spells. Find them, steal them, buy them, and share them. The third is too expensive and the last doesn’t count. This is why sorcerors go into ruins. Gralen, if he survives this adventure, will be able to add *dreams*, *sleep*, *dream omen*, and *dream walk* to his spell books, although he’ll need to be 2nd level for the first two and 3rd and 6th, respectively, for the latter two. Some of these are spells that no other sorcerer in Highland has.

† It’s a puzzle, Gralen. A puzzle!

“They’re buttons,” she said. “Maybe we need to press them all. But I can’t reach them all at the same time.”*

Will pressed in on six of the eyes on the other end of the constellation. Sam pressed the eyes on her end.

A loud *click* echoed down the hallway. One of the waves rolled over, revealing a keyhole.

Sam unrolled her locksmithing tools again. She worked at it for a minute, and then opened the door.

“Another Dwarf lock down.”

A scouring sandstorm assaulted them as a great wind blew out from the darkness beyond the doorway. Gralen and Charlotte stumbled about clutching at their eyes.† Charlotte’s map fluttered violently down the hallway. Sam leapt to rescue the lantern as it rolled about the floor spilling light.

“My god,” said Will. “It’s full of gold!”

The cold dry wind died down and the dust settled. Gralen and Charlotte washed their eyes with their drinking water. The room was filled with sacks overflowing with gems, gold and silver coins, necklaces and bracelets covered in bright metal and shimmering opalescent stones, goblets of gold embedded with rubies and emeralds.

“This is impossible,” said Sam. “Let’s get it and get out of here.”

“Wait,” said Gralen. “Where did that wind come from? What is in this room that could cause a *sandstorm*?”

“We can’t back out now,” said Will. “This is what we came for,

* Sam’s player did not make a roll to think of this. Sam’s player thought of it. Some actions can only be handled through rolls, such as attacking a giant spider (I’m assuming you don’t have giant spiders in your gaming room). Other actions are puzzles that need to be or can be solved by players. Remember that if you solve a problem before rolling, it reduces the number of rolls that can fail. I’ve even had a player decipher the vocalizations of a made-up script, by recognizing that the characters were similar to the (also made-up) Elvish script he had a key for. (This player is, by training, an archaeologist, which may have played into his ability to do so.) Solving this problem through in-game mechanisms would have taken his character weeks; solving it on his own meant his character could immediately start using a magic item that used those vocalizations.

† Sam and Will each made their evasion roll to avoid the dust storm. Charlotte and Gralen failed theirs.

isn't it?"

"I came for lost knowledge."

"Well, I came for gold," said Sam. "But you might be right."

She touched the gold with her ten-foot pole. It was sucked out of her hands into the room—but never appeared there.

"It just—disappeared."

"That's what I came for," said Gralen. "The knowledge of how to do things like that."

"What is it?"

"Most likely a spell of destruction or a transport spell. Anything going through that doorway is either destroyed, or sent somewhere else."

"Where's my pole?"

"Somewhere else in the castle, maybe," said Gralen.

"If I were them," said Will, "I'd send anyone walking through this entrance straight to those dungeon cells we saw."

"So how do we get the treasure?" asked Sam. "Look at all that stuff!"

She tried to shine the lantern's light further into the room.

"Huh," she said. "That's not right."

"What?"

"There are no shadows."*

"It's an illusion!" Gralen cried.†

"The treasure's not real?"

"This seems like a lot of work to protect something that isn't there."

Will cut a couple of yards off their rope, and tossed one end toward the treasure. They heard the rope flop on the ground inside the entry, but did not see it. Will easily pulled it back out; there was no force on it, nothing sucking it away from him.

"What does that mean?"

* The Adventure Guide asked Sam's player to make a perception roll. Sam's perception is 5. She rolled 5, and saw that there was something wrong with the illusion.

† There are different kinds of illusions. Monks, such as Charlotte, can create illusions out of the minds of their victims, and those illusions would throw shadows because the victims would expect shadows. The other kind of illusion is a purely visual light show, such as this *ephemeral backdrop*.

"Maybe it only likes eating wood?"

"I'm not touching that line with a, um, never mind," said Sam.

She tossed a dagger inside; it disappeared when it passed the illusion. They heard it clatter on stone on the other side.

"Maybe the trap only worked once?"

"Were they only expecting one burglar?"

"Or we don't really understand what's happening," said Charlotte.

"Whatever," said Sam. "I'm going for the gold."

She took a deep breath... and walked through.

"Can you hear me? I can still see the gold, but now it's in your direction."

The rest of them walked through the shimmering flat treasure. Three halls extended from the space behind the illusion, lined respectively with swords, spears, or maces. The walls were large stones set in a pebbled mortar. Will examined one of the spears.

"They're in decent enough shape for their age," he said. "But the wood's too old and brittle for combat."

"I preferred the illusion," said Sam.

"That seemed like a lot of trouble to protect perfectly normal weapons," said Gralen.

"It does," said Will, "seem like overkill."

"There must be another secret door," said Sam.

"Where?"

"One of these hooks the weapons are hanging from?"

They tried pulling, twisting, and pushing the various hooks. No secret doors slid open to reveal great treasure, nor even piddling small treasure.

"Do we give up?"

"No," said Sam and Will, nearly in unison.

"I thought you wanted to go back upstairs?"

"I want to go home alive, sure. But also rich."

"Light some of these torches," she said. "Let's search the end of each of these hallways. Charlotte, you take the left, I'll take the middle. Will and Gralen, you take the right."

After a few minutes, Sam cried out, "I found something!" Then they heard a faint "crap" and saw her crumple to the ground. Her locksmithing tools scattered on the floor. A small bag fell away

from her hands and jangled as it hit the stones.

A hole had opened in the wall.

Will ran over to her.

“Careful!” cried Galen. “It might be gas!”

Will lifted her and carried her back to Charlotte and Galen near the golden illusion.*

“I feel tired,” he said.

“You just breathed the gas that must’ve knocked her out. Or—”

“She’s still breathing,” said Charlotte.

“We’ve been trailed by orcs, attacked by spiders, shot at by people who’ve been dead for a hundred years, gassed by them too, and almost transported to God knows where. What’s next?”

“Next will be when the dragons burst out of the earth looking for mead,” said Charlotte.

“Ha. Ha.”

Will took the cork from his waterskin and poured water on Sam’s face.

“Giving her a bath?”

“Trying to wake her up.”

“Ah.”

“We’ve got to do *something*.”

He walked down the hall of swords, pulled down several of the weapons, hefted them, swung them experimentally.

Galen studied the notebooks they’d taken from the safe.

Charlotte drew this room into her map, and annotated the map with what they’d seen so far. After every line she felt Sam’s wrist and then her forehead.

Finally, Sam lifted her head.

“What... are you all waiting for?”

“Dragons and mead,” said Will.

“Huh?”

“How are you feeling, Sam?”

“Fine. Why is my face wet?”

Will handed her a longsword.

* Will rolled a 4 on his health roll to avoid the effects of the gas. He needed 6 or less. Sam’s health is 5, and she rolled 16. Health is not archetypal for thieves (or warriors), so even if she’d had 11 mojo left, she wouldn’t have been able to use it to make her roll successful.

“This sword could use some maintenance, but it’s a decent weapon.”

“I found silver coins. Behind a secret door.”

“Which was trapped,” said Charlotte. “You ought to’ve let us know.”

“Whatever. There’s more treasure in the vault.”

The bag she’d dropped held a hundred silver coins. A second bag held gold coins, and a third more silver.*

“What is this money?” asked Will.

Charlotte sorted through them and laid twelve out.

“They’re all astrological. The Astronomers must have had their own mint, or hired someone to mint these.”

Other bags contained powders, and dried plants. There were jars of feathers, horns, teeth and bones, insects and insect parts. One bag contained a single rock, heavy and blackened.

“These are magical ingredients,” said Gralen. “Take the powders first, and then anything else you can, we should be able to sell most of it if I can’t use it.”

They carried their bags of gold and dust and rock back through the illusory treasure, and returned up the stairs to the grand entrance.

* Each bag contains a hundred coins. They now have two hundred silver coins and one hundred gold coins. That’s a total of about 1,200 to 2,200 shillings, depending on how much these astrological coins are worth back in Crosspoint.

The Great Escape

“We should secure the foyer,” said Will. “Block the doors, at least. Honestly, this place is indefensible.”

“There’s nothing alive outside,” said Sam. “If we block the doors to the rest of the castle, we’ll be safe from any remaining spiders.”

Charlotte pulled spikes out of her pack* and handed them to Will.

“Jam these under each door.”†

After they set up camp, Will and Sam sparred, Sam using her new sword. Gralen and Charlotte read through the scrolls and journals from the Gemini room. When they extinguished their lantern to sleep‡, and their eyes adjusted to the darkness, stars appeared overhead. Cut into the dome, each of the constellations of the zodiac glowed in the dark.

They heard a faint whirring from the great clock above.

The floor was hard and cold beneath their blankets; they drifted fitfully to sleep. In the still-dark morning Charlotte awoke from a dream of being locked in a room. Someone was trying to get into the room. Or was something trying to get out?

In the twilight between sleeping and waking, she slowly realized that the dream was real. The half-bar across the main doors was rattling.

She heard the wood cracking.

“Wake up!” She pushed Sam, stood, kicked Will, then Gralen.

* Charlotte’s player used 1 mojo to get 30 shillings, then paid 3 shillings, retroactively, for ten iron spikes. They’re going to miss this feature once they reach second level and can’t do things retroactively anymore.

† This is why spikes are in the rulebook. Along with rope and ten-foot poles, they make up the old-school trifecta of indispensable general-purpose adventuring equipment.

‡ Why extinguish the lantern? Because lanterns use oil, and they have a limited amount of oil in their packs. Since they’re all first level, they could, of course, have bought more, but it’s still a waste of either money or mojo.

“Wake up!”*

They heard thuds against the door to the ballroom. The iron spike scraped against the floor with each pounding.

They rushed to arm themselves. Will and Sam donned their armor, armed their crossbows.†

“Let’s go upstairs,” said Will, “and see what’s out there. Take everything. We might not return.”

...

A waning moon lit the battlement. In the courtyard shapes moved on the outer walls.

“Goblins,” said Charlotte.‡ “Dozens of them. Gaunt. Everywhere.”

“The back tower,” Will replied. “The secret tunnel.”

They ran through the charred skeletons of the southwest tower, across the south battlement into the back tower, and down the stairs to that tower’s first floor.

“Spike the door that leads outside,” said Will. “I’ll spike the door to the main part of the castle.”

“We should take the tunnel,” said Sam.

“I agree. But we need to slow them down. We don’t know where the tunnel goes, or even if it goes anywhere.”

“Gralen!” cried Charlotte. “The sword! Look at your sword!”

“I don’t have a—”

The broken rune sword he’d tied to his belt now had a glowing blade. Gralen pulled the sword out; the blade threw an emerald

* The Adventure Guide rules that they slept long enough to gain back survival. Gralen regains his lost survival; Will is now only down 1 survival. Everyone has full verve.

† They judged, correctly, that they had time to put their armor on without rushing. If they’d been wrong, they’d have been caught without armor. If they’d rushed, they would have had to make an agility roll to successfully put their armor on.

‡ Charlotte, as a Half-Elf, has the best night vision.

glow over the bones and tower walls.

The door to the outside opened. A creature walked in*, a creature not of flesh but bone, half their height, a skeletal body draped in wet leaves, moss, and the tattered remains of ancient armor.

Will swung his sword, shattered the fanged skull. Headless, the skeleton swung its own rusty sword, but Will parried and shattered the creature's ribs and backbone. It collapsed.† A stench burst upon their senses as two more bony creatures, all scraggly hair and dripping with watery weeds, walked jerkily in. They heard more outside.

Gralen tossed Will the glowing rune sword. Will caught it by the hilt and sheathed his own.‡ Charlotte and Sam had already pushed the trap door open and rushed into the tunnel. Gralen and Will followed. Will tried to push the trap door shut, but a skeletal arm reached through. He pushed harder. The bony hand fell grasping to the dirt stairs, bouncing step to step before it stopped twitching.

The door was shut, but it shook with a heavy, powerful pounding.

"I have an idea," said Sam.

"Run like hell?" asked Gralen.

"The trap. The deadfall. We can trigger it on top of these things."

"Then run like hell," she added.

The pounding continued. The trap door began to crack.

"I love this idea," said Gralen. "Do you love this idea, Will?"

"It's a beautiful idea, Gralen."

"Right, let's set us up the trap!"

Sam led Gralen and Charlotte down the thin corridor, measuring

* This is what they get for *talking* and not *doing*. A couple of well-placed spikes could have kept the goblin skeleton out, at least for a few more minutes.

† Two rounds. Will hit both times, and rolled good damage: 5 points and then 6 points; the Adventure Guide rolled 4 (on d10) for the skeleton's survival. But slashing weapons only do half damage against skeletons. So Will really did 2 points and then 3 points. Fortunately the skeleton failed its endurance death roll, with a 15, after gaining that injury point.

‡ Catching the sword was a difficult agility roll. Will's agility is 14, so he needed 14 or less on d20 to catch it. He rolled 2.

out a coil of rope as she went.

Will shoved a spike through the trap door's ring to help hold it shut. He continued pushing it up whenever the creatures on the other side resumed battering it.

Sam leapt across the trap's trigger, ducking the ceiling. Gralen followed, and then Charlotte.* Sam broke her ten-foot pole into three pieces. She and Charlotte constructed a makeshift tripod, and placed the heaviest rock they could find on top.† She tied a fifty-foot length of rope to the leg facing the trap.

"Will, get the hell over here!"

Will let go. He leapt across the deadfall's triggering plate. The spike rattled against the ceiling, but held the trap door shut—for now.

Sam trailed the rope behind as they ran down the thin corridor. Before the rope played out, they turned a curve and came smack up against a door.

"It's locked," said Gralen.

Sam loaded her crossbow. Will grabbed it away from her.

"We can't fight our way back," he said. "There are too many. Unlock the door and yell when you're done."

Will ran back. He was outside the lantern's light, but the glow from the rune sword's hilt cast an eerie illumination. The skeletons had opened the door. He shot at the first skeleton, coming down the stair. The bolt bounced through its bare ribs.‡ He hung the crossbow on his back, and then fired Sam's. The bolt went wild.§ He leapt across the deadfall's trigger to meet the skeletons at the bottom of the dirt stairs.

* Jumping five feet is an agility roll, with strength as major contributor and a bonus of 8. Sam rolled 11, Gralen 19, and when Gralen's roll didn't fail, Charlotte's player felt a lot more comfortable about it. She succeeded on a 10 (she needed 16 or less, so she probably shouldn't have been so sanguine about her chances).

† This was a group effort, with Charlotte using one mojo to add a *traps* skill to her *Engineering* field, and Sam using her *locks & traps* skill in her *Burglary Science* field.

‡ Round 1: Will rolled 5 points. It only had 4 survival. But skeletons are mostly immune to pointed weapons—it didn't matter what damage he rolled, pointed weapons only do 1 point.

§ Round 2: Will missed.

His ethereal blade sliced through a skeleton's ribs.* Its own rusty sword nearly poked through Will's armor.† It tried again, and as it swung Will ran the green blade through its skeletal spine.‡ It fell. Another skeleton stepped into its place.§ A red beam of light burst past Will, and the new skeleton collapsed.

Will sliced the next skeleton into three pieces.**

And still they kept coming, falling through the trap door and knocking knees down the stairs.

"Hurry!" he yelled.

...

Sam had fitted her tools to the door's lock about the time Will fired his first crossbow. Gralen watched Will fighting. When Will killed the first skeleton, Gralen loosed a magical ray that burst the second skeleton asunder.*†

Sam cursed and banged at the door.**

* Round 3: Will hit, and rolled 1 point damage, +2 because this is a +2 magic sword, for 3 points. The skeleton had 3 survival, it now has 0. Undead don't have to roll to retain consciousness, so it keeps fighting. They do have to roll for death when they gain injury points, according to the rules for non-player characters in the *Encounter Guide*.

† It did 2 points damage to Will. Since Will is a warrior, they come off his verve first. Will has 4 verve remaining.

‡ Round 4: Will hit, then rolled 7 on d8 for the sword, doing 9 points damage to the skeleton, a bit of overkill since it had no survival left.

§ Fortunately for Will, the thin passageway keeps them from fighting two against one. If they were using spears, they'd be able to double up against him.

** Round 5: Will did 4 points damage, and it missed.

*† Thus the red beam of light that killed the skeleton back in Round 4.

**‡ Sam's player rolled an 18. She needed 16 or less. This failed, and she only has one mojo left, not enough to bring an 18 to a 16.

“Charlotte,” she said, “I need some help here.”*

...

Will dodged a sword-thrust from a tatter-armored skeleton, and it ducked Will’s ethereal blade.[†] Then as he dodged its next attack and it was raising its sword to try again, another burst of light exploded against the creature’s skull. It collapsed in a pile of bones.[‡]

Three skeletons lay broken on the ground. Another swung its sword; it cut Will’s armor. Will destroyed it with the magic blade.[§]

Two skeletons thrust spears at him. It was as if the sword itself guided him in dodging the attacks. He destroyed one.**

Will danced his dance with death.^{*†} The remaining skeleton’s spear thrust up into Will’s armor and drew blood.^{**} The glowing sword sliced across the skeleton. It fell to the ground.^{*§} Still there were more.^{†*}

* You can only roll for an action once; if you can’t do it the first time, you don’t know how to do it. But you can also try *one* group effort as well. Charlotte is not as good as Sam at picking locks—in fact, she has no skill with it at all, and it’s restricted to thieves, which means Sam’s player needs to roll even better than was necessary the first time.

† Round 6: Will and the skeletons missed.

‡ This is the last of Gralen’s two spells. Do you think it was a good idea for him to save them for later back when they fought the giant spider?

§ Round 7: The skeleton hit Will for three points. He has one verve remaining. He hit the skeleton for four points; it had two survival and “died”.

** Round 8: Both skeletons missed, and yes, the magic sword improves his defense as well as his attack. Then he hit one for just enough damage to kill it.

*† Round 9: The remaining spear-wielding skeleton missed, as did Will.

*‡ Round 10: Will missed; the skeleton did 6 damage, using up Will’s remaining 1 verve and all 5 of his remaining 5 survival. he is at zero survival and must make a fortitude roll or go unconscious. He rolls 8 on d20; his fortitude is 7. Will bids his last mojo to stay conscious. This also gives him 50 experience.

*§ Round 11: Will hit, the skeleton missed, and Will did enough damage to kill it.

†* This is the *conga line of death*: maneuvering an enemy who outnumbered you such that they need to fight you one, or at most two, at a time.

...

Sam and Charlotte carefully examined the lock. They slowly worked Sam's lockpicks into it, prodded at its workings, adjusted the picks. They twisted Sam's tools in the lock.

It clicked.*

"Will!" she cried. "It's open!"

Will retreated and leapt again over the trap.† When he was well away from the trap's trigger, Gralen pulled on the rope. The rock thudded to the ground. The goblin skeletons swarmed toward it. The four friends held their breath, watching, until Sam yelled, "move, goddammit!" They turned and ran through the door just as the roof caved in above the bony goblins giving chase.‡ There was a great noise, and dirt and dust billowed through the doorway and around them until Will slammed the door shut and spiked it.

...

* As a group effort with Charlotte and Sam, their two scores are averaged; Sam's *Burglary Science* target number is 10. Charlotte's is 5. Their average is 7; they have +1 for a group effort with two people; they took their time for a careful attempt, taking one minute and getting +1 to the roll, so they need to roll 9 or lower. They (probably Sam's player) rolled 10. Sam's player bid her remaining mojo and thus used 1 mojo to bridge the gap between 10 and 9. Sam's field bonus with *Burglary Science* increases by 1, to +7. *Burglary Science* is restricted to thieves, so Charlotte cannot benefit from that, but both she and Charlotte get 50 experience points for Sam's mojo use. Sam has gained 300 experience points over the course of this adventure... if she can survive to use it.

† Round 12: Will did not attack, he ran. The skeleton attacked, and it missed. As a writer, making this up and rolling the dice, I expected Will to die fighting off a horde of skeletons alone. As fiction, death is called for here, to accentuate Will's heroism. But the dice rolled well, and Will lived to die another day. I could have altered the dice to show how the death rules work. I didn't, because the important point is that role-playing games are not novels.

‡ Use your surroundings for tactical advantage! Traps can be set off against monsters just as well as against you.

They continued down the long tunnel for an hour, as well as they could determine. Will's sword slowly dimmed, then was, again, nothing more than a broken hilt. The tunnel sloped up slightly at first, and then circled up quickly toward the end.

At the end of the tunnel there was another trap door in the ceiling.

"It's stuck," said Sam. "Something's on it."

Will put his shoulder against it, slowly tilting it up until something metal slid off. They climbed into the fresh air. A full moon on the horizon shone through wooden slats. The stars were bright beyond a dilapidated roof. There was a fluttering, and an acrid odor, as dozens of bats took flight.

They left the building. It was a small, one-room shack, heavily tilted to the side, built on a terrace on the side of the mountain. Below, they saw another terrace with more dilapidated buildings. Charlotte thought she could see the castle far down the mountainside.*

Wheat and rye grew wild. When they clambered down an overgrown path to the next terrace they found grapes on fallen fences, hyssop growing between the posts. The odor of mint wafted up. Further below, nasturtium hung from apple trees.

They walked down the mountain, west and north, using what paths they could. When the steep hills turned to low hills, Gralen's raven flew down and landed on his shoulder, screeching.

"I missed you too," said Gralen.

"If we had our horse to carry our packs," said Charlotte, "I could kiss it."

They heard neighing a few yards away.†

"Pucker up," said Sam.

* Charlotte, remember, is the only person with night vision.

† Sorcerer familiars such as Gralen's raven are smarter than your average animal. Gralen called his raven to him, and it led the packhorse.

Home to Hometown

They walked northwest toward the Leather Road and home.* The glow of the sun slowly brightened over the mountains to their right. Mid-morning they made camp on a hill and slept.† They awoke late-afternoon‡ and continued following the foothills until nightfall, and rested again.§ Toward evening of the next day, Charlotte said, “I hear something in the woods. I’m not sure how many, but more than one. They’re following us.”

Will and Sam loaded their crossbows. Gralen took his tiny arrows from his pouch.

Five goblins, living goblins, ran screaming at them from five directions.**

Will’s crossbow bolt killed one goblin. Sam’s missed. Gralen’s spellbolt killed another. The three remaining goblins turned and ran south.*†

The group continued walking. Gralen whispered to his raven. It flew into the air, then south. It returned an hour later.

“The night trolls aren’t following us,” said Gralen.

Through the next two days*† they walked the forested foothills of the High Divide, until late afternoon of the latter day they heard a fast trot ahead, getting louder.*§

“Everybody hide.”

Two horses galloped into sight. One was a burnished red, the

* In a game, it’s important to get home with your treasure. A novel might as well end at “pucker up” in the previous chapter. They’re safe, compared to the castle. But in a continuing game—a campaign—that isn’t enough.

† Will heals 1 survival from the day’s rest. He is now at 1 survival instead of 0.

‡ Will heals another survival after that night’s rest, bringing him to 2.

§ After they rest that night, Will is at 3 survival.

** The Adventure Guide rolled for random encounters and knows when those encounters will happen. The Guide is fast-forwarding the boring parts of the trip, then slowing down for the interesting part where the encounter will occur.

*† The Guide rolled what’s called a “morale check” for the goblins to see if they continue fighting after losing two members before even closing to melee. They failed. Only non-player characters are subject to morale checks.

*‡ Which brings Will back to 5 survival.

*§ This is the beginning of another random encounter.

other black with a white patch on its forehead.

"Are they wild horses?" asked Gralen.

"No," said Will.

He lay his sword and pack on the ground, and when the horses rushed past he grabbed the red one's saddle, flipped up onto the mount, grabbed its reins, leaned into the gallop. He kept it running to herd the second horse, turned them around, and brought them both to a stop.*

"These are well-tended animals," he said. "They were scared."

He patted the horse on the neck and dismounted.

"Too many people here talk to animals," said Sam.

"Can't talk to them. Just obvious they were running from something."

Charlotte peered up the trail.

"From what?"

"I don't know."

Gralen sent his raven up. It returned a few minutes later.

"Vultures are gathering ahead."

They reached the vultures at the end of the day. The vultures flew off as the adventurers approached. Five dead goblins, their eye sockets emptied and flesh torn from their bones, lay in the path.

They made that night's camp well beyond the half-eaten corpses.†

Halfway through the next morning, coming over a rise, they spotted a log and thatch cottage nestled in the hills. A rough fence enclosed a plot of land around it. A tiny stream ran through the plot.

"Who the hell would live south of the Leather Road?" asked Gralen.

"The person who owns the horses," said Will. "Their tracks lead here."

The fence's gate was flanked by two barrels, each filled with black dirt and planted with red and orange flowers. Violets grew around the cottage walls. Will knocked at the gate, and yelled a

* Will rolled a 12 against his 14 agility. The musical *Hair* is not a standard source for fantasy inspiration, but you take your inspiration where you find it.

† Will is now at his full 6 survival.

greeting. Hearing no answer he opened the gate and led the horses onto the path inside.

The doorway on the cottage was eight feet tall.

“Let’s tie them up and leave,” said Gralen. “Who *would* live out here?”

“Who would *trespass* out here?” yelled a gruff voice.

A tall, dark-haired man stepped around the house. He stood over seven feet tall, wide-shouldered, and carried a deer carcass. A large knife hung in his belt.*

“We mean no harm,” said Will. “We found these horses yesterday, and they appear to be yours, so we’re returning them. They were running like the devil.”

“We were attacked by a pack of giblens,” the stranger said, “and my friends here wisely ran at the danger; and unwisely kept running when the danger was gone.”

“Goblins?” said Will. “They’re all over the place down here. We saw five of them dead yesterday afternoon. Was that you? How?”

“A strong stand can send them packing,” he replied, “at least as long as they don’t have an hobgoblin leading them.”

He threw a rope over a tree branch, and hung the deer by its feet.

“Come inside,” he said. “You’ve obviously traveled a great distance, and must be thirsty, hungry, and tired.”

“Good god, yes. I’m Sam. These are William, Gralen, and Charlotte.”

“Burwell Cooper.† Step inside while I take care of Red and the Pirate.”

Burwell Cooper led the horses around the back of the house.

“I don’t like this,” said Charlotte.

“He offered us food and drink,” said Sam. “Don’t be rude. If we see dead bodies hanging from hooks, we can run.”

* This was a random encounter; the Adventure Guide created it on the spur of the moment from the kind of “creature” encountered. Depending on how the players handle it, it could lead to further adventures, a fight, or a well-deserved rest.

† How does the Guide create names on the fly? I stole Burwell’s name from a movie I’d recently watched, in which Chris Cooper acted and Carter Burwell provided the music.

Will shuddered.

"The horses were well-treated. Those who treat horses well can be trusted, my father says."

He opened the door and peeked inside.

"It'd be four against one anyway," said Sam.

"It was more than five against one when he fought the night trolls, I think," said Will. "No hanging bodies here, but there are heads."

There was an antlered deer head above every door; each of which were also sized for Cooper.

"We're like dwarves here," said Sam.

They heard metal banging metal beyond their sight, and the flow of liquid.

"Who would build a house out here?" said Charlotte.

"Someone strong enough to keep it," Sam replied.

Burwell entered from the back.

"Welcome, friends."

He had a huge barrel over his right shoulder, and in his left hand carried a large tankard.

"A drink to the safety of friends in tight places!"

He filled the tankard with a brown liquid from the barrel, took a long drink, and passed it to Will. It smelled and looked like beer, and in fact smelled like good beer. He drank it, and handed the tankard to Sam. They passed the beer around several times.

"What brings you to the southern forest?" asked Cooper.

Will grabbed the tankard. It was empty; while he filled it from the barrel Charlotte answered.

"Tracking down rumors of an old castle."

"And we found it," said Sam. "But only after fighting goblins and strange things in the fog."

"You came through the mist? I hope whatever you found was worth that."

"The creatures in the mist," said Will, "were unimaginable. It was hell come above ground."

"That's a good description," said Cooper. "The mist is a baser world. It grows and falls with the moon. You went through the mist at its strongest."

"So that's what happened to Mistoles," said Gralen. "He also

went through during a full moon.”

“We found a lot of dead bodies in the castle,” said Will, “and a few coins.”

He tossed one to Cooper.

“What is this image?” he asked. Charlotte held out her hand, and Cooper handed it to her.

“That’s the ram,” she said. “The constellation, Aries.”

She handed it back.

“Ah!” he replied. “I thank you, then.”

“Isn’t it dangerous down here on your own?” asked Will.

“True, none can live completely by their own wits, south or north. I have my companions here—”. He raised his voice. “—though some of them cannot be trusted in a fight!”

Two horses outside whinnied. Cooper laughed and stamped his feet and took another long drink. Sam took the next one out of turn.

“Too many people,” she muttered.

The aroma of baking bread slowly wafted into the room as they drank and talked.

“How,” asked Will, “can the night trolls come out in the day down here?”

“What a strange question,” Cooper replied. “Why wouldn’t they?”

“That’s why they’re night trolls, isn’t it? Don’t they turn to stone in sunlight?”

“They prefer the night,” said Cooper. “Bright sunlight hurts their eyes. But I have never seen one turn to stone. Perhaps there are different races where you live.”

“There’s a town called Stone Goblin,” said Gralen, “with a sun-stoned goblin in its square.”

“Stone Goblin!” Burwell scratched his bearded chin. “I know someone there. He shares your name, friend William.”

“We may go there someday,” said Charlotte, “on the way to the Long Lakes.”

“Well, if you see Will Dearborn of Stone Goblin, give him a greeting from Burwell Cooper. And tell him of your adventures. He’s an old traveler himself.”

He went into the back room and returned with trays of warm

bread and butter, roast venison, and steaming potatoes, carrots, and onions. Everyone tore into the food.* They talked further about events in west and east Highland. Sam told of her exile from Crosspoint.

“So old Riley was finally brought to bay,” said Cooper.

“Hanged,” she replied, “but the organization’s still there, and they’re pissed at me for testifying against him.”

“This is a feast,” said Charlotte. “We can’t thank you enough.”

“I receive guests rarely enough,” he replied. “It’s worth a little extra on the table—as long as it doesn’t happen too often.”

Early in the morning, Burwell Cooper woke them with a loud laugh and a deep “Rise up! Morning is come, and ‘tis time for men to walk the forest again.”

The sun had not risen, but they could see its glow over the peaks of the mountain. When they were ready for travel, Cooper handed each of them a skin filled with beer.

“Burwell Cooper,” said Will, “we thank you for your hospitality to strangers, and we are strangers no longer. If you find yourself north, my home is open to you.”

“And if you return south,” said Cooper, “bring more news, and we shall drink to it again. Do not forget me in Stone Goblin either.”

They shook hands, and left the strange man and his lonely cabin and resumed their journey north. They awoke two mornings later to the sound of someone going through their packs in the trees outside the tents. Will felt for his sword and peeked through the tent opening.

Two badgers were picking through their packs.†

“Shit!”

Will rushed out, sword in hand. The badgers scattered, one carrying salted pork in its mouth. Gralen, Sam, and Charlotte followed Will as best they could. He chased the badgers several

* Dry rations last longer than good food, but they aren’t the tastiest of things, especially after days and weeks of nothing else.

† The Adventure Guide rolled “two badgers” as a random encounter, then decided what the badgers did. Had the players taken better precautions against animals pilfering their provisions, they might have avoided this encounter completely.

hundred yards into a clearing among the trees.

It wasn't a clearing, he realized, it was more of a pathway, and a big one, running east and west. He stopped short. Looked both directions—

“We’re back!” he cried, just as the others arrived. “This is the Leather Road, we’re back home! We made it!”*

* The Guide knows there are no more random encounters, assuming they go straight home, and told them so.

Post-Adventure Character Sheets

These are the character sheets at the end of this adventure, at the moment the characters returned to Hightown. Money has been spent; equipment and skills acquired; and treasure found. Some treasure has been moved from the characters to their horse. Some equipment has been lost—the iron spikes that Charlotte used to bar the door in the foyer, for example.

This reflects only those things that happened during this adventure. The Adventure Guide has not yet calculated the experience gained from the adventure, which means that they have not yet reached second level. Some of them do have experience on their character sheets for using mojo, but the experience total gained for this adventure is likely to be provided at the beginning of the next session.

The players may want to spend any remaining mojo before the Guide gives them that experience total. Once they reach second level, all new spells, fields, and skills will cost more mojo than they do at first level.

Gralen's player especially may want to use some of his remaining seven mojo to have acquired spells for Gralen's spellbook. Charlotte's player will likely want to improve Charlotte's Psychic fields and add some Psychic skills to one or more of those fields. They will all want to look at what's happened during this adventure, and what they hope to happen in future adventures, and choose to improve some fields or add skills to some fields.

	<h1>Charlotte Kordé</h1>	
	<i>Level 1 Monk, Good</i>	
●	Charisma: 17 (+3/+2)	Home: Crosspoint
	Agility: 8 (-1)	Age: 36
	Endurance: 10	Height: 5 foot 1 inch
	Intelligence: 12 (+1)	Weight: 93 pounds
	Strength: 9	Experience: 50
	Wisdom: 15 (+2/+1)	Mojo: 9
	Movement: 9	<u>Reactions</u>
	Defense: -1	Perception: 8
	Survival: 5	Evasion: 3
	Verve: 7	Fortitude: 4
●		Health: 4
		Reason: 6
	Fields	Willpower: 8
	Fighting Art +0: Quarterstaff	
	Native Culture +2: Crosspoint etiquette	
	Language Science +1: Anglish, Frankish, Literacy	
	Performance Art +1: Acting	
	Personality Art +1: Demagoguery, Mediation	
	Engineering Science +1: Clockworks, Traps	
	Specialties	
	Half-elf species, night vision (-2), move quietly alone (-3), +4 against mind control and sleep, age at one-sixth normal	
●		

Psychic pool: 1

Telepathic Art +5

Illusion: senses (1, +1); damage (1); independent items (1); targets (1); range (3 yards)

Psychokinetic Craft: +3

Telekinesis: mass (1 pound); motion (1 yd/rnd); targets (1); range (3 yards)

Equipment (carry: 6)

1. 28 shillings, 6 pennies, 1 half-penny in pocket

2-3. quarterstaff (d6 damage, bulk 12)

4 shoulder pouch (flint & steel)

5 lantern

Even though I have a good life, I will explore the ruins because I want to meet the Elves.

Charlotte was born in the mountains southeast of Crosspoint to a human mother. She has never met her father, and has only recently begun to realize what her ancestry means—at 36 years of age, she is the youngest-looking of all her friends.

Charlotte believes her psychic powers are from her father's side. She is self-trained. She has been a mentor to Sam Stevens since Sam left the thieves' ring in Crosspoint.

Gralen Noslen

Ordered Good Sorcerer

Level 1

Intelligence: 15 (+2/+1)

Home: Crosspoint

Agility: 12 (+1)

Age: 16

Charisma: 12 (+1)

Height: 6' 6"

Endurance: 12 (+1)

Weight: 217 lbs

Strength: 11

Experience: 0

Wisdom: 9

Mojo: 6

Reactions

Movement: 11

Reason: 7

Defense: 1

Evasion: 6

Survival: 6

Fortitude: 4

Verve: 6

Health: 5

Perception: 5

Willpower: 4

Fields

Fighting Art +0: quarterstaff

Native Culture +2: Sorcerer's Etiquette

Language Science +1: English, Latin, Literacy

Historical Science +1: Ancient History

Specialties

Raven familiar: 5 survival, 4 intelligence, 4 charisma, 4 wisdom

Spells

3 spell slots

Spell	Range	Formula	Duration	Cast	Effect area	Reaction
Farseeing	touch	WG	10 min	1 rnd	1 creature	none
Mage bolt	20+10yd/M	WG1 (arrow)	1 rnd/M	1	3 yd radius	none
Understand languages	touch	WG1	5 min/M	1 rnd	1 creature/item	willpower
			(mandrake)			

Equipment (carry: 8)

Horse:

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------|
| 1. 75 shillings, 3 pennies, 1 half-penny in pouch | saddlebags; 15 yards rope; |
| 2. spellbook (1.2 bulk) | 2 flasks oil; tent, 4 blankets; |
| 3 quarterstaff | 200 astrological silver coins; |
| | 100 astrological gold coins |

Even though I prefer libraries, I will explore the ruins because I want knowledge no one else has.

Gralen knew he was a sorcerer from a young age. Poe, his raven familiar, has been his friend and confidante since he was eight. Gralen is self-taught. He left home at twelve to study at Illustrious Library across the mountains from Crosspoint. He stumbled, almost literally, across the magical research of a sorcerer who once lived in the now abandoned Illustrious Castle outside of town. He's been daring Will Stratford into going to Illustrious Castle, where he believes more magic can be found.

Sam Stevens

Thief 1, Warrior 0

Agility: 14 (+1)

Strength: 11

Charisma: 14 (+1)

Endurance: 14 (+1)

Intelligence: 11

Wisdom: 10

Home: Crosspoint

Moral code: Good

Age: 20

Height: 5'9"

Weight: 154 lbs

Experience: 300

Reactions

Mojo: 0

Evasion 6

Fortitude 4

Movement 11

Health 5

Defense +3

Perception 5

Max combat pool 2

Reason 4

Survival 6

Willpower 4

Verve 5

Fighting Art +1, weapon fluency, basic weapons, unarmed combat, crossbow, short sword

Native Culture +2, english underworld etiquette

Scaling Craft +1, climb walls

Stealth Art +1, hide, silence

Burglary Science +7, locks & traps, search

	damage	fire actions	range
short sword	d6	2	2
crossbow	d6	2	15

Specialty: multiple archetypes (next: WARRIOR)

CARRYING (CARRY 9)

1. 26 shillings 3 pennies
2. short sword, bulk 6
3. crossbow, bulk 14
4. 15 yards light rope
5. dagger
6. shoulder pouch (thieves' tools, flint & steel)
7. quiver (16 bolts)
8. leather armor (+2 defense)
- 9.

Even though I'm a sneak, I will explore the ruins because I am on the run from the mob.

Sam was born on the waterfront in Crosspoint and lived on the streets until she was taken "under the wing" of a burglary and child-fighting ring run by the infamous Will Riley (hanged two years ago for the murder of councilman Jim Myers). Charlotte helped Sam quit the ring and get work as a guard for travelers. She met Will through his father's guard company. She avoids the Crosspoint mob.

Will Stratford

Level 1 Warrior, Good

Strength: 15 (+2/+1)

Home: Hightown

Agility: 14 (+1)

Age: 21

Charisma: 9

Height: 6'1"

Endurance: 14 (+1)

Weight: 169

Intelligence: 10

Experience: 50

Wisdom: 11

Movement: 12

Mojo: 0

Defense: +1

Survival: 6

Reactions

Verve: 6

Fortitude: 7

Specialties

Evasion: 5

Weapon specialist, Stigmas di Cristos style:

Health: 6

slashing weapons

Perception: 4

Reason: 4

Willpower: 4

Fields

Fighting Art +1: weapon fluency, unarmed combat, longsword, crossbow

Native Culture +2: Anglish, caravan etiquette

Slashing weapons +1: longsword

Survival Craft +1: fire, first aid, horsemanship

Weapons

Damage

Fire actions

Range

Longsword (+3)

d8+2

2

3

Crossbow (+1)

d6

2

15

Equipment (11 carry)

1. 28 shillings, 9 pennies, 1 halfpenny (pouch)

2. longsword (bulk 8)

3. crossbow

4. 16 bolts (quiver)

5. dagger

6. magic rune-sword hilt

Combat pool stuff

Pool max: 2

+1 defense: 1 pt

+1 damage: 1 pt

+3 combat movement: 1 pt

+1 attack: 4 pts

+1 quickdraw: 1 pt

+1 act first: 1 pt

+1 lose surprise: 1 pt

Even though my father wants me to run the company, I will explore the ruins because I am friends with Gralen.

Will's father owns a security company. Will works for him as a guard on the leather road, guiding caravans from Crosspoint, across the mountains, to Black Stag. Will longs for more than the back and forth between Crosspoint and Black Stag. He is good friends with Gralen, whom he met while researching the low roads at the Babylon library.

More Than a Story

The story you have just read is not true. It is better than true. It isn't even a story. It's a fictionalized example of the kinds of things characters can do in the **GODS & MONSTERS** fantasy role-playing game. The game would have played out while sitting comfortably around a dining room table or on living room couches. The Adventure Guide describes a situation, and the players each describe their character's actions and reactions. Play proceeds from those choices using the game's rules to determine the success or failure of those actions.

Everywhere you disagreed with a character's choices, you could have chosen differently if it had been your character. For example, the characters in this story were very careful. Would you have taken more risks? They chose to explore some rooms but not others. Would you have explored more rooms? Different rooms? How would you have had your heroes react when the goblin skeletons began to overrun the castle? Will's player took quite a risk volunteering Will to hold off the skeletons while his friends opened the escape route. Will lost all of his survival in that fight. One more successful attack by the goblin skeletons would have injured him, potentially killing him. Would you have risked your character in that way? Was there a better choice? If Sam were your character, would you have been so impetuous when you discovered the secret treasure trove, or would you have announced your discovery and *then* tried to open it? Would you, as Gralen, have limited yourself to being a walking encyclopedia instead of casting spells, until the final running battle?

What happens in the game is up to you, and your friends, and sometimes the dice.

I didn't transcribe a real game, because I wanted to show off as many rules as reasonable. But games are not writing, and no story can encompass all that can happen in a role-playing game. We sometimes borrow terminology from writing, from movies, from television series, but this is for convenience, and is little more than calling a train an iron horse. No horse is involved unless the train

is broken. The same is true of role-playing games. I hope you enjoyed the story as a story, and I also hope it entices you into wanting to play the game, to roleplay characters such as Charlotte, Gralen, Will, or Sam and choose the actions they take, the secrets they expose, the ruins they explore, and the way they interact with each other.

In a **GODS & MONSTERS** game, each of the four characters would be played by a different person. The person who plays each character creates their character using the game's rules. Most of the time your group will have a warrior like Will, a thief like Sam, and someone who uses supernatural powers like Gralen or Charlotte. Each of the character types can do different things at different times because of their archetype (warrior, thief, monk, sorcerer, prophet) and because of their specialties.

You can read the **GODS & MONSTERS** *rulebook* at godsmonsters.com/Rules. The rules provide more information on the game's rules and how to create characters for game play. The initial character sheets for these example characters are in that book. I've also included their character sheets at the start and end of the game here. Character sheets are where you write down your character's strength, agility, endurance, intelligence, wisdom, and charisma. Whenever one of the players in the story spent mojo to acquire something, that something, whether it was equipment or skills, was written down on the player's character sheet. Whenever a character lost survival points, the player tracked the loss on their character sheet.

One of the players, the Adventure Guide, does not create a player character.* The Adventure Guide creates—or buys, and then customizes—adventures for the player characters to explore. The Guide creates the town they start in and the castle, ruins, or other places they adventure in, and describes each situation for the player characters to react to.

This is not as hard as it sounds. Read the *Adventure Guide's Handbook* at godsmonsters.com/Master for advice on how to create adventures, and how to present adventurous situations to the

* *Player character* is a term for a character played by one of the players. All of the characters controlled by the Adventure Guide are *non-player characters*.

other players and their characters.

This story is based on the introductory adventure *The Lost Castle of the Astronomers*. The game doesn't end for the player characters after they leave the castle. Most fantasy games take several sessions to play out, with several individual adventures within the campaign*—much as a novel contains several sections, and might even be part of a longer series.

What happens to these characters next will depend on the choices the players make. Will they investigate the strange creatures of the mist? Or the Druid stones scattered throughout Highland? What about their new magical sword with unknown runes? Where did it come from?

Gralen's new spells might require seeking exotic ingredients. There's that confusing reference to a dwarven dungeon beneath the entirely mundane castle of the Order of Illustration. Charlotte wants to travel to the Elves; will they visit Stone Goblin and Will Dearborn on the way? They might choose to return to the *Lost Castle of the Astronomers*, attempt to overcome—or avoid—the dangers there in order to get more treasure out. They might even try to discover the mysterious ghostly castle that Gralen talked about.

All of these, and more, are *possible* adventures. What would you do next?

* A campaign is a series of adventures played by the same group, usually with continuing characters.

Experience

As characters adventure, they gain experience, measured in experience points. Each of the characters here started the game with zero experience. They were first-level characters. As characters gain experience, they increase their level. Higher-level characters can do more things, and improve their odds of successful actions.

At the end of each adventure, the Adventure Guide adds up the experience that the characters earned during the adventure. In this adventure, each of the characters gained 1,125 experience points from conflict and other interactions. Most of the experience came from day six, when they fought the goblin skeletons. This provided the bulk of their experience because it hit all three of the ways in which conflict provides experience:

1. They defeated ten goblin skeletons. They gained experience for defeating opponents in a fight.
2. Each of the skeletons was a first level monster. The characters were also first level, and so the characters gained experience for defeating opponents who matched their own level.
3. The total levels of defeated opponents during day six was ten. The total levels of the adventuring party was four. So the characters gained experience for defeating opponents who, in aggregate, were more powerful than they were.

As the characters go up in level, goblins, even goblin skeletons, won't be worth as much experience. The characters will need to defeat tougher opponents, opponents that match (and exceed) the characters' rising levels.

Besides experience for fighting things, they also gained experience for talking to the goblin that they captured back at the beginning of the adventure, and for talking to Burwell Cooper.*

Sam and Will, who used *mojo* to turn failed die rolls into successful rolls, gained experience from that, and Charlotte gained

* As you can see on the table, they receive much more experience for conflict than for talking. Talk is cheap.

from taking part in a group effort with Sam, when Sam used mojo to pick the lock on the tunnel door. Sam thus had 300 extra experience, and Will and Charlotte fifty extra experience, for using mojo to modify die rolls.

Players add mojo experience to their character sheets immediately. If they gain enough experience to reach a new level, their level increases immediately. Other experience is calculated by the Adventure Guide at the end of the adventure. The *Adventure Guide's Handbook* tells the Guide when and how to make these calculations.

	Conflict	Talking	Mojo	Total
Charlotte	945	180	50	1,175
Gralen	945	180	0	1,125
Sam	945	180	300	1,425
Will	945	180	50	1,175

Since it takes one thousand experience points to reach second level,* they are all second level now. Will can fight more effectively. Charlotte is a stronger psychic. Sam's a more adept thief—and warrior.† And Gralen can cast more powerful magic. In each case, their chance of success when using their skills improves. And they often gain new skills or other abilities, such as Gralen gaining the use of new, more powerful, spells.

Perhaps, now, they can take on that tentacled creature of the mist... but I doubt it.

* See the rulebook for experience point level thresholds.

† Her second level will be as a warrior, since her specialty lets her choose different archetypes at each level and she's already pre-chosen warrior so as to take advantage of some of the features of that archetype.

Treasure

The characters have a lot more money at the end of the adventure than they did at the beginning. Their 200 silver astrological coins and 100 gold astrological coins are worth about 1,600 shillings. How much they're worth specifically will depend on how they negotiate to sell them or convert them once they return to civilization. They also have other treasure that they can potentially sell or benefit from:

1. The vial of suspended silver found in the tower laboratory.
2. The two golden busts found in the spider-webbed tower.
3. The spellbooks and other scrolls found in the Gemini room.
4. The various magical powders, and the rock, found in the Pisces room.

They can keep, trade, or sell any of it. It's up to them. How much they get for what they sell will be a matter of role-playing.

If they divvy their new money up, they could each use it to buy better equipment—better armor for Will and Sam, for example. Dividing the treasure is entirely up to the players. They might divide it equally; they might keep some of it in a communal pot for future group purchases.

They could also, as often happens at the beginning of movie sequels in which the protagonists made lots of money in the previous movie, decide to have lost all or some of that money in exchange for more experience points. For each silver coin's worth of money lost, the group gets two experience points. So if they were to stipulate that 1,000 shillings were lost, the group would get 2,000 experience. Each character would gain 500. This would be almost enough to bring Sam to third level! Everyone would be within reach of third level with only a little mojo use during their next adventure.

It can be very exciting to be in a losing or evenly-matched battle, use mojo, level up, and suddenly gain new abilities.

But there's a lot to be said for keeping the money to buy equipment, too. As with everything else in the game, what your characters do is your decision.

The Allure of Tabletop Role-Playing

I played my first role-playing game on October 31, 1981. I was a high school senior in rural Michigan, in a tiny town of about nine hundred people. After escorting my younger brother and sister trick-or-treating, I met the people who would join me every Friday or Saturday evening for the rest of my senior year. I expected a fantasy-themed Candyland. What I got was an open-ended question.

You guide your horses up the long dusty road to the castle. At the entrance an iron portcullis blocks your way into the darkness beyond. You see shapes moving inside, and you can hear a river nearby. What do you do next?

We played the game around our dining-room table. Mom made popcorn. I'm pretty sure we went from creating new characters to killing them in a single night. From then on we gamed on the pool table in the basement, safe from parents and younger eyes.

Playing *Dungeons & Dragons* was like waking up groggy on Christmas morning. This was a completely different kind of game, unlike any of the board games I'd played, unlike any of the card games my parents played. It wasn't Candyland, Monopoly, or Hearts. It was a game of infinite choice.

When we were gaming, we were inside a world of fantasy fiction. I had already read *The Hobbit* and probably *The Lord of the Rings*, because I read just about everything fantasy in our small-town library. Probably also *The Sword of Shannara* and *A Wizard of Earthsea*. Turning that sort of experience into a game just clicked; that such a thing was possible meant that the world made sense after all.

Of course I was also an avid comic-book reader. One of the first things I did after discovering *Dungeons & Dragons* was start writing rules for a superhero role-playing game. In school, when I finished my schoolwork, I'd pull out my notebook and think about how superpowers could be defined by a game's rules.

Or I'd pull out the notes on my own *Dungeons & Dragons*

world, a huge island covered in castles, caverns, and dungeons. Having no idea what a gaming map was supposed to look like, I used graph paper from math class and drew the entire *Isle of Mordol* fifty feet to the square. It took 35 sheets and completely covered the pool table we gamed on. You can see it at godsmongers.com/mordol. I ended up taping the map into seven scrolls each five sheets long. When the characters moved from one area to another, I'd unroll the scroll up or down, or if they'd moved laterally I'd roll up the current scroll and unroll a new one.

The island was a few miles wide. Its climates ranged from desert to snowy mountain, forest to jungle. You had to suspend disbelief with a rocket, but suspend we did. We had a blast.

In that first Hallowe'en game we used the first version of the *Basic D&D* rules. For Christmas that year I got the newer *Basic D&D* boxed set, the second version. This was the version available in the toy stores where my parents shopped. When our cousins, whose parents ran a variety store one town over, discovered *Dungeons & Dragons*, they added a game shelf to their store. We got a family discount on the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* books, the more complex version available in specialized gaming stores. We used all of those books, at the same time, to play our game.

As in Hollywood, where every actor sooner or later wants to direct a movie, every gamer someday, even if only once, feels the urge to design and run their own adventure. Two of us took turns as referee, or *Dungeon Master* in the game's lingo (the game master, or GM, the same role as the *Adventure Guide* in **GODS & MONSTERS**). When I wasn't pitting them against my crazed magical island, I played the cleric Elzaac, a priest of the Norse god Thor. Elzaac explored deserted castles, banged monsters with a hammer, called on Thor to smite monsters with magic, and took their treasure.

When we weren't playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, my brother ran a post-apocalyptic game by the same company. In *Gamma World* the dungeons weren't the ruins of ancient castles but the ruins of the modern world. We were mutated creatures trying to survive a world long-destroyed by nuclear war.

I went to college the next year. An hour or so after my parents

dropped me off I was sitting in my dorm room, my cot covered with partially-unpacked boxes. A sophomore from California walked by, noticed my rulebooks, and invited me to join the D&D group he was starting. I was all set to roll up a new cleric of Thor just like Elzaac, when I discovered that our new Dungeon Master's real name was... Thor. I made quick use of my pencil's eraser—always write your new characters in pencil—and introduced Praxos, cleric of Ra.

Praxos and his companions set out into the Fell Pass, a long tunnel through the Barrier Peaks, the only shortcut to something, I don't remember what. In the Fell Pass we met displacer beasts, and huge rats—and in D&D huge rats are dangerous to first-level characters—and things we never did find out what they were. I know this because I still have the map I drew as we explored the tunnels.

Praxos's companions were O'Shin, a Halfling thief, Dweomer, a Gnome illusionist, Kellson, a human magic-user, and probably a fighter or two. O'Shin was famous for having an 18 dexterity but still somehow usually managing to roll higher than 18 on a d20 when attempting some dexterous feat of derring-do. If there were an award for "most resurrections in a role-playing game" he would have won it in our group.

Praxos eventually died by slipping off the side of a mountain. He also failed his roll to grab the side of the trail and hang on; he failed his roll to grab one of his companions; and his companions failed their rolls to grab him. It might have been possible to drag his battered body to a shrine for resurrection, but Praxos's magical staff also failed its roll and blew up at the bottom, leaving a crater and no trace of the fourth-level Curate of Ra. I have his final character sheet. When he died he carried wolfsbane, garlic, and a silver holy symbol. He knew the spells *cure light wounds*, *augury*, and *slow poison*. He had already used *detect evil*, *hold person*, and *silence* that fateful day.

I had no problem accepting his death and moving on: Praxos's character sheet contains notes on my next character in that campaign, a Paladin of Vanimaar. As far as I recall, Sheridan the Paladin survived to the end of the campaign. The last of Sheridan's character sheets has him at 8th level with a warhorse named Daren.

I assume he rode off into the sunset.

We played as much as we could in those four years, and not just *Dungeons & Dragons*. We played the superhero game *Villains & Vigilantes* along with my own *Men & Supermen*. We tried other fantasy games: *DragonQuest* and the horribly complicated *Chivalry & Sorcery*. C&S's science fiction counterpart, *Space Opera*, was so complicated it took an entire night just to make a character, and the game was too much even for a bunch of computer geeks. But we did, later, play the simpler *Traveller* and the even simpler *Star Frontiers*. *Traveller* is remembered today for a unique, at the time, character creation process which produced detailed random backgrounds—with the risk that a character could die before you even started playing.

There was also *Call of Cthulhu*, based on the works of H.P. Lovecraft, where the goal wasn't surviving against unbeatable odds or coming back with great treasures. It was maintaining personal sanity in the face of unspeakable horrors. Success didn't mean being a hero or killing monsters. It was remaining sane. The best way to succeed in *Call of Cthulhu* was to die in style or retire outside of an asylum.

When three members of my college group found ourselves across the country in San Diego in the nineties, we had a new breed of games to play. The Internet helped fuel a role-playing resurgence. We still played *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (now in its second edition) but we also played a completely new genre called cyberpunk.

Back in college Thor had foreseen the need for a near-future, cybered-up role-playing game, but we'd never been able to get our heads around the concept enough to write one that worked. In the nineties we played the games of those who had: *Cyberpunk 2020* and the cyberfantasy hybrid *Shadowrun*. You can still see some of what we did in the latter game if you search for *The Neo-Anarchists Guide to Everything Else* online.

And since goth was in, *Vampire* took *Call of Cthulhu* to a different level. We role-played undead creatures struggling vainly to maintain a grip on their fading humanity in the face of unquenchable hunger. Just about every vampire movie or television series today seems to be inspired by this game.

There were so many characters. The clerics Elzaac and Praxos, Sheridan the Paladin, Snapdragon the superhero, Sam Hain the prohibition-era private eye, Sony Louis-Rollando the cyber-warrior. And many more lost in the character sheets of time.

In the twenty-first century, we began playing **GODS & MONSTERS**.

Role-playing games are not for everyone, but those of us who enjoy them find it hard to understand why. Who wouldn't enjoy a game that makes such a profound use of individual creativity in a shared setting? A game that stimulates creativity and challenges intelligence in a way that is so incredibly fun? A game designed to be played without rules?

Even *Space Opera*, with its night-long character creation process, has finite rules and infinite possibilities. For all practical purposes, *role-playing games have no rules*. The rules are there to assist you as player and as game master, but for the most part they are inconsequential. There are no rules for the vast majority of things your character does. In **GODS & MONSTERS**, for example, when your character gets in a fight there are rules to let you know how to keep your character alive, rules that let you reasonably know your character's chance of success. But when you decide to sneak into town at night or take over the local ruling council, the die rolls you make are inconsequential compared to all of the shared decisions between you and the Adventure Guide. Those decisions have no rules to cover them.

Rules are, in a sense, sandboxes that the characters occasionally enter, places where the players know more precisely the process of what will happen to their characters. But most of the action in a game takes place in the negative space outside the rulebook.

Someday we might be able to program computer games that have no rules, but for now role-playing games are an unequalled means of passing the time with friends and strangers. No other non-physical game produces stories about game sessions like role-playing does. Old adventures come up in conversations just like glory days for football players. *Do you remember the time Xen-Arbus tried to get the attention of an oblivious farm family—and ended up waking the dead? We had to fight three skeletal ghouls! Or the time Xen-Arbus decided that there were definitely monsters behind this one door, opened it and rushed in to surprise them—in*

full plate armor—to discover a forty-foot down stairway behind the door? He couldn't hear for the rest of the adventure.

If you read books and wonder what might have happened if the characters took a different path, you might enjoy role-playing games. If you're the person who always yells at movie characters to *pick up the gun!*, and of course they never do, you might enjoy role-playing games. If you accept the fiction that dragons are real, and then argue about how realistic they are within the fiction, you almost certainly will enjoy role-playing games.

In **GODS & MONSTERS** you'll find adventure, excitement, and really wild things. If every gamer eventually wants to run a game, then every gamemaster eventually wants to write a custom game. After twenty years of gaming, I knew what I wanted game rules to do, and I knew what kind of game I wanted to play. I wrote **GODS & MONSTERS** to be that game, and made it open source so that you can do the same with it.

However you play, may the dice be ever in your favor.