

THE ORDER OF THE ASTRONOMERS

A Gaming Adventure Story for Gods & Monsters

by Jerry Stratton

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(Caspar David Friedrich's "Abbey in an Oak Forest", circa 1819)

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HIGHTOWN MARKET

Hightown is a small town in western Highland, about a thousand people living a week's ride over the western side of the High Divide. South of Hightown is just "the forest". There is nothing else south but night trolls and worse. You can keep going west along the leather road from Hightown to Black Stag, the largest city in west Highland. North of Black Stag are many smaller towns further up Fawn River, until the towns dwindle to villages and the villages dwindle to wilderness. Beyond that, according to Charlotte Kordé, lay the Long Lakes and the forest city of the Elves.

Charlotte was going to go there, she told Galen and Sam, "someday". This is when she would always take another drink and continue, "Someday soon."

Charlotte, Sam Stevens, and Galen Noslen were from Crosspoint, across the mountains. Sam was on the run from a thieves' ring, working her way west as a caravan guard. Charlotte was trailing along. And Galen came from Crosspoint by way of Byblion, just to the north of Hightown. Byblion had a library, perhaps the oldest library in east or west Highland. Galen was a scholar. His best friend was Will Stratford. Will's father lived in Hightown, and was a caravan guard-for-hire. Will had been in both Crosspoint and Black Stag many times. Last two times he even got paid as a guard himself. He even had his own longsword. Sam just had a short sword; she hadn't even learned to use a longsword yet.

The leather road received its name from the most prominent item of trade out of Black Stag: leather. The tanners and craftsmen of west Highland are renowned for the flexibility and strength of their product. In west Highland they called it the low road, but the rest of the known world called it by their dreams of riches. North of the leather road was west Highland, and civilization. South of the leather road was the unknown. There was no reason to go there, and no one ever did. It was from the deep forests to the south that the goblin mage and his night trolls came a hundred years past in a nearly-successful attempt to conquer the north.

The four met in the marketplace in Hightown. Galen and Will knew each other from town—they'd become inseparable, at least when Galen wasn't studying and Will wasn't traveling. Will knew Sam through his dad's

This adventure begins in a town. This is one of the classic adventure sequences: civilization; wilderness; ruins. 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 may be 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 of the dead can be replaced with an ancient, lost civilization, contrasting the past with the present.

When players create characters, it will help a lot if each character knows at least one other character somewhere in the character's background. It can help avoid the more obvious clichés involved in getting a group together.

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.

guard service. She'd just signed up as a mercenary. He hoped she'd stay on as a regular, but his dad just shook his head and said he didn't think she was that type. "Good worker, though," he'd add thoughtfully.

Gralen invited Will. Will invited Sam. Sam and Gralen invited Charlotte and looked at each other suspiciously when they found out the other knew her.

Gralen and Will were quite a pair. Will was clearly the more muscular of the two, and was taller than just about everyone around—except Gralen, who stood nearly a half foot above Will's six feet. But where Will was muscular and exercised, Gralen was gangly and pale.

The market in Hightown was nothing like the market in Crosspoint. There were potatoes everywhere, and onions. Lots of boxes and crates. But the exotic fruits of Crosspoint were nowhere. Crosspoint was the center of merchant routes west into Highland, north to the Celts, and south to the baronies of Great Bend. Fishermen brought fish from the sea to market, farmers their produce, and hunters their catch. Hightown, a stopover between Black Stag in west Highland and Crosspoint in east Highland, attracted to its stalls the merchants who took the leather road. West Highland merchants sold their goods to east Highland merchants, and vice versa. Then both went home.

It was mid to late autumn. The nearly full moon remained visible low in the sky in the early morning. Farmers were selling apples, apple cider, and the last harvest of roots until summer again.

The entertainment didn't live up to Crosspoint standards either. A crowd gathered around a pair of singers, but most of the crowd was talking to each other and not listening. The entertainers—two dark-haired twins—sang in an unmistakable Great Bend lisp. One played a lute. The other, a whistle. Their song was a tale of two armies, a variation on an old tale of "the Mist and the Christ", war between two orders back in the time of scholarly combat.

"Stop," said Gralen. "I want to hear this."

*...so passed the Mist
through Byblion Town.*

Bad poetry is a staple of fantasy adventures.

*"South!" he cried, and south he led
his hundred men down past the road,
into the deepest forest led
a hundred men to steal the gold
of Christ-at-Anna's starry hold.*

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

*Things that fly and things that creep
with leather wings and slimy hoof,*

*feared, and fled, in the forest deep
before the Mist's well-armored horde.*

*The third night out the noon was gone
Beneath the stars they made their camp.
One by one the stars went out,
A mist rose up, so cold and damp.*

*"Mist for Mistoles? An omen good,"
So cried Mistoles' 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 coals 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 warnings 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 describe the 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 tossed them a ship and sword.

“That’s a lot of money for a song,” said Sam.

“I think there was some good information in that song,” said Gralen.

“It was told to us by zee last survivor of zee battle,” said one of the singers.

“Of course it was,” said Gralen. “Thank you for singing it to us. Did you know that the town of Byblion that Mistoles passed through is just north of us?”

“We heard the name,” said the other singer, “and zought it would be appreciated here.”

“And it was,” said Gralen. “What brings you north to Highland?”

“An aczidont,” said one singer.

“Oui, an aczidont with a duke’s daughter,” said the other.

“Say no more,” said Gralen. “Find a place to settle soon. Our winters are colder than the southern winters.”

“Zank you,” they said. “Perhapz we will zee you zoon.”

One of them winked his dark eyes at Will. They bowed and left with their instruments. Will shivered once as they left.

“What was that all about?” asked Charlotte.

“Mistoles was the last leader of Illustrious Castle before it fell to the goblins from the Deep Forest. After Mistoles died and the Order of Illustration retook the castle, they fell into ruin. Kristagna, what they called Christ-at-Anna’s, is the castle where their rivals supposedly lived. Illustrious Castle is about sixty miles north of here. Kristagna is supposed to hide great treasures and greater knowledge. Kristagna is supposedly somewhere south, in the Deep Forest. Nobody knows where, but I have some ideas.”

“But the goblin armies came up over a hundred years ago,” said Sam. “There’s no way they 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 they know, anyway.”

“Then who’d they hear the story from?”

“From other singers, probably,” said Gralen, “who heard it from other singers, who heard it from other singers. Most of it had altered considerably from what I know really happened.”

“If they lied about hearing it from a survivor, how do you know that they didn’t lie about the rest of it?” asked Will.

“Ship and sword” is slang for a standard monetary unit in Crosspoint. On one side is a ship, the other a sword. It is a standard monetary unit in game terms. In Highland it is silver. It is a lot of money for your average singer, probably what they would normally make in a week.

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

“Maybe they did,” said Gralen. “But singers always make up some story about how they heard the song from someone who was there, or even better, that they themselves were there. Remember, they’re selling a product just like everyone else here in the market. They have to make it more exciting.”

“They probably made up the duke’s daughter,” said Sam.

“Probably,” said Gralen. “More likely they just ran up too many debts.”

“How’d you like those earrings?” asked Sam.

“Probably a custom down south,” said Gralen.

“Emerald-green earrings?”

“Musicians are strange people,” said Will.

“But what did you hear in the song?” asked Charlotte. “What makes you think you know where this Kristagna is?”

“There are some books in the library that haven’t been read in a long time,” said Gralen.

“There are clues. But they never fit until now. If the song is right, we might find it by ‘bearing down’ on Isaiah’s Breasts.”

“Who is Isaiah and why do we care about his breasts?” asked Will, getting a laugh from everyone except Gralen.

“Isaiah was one of the founders of the Astronomers. Isaiah’s breasts are two mountain peaks that I think I remember reading a snippet about. From the right vantage point, they look like, well, breasts.”

“Breasts to normal people, or breasts to hermit-like warrior-scholars who haven’t seen a woman in months?” asked Sam.

“There’s probably something to that,” said Gralen.

“How far south are the peaks?”

“Three days ride,” said Sam, “if the song is right.”

“That could be,” said Gralen. “I don’t know, but I think I saw it referenced in one of the books I’ve been studying.”

“Show me these books,” said Charlotte.

“I can’t, they’re in Byblion,” said Gralen. “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.”

“Let’s go, then.”

While Gralen and Charlotte went to the inn, Will and Sam wandered the marketplace.

“Pretty amazing that you and Gralen both know Charlotte,” said Will.

“I’ve known her since I was a kid,” said Sam. “When I was still living on the streets.”

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

“Really? How did you meet?”

“I tried to steal an apple from her.”

Will looked at her.

“I was hungry,” said Sam.

“Was this a rich kid/poor kid thing?”

“She wasn’t a kid,” said Sam. “She was old enough to be my mother when I first met her.”

“How can that be?” asked Will.

“She says she’s nearly forty years old,” said Sam.

They walked on, and stopped to bargain over some bright red apples.

“She isn’t really that old, is she?” asked Will. He took a bite from his apple.

“Hell,” said Sam, “I’ve known Charlotte since I was able to walk and I swear she hasn’t aged a bit. She looks younger than I am.”

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

Sam looked at him, and his eyes turned away. She couldn’t figure out if he was complimenting her or mocking her. She’d been living on the streets since she was ten years old, and it showed. Her face was pocked more than

most twenty-year-old women from Crosspoint. She wore her hair short and kept her legs in pants. Charlotte wore long but loose-fitting clothing, but when some leg did show her skin remained soft and clear. Was William saying something about that? William was handsome and dashing... well, no. William was handsome. But he wore his heart on his sleeve. She decided that he was complimenting her, and held her tongue. For his part, he had no idea what torture he had barely missed with his compliment.

Will’s charisma is 9. Sam’s is 14. While Will is far more attractive physically than Sam, he doesn’t have nearly the interpersonal skills that Sam does.
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THE COMPANY OF THE LOST STARS

They met at King's Inn at the end of the day. There are no kings in Highland. The only government is local and the church. Kingdoms, according to the church, are one of the three deadly sins that led to the great cataclysm. King's Inn is owned by Rex King. Gralen asked Will at least once whenever they visited if he knew that "Rex's first name is his last name in the ancient tongue?" Will usually answered, "uh, yeah, now I do."

Charlotte and Gralen laid out the plan to Will and Sam.

"Four days there, three days exploring, four days back," said Gralen. "The moon is nearly full now, it will be a good time to spend in the woods. We'll have a full moon in three days, and we'll be back before its gone."

"Equal shares of any money or saleable items we bring back," said Charlotte. "We'll be like a merchant company, but our mine will be ruins and our lode the lost treasure of the Astronomers."

"The company of the lost stars," said Gralen. "If we can find Kristagna it should be lucrative."

"I didn't know you were so interested in money," said Will to Gralen.

"The Astronomers knew many strange magics," said Gralen. "If I can find their notes, I might be able to reconstruct some of their spells."

"You're sure there's money there?" asked Sam.

"We're not sure of anything," said Gralen.

"I am," said Charlotte. "No one has ever found it, it has to still be there. Unlike Illustrious Castle north of us, which has been stripped bare, Kristagna is south of the road."

"So what were the two castles fighting over?" asked Will.

"Knowledge," said Gralen. "Or theory. The old scholastic orders took their science very seriously. A scholastic question would sometimes be settled on the field of battle, and a dispute could erupt into war."

"That's crazy," said Will.

"That's why most of these Orders died out," said Charlotte. "I think the only remaining orders are the Knights of the Thistle and the Knights Cælius."

"How do we know the Astronomers are gone?" asked Will.

"No one's heard from them in years," said Gralen. "No one comes from there, and no one ever travels there."

"No one travels there for a reason," said Sam. "Monsters live there!"

"Okay," said Will. "I could do this. If we do find gold, I could set up my own caravan company."

He turned to Sam.

“You could work for me if you wanted.”

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

“We’ll need to be prepared,” said Charlotte. “Each of us will need food and water to last a week. Water we can replenish in the forest. Food we *probably* can replenish, but bring dry food for emergencies.”

“And arms,” said Sam. “Just in case.”

“Bring blankets and clothing. I’ll make sure we have a donkey to carry it,” said Gralen.

They started out on the following morning, after each searched the town for the equipment they thought they might need. They had staves, and rope, and lanterns and oil. Each carried dried berries, cheese, and bread, and a skin of water. They loaded everything they didn’t carry themselves onto the donkey.

“To the company of the lost stars,” said Charlotte, raising her staff to the still visible moon as they stood in the cold morning air.

“The company of the daft song is more like it,” said Will. “But if the song *is* right about the breasts,” he continued, “then what about the thing that gropes the wood?”

“I wouldn’t touch that line with a ten foot pole,” said Sam, tapping him on the head with the ten foot pole she was using as a walking stick. Will turned bright red.

There are few items more useful to the adventurer than the “ten foot pole”. That and a coil of silken rope have gotten adventurers out of an infinite number of problems.

“What’s with the blackbird?” asked Sam, pointing at a bird that was circling above them.

“That’s not a good sign,” said Will, and he cranked up his crossbow.

Gralen gently pushed the crossbow down.

“This particular raven is a very good sign,” he said.

Sam set her staff before her and began walking.

“It’s not for no reason that going crazy is called *gone south*,” said Sam. “Let’s go.”

With the sun still hidden behind the High Divide, the company of the daft song walked across the leather road and into the deep forest.

THE DEEP FOREST

They were surprised to find that the forest on the south side of the road was no different from the forest on the north side. The trees were in autumn bloom with dry leaves of red, orange, and yellow covering the trees and the ground beneath the trees. The leaves on the ground crackled as they walked.

There was one difference between north and south.

“No one’s been here in a hundred years,” said Charlotte, to Sam, as they walked through the woods. Will and Gralen were strolling ahead a hundred yards or so. The donkey was with them. No one was walking in any hurry.

Gralen 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 themselves down to the movement score of the slowest person in the group to avoid splitting up. These are not seasoned adventurers.

“No one human, anyway,” said Sam. “Unless the Astronomers are still here.”

“I can’t believe they’d still be around,” said Charlotte. “They’d have to come up to Hightown occasionally for trade. When the night trolls came through, they came far enough north to defeat the Knights of Illustration. The Astronomers must have been even more besieged.”

“Night trolls,” repeated Sam. “What do we do when night rolls around?”

“We find a secluded camp before nightfall,” said Charlotte.

“What if Will or Gralen snores?” she asked, and laughed. Charlotte laughed also.

“Smother them with a pillow, I guess,” she replied.

“Did we bring pillows?”

“I wish,” said Charlotte.

“You don’t like roughing it?”

“I love it,” said Charlotte. “I don’t normally go out like a pack animal, though. But walking in the forest, sleeping under the stars. There are wonderful animal trails throughout the forests around Crosspoint.”

“But we have no goblins around Crosspoint,” said Sam.

Creatures will often have multiple names, and different names in different places. Here, Charlotte and Sam know “goblins” as both goblins and as night trolls.

“We do,” said Charlotte. “But they aren’t very bold.”

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

As the sun rose, shafts of bright sunlight shone through the leaves of the trees, illuminating dust in the air. Will and Gralen were lazily picking raspberries here and there, putting them into their bags 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, maybe,” said Will. “He doesn’t understand me.”

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

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

“What do you want to do?”

“I’d like to start my own company. Go down to Great Bend. Or maybe not start the company, and just go to the bend. Or when we go to Black Stag, why not head up the river and see what’s up there?”

“There’s no money in it, probably,” said Gralen.

“Yeah, that’s what he says,” said Will. “Everything up the river comes down the river, we don’t need to go chasing it.”

They walked south silently for a little while.

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

“And little pixies that live in holes and smoke big pipes,” said Gralen. “You hear a lot of things if you want to.”

“Charlotte thinks there are Elves up that way.”

“She’s probably right,” said Gralen. “But not too many people visit them.”

“She’s going to.”

“She’s been saying that for as long as I’ve known her,” said Gralen. “Usually after she’s had a bit to drink.”

“That’s what everybody says,” said Will.

“Everybody?”

“Well, Sam said the same thing.”

Gralen looked at him.

“You know, you probably shouldn’t go talking about Charlotte to people you don’t know.”

“Why not?” asked Will.

“It’s odd,” said Gralen. “She’s got a secret, and secrets of that sort are often best kept.”

“But Sam doesn’t know me,” said Will.

“True, and that was my point,” Gralen replied.

“Who is Sam?” asked Will.

“A friend of Charlotte’s,” said Gralen. “She’s a tough one.”

In some campaigns, non-human races will be as common as humans (Tolkien had more non-humans than humans, for example.) In others, such as this one, non-human races will be rare, with the possible exception of those non-human races infringing on human lands.

“I don’t know,” said Will.

They set up camp that night in a small dell nestled within the hills. They set up their tent, hung their food from the trees, and built a small fire with which to cook their dinner.

As the players get more experienced, they will choose better camp sites. If it rained, they’d be flooded out. If they get attacked, they haven’t anywhere to run.

Afterwards, Gralen went to studying his notes and the two books he’d brought with him. Charlotte went off on her own in the woods around their camp. And Will began to practice his swordplay. Sam watched Will as he fought imaginary opponents and blocked imaginary attacks.

“Can you teach me how to do that?” she asked him.

He turned and looked at her.

“Uh, yeah,” he replied, “uhm, why would you want to?”

She looked him in the eyes, and surprisingly he didn’t look away.

“I’m never going to be the girl who lets someone else protect her,” said Sam.

“I noticed that,” said Will.

“As long as we understand each other.”

“Show me your positions,” said Will.

“My what?”

“Attack that bush with your short sword.”

“Oh.”

She hacked at the tall bush he’d indicated.

“You taught yourself, didn’t you,” said Will.

“Yes, and I do pretty well,” said Sam. “The tree didn’t lay a hand on me.”

Some groups won’t like calling things “short sword” and “long sword”, they’ll want to use the real medieval names for those weapons. If you’re interested in that sort of thing, you can find it in books such as Stone’s “Glossary of the Construction, Decoration, and Use of Arms & Armor”.

“You can do better. Put your sword down, and follow my steps.”

He showed her three basic fighting movements.

“You’ll want to practice these whenever you can,” said Will, then he handed her his sword.

“Yours is heavier than mine,” said Sam.

“I’m not touching that line with a ten foot pole,” said Will.

“Touché,” said Sam.

“Well, you know the words, let’s see if you know the walk. This is your enemy,” he said, pointing at the abused bush. “Attack it.”

She took more foliage off of the bush.

“Don’t look at your sword,” said Will. “It isn’t going to attack you. Watch your enemy.”

“My enemy’s a bush,” said Sam.

“Always keep the sword moving,” said Will. “And pretend that the bush can fight back.”

The first night was awkward. They shared a large tent, but not large enough. Each lay out their own bedroll. Will and Gralen slept on one side, Charlotte and Sam on the other. Will and Charlotte were in the middle. They put their packs between the two sides.

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

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

“Oh, I’m quite familiar with him,” he replied. “Go to sleep.”

In the middle of the night, Sam tapped Charlotte’s shoulder until she awoke.

“Do you hear something?” asked Sam.

Charlotte tapped Will’s shoulder until he woke up.

“Something’s outside,” she said.

Will tapped Gralen’s shoulder.

“The girls are worried about something outside,” he said.

Sam tried to hit him, but Charlotte was in the way. Gralen lifted the bottom of the tent up and peered out.

“There’s some animal out by our fire pit,” said Gralen. “It’s a deer or something.”

They heard a sudden noise of branches moving.

“What was that?”

“The deer just ran away. Maybe we scared it off.”

They heard a wolf howling, and it didn’t sound distant at all.

“Or not.”

Halfway through the second day, they saw a small structure on a small hill beyond some trees. As they drew closer, they saw that it was a circle of columns set into the ground. The stone ring that the columns once held was fallen in pieces around the hill. In the center of the columns and broken stone was an altar on a round dais, with strange markings inscribed on it: slashes and straight corners, no curves at all. But it looked like it ought to be writing.

“What does it say?” asked Charlotte. “Do you know?”

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

Putting stuff like this in, you have to gauge your players. Some players will spend all day at the standing stones trying to figure out their relation to the adventure. Still, you want to foreshadow other adventures, and put physical evidence of the legends of the past throughout your world.

“I can’t read this,” said Gralen. “But there’s one between Hightown and Byblion that I’ve deciphered, and it is a dedication to a king, or god, of the silver hand.”

Gralen was able to read the other one because he has a spell called *Understand Languages*. But he wasn’t expecting to need it until arriving at Kristagna, so he currently has *Farseeing* and *Mage Bolt* impressed.

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

“Who knows?” asked Gralen. “I’ve heard that these monuments lie scattered throughout west Highland. Perhaps each is dedicated to a different god or demon.”

He ran his fingers over the inscribed markings.

“Whatever it is, it’s been abandoned for a long time,” said Will.

“You get a nice view up here,” said Charlotte. “This forest is as wonderful as any back east.”

Yes, so now that I mentioned it, now *would* be a good time for Gralen to use *Farseeing*. But when you’re a first level sorcerer, you tend to conserve your spells.

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

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

“Or be able to see the breasts,” said Charlotte.

“We might be able to save some time by going kitty-corner, but we might also end up getting horribly lost if we do that,” said Gralen. “Though I’m thinking that on the way back we might be able to go straight north to the low road, or north-northwest.”

“We can’t hardly miss the leather road,” said Will.

The second night, Sam decided to scout the perimeter of their camp. Charlotte thought she’d seen some animal following them for an hour or so before they stopped. Sam stepped as quietly as she could—and it was surprisingly quiet to the rest of the friends. When Sam stepped into the trees, she practically disappeared.

They’re called thieves by the game rules, but in adventuring terms, and especially outside, it almost makes more sense to call them scouts. It’s only inside dungeons or in cities that their lock-picking and pickpocket skills really become useful.

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

“Let’s set up the camp,” said Gralen.

Sam snuck through the trees as quietly as she could, and it was quietly enough. Hidden in the ferns only about fifty yards from camp were three human-like creatures half her size, but with splotchy white faces and two small fangs. They were watching Gralen, Charlotte, and Will set up camp. Each carried spears, and one carried a short sword of some kind.

“I think they’re night trolls,” said Sam to the rest when she returned to the camp site.

“They’re probably waiting to kill us when we go to sleep,” said Gralen.

“Where are they?” asked Will.

“Don’t look!” said Sam. “We don’t want them to know that we know that they’re there. Not yet.”

She motioned him to move behind the tent.

“Go to that side of the tent, so they can’t see you, and load your crossbow,” she said.

“Why?”

“We can’t let them go find more of their kind,” said Sam. “We’re going to have to sneak-attack them before they sneak-attack us, or before they go for reinforcements. I need you to cover me while I go back around.”

The group hasn’t chosen a leader. Some groups don’t need them. They simply let whoever is most qualified at the problem in question take control.

“I should go back around,” said Will. “I haven’t taught you anything yet.”

“I know how to use a crossbow,” replied Sam, “and you make as much noise as a herd of cattle. I’ll go, you cover me.”

“What do we do?” asked Gralen.

“I’m going to sneak back to the other side of them. One of you go behind the tent and count to a hundred, then sneak up as well as you can.”

“What about the other two of us?” asked Charlotte.

“You back me up when you hear me yell,” said Sam.

Sam went back into the woods, with her and Will’s crossbow armed and ready.

“I’ll go,” said Will.

“No, you need to cover her from here,” said Gralen. “You should stay here because you can get there fastest when she yells.”

On the other hand, arguing about who is going to cover a friend *after* that friend walks into danger is probably not the best strategy.

“And you’re too obvious,” said Charlotte to Gralen. “I’ll follow.”

Charlotte stepped into the forest from behind the tent.

“Let’s just finish setting up the fire,” said Gralen to Will.

“I hope she knows what she’s doing,” said Will.

“Lay your sword down as you try to start the fire,” said Gralen, “in case they’re worrying about where the other two went.”

Will leaned his sword down against a rock that was next to the space they’d cleared for the fire. Gralen looked up into the sky, and whistled once. Then he turned to Will again.

“Hold still,” said Gralen. “I’m going to do something so you can better use that crossbow.”

Gralen spoke for a few seconds in words that Will did not understand, and then touched Will’s eyes. Will blinked, and when he opened his eyes, everything was suddenly much clearer. Things he didn’t previously notice suddenly came *in focus*. He could see the veins on the leaves ten feet away, and could see for three times the distance he could have before.

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

“You can see further and better now,” said Gralen.

“This is incredible,” said Will.

He glanced slowly around the woods, and could now clearly see the goblins hiding behind some bushes over a hundred feet away.

“I see them,” said Will. “Three of them, just like she said. Shouldn’t we head over there now?”

“Wait for her signal,” said Gralen. “It’s her plan, we don’t want to screw it up.”

At the perimeter of the camp, Charlotte was not quite as silent as Sam had been. Sam realized that the creatures were getting nervous. When Charlotte arrived within about twenty paces, Sam aimed her crossbow at who she assumed was their leader, and stepped out of the brush.

“Stop!” she yelled.

Will grabbed up his sword and crossbow, and pointing his crossbow at one of the goblins, he walked quickly but firmly towards them. Gralen moved slightly to the right and walked with him. He also fished into his pockets for a small model of an arrow. When they were about forty paces, the goblins screamed and jumped at Sam with their spears.

Sam pulled the trigger on her crossbow, but in her surprise at their ferocity her bolt went wild. Gralen whistled and pointed his staff at the creatures, and began running towards the goblins and Sam. Will chose his target and shot his crossbow. The bolt hit the goblin and the goblin fell to the ground.

One of the goblins began spearing at the air as if fighting an imaginary opponent. Sam didn’t take time to be confused by it. She dropped her crossbow and drew her sword against the remaining creature, but it thrust its spear forward, barely missing her. She twisted round its attack and, off-balance, was unable to complete her counter-attack. Will threw down his crossbow and ran towards the fight.

By this time, Gralen had moved to about thirty paces from the creatures. He began mumbling, and threw something towards the fight. It burst into an arrow of light that slammed into Sam’s opponent.

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* 2 of these are negated, for a total penalty of only 1.

Of course not, Sam’s a thief, it’s her job to be silent. Still, Charlotte was probably better at it than Gralen and definitely better than Will. Charlotte needs to get close because her psychic abilities work best at very close range.

Cover round: Gralen needs to be within 30 yards to use his *Mage Bolt* spell. Sam’s player, Sarah Dent, rolled an 18 to attack. Even with the bonus for having the goblin covered, this still misses. Will’s player, Tony Barlow, rolled 8. Since Will no longer has any penalty to attack, this hits easily—he needed a 10, and he had them covered. He only rolled 1 for damage, but his target only had 2 survival points—and he got a bonus of 1 for having the target covered.

First round: Charlotte is attacking with a visual illusion that can do one point per round to its opponent. It started with 3 and has 2 points left. No one else can see it. Sam got speared for three survival points, and missed her opponent, but Gralen cast a *Mage Bolt* for four survival points. It started with 6 and has 2 points left.

Will is running towards the combat at 11 yards per round. He is now 29 yards away.

A raven swooped out of the sky and clawed at Sam's opponent, and that goblin tried to run past Sam to get away, thrusting again with its spear. Perhaps she should have let it go, as its attack drew blood before she twisted it out of the way with her sword and followed the spear down to its bearer, thrusting it into its chest and pulling it back out. The creature fell backwards a few steps, and then keeled over onto the ground.

Sam pointed her sword at the remaining goblin, which was now looking scared as well as confused, and it tossed its spear away and jumped to the ground whimpering.

"Great," said Will. "We've got a prisoner. Jesus, Sam, are you all right?"

"I'm fine," said Sam, "I think. You sure as hell were right about that raven bringing good luck," she added to Gralen.

She touched at her side, inside her leather armor, and came back with blood.

"Shit."

"Get her back to camp," Will told Charlotte.

"I'm going to tie this thing up."

Will pointed his sword at the goblin.

"Go," said Will.

The creature didn't seem to understand the words, but it did understand the gesture. Will led it at sword's point back to the camp and tied it up.

"Charlotte," said Will. "How bad is Sam?"

"I don't know," said Charlotte. "There's blood everywhere."

Will went to take a look at Sam's wound.

"It doesn't look too bad," said Will, "though I'm no barber. Tie it up with some strips of cloth. Use the blankets if we don't have anything better."

Will turned to Gralen and pointed at the goblin, tied now to a small tree.

"We're going to have to keep a watch tonight," said Will, "to keep an eye on this thing. We can't let it go, and we really can't just kill it. Too bad we can't talk to it."

Later, in the tent, Will asked Gralen about the legend of the silver hand, and Gralen told them the story.

Sam was hit for another three points: she now has only one point left. But she hit her opponent for three also, bringing it below zero. (The raven, Gralen's familiar, helped by hitting for 1 point damage.) Gralen and Will, meanwhile, are still running towards the combat, and while Charlotte's illusion has nearly killed *her* opponent, the illusion has run its course and she was very lucky that the creature didn't make its saving roll vs. a simple, sight-only illusion. The team might want to rethink this sort of plan in the future. Especially since none of the individuals were aware of the other individuals' special abilities...

Sam couldn't afford leather armor—she was one monetary unit shy. But Charlotte, as a friend, gave her the money before they left. Always a good idea to make sure that those who can fight, can do so effectively.

Nobody here has any healing skill or powers. But Will has survival, which the Guide rules is enough to know how to put bandages on wounds. If he didn't, Sam would still be "okay". But she'd have coagulated blood all over her clothes and she and Will would be denied a special moment.

“This is what I read on the stones north of Hightown,” said Gralen. “The king of the silver hand, the father of kings, ruled a great city, and his brother ruled another kingdom. Evil

Most likely the Guide tells this story through Gralen, but there’s nothing wrong with Sandy making it up with the Guide’s approval.

creatures came from over the sea, creatures that could hear any word spoken if any wind was blowing around the speaker. The wind would carry what was said to the evil ones, who could terrorize the countryside with full knowledge of their enemies’ plans and secrets. So the king held council with his brother in a place 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 runs the risk of telling it to the wind, who then would inform the invaders.”

“So the king mashes up insects?” said Will.

“And,” continued Gralen, “he sneaks into the camp of the invaders and switches their porridge with his insect mash. When they eat it, they can no longer hear the wind. And now he and his advisors can create their stratagems without being overheard, and so they defeat the invaders.”

“Insect mash?” said Charlotte. “That’s disgusting. Wouldn’t they have noticed?”

“Well, it’s a legend,” said Sam. “Strange things happen in legends.”

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

“Not yet. There was another problem in the land. 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 died. His brother helped him here, also. He said that the screams were the screams of dragons in the earth, and that the dragons could be quieted by giving them strong mead. So every mayday he had his people bury crocks of mead in the earth to lull the dragons.”

“I could use some mead right now,” said Sam.

“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 so they do,” said Gralen. “The king’s provisions in the castle were disappearing the night after they arrived. They would eat the first night, and then the court would have to go hungry until they received more provisions, which themselves would disappear by the morning after they arrived. The king and his court would try to stay awake to find out what was happening to the food, but they always fell asleep before morning, and when they awoke the food would be 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 keep himself awake. The king did so, and discovered that a wizard was using magic to send the entire court to sleep. The king jumped out of his bath, took his sword, and defeated the wizard in mortal combat, and the court was finally able to have breakfast.”

“I’ve known people who could use a cold bath at night,” said Sam.

“What I want to know is, who is his brother?” asked Will.

“That’s a good question,” said Gralen. “Who knows? You’d have to ask the night priests, or Druids, or whoever built the monument.”

“Sleep well,” said Charlotte.

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

Gralen took the last watch, and spent it studying his books to regain his spells.

“Do we have anything we’d like to discuss with this creature?” asked Gralen when everyone else awoke and began digging through their packs for breakfast.

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

Sam regains a survival point for her night of rest. She is now at two survival points.

“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.”

Gralen sort of did learn its language in the night: he impressed “Understand Languages” as one of his spells for the day.

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

“So we can avoid it like a plague,” said Will.

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

“Funny.”

“So ask it about castles,” she added.

“Good idea,” said Gralen.

He took something out of his pockets, pinched between his fingers, spoke some words that no one understood, and ate it.

“What the hell is that?” asked Sam.

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

The goblin flinched. Then, Gralen began gesturing to it. When the goblin spoke, Gralen gestured further. He pointed east. The goblin spoke 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 of hard bread and jerky soon.

“Well,” said Gralen when he was done. “If you can trust it, it lives back west and a bit further south. There are hundreds—or at least ten handfuls—more of them. And it not only hasn’t heard of a castle, it doesn’t recommend finding the castle that doesn’t exist. Also, it wants to know when we’re going to kill it, because it wants to kill us.

Will partially untied the goblin and handed it some of their breakfast.

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

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

“He doesn’t appear to like the light that much,” said Gralen.

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

“Let him go when we get further down,” said Will. “We can’t keep him, and we aren’t going to kill him now that he’s harmless.”

“He won’t be harmless if 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 to track us down before we get back home,” said Will. “We’re not going back the way we came, right?”

THE MIST

On their third day out, the mist did rise. Before the sun reached its zenith, a fog rolled in slowly from the south. Visibility dropped to a hundred paces, and then dropped further, until they moved as ghosts within the grey light that filtered through the fog. They grabbed their blankets from the packs on the donkey, and wrapped them around their shoulders and backs for warmth. Their captive was very reluctant to go further, but Will's sword convinced it to do so.

The raven that had been so useful during the fight flew down through the mist and landed on Gralen's shoulder.

"Looks like you've got a new friend," said Sam.

"An old friend," said Gralen. "She's afraid of the mist."

"The night troll's afraid, too," said Will. "Why?"

"It's near time to stop for food anyway," said Sam. "We should climb up the next hill and see how far this mist extends, if we can, and maybe see if there's something else we should be aware of. Or even if we should just go home."

So the next time they felt a hill rising beneath their feet, they followed it upwards.

At the peak of the hill they rose above the mist. They could see tall trees rising out of a cloud-like sea of mist, and here and there other hills jutted above the fog. The sun glimmered over the mist. To the east, the High Divide rose out of the misty sea, with two rounded, white-tipped peaks due east especially prominent.

"Well," said Gralen, pointing to the mountains. "We've moved a little faster than Mistoles. There are Isaiah's Breasts."

But the mist continued rising as they discussed moving east, and soon the mountains and the breasts were only shadows in the fog.

"This may be a blessing in disguise," said Sam. "We can pass east undetected by any creatures like yesterday's."

"Then let's step up the pace," said Charlotte.

Back in the misty woods, the crackling of leaves beneath their feet took on a new dimension. The sound of their footsteps and the leaves was muffled by the thick mist. But the mist also carried noises that they didn't recognize. The chirping, and screeching, of birds or insects they never saw, and sounds like branches cracking and falling from far away.

Charlotte suddenly stopped and turned her head to the right.

"Did you hear that?" she asked.

"No," said Gralen. "What?"

"Listen," said Charlotte. "Do you smell something?"

Charlotte held up her hand, motioning them to silence. Now they all heard it: a snap and a swish deeper in the forest.

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

“Something’s moving out there. Something big.”

Charlotte’s player made her perception roll. Monks often will.

“Did you ever notice how all legends like ours start with *farmers* heading into the wilderness?” said Gralen.

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

“Yeah,” said Gralen. “A farmer would know what that was.”

“It’s probably just some bird,” said Sam. “Right?”

Then they all heard it: a loud crack that couldn’t have been more than forty paces away if they’d been anywhere but this sound-altering mist. A dragging noise, or slithering. And then silence. Then the same thing from a different direction.

Suddenly, a snake leaped out of the mist and wrapped itself around Will. He screamed. Only Sam kept her head. In one swift movement she unsheathed her sword and hacked at the huge snakelike thing hanging onto Will. It unraveled from Will and lashed at Sam.

A surprise roll was still required because, while the characters were aware that there was something out there, they had no idea what it was or where it was. It is unlikely that they were expecting tentacles of unknown origin. They did get a bonus due to being aware of something.

“What is that thing?” asked Will.

“Don’t worry about what it is,” yelled Sam, “kill it!”

Another one lashed again, barely missing Sam. Will yelled at her to get away.

“You aren’t in any shape to be fighting something like... this... thing,” he said.

“My god,” said Charlotte, “they’re slimy.”

“It’s attached to something even bigger out there!” said Gralen. “I think it’s just an arm or...”

“Tentacle,” said Charlotte. “Like an octopus.”

Gralen sent a magical bolt to the tentacle, just as Will swung his sword around and into it. His sword dug deep, nearly cutting through, and the thing, whatever it was, slithered the way it came, back into the forest.

Fans of Shannara might recognize this scene. It will be difficult to Guide a fantasy role-playing game if you are not already a fantasy fan. Besides giving you an understanding of the genre and of what your players want to see, it will also give you ideas for adventures, or one-shot scenes like this one. Don’t simply steal entire novels for your adventures. Deconstruct them into their themes and situations. You can never be sure that your players will follow the plot. Requiring them to will probably create a poor adventure. It is one thing (and perhaps gratifying) to hear your players say, “wow, this is kind of like Battlestar Galactica! I feel like Starbuck! Cool!” It is another thing entirely to hear “This is just like Battlestar Galactica but with horses and lizards and magic. That means this guy is Baltar. We kill him now.”

“Crap!” said Sam.

“Worse,” said Will. “The goblin’s gone.”

“I don’t think we have to worry about it bringing back more to attack us,” said Gralen. “It probably thinks we’re dead.”

“I’m not sure it’s wrong,” said Charlotte.

“Let’s keep moving,” said Gralen. “Just in case.”

“I think we know what everyone was afraid of,” said Sam, as they ran further east, with the mist swirling around them, Will coaxing the donkey into moving as quickly as they were.

THE FORGOTTEN ROAD

The mist was still thick in the evening when they set up camp on the top of a wooded hill. They weren't absolutely sure it was evening until the fog went dark. It was the further cold in the mist that warned them nightfall was approaching. They tried to start a fire but all available kindling was too damp, so after a cold meal they huddled closely together in their tent for warmth.

"What is that screeching?" asked Will.

"Another creature of the mist, perhaps," said Charlotte.

"I hope not," said Sam.

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

Light from the moon barely filtered through, just enough to cast faint shadows of strange flying creatures onto the canvas of their tent. They watched them, for a long time, before finally falling to sleep. Will was the last to nod off, and when he thought everyone else was sleeping he peeked under the tent, then quickly dove back into his bedroll like a child afraid of imaginary creatures. The creatures were hard to see in the misty dark, but their shadows were nothing compared to their shape, more like huge fat insects than birds.

But even he fell asleep eventually.

"I'm getting tired of wet clothing real quick," said Charlotte after they started out the next morning.

"I thought you loved getting out into the wild?" asked Sam.

Note: Sam is now at three survival points.
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"I like to see what I'm into," said Charlotte. "This mist is a killer."

"How do we even know what direction we're going?" asked Sam.

Gralen, leading the way, answered that a little bird told him.

"Can your little bird tell us how long this mist goes for?" asked Sam.

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

"That's a nice pet," said Will.

"Can it do tricks?" asked Sam.

"It's not very smart," said Gralen. "I've only been able to teach it one trick: pecking the eyes out of smart-asses."

The bird flew back through the mist and back to Gralen, chirping as it did.

"You are beginning to really scare me," said Sam.

"He says the fog only extends a little ways further," said Gralen, "although I don't really know how much that means. Probably half a day."

And the mist did begin to clear. By mid-morning it had cleared enough for them to see that the path they'd been using had become a long unused road. Even the path was long worn away. Only rarely did bits of stone mark the old road beneath it. Grass had mostly grown over them, but every once in a while a stone marker told them they were getting closer and closer to something.

"Kristagna," said Gralen, as they passed the third one. "It has to be. We'll be there by evening, if not sooner."

The trees were red and orange with autumn, and the leaves crackled beneath their feet. The mist cleared completely by noon. Climbing a hill they could look west and see the mist still there, hanging in the forest and above it. As they walked further on, the mist above the faraway trees become little more than a silver sheen, and by the time they first saw the towers to the east, the mist to the west was visible only when they climbed the tallest hills.

They walked forward, and the towers of Kristagna grew larger. Slowly the castle became visible between the towers.

"My god," said Charlotte. "Look!"

And she pointed off to the side of the old road. Half buried in the ground and grass was a small skeleton. It could have been a child's skeleton but for the slight fangs in the skull.

"There's another," said Sam, pointing a few yards beyond it.

"Don't step off the path," said Will, as everyone stepped into the forest to follow the trail of skeletons.

"Night trolls?" asked Charlotte.

"Here's a human warrior," said Sam, "it's still wearing its armor."

"And another," said Gralen.

"It always ends up badly," muttered Will, "in stories."

And he followed them into the forest just before Sam stepped out of sight.

"This was a battlefield," said Sam. "I think we know now why the Astronomers were never heard from again."

"Do you think the night trolls have taken the castle?" asked Will when he and the others returned to the road.

"It doesn't look like *anyone* uses this road," said Charlotte, "human or otherwise."

"These skeletons have been undisturbed since they fell," said Gralen. "And judging from the decomposition of the bodies and the rust on the armor, it must have been a hundred years ago, or more."

The castle moat, when they came to it, was filled with goblin and human skeletons. The water was murky and covered in moss and red leaves. The bridge to the castle's main entrance was lowered on the other side of the moat, but only half of it was there, pointing towards them like a jagged burnt arrow.

“So how do we get across?” asked Charlotte.

“I am not going in that water,” said Will.

Even Sam shuddered at the thought of sharing that moat with the dead who still lay strewn about.

ASTRONOMER'S KEEP

"If we can't swim," said Charlotte, "and we certainly can't fly, then we need a boat or we need to build a bridge."

"Isn't that a raft over there?" asked Sam, and pointed across the moat.

Across the moat, mostly submerged in the water, was a makeshift wooden raft peaking up on the far shore.

"That hasn't been here for a hundred years, has it?" asked Will.

"I don't think we can use it," said Gralen, "but we can probably build one. We certainly have enough wood here, and we've got a supply of rope."

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

"Hold on," said Will. "It'll take us half a day to make a raft, why don't we look around the castle first and see if there is any other way across this moat? I hate to say that I miss being out of the mist, but now that we're in the open again I want to be inside that castle well before nightfall."

It can be 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 in the middle of a dangerous wilderness they're going to have issues with that. Listen to them.

"Okay," said Charlotte. "Let's follow the moat."

"You and I will take the right," said Will. "You two," he said to Gralen and Sam, "take the left. And don't wander off!"

The castle was built atop a small hill, with the moat circling round it completely. Six towers of varying sizes rose above the stone walls, and the dome of another building rose slightly into view. The silence around what was once a fully populated castle was strange.

In the movies, one or both of them would certainly end up "wandering off," getting into trouble for the main character to bail them out of. In a game there is no main character, and it is generally less fun to run a game with two groups of characters doing different things. The relevant quote from our gaming circle is "Character 1: Let's split up. Character 2: Sure. We can take more damage that way."

On the far side, off to the left, a huge war engine—probably once an attack tower or ramp standing forty feet or taller—had fallen into the moat and covered most of the breadth of the water like a huge wooden wall. But it was on its side, not flat.

"I can get across that," said Sam.

"What about the rest of us?" asked Gralen. "I don't think I could even begin to scale that wall."

"We tie a couple of lengths of rope on this end, I'll carry them, tie them on the other end, and the rest of you can use it for support."

They called Will and Charlotte over, and then, after tying four lengths of rope together to make two long lengths of rope, under Charlotte's instruction they wrapped the rope around a tree and handed both ends to Sam. Sam carried the ropes 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 something else to hold onto in time.

In other words, she's a thief, and she made her "climb walls" roll (in this case at a pretty good bonus). Incidentally, she has to be really careful: she still has only three survival points.

Meanwhile, the rest of them unpacked their donkey, distributing what they could and tying the rest high into a tree.

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

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

"You can't come either," Gralen said, speaking directly to the raven. "Stay out here and watch for trouble. And stay out of it yourself."

Will looked at him.

"We do what we can do," said Gralen.

Sam tied the four ends of the rope to a younger tree on the other side, one rope high and the other low to match what Charlotte had done.

Will volunteered to go last, "just in case", so Gralen went next, gingerly holding onto both top ropes with his hands and trying—successfully—to keep his feet on the lower rope. When he stepped off of the rope, Charlotte took a deep breath and stepped on, gripping the ropes so tightly her knuckles turned white.

"Don't look down!" yelled Sam, as Charlotte began to lose her footing while looking down into the moat. "You'll get across a lot quicker if you relax!"

She struggled unsuccessfully to grab the rope her feet had been on, and landed with a huge splash in the water below. She went completely under for a second, then scrambled back up by grabbing onto the sides of the fallen war engine, bringing her head above water. She spit the slimy water out, brushed the stuff off of her face with a slimy hand, and waded across the rest of the way. The water was too deep to walk, so she had to pull herself over grabbing onto the sides of the wood.

Charlotte failed her agility roll and slipped while walking across the rope, and then failed a second agility roll to grab onto the lower rope. Fortunately, she made her evasion saving roll to avoid bouncing her ungraceful skull off of something damaging. She is still going to be wet and cold.

Gralen and Sam pulled the lower rope even lower.

"Grab onto it!" they yelled.

She spit, and said, "I'm already soaked, I might as well stay safe."

The moat here was also filled with skeletons. She had to push a few aside to get across. Gralen shrugged. Sam rolled her eyes. They let the rope back up.

"Safe," said Sam. "Just you and a bunch of dead goblins."

Charlotte was soaking wet when she crawled up out of the moat. Her tunic and hair hung down dripping. Will came across next, agilely crossing the rope bridge as if it were a real bridge. When everyone was across, they untied the ropes and pulled them across through the moat.

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

Hey, Charlotte's an engineer. A useful skill with ropes and in dungeons.

“Next time,” whispered Sam, “use it.”

By now it was mid-afternoon. The sun was beginning to move down towards the Great Mountains far to the west.

“Let's get inside,” said Will.

The plant life on this side of the moat was of a different quality than on the other side. There was more yellow in the grass, and the trees were smaller but slightly more gnarled and twisted than their taller cousins in the forest. None of them held their leaves, which were scattered loosely about the ground in red, orange, and yellow, leaving the trees stark and sharp in the afternoon light. They walked around to the broken drawbridge, passing beneath one of the front towers. Will reached out and touched the stones of the tower as they went by.

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

“ooooOOoOoOooooOoOOO,” said Sam. “Ghost castles.”

But the joke fell flat.

“I've heard a story of 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. The castle holds great treasures and magic, but anyone who enters to get the treasure and magic never comes out.”

“If they never come out,” said Sam, “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.”

“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,” said Galen.

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

“Sometimes those shadows seem alive,” said Will.

“That's because sometimes they hold people like me,” said Sam.

At the front of the castle walls they walked gingerly onto the portion of the drawbridge that remained intact, and even though they were not above water it still felt unstable and dangerous until they left it and came into the long murder hall. More dead men and dead goblins lay about the hall. At the end of twenty paces two tall doors stood open onto the

inner courtyard. The ceiling was gone. Once wood, it had fallen in and cracked and rotted beams lay atop the dead warriors and goblins.

When they arrived at the far doors, they found that they didn't stand open, they had fallen completely away, possibly battered in, possibly simply falling with age, or possibly a combination. Inside the courtyard the battle had obviously continued, and many combatants remained.

"Do we want to examine the guard towers?" asked Will.

"I think what we're looking for will be in the main castle," said Gralen. "There won't be money or magic in the towers."

"If there's anything left at all anywhere," said Sam. "What if the whole place has been ransacked?"

"Yeah," said Gralen. "It might be that everything is gone. But I think there's a reasonable chance that goblins wouldn't have taken the scholarly research, and also that they wouldn't necessarily recognize some of the treasures of a militant order."

"Any gold and silver will probably be gone, though," said Charlotte, "if it could be carried."

"Crap," said Sam.

They looked around again at the remnants of a hundred-years-old carnage. Inside the walls, the castle itself had two towers on the right, slightly larger than the towers at the four corners of the keep's walls, and a large dome over the front and center. The dome was painted black. The rest of the castle was stone. Two huge doors on the front wall beneath the dome were closed, a faded moon painted on the left, a similarly-faded sun painted on the right. A faded gold clock stood on the dome atop the castle.

"I swear that clock is the right time," said Gralen.

"It can't possibly still be running," said Charlotte. "Even if the goblins left it alone, clocks need regular care."

"Let's go see what the goblins have left for us," said Will.

He walked across the courtyard with the others following, and he pushed the main doors open. They opened with difficulty. When everybody's eyes adjusted to the lower light, they saw a small, circular room, with thin stairs circling either side leading upwards.

"No skeletons," said Will.

"But it was broken into," said Charlotte.

She pointed out the broken length of wood that had once barred the door and was now in two halves on the floor.

"Do you think we can rebar these doors?" asked Will.

"It won't be as strong as it was originally," said Charlotte, "but if we put one of the halves across the inner bucklers, it will hold against smaller... creatures."

"Okay, let's bar it and see what, if anything, has been left here," said Sam.

They barred the doors as best they could. Charlotte pushed the second half of the bar so the point of its jagged edge was partially beneath the door.

“That’ll help keep anything out,” she said. “When they push, it will apply similar force back at them.”

They took their heavy packs off and put the stuff they’d taken from the donkey onto the floor.

“Don’t leave anything important,” said Will.

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

They walked up the grand staircase and came up to a platform overlooking the front courtyard that they’d already walked through. From above it looked even more desolate, and in contrast to the beautiful forest beyond the keep’s walls.

Charlotte looked up at the clock.

“It has definitely moved,” she said. “And I’m pretty sure it’s at the right time. Look at the three hands: one for the sun, one for the moon, and one for the zodiac. The smallest hand is pointing at Virgo. The middle hand is pointing at the full moon. It’s amazing enough that it’s still running, but it’s unbelievable that it’s kept the correct time for this long!”

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

“It’s got gears inside,” she replied, “although you can barely hear them. They collect dust; they rust; birds try to build nests above them. A timepiece like this requires constant care to keep it running. The amount of care that went into the clock, compared to the amount of care that didn’t go into the castle... I would say that I don’t think the same people could have built both, but I don’t know of anyone who *could* have made this clock.”

“I think the clock’s too big to carry away,” said Sam. “Why don’t we go look for treasure.”

“We can come back later to look at the clock if you’d like,” said Gralen.

“We’ll have to,” said Charlotte.

To either side they could walk out onto the battlements through open doorways. Across one of the battlements, on the front tower, they saw burn marks. The door to the tower was charred and black. The ceiling of the dome that stood over the entrance room had tiny holes scattered throughout. They walked, single file, Gralen leading and Charlotte trailing, across the battlements and towards the blackened door. Gralen gingerly pushed the door open with his staff. Inside, in a scene they were rapidly not becoming used to, were more skeletons in disarray, but few of them were goblins. Most seemed human.

In game, your group will have a “marching order” that determines who gets the opportunity to see danger first, and who gets attacked first in a surprise attack.

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

Gralen tapped the floor with his staff. The floor was stone beneath the soot, so he stepped inside. The others followed. There were stairs leading up, and two more charred doors.

“I don’t know,” said Will, looking at one of the skeletons, “but it seems likely.”

He gently removed a sword from one skeleton’s hand and looked it over. It was mostly just the hilt, and about three inches of blade remaining, ending in a jagged break.

“This guy’s sword broke,” he said. “Look, there’s some markings on it.”

“I can’t understand it,” he added, and handed it to Gralen.

“I’ve never seen this either,” said Gralen.

“That’s interesting. It’s not the ancient tongue, and it isn’t the Druids.”

“Do you see the rest of it there?” he asked.

I’m a traditionalist. I believe that other languages seriously enhance the game experience. The characters will be seeing more of this script in later adventures.

“No,” said Will, after looking around further. “Maybe he broke it somewhere else.”

Gralen tied the sword hilt to his belt.

“Why would he be holding it here, then,” asked Gralen, more as a statement than a question.

Will shrugged.

Sam picked up another sword, which while intact was quite rusted, the leather around the hilt flaking.

“You still going to show me how to use one of these?” she asked.

“Let me find you a decent one,” said Will. “Or semi-decent, none of these swords have been cared for in the last hundred years, obviously.”

The one he chose for her was not quite as rusted.

“You can’t use it yet,” he said, “but I think we can work it into shape later.”

She took it and, having nowhere to put it, used it as a walking stick. Will winced as she did this.

“If I’d known you were going to treat it even worse than the elements, I wouldn’t have given it to you,” he said. “Give me your rope.”

He measured off a piece of rope, cut it, and fashioned it into a makeshift belt allowing her to keep the sword on her back.

The stairs leading down looked like they had been barricaded shut, from this side, though the wooden barricade was now laced with charcoal.

“They locked themselves in here, and then burned themselves to death?”

“Maybe they locked someone else out, and then that someone else tried to burn them out,” said Will.

“Christ,” said Sam.

The stairs continued upwards as well, around the curve of the tower. The door was open, and in the room, filled with papers and flasks, everything was covered in ash. There were a couple of skeletons here as well, lying on the floor, many with tattered cloth wrapped around their skulls.

Charlotte picked up one scroll of paper.

"Careful!" said Gralen, but too late. The paper tore in her hands, into two pieces and then three. She handed one piece to Gralen.

"I can't read it," she said.

"It's ancient," said Gralen. "Many of these old schismatic orders used the ancient tongue to keep their records. Some even spoke it, forbidding what they called 'vulgar' language."

He looked at another scrap.

"It looks like some sort of recipe," he said. "Sulfur, pitch, and quicklime among other things. Well, whatever it is it isn't going to taste very good."

Will looked out the window at the setting sun.

"It's going to get dark in a few hours," he said. "Unless you think there's something else here, let's go to the other tower."

"Take that flask," Gralen said, pointing to one soot-covered flask filled with a grayish liquid. "I think it's silver of some kind. Might be worth something. It's hardly piles of gold and silver coin, but it's a start. When we've scouted this place out I'll come back here and see if I can get these papers without harming them."

Sometimes when you're ransacking abandoned buildings, you've got to take your treasure where you can find it. It's not all gold coins and jewelry.

Across the south battlement, in the other tower, the door was long since busted wide open and when they walked inside, found more remnants from long-gone battle. But here there were also the desiccated corpses of small animals and birds. Will poked at one with his sword and it dissolved into dust. Others looked fresher. Everyone looked around and up. Nothing else was moving here. Up the stone stairs leading up around the walls of the tower was a grayish curtain hanging down to cover the entrance to the upper room.

"It's a spider's web," said Will, after they walked up the stairs.

Will brushed aside the light webbing and, after looking around inside carefully, he stepped inside. The others followed him. It was the upper level of the tower. A similar gossamer net hung across each of the windows. A tiny bird struggled in one, moving back and forth to eclipse the setting sun as if it were sending them signals.

Will took a dagger from his belt and cut the bird free. It stumbled in the air for a moment and then flew off.

"Aren't you the nice one," said Sam.

Will shrugged.

"Sor—" started Sam, and then she ducked and jumped at the same time as something large fell from the ceiling onto her and then fell off. The dark thing scuttled towards her on the floor. Gralen batted at it with his staff, crushing it, and then another one fell onto the floor next to

The spider gained surprise, 'chose' to attack Sam, but missed anyway.

The second one 'hit' Gralen, but it didn't *really* hit: while Gralen lost 1 survival point, he made his Evasion roll against the spider's poison.

him. They were clearly spiders, but spiders far larger than any they had seen before. Their bodies must have been half a foot across. Will and Charlotte tried to maneuver to where they could assist, but the spiders were small and they couldn't attack without risking hitting their friends.

Gralen tried to crush the second spider, but it scuttled out of the way and he ended up just slamming his staff onto the floor. Sam tried to hit it with her short sword as it tried to bite at Gralen, and her sword clanged against the floor as well.

"Gaak!"

Gralen jumped away from the scuttling thing as it bit at him, and slammed his staff down at it again, just as Sam did the same with her sword. Both attacks found their mark, splattering the spider onto the floor.

"These are the biggest fuckin' spiders I've ever seen," said Sam.

"It makes me wonder what else is waiting for us in this old place," said Will.

"What's that behind that webbing?" asked Charlotte.

There was something reflecting light against the wall, but behind a lot of webbing. Gralen, still breathing a little heavily, brushed it away with his staff.

"This is what's waiting for us," he said.

There were two golden heads, studded with black gems for eyes and green for earrings. The gold atop the heads was pounded into curls for hair.

"They look kind of familiar, don't they?" asked Charlotte.

Will took one of them from the shelf they were on, and a book flopped over onto its side.

"Are they solid gold?" he asked.

"No, they're not solid," said Charlotte. "If they were, you couldn't lift it nearly so easily."

"What are they?"

"Bookends," said Gralen.

"But who are the images of?"

"Demons? The founders? Who knows?"

"More important," said Sam, "is 'how much are they worth?'"

"Depends on how much gold and what the gems are," said Gralen.

"Duh."

"Sorry, I don't know."

Combat in *Gods & Monsters* is very pulp-oriented. Most novels don't go into the detail that pulp novels go into when protagonists fight. Where Hemingway might say "and they got into a brawl," Burroughs will detail each swing in the brawl. While *Gods & Monsters* doesn't quite do that—any single attack roll might be one, more than one, or zero actual swings—it is very similar.

She nodded and took the other one from the shelf.

"Gold is as gold does," she said. "We're going to need our bags to carry this stuff."

Will leaned out the window he'd cleared earlier.

Across the side walls it looked out over an endless forest, and to his left the High Divide loomed tall, lit by the setting sun.

"The sun's almost down," he said. "If there's nothing left here, let's go back to our packs and drop this stuff off, then go down the stairs instead of up."

"We'll need my lantern," said Gralen.

They returned down the stone stairs, past the hanging strands of spider's webbing. At the bottom more long-dead combatants waited.

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

"A last-ditch defense?" said Will.

"Hey, this guy's got his hands on something," said Charlotte. "Jesus, he's also got an arrow right through his forehead."

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

"He was crawling away," said Sam, "when he died. He was trying to push this..."

She carefully moved the skeletal arm away, scrawling a line in the dust as she did so, and then she wiped more dust away with her hands.

"It's a secret trap door," she said.

She pushed down on one of the stones in the floor, and one section of the floor shifted down slightly. Sam pushed on it lightly, and then when nothing happened pushed more firmly. It creaked, loudly, as one square flipped down, revealing a dirt stairway leading down into darkness.

"It's held by a spring," said Sam.

She peered down into the hole.

"And it's awfully dark down there."

She slid down through the trap door.

"There's nothing that I can see. Just a tiny hallway. But it's too dark to tell where it goes."

"Hold on," said Will.

He ran back to their makeshift indoor camp and grabbed the lantern. He grabbed an empty bag while he was at it.

If you're traveling into uncharted dungeons looking for gold, make sure you can get the gold out. Bags and backpacks are the most popular. Pouches just don't hold enough loot, and chests are too difficult to carry (but if you can get them out, they carry more).

Guide analogies can be downright weird sometimes. Be kind, they're thinking it up on the spot. This is sometimes called "flavor text." It doesn't always mean anything, but it adds "flavor" to the descriptions.

“Damn well better be treasure,” he muttered.

When he returned with the lantern, Sam took it down through the trap door.

“It’s a long empty hallway,” she cried back.

“Hold on, we’re coming down,” said Will.

He lowered himself down into the hole, and was followed by Charlotte and Gralen.

It was a tunnel dug out of the dirt, with stone arches buttressing it here and about ten steps down.

“Look,” said Charlotte, pointing at the dirt, “footprints, and not Sam’s.”

“I don’t think this place has been entered since the goblin wars,” said Will.

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

“Let’s follow,” said Gralen.

“I wonder why only two of them came down here,” said Charlotte as they walked along.

“Everyone stop!” cried Sam.

“What?”

“There’s a trap here somewhere. Look at the ceiling.”

Everyone looked at the ceiling. It was stone and dirt, like the rest of the tunnel.

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

She traced—lightly—her finger across dirt floor of the corridor.

“See how there’s a slight depression in the sand 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 this depression is stepped on,” said Sam.

They looked further down the thin hallway. The light from their lantern faded into the darkness.

“I don’t think we should follow this until we’ve explored the castle,” said Gralen.

“I don’t think we should follow it even after we’ve explored the castle,” said Will.

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

Charlotte took some chalk from her pouch and drew a vertical line on the walls.

Something to write on walls with is also useful, especially in mazes.

“So we know where the trap is if we come down here again,” she said to the others.

“Good idea,” said Sam.

They returned back out the tunnel and up the trapdoor into the tower.

They walked down the long hallway back to the grand entrance, where all their stuff was.

They passed several doors on either side along the way.

“Don’t we want to check these doors out?” asked Sam.

“Let’s start from the middle,” said Gralen. “More likely to be things of interest there than out here near the guard towers.”

They rolled the statue and some of the vials that Gralen had taken from the tower into their packs, and took more supplies out. Gralen took some flasks of oil out. Charlotte brought writing materials out of her pack.

“Let me make sure my lantern’s full,” said Gralen, and he did so, stuffing the remaining flasks into his pouch.

“Let’s check these large doors first,” said Sam.

They walked through the double doors opposite the entrance. The doors themselves, like the entrance doors, were stuck, but Will easily pushed them open. They were intricately carved with interlocking circles, bands, and curves, some bands occasionally ending in serpent’s heads, and some circles enclosing many-pointed stars. Tarnished silver lay green inside the engravings.

Beyond the doorway was a long corridor, with a stone wall on the right and a wall of marble arches on the left. The white marble was covered with dust and cobwebs. Everyone looked gingerly towards the ceiling and around them.

“Anyone see any more of those spiders?” asked Gralen.

“I don’t think so,” said Sam, pushing away at some cobwebs with her staff.

She cleared one of the arches so that they could walk through.

“Look,” she said, pointing at the floor.

A once-richly colored and embroidered cloth lay crumpled beneath the archway. It had once been dark blue and embroidered in gold stars. Now the color had leached away, and the dust faded what remained. When Sam poked at it with her staff, a silverfish crawled quickly away.

“There must have been curtains here,” said Charlotte.

Tiny gems were scattered on the floor around the arches, and they each pocketed a few.

“I suspect that there were hangings of some sort here,” said Charlotte, “and that’s what these gems were once in.”

They stepped through the archway, stepping over the cloth, and found themselves inside a large room filled with columns. Light shone through cracks in the ceiling and walls, producing nearly flat beams of light cutting through the dusty air. Will ran his fingers down one of the columns. It was marble, like the marble of the arches: veins of darkness twisting and curling throughout the pale stone.

Here and there throughout the columns more skeletons lay, some armored, and they had to step carefully to avoid disturbing the dead.

At the far corner of the room was a dais of black stone, and on the stone were three

elaborate white marble chairs. One skeleton lay half draped over the largest, middle throne, parts of it on the floor along with its rusted sword.

“Do you think it was the king?” asked Will.

“The Orders didn’t have kings,” said Gralen. “It might have been their leader, but it might just be that this is where the warrior fell in battle. The battle must have ranged throughout the castle.”

“All of the skeletons are human,” said Charlotte. “The Goblins must have done quite a job on them.”

“Unless they were fighting each other,” said Sam.

Next to the dais, two great arched oaken doors were partially opened. Dirt, grass, and weeds grew slightly into the deserted hall.

“This leads outside,” said Charlotte.

They stepped through the doors and were in a wildly overgrown garden. Bright purple flowers flowed from vines hanging from trees, and the trees themselves drooped purple and yellow trumpets towards the ground, weighed down by the vines. Wrought-iron posts, ten feet tall, themselves covered in vines and weeds, and shaped like tall writhing serpents, held sparkling crystal birds shaped as if they were swooping to the garden.

“Someone help me get those things,” said Sam.

“What?” asked Will.

“Hold the post steady,” she replied.

She climbed up one of the wrought-iron posts while Will held it firm, and found that the crystal robin was easily removed. Beneath it was a candle holder, covered in dirty wax.

“They’re lights,” she said.

“We should sleep here tonight,” said Charlotte. “We’ve got nightlights.”

“Too many places for things to hide,” said Will.

Sam looked up at each of the five crystal birds.

“We’ll come back later for these,” she said. “I’ll bet they’re worth something, but if we carry them around in this place we’ll break them.”

She nudged one, a little hummingbird, and it spun around on the pole.

“Let’s go back and try the other hallway,” said Will.

They walked back into the great hall, around the columns and battle, and again into the grand foyer. The other hallway, the one which led back to the secret trap door in the tower, had many doors leading off of it. While the others decided, Charlotte drew their locations as quickly as she could on her paper.

Map! You’ll learn pretty quickly that if you don’t make maps, you will get lost, and if you get lost in a dungeon you’ll die. You’ll run from one danger right into another.

The first door on their left, a simple oaken door that opened (with some force from Will) outward, opened onto stone stairs leading downwards. The stone here was simpler than

the stone of the hallway. Large, grey stones of varying shades were inset into a cement which held them together. Gralen held his lantern out over the stairs. At the bottom was another door, this one of wood bound with iron and barred with a thick wooden pole.

“Well?” asked Will.

“Let’s go,” said Gralen. “This is likely to be the most interesting part of the castle. Especially if it was never penetrated by the goblins.”

ASTRONOMER'S DUNGEON

They stepped down the thin stone stairway into the earth, Gralen leading with his lantern.

The door was barred, but when they removed the bar it was still locked.

"It feels like its barred from the other side also," said Sam. "Hold on."

She pulled a metal file from her pack, and tried to squeeze it in between the door and the wall.

"I'm trying to lift the bar," she said, "but I just can't get the leverage."

Will tapped on the door, hard, testing it.

"Here," he said. "Stand back."

He shoved, hard, at the door, bursting it open. He almost tripped over debris on the other side, and then discovered what the debris was. The lantern's light illuminated more of the now common skeletons, here partially mummified.

After Sarah failed Sam's "pick locks" roll, Tony made Will's Strength roll, which even at a penalty of three was enough to burst the age-weakened bar.

"It doesn't look like they died in battle," said Will.

"Perhaps they were simply starved out?" asked Charlotte, looking back at the burst door.

"What else is down here besides skeletons?" asked Sam.

Gralen pointed the lantern around and illuminated a long hallway running cross-ways against the entrance. The walls and floors were set with large stones, boulders of granite and occasionally dark marble, inlaid with greenish metal around the stones. The hallway was taller than the previous one, leaving a foot of space above even Gralen's head. It was only about five feet wide. The hallway curved around slightly, but by the end of the lantern's light was a door on each side, spaced eight or nine steps part.

The nearest door on the left had on it a carving of the constellation Libra, the scale of Justice, lacquered in bright blue. A little further, on the right, a door with a carving of Taurus, the bull. The bull was carved into the dark brown wood of the door and lacquered black.

"The scales or the bull?" asked Will.

"Let's try the scales first," said Gralen. "They're closer. Be careful."

Will pulled forth his sword with one hand and with his other tried pushing on the door. It opened, easily, into a small auditorium. Stone stairs led down, past oaken seats, to a head table flanked by dark marble statues of Libra on the left, and the great crab, Cancer, on the right. The statues were veined with white streaks and blood-red streaks. Seven high-backed oaken seats, ornamented with stars, seemed still to hold ceremony here. There were torch sconces around on all of the walls, each with a torch inside, and behind the table a much larger, empty scone.

"Is there anything of value here?" asked Sam.

“Not unless we can haul away these statues,” said Will. “Gralen, you got any statue-hauling spells?”

Gralen was already down at the other end, examining the statues and chairs.

“There doesn’t seem to be anything special here,” said Gralen. “I don’t know. Let’s go to the next room.”

“This thing has never held a torch,” said Sam, examining the larger sconce behind the table. She pulled on the sconce.

“Don’t—” cried Gralen, but nothing happened. Sam shrugged.

“You never know,” she said.

“No, you don’t,” Gralen muttered.

The bull door on the right opened as easily as the Justice door, and with only a little creaking. Inside, a huge glass table, held four feet off the floor by an obsidian bull that still shone in the lantern’s light, was covered with maps. The bull’s eyes were hollow, giving it an eerie vacant stare. Beneath the bull’s head, on the floor, were two brilliant red rubies.

“Here are the eyes,” said Sam, picking up the two gems.

“Put them back in,” said Charlotte.

“Be careful,” said Gralen.

Sam put the eyes back into the bull’s head. They fell back to the floor, but she caught them before they hit.

“I don’t think it’s going to be that easy,” said Sam.

Will shifted his attention from what was below the table to what was on the table. The maps were brittle, and their corners cracked at the merest touch.

“These are all maps of Highland, Byblion, and Illustrious Castle,” said Will. “It looks like they were planning an attack on Illustrious Castle before they died.”

Sam pocketed the bull’s eyes.

“It’s getting late,” said Will. “I think we need to get some sleep soon so we don’t get caught napping tomorrow if anything shows up.”

“Then let’s take a quick survey of the area,” said Charlotte. “It looks like the corridor is curving around. I’ll bet it circles back.”

“Yeah, we can always come back down here later,” said Sam.

“I’m not sure I want to,” said Will.

The next door on the inner circle had an image of a scorpion on it, and the constellation Scorpio. Charlotte marked that onto her map. The next outer door was dedicated to Sagittarius, the archer. Then another fifty or so paces down and curving in, another outer door, this one left partially open. When Gralen gingerly widened the opening with his staff and shone the lantern into the hole, they saw more tattered spider webs, and skulls

Putting things back together is often the “key” to opening hidden doors or finding secret dangers or treasures. But sometimes things just fall apart because they’re old.

and skeletal hands poking above the webbing. Beyond that some thin stairs were dug out of the dirt, going up and twisting around out of sight.

"The goat," said Gralen, pointing to the mountain imagery carved around the door frame. "I think we could easily get lost in here."

"Let's continue the survey," said Will. "We're definitely circling back around. Then we can choose which direction we want to go *tomorrow*."

A little ways down and around, another inner door, this one marked as the crab, cancer. It was oak, and when Sam tapped it with her staff it sounded thick and heavy.

There was an open entrance on the outer wall which was dedicated to Aquarius, the water-bearer. From the recesses of the twisting hallway beyond they thought they heard water and perhaps other movement, and they smelled an earthy odor emanating from it. Leo the lion ferociously guarded the next inner door, inlaid with gold with precious rubies for his eyes and tail. "Beautiful," said Sam. Another inner door, for Virgo this time, decorated not just with the constellation but with delicately painted nobility, both men and women, their chasteness apparent from the painter's care. And then they returned back to the entrance to the dungeon.

"This one's Aries, the ram," said Gralen. "I don't remember Gemini," he added. "How many doors did we find?"

"Ten," said Charlotte. "And something else isn't right. Some doors are missing."

"Well, maybe the goblins stole them," said Will.

She paused and just looked at him.

"What?" he said.

"No," she replied, "I mean there should be some doors where there aren't any. Look."

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

"It's a six-pointed star," she said, "or it would be, if there were another door *here*," and she finished the star for the inner wall, "and *here*."

She finished the star for the outer wall.

"That makes twelve," said Sam. "One for each zodiac sign."

"Let's go take a look then," said Gralen. "What symbols are missing? Gemini and...?"

Charlotte counted up on her map.

"Pisces," she said.

"Secret doors," said Sam. "Now we're talking."

Charlotte turned her map around.

"This way," she said, "to the missing inner door."

They walked back around.

"Ram to our right," said Charlotte, counting off the doors.

“Scales to our left...”

“Bull to the right...”

“Scorpio on the left...”

“Sagittarius on the right...”

“The missing door,” said Charlotte, “is on our left somewhere.”

“We’re switching to Gemini right here,” said Gralen. “Lots of twin imagery.”

“I don’t see anything,” said Charlotte. “Sam, can you see any indication of a door here?”

Sam looked over the wall. She traced her hands down the carvings of the twins and of Janus, and a two-headed giant. She frowned at a symmetric, mirror-image forest and mountain, and then retraced around the giant.

Sam looked over the wall, and made her “search” roll (the second time, meaning that it took about ten minutes. It wasn’t that hard now that they knew the door was here.

“Here,” she said, tracing around the lake and mountain in the symmetrical image. “This is the border of the door and the wall.”

“How do we get in?” asked Gralen.

“Let me see what I can do with it,” said Sam.

She put her pack onto the floor and dug into it for a long roll of leather. She unrolled it onto the floor, revealing a selection of small metal and wooden tools. She choose two fine metal wires, and began working them into the giants’ eyes.

Picking the lock turned out to be pretty hard. She failed three times before she (barely) succeeded with a roll of 5. It took her about fifteen minutes, since she went for the bonus of 1 for taking a minute per try on the first three, and then a bonus of 2 for taking ten minutes on the final try.

After about five minutes the others began pacing restlessly.

“How long do you think this is going to take?” asked Charlotte.

“Patience,” she said, without much conviction. “They really didn’t want us in here. This is one of the best locks I’ve ever seen.”

“How many locks have you seen in this way?” asked Will.

“Your mama,” said Sam.

“Huh?”

“Never mind.”

After another ten minutes, with Gralen and Will leaning against the wall discussing the merits of various bars in Hightown and Byblion, and Charlotte poring over her map, there was a soft “click” from the wall where Sam was, and she stepped back.

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

“Wow!” she said, “I got it! Damn, that was good!”

She smiled at them.

"I've never seen a lock that well made. But I got through it."

"Great," said Will. "Let's go see what they were protecting."

"Hold on," said Sam.

She took her staff and pushed the door open. It swung inside.

Nothing happened.

She tapped her staff on the floor inside the doorway. Nothing happened.

"Well?" asked Will.

"I don't know," said Sam. "That was a well-made lock. Anyone who can make a lock like that can also make some dangerous traps."

"What's inside?" asked Charlotte.

Gralen pointed the lantern into the room. There was a short initial hallway, but otherwise it was diamond-shaped, very similar to the Libra room, but without any of the seating. The door and its short hallway was on one point of the diamond.

"What are those bells?" asked Will.

Just inside the room, past the short entrance, there was a bronze bell on either side of the entryway, mounted a few feet off of the floor.

"Bells on the floor?" asked Sam. "What kind of a room is this?"

"Maybe it's a temple of some kind?" asked Charlotte.

Sam stood up against the doorway and extended her staff into the room. She tapped one of the bells with it. It rang softly, sweet and clear, in a high tone that faded slowly to quiet again. When she tapped the other, it rang just as sweetly, in a slightly lower note.

She tapped the first one harder. It rang louder, but just as clear, and faded slowly, very slowly, as if it never really faded completely but just kept going softer and softer.

"That's beautiful," said Gralen. "But it doesn't appear to be doing anything."

"What do we do next?" asked Will.

"I guess we step inside," said Gralen.

He stepped gingerly into the short entrance, and walked slowly into the room, followed by Sam, then Will and finally Charlotte.

The walls on the far half of the diamond were lined with counters with benches in front of them. On the counters were quills and inkwells, and an abacus stood on each side. On the far wall a large tapestry hung from ceiling to floor, and side to side it was eight or nine feet wide.

"It's not a temple," said Charlotte. "It's just a work room."

"Maybe they worshipped work," said Sam. "Or maybe they worshipped this tapestry."

Sam went over to touch the cloth of the tapestry. It was fine, silk-like, soft to the touch. It

was woven into an image of the castle itself, and above it in the night sky the moon greeting the sun, and between them the stars in silver. Written across the bottom of the tapestry were words in the ancient tongue: "Praeluxi Astralis Eruditio".

"What does it say?" asked Sam.

"Knowledge shines forth from the stars," said Gralen.

Sam lifted the bottom of the tapestry and hefted it in her hands.

"Much too heavy," she said. "I wish we could bring this back with us. I'll bet it would go for a *lot* of money."

"If we keep quiet about the place," said Gralen, "maybe we can come back with more pack animals."

"Good idea," said Will. "Just remember that the more we bring, the more we're going to attract the things that live down here."

"Hey," said Sam, "there's a door behind this! It looks like a safe!"

Charlotte spun around to look back at the entrance.

"There's something coming!" she hissed.

A dark shaped scuttled towards them through the entrance hall.

"Holy Christ, it's the mother spider," said Sam.

"That thing is impossible," said Will, drawing his crossbow and aiming it at the creature.

Sam did the same.

It was a huge, huge spider, the size of a dog, easily two and a half feet in diameter just for its body. It was black with a purple sheen, and its spindly, hairy black legs snapped against the wall as it started to climb up the side.

"If I hadn't seen the big ones up in the tower, I would never believe it," said Will.

"How much bigger do they get?" asked Gralen.

They all backed up against the wall as the creature crawled around the doorway, ambling sideways into the room on the right wall. Sam and Will quickly cranked their crossbows, while Gralen fumbled in his pouch for his tiny arrows.

"Do we shoot?" asked Will.

"It isn't going to stop now," said Charlotte.

"But what if we don't kill it?" asked Will.

The creature looked straight at them when they started talking, or looked like it did, and Will and Sam both pulled the triggers on their crossbows. One bolt grazed its side. It dropped to the floor and kept coming. Will hung his crossbow back onto his pack and pulled his sword. Sam dropped her crossbow and did the same, just as the creature came within biting distance. It had teeth, and a vile liquid dripped from its teeth to the floor as it bit at Will's leg. Will kicked out at the same time that he slammed down hard with his sword, barely missing the thing. It pulled back and hissed at them, while Sam and Will used their weapons as much to keep it back as to hit it. It jumped at Will, who sliced it through its eyes.

It fell to the floor quivering. Its bloated body deflated, blurbled, and went still.

"What other creatures are out here?" asked Sam.

Will wiped the goo off of his boots and legs.

"We could've used some of those magic bolts you used against the goblins," he said to Gralen.

"I know," Gralen replied, "but we might need them later as well. Sam's right: we have no idea what else is down here. And I only have the control for a few of those at a time."

"This door is locked," said Sam. "Let's see what's behind it."

She unrolled her leather strap onto the floor, once again displaying its tools. Will held the tapestry clear for her to work. After examining the lock closely for a few moments, she selected one tool and went to work. Everyone except Sam practically held their breath with expectation as she carefully twisted and turned the blade in the keyhole. After a short while she pulled another tool from her collection and inserted it into the lock at a slightly different angle.

One more deft flick of her wrist—and they all heard the click of something inside the wall beyond the locked door.

"There's no guarantee that I've done it right," said Sam, "even though I always do. You should all stand back, just in case."

"We should stand together," said Gralen.

Four rounds: it had 10 survival points. The crossbow attacks hit for 3 and 5, the creature gained the advantage but missed, Will hit for a single point but Sam missed, the creature gained the advantage but all three of them missed, Will gained the advantage and killed the creature with 3 points.

But didn't we say before that unless it kills them, it didn't hit them? Not quite: it's up to the player and the Guide how physical a successful attack is. Like the arrow that hit Sam's armor above, sometimes attacks can hit without being the killing blow. In the movie "The Lord of the Rings," Boromir takes on three arrows before he dies. The writer knew ahead of time that Boromir was slated for death. It could have been as impressive even if Boromir survived, nursed slowly back to health by Aragorn. But it would not have been impressive if Boromir always took lots of arrows to the chest and simply walked away every time.

In other words, he has enough spell slots for two spells a day, which are currently both magic bolt because he expected to be getting into fights. Still, I hope Gralen would have felt bad if the spider successfully poisoned his best friend. Beginning adventurers are rarely any match for poisonous creatures if the poison gets in.

Some say that the perfect trap takes place ten to twenty feet back from where it's set off, because it gets the *rest* of the party.

"I need someone alive to rescue my barely living body if there's a trap," said Sam.

"She's right," said Will, and then, to Sam, "no heroics."

"It's a safe, not a dragon," she replied.

They all but Sam stepped back to the door of the room, Gralen still clutching his tiny arrows. Will lifted Sam's crossbow from the floor, and loaded it along with his own.

"Watch your aim there," said Sam, as she pried the safe open, slowly, with her knife.

Inside were papers, books, and scrolls. Everyone exhaled and walked back up.

"Careful," said Sam. "It could still be trapped."

She reached inside the safe and pulled out one of the scrolls.

"It's okay," she said.

They all heard a 'thwip' as an arrow lodged in her leather jacket.

"Shit," said Will.

"Fuck," said Sam, gazing in wide-eyed wonder at the arrow sticking out of her stomach.

"Are you okay?" asked Charlotte.

"I feel okay..."

"Jesus," said Will, examining the arrow. "It didn't get through the leather."

She made her saving roll, and the Guide decided to let it hit, but hit in a way that didn't cause her any damage.

"The mechanism is probably old," said Charlotte.

"You're lucky it didn't hit you somewhere unprotected," said Will.

"I've got a thick head, too," she replied.

Will pulled the arrow out of her jacket and offered it to her.

"Memento?"

"Thanks," she said, "but I think I'd rather have gold," and she tossed it back into the safe.

Another arrow flew out and shattered against the far wall.

"Are we sure we want what's in there?" she asked.

"No," said Gralen.

Sam took her staff and poked it into the safe, being careful to stay away from the opening. She hit against all sides, and nothing more came out.

"Let's look at the scroll I've already taken," she said. "First."

"I don't understand this," said Will. "What else is in there?"

Charlotte and Gralen began pulling out the papers and poring over them.

"Most of this paper is just contracts and treaties," said Gralen. "All of it written in the ancient tongue—the same language that the tapestry's words are in."

"This one's English," said Charlotte. "It appears to be a contract—"

Gralen looked over her shoulder.

“With Dwarves. For building this dungeon, I think,” he said.

“Dwarves? That might explain the clock,” said Charlotte. “I didn’t think these people could build something like that.”

“I broke through a Dwarven lock?” said Sam. “I am hot shit!”

“Ha! Listen to this!” said Gralen, taking the contract from Charlotte. “In their ridiculously long preamble they forgive the Dwarves for working with their enemy.”

He paused and looked at it for a few seconds.

“Hm,” he said, finally, “I wonder what the Dwarves would have built for the Knights of Illustration? Another dungeon? I don’t remember anyone talking about a Dwarven dungeon in Illustrious Castle...”

“Don’t you even think about going into another wilderness,” said Charlotte.

“When we get home I’m never leaving Crosspoint again,” said Sam.

“This one’s north, remember?” said Gralen. “Anyway, before we decide where we aren’t going when we get home, we should finish here and get home.”

“Here’s a peace treaty, I think,” said Charlotte. “Some of it is in English. Looks like a peace treaty with the Order of Illustration.”

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

“Holy, shit,” said Gralen.

“What?” asked Will. “Did they really have one?”

“No. This is even more incredible.”

“A treaty with the goblin mage?”

He rolled the scroll up and put it back into its casing.

“These are spells of some kind,” said Gralen, awed. “They’re old: they’re older than mnemonic magic. But I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like them.”

“What do they do?”

“This one... this one claims to control dreams.”

“That’s really useful. Is there one in there that can kill ghosts?”

Everyone laughed.

"You don't understand," said Gralen. "These are *new*. I've never heard of anything like them. This is like finding a completely new animal or, or, or something."

"I would rather not find a completely new animal, either," said Will, looking at the bloated spider's corpse.

"What about this one?"

Charlotte handed a piece of paper to Gralen. He looked at it, scratched his head, and sat down at the counter. Charlotte looked at Will and raised her eyebrows in question. "He never scratches his head," she whispered to Sam. "He's never confused. Not about this sort of thing."

There are probably three ways to get new spells: find them, steal them, pay for them, and share them. The third one is too expensive and the last one doesn't count. One of the reasons that sorcerers go into abandoned places is to find abandoned spells. After this adventure, Gralen (if he survives) will be able to add *Dreams*, *Sleep*, *Dream Omen*, and *Dream Walk* to his spell books, although he'll have to wait until he is the appropriate level to use the latter two. Because these are older than mnemonic magic, it will take some work to convert them. But when he gets them, he'll have spells that no other living sorcerer in Highland has.

"I don't know," said Gralen. "It looks like it's in English, but it sounds nonsense. 'So the four maps to Charon were cured here of war. Ten fun games cause doom to man in his writing, creating the lament that is his fee due god. We issue in you this world of humor, you mute women known. Test semen under no fat woman gods you nurture, you who mint them the noxious musks. 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?"

"It starts out okay," said Will. "But it loses me fair quickly."

"It sounds like it ought to mean something," said Charlotte.

"Let's take what looks to be the most important stuff," said Gralen, "and lock the rest back up."

Sam helped Gralen and Charlotte load paper into their packs, while Will stepped back outside, sword drawn, and looked down the hallway.

"There's nothing *else* coming, is there?" asked Sam.

"No," he replied. "But I thought I'd better check. We really need to set up camp somewhere, and I don't like being underground like this. We could easily get trapped."

"Let's find the other secret room and then go back upstairs then," said Sam. "Maybe the next one will hold something useful."

"You mean like gold," said Gralen.

"Exactly," said Sam. "You can keep your dream spells."

They completed another circle around the dungeon.

"The only zodiac sign missing is Pisces," said Charlotte.

"I'm sure I saw some fish symbolism on the outer wall," said Sam. "Near the lion."

The engravings on the wall around the Aquarius entrance began to switch from forest to river when they passed that entrance, and then to sea, and the sea to storm. There were

whales in the sea, and great kraken in the storm feeding on the whales.

They examined the scene in silence.

“Look,” said Charlotte, finally, “the eyes of these monsters are the stars of the constellation Pisces!”

Sam touched one.

“They press in,” she said.

“Good, but could you be more careful about what you touch?” asked Will.

“Aw, I’m glad you care,” said Sam.

“Nothing’s happening when you press them,” said Gralen.

“Maybe we need to press them all,” said Sam, “at the same time. But I can’t make my hands reach them all.”

Will put his hand up to the other end of the constellation and pressed in on six of the eyes with this hands. When Sam went back and pressed the remaining ones, there was a loud click from behind the wall. One of the waves rolled over, revealing a keyhole.

“Um, Sam?” asked Gralen.

“Sure,” she said, and began unrolling her locksmithing tools again.

Sam worked at it for about a minute and then stepped back and smiled proudly.

Sam has been doing very well at picking locks today. This time she rolled a “3”, and got it on the first try.

“One more Dwarven lock down,” said Sam.

A great wind blew dust through the darkness as they opened the door, blowing Charlotte’s map right out of her hands. Sam and Will blocked their eyes; Will grabbed it as the wind blew it past him, and handed it back to her. She didn’t take it immediately, instead squinting and rubbing her eyes. Gralen was doing the same.

“Christ, I can’t see a thing,” said Charlotte.

“Where’d this dust come from?” asked Gralen. “Where’d this wind come from?”

“Good reflexes, sugar,” said Sam to Will.

She took the map from his hand and handed it to Charlotte.

The wind, cold and dry, died down, and the dust with it.

“My god,” said Will, “look at all the gold!”

Inside, the room was filled with sacks overflowing with treasure: gems, coins of gold and silver, necklaces covered in silver and gems, goblets embedded with rubies.

“This is way wrong,” said Sam. “Let’s go get it.”

“I don’t like this at all,” said Gralen. “There isn’t anything in there that should be sending a wind out.”

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

"No," said Gralen, "I came for the lost knowledge of the scholars here."

"Well, I came for the gold," said Sam. "But you're right."

She pushed her staff into the room. As it passed the end of the very tiny hallway, something sucked it out of her hand; as it went into the room it disappeared.

"Uh, crap?" asked Will.

"Shit," said Sam.

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

"What is it?" asked Charlotte.

"It could be anything," said Gralen, "but most likely it's one of two things: a spell of destruction, destroying everything that passes through the doorway, or a spell of transport, which automatically transports anything passing through to somewhere else."

"To where?" asked Sam. "Where is my staff?"

"Could be to another place somewhere in the castle," said Gralen.

"If I were them, I'd make it go straight to their dungeon," said Will.

"That'd be good," said Gralen, "because the dungeon is probably right nearby. Or it might be even more powerful, and transport to a nearby mountain peak. We can't know for sure unless we go in."

"And I don't recommend that," he added.

"Well, how do we get the treasure?" asked Sam. "God damn it, look at all that stuff!"

She took the lantern from Gralen and tried to shine it into the room.

"Huh," she said, much more calmly. "That's not right."

She moved the lantern back and forth to illuminate different things in the room.

"There are no shadows," said Sam.

"I just noticed the same thing," said Will.

"It's an illusion," said Gralen.

"Not a very good one," said Charlotte.

"You mean there might not even be treasure here?" asked Sam.

There are different kinds of illusions. Charlotte is used to a smarter kind that use the observer's mind to create small bits of believability. This is a purely visual illusion that does none of that.

"Maybe not," said Gralen. "Although except for the illusion, none of this is *easy* magic, so it seems like a lot of work to go for just a red herring."

"Let's toss some rope through," said Will.

"We gotta be careful with this," said Gralen. "You saw how it sucked her staff through. We don't want to lose all of our rope."

Will cut off a five-yard piece of rope with his dagger, and tossed one end down the

hallway, holding tightly to the other end.

It flopped beyond the illusion, and fell to the ground. They heard the rope hit the ground on the other side.

“What the fuck does that mean?” asked Sam.

“Maybe it only likes eating wood,” said Will.

“I’m not touching that line with a, um, ten foot pole,” said Sam.

“Good,” said Will.

He pulled the rope back out.

“It looks perfectly fine to me,” he added.

“Give me your staff, Gralen” said Sam.

“My staff?” he asked, holding it away from her.

“Okay,” she said, “fine.”

And she took a dagger from her belt and tossed it through the hallway. It went behind the illusion and they heard it clatter against stone and fall to the stone floor.

Gralen poked his long wooden staff up the hallway. When it went past the illusion, nothing happened. It didn’t pull away; it didn’t disappear; he could pull it back out again. Sam

At some point around here one of the players is going to make the point that this is getting needlessly suggestive.

grabbed it from him and tossed it through. They heard it clatter on the other side and then it bounced back half visible on this side of the illusion.

“I think whatever the trap was, it only worked once,” she said, when it came to a rest.

“That seems pretty stupid,” said Gralen.

“Maybe they only expected one person to try to rob them,” said Sam.

“Or maybe we don’t really understand what was happening,” said Charlotte.

“Whatever,” said Sam. “I’m following that staff.”

“Hold hands,” said Will.

She looked at him.

“Just in case,” he said.

They walked, hand in hand, through the illusion, and found themselves on the other side. Sam picked up her dagger. Gralen picked up his staff. Beyond the illusion the hallway forked into three halls, each lined with swords, spears, or maces.

Will examined one of the spears down the middle hallway.

“They’re in pretty good shape,” he said, “for their age. But you wouldn’t want to trust them in combat. Wood needs to be cared for to keep it strong.”

“This all was a whole lot of trouble to protect some weapons,” said Gralen.

"I preferred the illusion," said Sam.

"There's nothing special about these at all," said Will. "I mean, there are a lot of weapons here, okay, and I'm sure it cost a pretty penny to acquire them, but..."

"It still seems like overkill, right?" said Gralen.

"Yeah," he replied. "These are perfectly normal, serviceable, but nothing special that I can see."

"Then we look for yet another secret door?" asked Sam.

"Where?" said Gralen.

The walls here were different from the walls in the main hallway. There were no engravings. The walls were made of large stones set in some form of pebbled mortar. Racks were embedded in the walls to hold the various weapons.

"It could be one of these hooks..." said Sam, "maybe."

"What, we try pulling on them all?" asked Gralen.

"What else?" said Sam.

"Okay, let's do it."

They tried pulling, twisting, and pushing the various hooks holding the weapons. The hooks were well made; none broke. But no secret doors slid open to reveal great treasure, nor to reveal anything else. Nothing happened.

"Give up?" asked Gralen.

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

Sam gave Will a look.

"I thought you wanted to give up too?" she said.

"I want to go home rich," he replied. "We're here, now is not the time to give up."

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

After a few minutes, Sam yelled out, "I found something!"

And then a few seconds later, when the rest of them rounded the corner to join her, they heard a faint "crap" and she crumpled to the ground, her locksmithing tools clattering on the stone floor next to her. The small bag she was holding fell away from her hands, and jangled as it hit the ground. Something shiny was barely visible inside the lip of the bag. A hole had opened in the wall.

Will ran towards her.

"Wait!" yelled Gralen, but Will ignored him.

Gralen held Charlotte back.

"Don't go yet," he said. "We can't know what the trap is. It looks like it might be gas."

Will lifted Sam in his arms and carried her back to the end of the hallway, depositing her next to Charlotte and Gralen.

He rolled a 4 on his Health roll to avoid the effects of the gas. He needed 6 or less.
--

"I feel really tired," he said.

"You probably just breathed sleep gas," said Gralen.

"Oh," he said, and sat down on the ground next to Charlotte.

"Stand up," said Charlotte. "Keep moving."

"We should move down one of the other hallways," said Gralen, "or back out of the room entirely."

"Here, I'll help," said Charlotte, as Will prepared to lift Sam up again. They dragged her around the corner into the hallway filled with swords, then lay her down again.

"She seems to be okay," said Charlotte. "She's breathing, anyway."

"What the hell are we doing out here?" asked Will. "I mean, what did we think we were doing?"

"Gold and knowledge," said Gralen, "we never said it was going to be easy."

"Easy?" said Will, "we've been trailed by orcs, attacked by huge spiders, shot at by people who've been dead for a hundred years, gassed by the same people, and almost transported to god knows where. Yeah, I never expected it would be easy, but what's next?"

"Next would be when the dragons burst out of the earth looking for mead," said Charlotte.

"Ha, ha."

Will took the cork from his water bag and poured a little on Sam's face.

"Giving her a bath?" asked Gralen.

"Trying to wake her up," said Will.

"Oh."

"Well, we've got to do *something*," he said.

He started examining the swords hanging on the wall of the hallway. After about ten minutes of looking at, choosing, and hefting swords, he chose one and kept it.

Gralen studied some of the notebooks they'd taken from the other safe, shaking his head in wonder and occasionally checking Sam for a pulse. Charlotte drew this room into her maps, and annotated the map with notes about what they'd seen in each part of the castle.

After about fifteen minutes of this, Sam lifted her head and dazedly looked around.

"What are you guys all hanging around for?" she asked.

"We're waiting for you to wake up so we can tell the dragons it's okay to come out," said Will.

“Huh?”

“How are you feeling, Sam,” he asked.

“I think I feel fine,” said Sam.

“You shouldn’t really open things that could be trapped without waiting for us,” said Gralen.

“I can buy that,” said Sam.

“But I found some coins,” she added. “Um... I must have dropped them. Let’s go back and take a look at the gold.”

She wiped her cheeks with her hands.

“Why is my face all wet?” she asked.

“Here,” said Will. “This is an even better sword. It still needs to be fixed up, but it should last you a good long time if you don’t use it as a walking stick.”

They walked carefully back towards the hole in the wall, and examined the bag Sam had dropped. It wasn’t gold, but it was silver—“probably a hundred” silver coins, “maybe more!” said Will. “What else is in there?”

Sam slipped into the secret hole, and returned with another bag that did contain gold coins, and another full of silver. They examined the coins.

“I’ve never seen money like this,” said Will.

“It’s all astrological,” said Charlotte. “They must have had them minted themselves.”

There were also larger bags filled with powders, spices, and dried plants. One bag contained nothing but a large rock, heavy and blackened. There were jars of feathers, horns, teeth, and bones. Insects and insect parts, lizard tails, and animal hair.

“No idea,” said Gralen in response to the questioning looks of the others. “But I think it safe to say that most of these are magical ingredients. Let’s close this up and we can come back with a wagon later.”

Will pocketed a tiny bag of cinnamon, Gralen a jar of horns. They walked back through the illusion of the gold and jewel-covered room, and went back upstairs to the entrance hall.

The bags each contain a hundred coins, so they now have two hundred silver coins and one hundred gold coins. That’s a total of about 1,200 to 2,200 monetary units, depending on how much the coins are worth back in Crosspoint.

A LONG NIGHT

“We need to secure this room,” said Will.

“Take these spikes,” said Charlotte, “and jam them into each door. That should keep the doors shut.”

“Well,” she added, “unless they come in with a battering ram.”

“They did once,” said Will.

Will and Sam sparred—Sam using her new sword—after they set up “camp” inside the abandoned castle. Will was clearly skilled at swordplay, and he was teaching Sam different ways to block. He had her moving slowly through each move.

“Yes,” said Will, “like that. Now, let’s go through it again, just a little faster.”

“This is silly,” said Sam, moving in slow motion, “I feel like I’m dancing.”

“Good,” said Will, “because that’s what you’re doing. It’s just like a dance, it has all the moves, you just don’t know what your partner is going to do.”

“I always know what my partner is going to do,” said Sam.

Gralen and Charlotte pored through the scrolls and papers they’d found, Gralen scribbling methodically into his own notebook as they talked.

“The way I see it,” said Charlotte, “there are three things we can do tomorrow. Explore the dungeon, explore the castle, or explore that tunnel we found.”

“The only useful things we’ve found have been in the dungeon,” said Gralen.

“The worst creatures too,” said Charlotte. “I want to try to find the backside of the clock. Just to see how they did it.”

“But we can’t take the clock back,” said Gralen.

“You got your knowledge, I want mine,” she replied.

“Fair enough,” said Gralen.

He extinguished the lantern.

“It’s dark,” said Will.

“Would you rather be outside?” asked Sam.

“Maybe,” said Will.

“Quiet!” whispered Charlotte. “Look up! Look at the stars!”

The dome above their heads was now a dark, starry sky. Each of the constellations of the zodiac shone in a band around the edges of the ceiling. They could also, in the still of the night, now hear very faintly the ticking of the great clock on the other side of the ceiling.

The floor was hard and cold despite their blankets, and, tired as they were, they drifted fitfully off to sleep one by one. Sometime in the night Charlotte awoke from a dream of being locked in a room with someone else trying to get in. In the twilight between

sleeping and waking, she quickly realized that the dream was real. The bar across the main doors was rattling. More than rattling, it was cracking. Someone—or something—was trying to get in and doing a good job of it.

“Wake up!” she hissed, pushing Sam awake, and then kicking at Will and Gralen. “Wake up!”

Now all of the doors were rattling, and loudly.

“What the hell’s out there?”

They all rushed to dress and arm themselves, Will and Sam putting on their armor and drawing their swords.

“Jesus,” said Gralen, “what can we do?”

“We leave,” said Will. “There are some places up the stairs that we can more easily lock ourselves into—and more easily get out of if we need to.”

“Grab everything,” he added. “We may not be coming back.”

They rushed, as well as they could lugging their supplies, up the grand staircase in the dark, and moved out to the battlement where the moon lit the sky and the ground. They dropped their things and looked out over the wall and to the outer wall. The full moon was high above their heads, and Aquarius bore his water above the horizon.

Will leaned over the edge of the parapet.

“There’s something,” he said, “but I can’t really see it. It might be goblins, or it might be human.”

“Or anything in between,” added Sam.

“Yeah,” said Will. “Or it could just be animals.”

“Don’t you see something on the far walls?” asked Gralen.

“They’re climbing across,” said Charlotte.

Charlotte, as a Half-Elf, has night vision.

“They must be swimming across the moat.”

“That’s disgusting,” said Sam. “That thing’s full of dead people.”

“Dead people and dead goblins,” said Will. “Maybe goblins don’t care about dead things in their nightly swim. Come on, let’s find a place to hide for the night.”

“The tower?” asked Gralen.

“Preferably some place we can get away if we have to,” said Will.

“What about the place with the secret tunnel?” asked Sam.

“Perfect.”

Charlotte glanced at the clock as they left.

“We may not be coming back after all,” she said softly.

They ran through the southwest tower and out its other door into the southeast tower, and then down the stairs to that tower’s first floor.

“Block that door that leads outside,” said Will to Sam. “I’ll go block the doors in the larger room. That will give us a lot of extra time if they try to break through those to get in here.”

“Why don’t we just leave right now?” asked Charlotte.

“I agree,” said Will. “We *are* going to leave right now. But we don’t know where the tunnel leads; it might not lead anywhere. We may have to return. And anything we can do to slow them down helps us.”

“Gralen!” she cried. “The sword! Look at your sword!”

“I haven’t got a—” said Gralen, and stopped when he saw the broken sword he’d tied to his belt. It now was full: a glowing green blade extended from the hilt. Gralen pulled it out from his belt, and it threw an eerie green glow over the tower room.

The Guide took pity on Sam, and let her player make a health roll to regain a survival point, even though the night’s rest was interrupted. On a roll of 5, Sam gains another point, bringing her to four survival points. Gralen fails his roll, and does not regain a point; he remains at four survival points.

The door to the tower slammed open and a thing rushed in, a creature not of flesh but of bone, half the height of any of the four heroes, rounded skull with small fangs sitting on a skeletal body draped in the tattered remains of armor. Will swung his sword around, shattering the tiny skeleton’s skull. Faceless, it thrust at Will with its own rusty sword, but Will parried, and smashed again at the skeleton. This time he shattered the skeleton’s ribs and backbone, and it fell to the ground.

A dry stench burst in upon their senses as the small creatures of bone and straggly hair, dirty and mossy, poured through the doorway. Some were clad in animal skins, some with nothing, and some dripping with watery weeds.

“Catch this!” Gralen called to Will, and tossed the sword. Will sheathed his own sword and grabbed the glowing one out of the air by the hilt.

He made an Agility roll to catch it.

Charlotte and Sam had already pushed the door open and were rushing down.

“Come on!” they cried, and Gralen followed, with Will rushing after him.

Will tried to slam the trap door shut as soon as he was through, but a skeleton already had its arm in. Will pushed with all his strength and the bony hand fell twitching to the dirt stairs, bouncing down to the floor.

The door was shut, but shook with a heavy, powerful pounding.

“I have an idea,” said Sam.

“Run like hell?” asked Gralen.

“Remember the trap?” she replied. “We can trigger the trap right on top of these things. *Then* we can run like hell.”

The pounding continued, and the trap door began to give way.

“I love this idea,” said Gralen. “Do you love this idea, Will?”

“It’s a beautiful idea, Gralen,” said Will.

“All right,” Sam said, “let’s set us up the trap!”

Sam pushed them down the hallway, measuring out a coil of rope as she went.

“Come *on!*” she cried.

They crossed the trap by leaping across, ducking the ceiling as they leapt. Sam went first, and then Gralen, then Charlotte. Will remained at the trap door, blocking it shut. Sam used some broken beams to quickly constructed a makeshift platform at the edge of the trap. She tied the rope around one of the legs, and carefully placed a large rock on top.

“It’s got to be big,” she said.

“Will, get the hell over here!” she cried, and he stopped blocking the door and ran across the trapped floor.

“Watch your foot, big guy!” Gralen yelled to Will as he leapt across the narrow and low hall.

“We need to get as far away as we can before we pull that rope,” said Sam.

They raced down the hallway and around a slight curve and came smack up against a door. Gralen tried to open it.

“It’s locked.”

“We’re never going to get the door unlocked in time,” said Charlotte.

Sam cranked her crossbow up. Will grabbed it away from her.

“We can’t fight our way back through them,” he cried. “Unlock the goddamn door! And yell when you’re done.”

Will ran back out the door and leapt to the other side of the trap. Outside the range of Gralen’s lantern, the glowing sword provided an eerie green light. He fired his own crossbow up into one of the holes in the rapidly failing trap door, hung it by his back, and then aimed Sam’s at the door.

He fired another crossbow bolt into the door and reloaded, but the creatures burst through and he tossed Sam’s crossbow down well behind him. The rune-covered sword glowed blue as he raised it in an arc trying to slice the skeleton coming through the door.

“I will not die,” he chanted in a whisper, “until I have completed the task I have set for myself.”

The tunnel was cramped and damp, which was to Will’s advantage. Only one skeleton could attack him at a time, as long as he backed up slightly when one fell through. The glowing sword seemed to want to guide him towards fighting, and he wasn’t sure he trusted that. While he was sorting this out, a skeleton’s rusty sword nearly poked right through his armor. The thing tried again, and he parried it, the glowing blade slicing right through the skeleton’s spine. It clattered to the ground, but that only left room for another one to step down. It tried to skewer Will with its aged

If they were using spears, they are small enough that two could attack him at once.

weapon, but Will flipped it out of the skeletons bony hands and sliced the skeleton in half like its predecessor.

And still another one fell through.

“Hurry up guys, these things just keep on coming!” he cried back at the others.

Sam was fitting her tools to the door’s lock about the same time Will destroyed the first goblin skeleton.

“Get back,” Sam told them. “I need room to work.”

Gralen and Charlotte stepped back up the tunnel so they could see Will fighting, Gralen readying his magical arrows. When Will killed his second skeleton, Gralen muttered some words that Charlotte didn’t recognize, and a tiny bolt of red flame sped from his left hand towards the end of the hallway. It zipped past Will and exploded into the tattered skeleton that had taken the previous skeleton’s place. Will slammed down with the glowing blade and sliced the skeleton’s wobbling, grinning skull in half, and it clattered to the ground twitching.

Sam was cursing and banging on the door as much as she was trying to pick its lock.

Will parried a blow from the tattered thing trying to hit him, and it parried his. A second time, and he almost got through its guard, and as it raised its sword for its own attack, Gralen fired a second magic arrow, which exploded against the creature’s skull in a burst of light. It fell to the ground.

“We’re ready!” cried Sam. “Get your ass over here now!”

The remains around Will were looking like another battlefield, with the skeletons of four goblins lying dead—a second time—around him. Another gleaming-eyed thing stepped jerkily into view. He sliced the glowing sword down across it, and it also crumpled to the ground. And then he turned and ran. The first skeleton tripped over the pile of bones that

Will’s fighting prowess had created, and then picked itself up and followed after him, other goblin skeletons following behind. Will jumped over the makeshift trap that Sam had created and when he was a good five paces beyond it, she pulled on the rope.

The piece of wall thudded onto the ground. They held their breath, and watched, until Sam yelled “move, goddammit!” and they turned and ran just as the roof caved in above the bony goblins giving chase. They ran back around the corner and through the now open door, further into the darkness.

On Sam’s first attempt to pick the lock, Sarah rolled an 18—she needed a ten or less. On her second attempt, she rolled a 19, and with a penalty of 2 that brought it to 21. Things are not looking good for picking the lock at this point.

It took her four attempts to pick the lock—and if she hadn’t successfully picked it the fourth time, she probably would never have, what with the penalty of 2 for every successive attempt. Her fourth roll was a four, with a penalty of six making it just barely at the ten or less she needed. Meanwhile, Will spent six rounds against the skeletons (and is down by four survival points). And then he had to make an Agility roll to successfully jump over the trap she made.

Here she had to roll vs. her “Locks & Traps” to see if she did this right, although in this case it was a pretty simple trap and she had a bonus of 4 to the roll.

THE GREAT ESCAPE

The long tunnel ended perhaps an hour later. They ran when they could, and walked, crouched, when it became too cramped. In some places the tunnel had almost caved in, the dirt ceiling sagging inwards, piles of dirt and stones on the floor. The tunnel sloped upwards slightly at first, and then circled upwards quickly towards the end.

At the end of the tunnel was a trap door leading upward.

“It’s stuck,” said Sam. “I think something’s blocking it from the other side.”

“Out of the way,” said Will.

He shoved against the trap door in the ceiling as well as he could, slowly moving the door up until something slid off it and it moved more easily. They all four climbed up into the fresh air above. The full moon shown through the wall slats of the building that they had entered. There was little of the roof left, and the stars above shone clearly in the night sky. A huge sound of wings fluttered, and then bats flew around them and into them, and were gone out of the empty roof.

A roll vs. his 15 strength produced a five, successfully bashing his way through the blocked exit.

“Dammit,” said Sam, “where’s my weapon?”

“Oh,” said Will to Sam. “Here’s your crossbow.”

“Ah. Thanks.”

She paused.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Just scratches,” said Will. “Once you get over the fear, they aren’t that powerful. And the sword sure as hell helped. This was not your average abandoned castle.”

“How many abandoned castles have you been in?”

“Well, there’s Illustrious Castle,” he said.

“Judging from what we’ve read,” said Gralen, “I’m not sure you’ve really been in it, or at least in all of it.”

“Oh, God,” groaned Will. “Let’s get out of *this* expedition before you go planning *another* one.”

“I’m not planning anything,” mumbled Gralen. “I just want to get home.”

“Then let’s get out of here,” said Will.

He carefully pushed open the dilapidated door of the small building they were in. The moon had nearly set below the horizon, and the stars were alone in the sky. The building they came out of was a small, one-room shack, now tilted heavily to the side; it had been built on a terrace on the side of the mountain. Below them, they could see another terrace with more dilapidated wooden buildings. Charlotte thought that she could see the castle far down the mountainside.

“It looks peaceful enough from up here,” she said.

Wheat and rye grew wild around them. When they clambered down the overgrown path to the next terrace, they found grapes on fallen fences, hyssop growing between them, and below that nasturtium hung from apple trees, and squirrels and other small animals put their heads up at the sound of metal and humans and rushed away, apples in their paws and mouths.

Gralen guided them down the mountain, west and north. As the steep hills turned to low hills at the bottom, Gralen’s raven flew out of the trees and landed on Gralen’s shoulder, screeching.

“I missed you too,” said Gralen to the bird.

“If we had our donkey again to carry all this stuff,” said Charlotte, “I could kiss it.”

They heard a braying a few yards away.

“Pucker up,” said Sam.

HOME TO HIGHTOWN

They walked northwest all night until they could walk no more, then they made camp on a hill and slept until late in the afternoon. They awoke groggily, their tent warmed from the afternoon sun.

Will is now down only three points instead of four.

Gralen looked back southeast. The sun shone through the trees in beams of dust-filled, golden light.

“It’s hard to reconcile this beauty with what we’ve left behind,” he said.

“All I want to do is put more distance between us and that castle,” said Will. “We can admire nature’s beauty later. We’ve a week before we’re north of the road.”

They continued their trek northwest, following the foothills the rest of that day and the following day. As the shadows grew long towards evening, Charlotte matter-of-factly interjected into their conversation, “there’s something in the woods. I’m not sure how many, but there are at least a few. I’m pretty sure they’ve heard us as well.”

Will is now down by only two points.

“Load your crossbow,” said Will to Sam, as he readied his own, “and make sure your sword is also ready. All of you, follow my lead.”

“We’re going to fight them again?” asked Sam.

“We’re going to run away,” said Will, “but if they attack us, we’ll be ready. Let’s keep away from areas where an ambush can occur. And if we can lose them, we will.”

“Move quickly but surely,” added Charlotte. “And don’t look nervous.”

Gralen put his hand in his pouch and retrieved his tiny arrows.

Five goblins, like the living ones they’d seen before, stepped out of the forest to their right.

“Crap,” said Will. He raised and fired his crossbow. Sam did the same, and Gralen muttered his ancient words.

Will’s quarrel found its mark, and the goblin fell to the ground. Sam’s missed, but the magical bolt from Gralen’s tiny arrow felled another goblin. Will and Sam both dropped their crossbows and readied their swords, but the goblins turned face and ran, dragging their fallen friends with them. Sam readied to chase them down, but Will put his hand on her shoulder.

Dropping crossbows is not good for them, but it is faster than hanging them back on your pack.

“We go the *other* way,” he said. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

They retrieved their weapons and continued on, even as it grew dark. Gralen whispered to the raven and it flew high into the air and back the other direction. It returned a few hours later.

“The night trolls kept going, too,” said Gralen. “They didn’t follow us.”

“Good,” said Will, “then let’s camp here.”

Through the next two days they walked through the forested foothills of the High Divide, until late afternoon of the latter day they heard galloping coming towards them through the vague path in the trees that they followed.

Two more nights puts Will back at maximum survival points.

“Hide,” said Will, and they did their best to hide behind trees. Will and Sam also drew their crossbows.

Two horses came into view rushing towards them. One was a burnished red in color, the other glossy black with a white patch on its forehead.

“Riderless horses,” said Will.

“Wild horses?” asked Sam.

“No,” said Will, and he lay his sword and pack to the ground quickly. When the first horse rushed past, he jumped onto the mount and grabbed its reins. He both calmed it and sped it on to herd the second horse to a stop. Then he led the one and rode the other back to the group. They were strong, well tended animals.

Will made his Equestrianism roll. (And Will’s player and the Guide are both fans of the musical “Hair.”)

“They’re friendly enough,” he said. “They were just scared.”

He patted the animal on the neck, and reluctantly dismounted.

“Too many people here can talk to animals,” said Sam.

“Oh, I can’t talk to them,” said Will. “It’s just pretty obvious that they were running from *something*.”

“Running from *what*?” asked Charlotte.

Will gazed ahead into the forest.

“I don’t know,” he said.

Gralen sent his raven up into the air with a whistle. It returned a few minutes later.

“There are vultures gathering a long, long ways up,” said Gralen.

“Everybody keep alert,” said Will. “I have no idea whether there might be some kind of night troll that uses horses, but I doubt that these horses were ever owned by such creatures. Man or monster, whoever is up there is likely to be skittish.”

They reached the vultures at the end of the day. Five dead goblins had just begun to be picked over by the birds.

Halfway through the next morning, coming over a rise, they spotted a cottage of logs and thatch nestled in the hills. A log fence enclosed a plot of land around the cottage. A tiny stream ran through the enclosed land.

“Who the hell would live down here?” asked Gralen.

“Ignore it?” asked Sam.

“This may be who owns these horses,” said Will. “We should find out and return them.”

They turned east towards the house.

“Look,” said Will, after they’d come close to the fence. He pointed downwards. “These prints are from these horses.”

The gateway to the fenced-off land was flanked by two barrels, each filled with black dirt and planted with brilliant red and orange flowers. Blue flowers, like the wild ones in the castle’s garden, grew around the cottage walls. They knocked at the gate and yelled a greeting, and hearing no answer opened the gate and led the horses onto the path inside and towards the cottage. The doorway on the cottage was a good eight feet tall, making even Gralen seem dwarfed standing next to it.

“Let’s tie them up and leave,” said Gralen. “Who *would* live out here?”

“Who would *trespass* out here?” they heard a gruff voice yell.

A tall, dark-haired man stepped with a heavy burden around the house. He stood over seven feet tall, wide-shouldered, and carried a small deer carcass. A large knife hung in his belt, and one hand held three spears.

This was a random encounter that the Guide fleshed into a full encounter. Depending on how the players handle it, it could lead to further adventures. The encounter chart for the deep forest did not give any detail except the fact of the encounter and the species of the encounter. Everything else is the Guide’s fault, made up on the spur of the moment.

“We meant no harm,” said Will. “We found these horses yesterday, and they appear to be yours, so we were returning them.”

“Oh,” the huge man replied, “but you can’t be too trusting out here.”

“They were running like the devil,” said Will. “May we ask what happened to scare them?”

“Yeah,” said Sam.

“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? Those things are all over the place down here,” said Will. “We saw five of them dead yesterday afternoon. Was that you? How did you beat them?”

“You may have discovered that a strong stand can send them packing,” said the man, “at least as long as they don’t have an orc leader.”

As they talked, he threw some rope over a tree branch, and hung the deer up by its feet.

“Come inside,” he said. “You have traveled a great distance, and must be thirsty, hungry, and tired.”

“Uh,” said Will.

“Good god yes,” said Sam. “I’m Sam. These are William, Gralen, and Charlotte.”

He looked them up and down carefully, and then answered,

“Burwell Cooper. Step inside while I take care of Red and the Pirate.”

Burwell led the horses around the back of the house.

"I don't like this," said Charlotte.

"He offered us food and drink," said Sam. "I'm inclined to accept. Don't be rude, step inside. If we see a bunch of dead bodies hanging from hooks, we can run away."

"I was inclined to stay also until you said that," said Will. "The horses have been well-treated. Anyone who treats their horses well can be trusted, my father says, no matter what their other faults."

He opened the door slightly and peeked inside.

"It's four against one," said Sam. "Why worry?"

"It was five against one against the goblins, I think," said Will.

"Are there dead bodies hanging from hooks?" asked Sam.

"Yes," he said, and stepped inside.

"Huh!" said Gralen.

Sam, Charlotte and Gralen carefully stepped into the cabin. There were no bodies hanging from the walls: there were deer heads. Antlered deer heads stood over every door. The other doorways were also sized for Burwell.

"We're like dwarves in here," said Sam.

They heard some rummaging in the back, metal against metal and wood, and liquid pouring.

"Who *would* build a house out here south of the road?" asked Charlotte.

"Someone strong enough to keep it," said Sam.

"Welcome, friends," said Burwell as he entered from the back. He fit comfortably and made the doorway look normal with his own size. He seemed much happier now, and he had a huge barrel over one shoulder, and in the other hand carried a platter of bread and cheese and a single huge tankard. The barrel sloshed as he walked.

"A snack until our meal is ready," said Cooper. "And a drink to the safety of friends in tight places!"

He filled the tankard with the brown liquid from the barrel, took a long drink from the tankard, and passed it to Will. It smelled and looked like beer, and in fact it smelled like good beer, and that made him very thirsty, so he shrugged and drank, and handed the tankard to Sam. They passed the beer around, and Cooper tore off some bread and sliced off some cheese and ate it.

"That really hit the spot," said Will. "We've been drinking nothing but water since we came out here."

Sam dug into the bread and cheese, and when Cooper said nothing about it, the rest of them also did. It was much better than either the week-old bread or the dry cheese that they had brought with them.

"What brings you to the southern forest?" asked Cooper after another long drink of beer.

Will grabbed the tankard to wash down his food. It was empty, so while he was filling it

Charlotte answered.

“Tracking down rumors of an old castle,” said Charlotte.

“Mmm,” he said.

“We found it, too,” said Sam, “but only after fighting night trolls and strange things in the fog.”

“You came through the mist?” said Cooper. “I hope that whatever you found was worth that.”

“I don’t think so,” said Will. “The creatures within the mist were unimaginable. It was like hell come above ground.”

“That’s a good description,” said Cooper. “The mist is a different world, a baser world. And it grows and falls with the moon. If you just passed through a week ago, you went through the mist at its strongest.”

Gralen looked up.

“So that’s what happened to Mistoles,” he said. “He went through on a full moon also.”

“We found a lot of dead bodies in the castle,” said Will. “Long dead. And a few coins. If you’d like one, you can have one,” and he tossed a gold coin to Cooper.

Cooper caught it out of the air, looked at it, and flipped it a few times.

“What is the image?” he asked.

Charlotte held out her hand, and he handed it to her.

“That’s the ram,” she said. “The constellation, Aries.”

She handed it back to him.

“Ah!” he replied. “I thank you, then.”

“What brings you to live down here?” asked Sam.

“Sometimes a man has to live on his own,” said Burwell.

“You can’t get more on your own than this,” said Will.

“Don’t you miss people occasionally?” asked Charlotte.

“I wouldn’t have invited you inside if I didn’t,” said Burwell. “But I do travel north to visit my remaining friends on occasion. I do say, those occasions are less and less as I grow older. A man can live quite well with no interruptions.”

“But isn’t it dangerous down here all on your own?”

“True, no man can live completely by their own wits, south or north,” Burwell replied, “and I have my companions here, although,” and here he raised his voice, “some of them cannot be trusted in a fight!”

Horses somewhere outside whinnied, and he laughed and stamped his feet and took another long drink. Sam took the next one out of turn.

“Too many people,” she muttered.

They began to smell the aroma of fresh bread from beyond the back door. They continued to pass the beer around, but left the cheese and bread alone.

“What are the night trolls?” asked Will. “And how come they can come out in the day down here?”

Burwell laughed.

“What a strange question,” he said. “Why couldn’t they come out in the day down here?”

“That’s why they’re night trolls, isn’t it?” asked Will. “Don’t they turn to stone in the day?”

“They certainly prefer the night if they can help it,” said Burwell, “and bright sunlight hurts them, but I don’t recall ever seeing one turn to stone. Perhaps there are different races further north that I’ve not heard of.”

“I’ve heard of a town called Stone Goblin that has such a goblin in its town square,” said Gralen, “though I’ve never seen it myself.”

Burwell scratched his bearded chin, and said, “Stone Goblin? I know that name.”

“It’s up the river from Black Stag,” said Gralen. “Have you been there?”

“No,” replied Burwell, “but I’ve a friend who, I’ve heard, has moved there since I last saw him. He shares your name, friend William.”

“We have some intention of going up that way,” said Gralen. “Or at least, one of us does.”

“Well, if you see Will of Stone Goblin, give him a greeting from Burwell Cooper,” said Burwell. “And tell him of your adventures, he’s a traveler from old himself.”

“Well, I don’t think we’ll be doing much traveling again, I’ll tell you that,” said Will. “Not like this, anyway.”

“That’s a smart choice,” said Burwell. “I recommend it. But if you are called, you can’t usually refuse.”

“Not without spending time in the belly of a whale?” asked Gralen. “Well, we weren’t called in any way, so it doesn’t matter. We simply discovered the possibility of lost knowledge, and lost treasure, and formed a quick company to exploit that possibility.”

“That’s right,” said Will, “when we’re done with this, we’re done.”

“Neither lost treasure nor especially lost knowledge come without their price,” said Burwell, “and you cannot always know when you are done until it is too late.”

“You sound like my father,” said Will.

“Your father must be a wise man,” said Burwell, laughing.

They talked further about events in Crosspoint over the years.

“So old Riley was finally brought to bay?” asked Burwell in response to Sam’s story.

“He’s been hanged, but the organization is still there,” said Sam, “and they’re pretty pissed off at everyone involved.”

“Some of whom are coming out west to avoid trouble,” said Burwell. “Well, let’s hold that thought—I think our meal is ready.”

He went back into the other room and returned with trays of warm bread and butter, roast venison, and roast potatoes, carrots, and onions.

Everyone dug into the food as they talked. Charlotte tried to be suspicious but couldn’t handle it. The food smelled too good, and everyone enjoyed it too much. Everyone ate until they were full to bursting, Burwell not the least of all.

“This is quite a feast,” said Charlotte, “we can’t possibly thank you enough.”

“I receive guests rarely enough,” said Burwell. “It is worth a little extra on the table—as long as it doesn’t happen too often.”

Early in the morning, Burwell woke them with a loud laugh and a deep “Rise up! Morning has come, and it is time for men to walk the forest again.”

The sun had not yet arisen, but its glow was barely visible coming over the peaks of the mountains. When they were prepared for travel, he handed them each a skin filled with beer. They happily accepted.

“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 find yourself south again,” said Burwell, “bring more news from east and west, and we shall drink to it again, whatever it may be.”

“Do not forget me in Stone Goblin either,” he added.

They shook hands, and left the strange man and his lonely cabin and resumed their journey northwest. 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 had climbed up the trees and back down the ropes holding their packs, and were picking through their food.

Like Burwell Cooper, the badgers were also a random encounter. The Guide actually rolled them on the previous day, and rolled a swamp for this, final, day. Deciding that a swamp wasn’t going to be interesting or make much sense that close to the road, the Guide switched the encounters so that the badgers could be their final encounter. Then, deciding that the swamp still didn’t make any sense (and was likely to confuse the players) it was thrown out.

“Shit!” cried Will, and rushed out with his sword in hand. The badgers jumped and ran, one carrying a huge salted pork in its mouth. Gralen, Sam, and Charlotte grabbed their things as quickly as they could and followed after Will as best they could.

They chased the badgers a good few hundred yards out into a clearing among the trees before losing them.

“Damn it,” said Will, “that’s—“

He looked around to the east and west.

“We’re back!” he cried, just as the others arrived. “Gralen! Sam! Charlotte! This is the leather road, we’re back home! We made it!”

FURTHER ADVENTURES

This story is an example of the kinds of things that can happen in a fantasy role-playing game such as “Gods & Monsters”. The story would have been “played out” while sitting comfortably around a dining room table or on living room couches.

No single story can encompass all of the things that can happen in a role-playing game, however. I hope you enjoyed the story, and I also hope that it entices you into wanting to play at least one game session where you are in control of the story. Where you play a character such as Charlotte, Gralen, Will, or Sam and you choose the actions they make, the secrets they expose, the ruins they explore, and the things they say to each other.

The story is based on the introductory adventure “The Lost Castle of the Astronomers.” Playing in that game after you read this story will test your role-playing skills. Can you role-play a character who doesn’t have your knowledge of the story? Can you direct your character’s actions, without using the knowledge that you, as a player who has read the story and as a person from the twenty-first century, have? And what would you do differently than they did? “Will Stratford” took quite a risk volunteering to hold off the goblin skeletons, for example. Would you have had your character make that choice within the story? Was there a better way? A more appropriate way? If you identified with Sam, would you have been as impetuous when you found the secret treasure trove?

In a “Gods & Monsters” story, each of those four characters would be played by a different individual. You might choose to play Sam, the “scout.” Three of your friends would each choose one of the other characters. A fifth individual, the Guide, will have created the town of Hightown and described it to you and your friends; will have created the goblin tribes of the southern forest; will have created every room, treasure, and monster in the lost castle of the Astronomers.

Every last bit of that world, from the characters to the grass beneath their feet, is under your control. What happens in this story is up to you. You and your friends.

Their story doesn’t end here. This was not an epic adventure. Most adventures won’t be. An epic adventure can’t fit into a single night, or even into a few nights. But the adventure can, when combined with other adventures, become an epic adventure. If “The Lord of the Rings” were role-played, it would take quite a few gaming sessions to play out, with quite a few individual adventures within the full story. (Especially if you include “The Hobbit”, which itself includes a number of adventures that build to the confrontation of five armies.)

What might happen next? There are a number of possibilities that the characters could explore, or that could grow into dangers needing elimination. There are the strange creatures of the mist, Druid stones scattered about west Highland, a magical sword with unknown writings on it. Gralen’s new spells might need new materials that he has to seek in far off lands. There’s the reference to a previously unknown part of another castle in the north. And, of course, there’s now a castle in the south filled with books and possibly more treasure—now guarded by the awakened goblin skeletons.

The choice is yours.

THE ALLURE OF ROLE-PLAYING

Cecil Adams began an article on role-playing with “a lifetime of Parcheesi does not adequately prepare you for this.” He then went on to compare gaming to double-entry book-keeping, an analogy that, for many game systems, has its validity.

I joined my first role-playing game on October 31, 1981. I was a senior in high school in rural Michigan, in a tiny town of about seven hundred people. I had no idea what was going to happen, but I did know it was going to be different from what I had done before. After escorting my younger brother and sister trick-or-treating, I met the people who would soon be joining me every Friday or Saturday evening for the rest of my senior year. I expected something like Candyland with a fantasy motif. What I got was an open-ended question:

You guide your horses up the long dusty road to the castle ruins. 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?

The first time we played, we played on our dining room table. Mom made popcorn. From then on we went down to the basement and used the pool table.

Playing *Dungeons & Dragons* was like waking up from a dreamless sleep 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. Nothing like the Candyland I’d played as a child, and nothing like the poker that all of the uncles played at family gatherings. It wasn’t just a new game, it was a new kind of game, a new way of socializing. When we were gaming, we were writing a fantasy story, and having fun doing it. I had already read “The Hobbit” and probably “The Lord of the Rings” by then. And of course I was an avid reader of superhero comic books. One of the first things I did after discovering role-playing games was start working on rules for what became *Men & Supermen* (<http://www.menandsupermen.com/>). In my classes, when I finished my schoolwork, I’d pull out the notebook for the superhero game rules.

Or I’d pull out the notes on my own *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign world, a huge island covered in castles, caverns, and dungeons. Having no idea what a gaming map was supposed to look like, I used square graph paper from math class. I drew the entire island fifty feet to the square. When laid out, the island’s map covered the pool table we gamed on. It was nearly impossible to use during the game. The island was at most a few miles wide and its climates ranged from desert to snowy mountain, forest to jungle. To quote the Knights of the Dinner Table, you had to “suspend disbelief with a frickin’ crane”, but suspend it we did, and we had a blast.

A memorable joy back then was finding a portable hole in the lair of some long-forgotten creature. The whole weird concept of a portable hole—a hole that you could drop vast amounts of junk into, roll up, and carry with you until you needed to retrieve the items—appealed to me more than any other magic item in the game, more than all the body parts that Vecna had to offer.

In retrospect, the person who introduced me to gaming probably wasn’t very experienced either; I would not be at all surprised if that first game I played on that Hallowe’en was the first time he had ever been a Dungeon Master. For Christmas that year, I got some

Dungeons & Dragons rulebooks. As in Hollywood, where every actor sooner or later wants to direct, every gamer someday, even if only once, feels the urge to design and run their own adventure. Two of us took turns as Dungeon Master. When I wasn't pitting them against the crazed magical island, I role-played Elzaac, a priest of the Norse god Thor. Elzaac's main purpose was running around deserted castles, banging on monsters with a hammer, calling on Thor to smite monsters with magic, and taking the monsters' treasure.

Much later, when I saw Richard Linklater's wonderful "Dazed and Confused," I thought it made no sense for the main characters to be playing poker together. Who played poker in our age group? When did poker cross jock/geek boundaries, or male/female boundaries as their game clearly did? Poker, I decided, was their code-name for *Dungeons & Dragons*. They just didn't want anyone else to know about it in 1976. Gaming was still underground even in 1982, and 1976 was only three years from the infamous and oft-misunderstood Dallas Egbert disappearance. Our Dungeon Master and I decided to "go public" as gamers following a particularly stupid local newspaper article in which the Muskegon Chronicle accused D&D gamers of actually casting real spells. Coming out of Mass the following Sunday I was stopped by a woman who thanked us for our letter-to-the-editor. "It seems like such a fun game," she said, and told us that her daughters also played. I have a suspicion that she did, also.

There were other games. When the two of us weren't running a *Dungeons & Dragons* adventure, my brother (the jock in our group—he was on the football team) ran a post-nuclear game by the same company. In *Gamma World* the dungeons were not the ruins of ancient castles but the ruins of the modern world. We were mutated creatures trying simply to survive the aftermath of a nuclear war.

When I went East to college the next year, role-playing continued to shape the direction of my life. I'd never been out of our village without my family (or without the Boy Scouts, which included my family). And here I was in a "big" city (the tiny city of Ithaca, New York), my parents had just left, and I was sitting in a dormitory room full of boxes waiting to see who my roommate was going to be. As I unpacked, a sophomore from California walked by and, noticing my *Dungeons & Dragons* rulebooks, invited me to join the D&D group he was starting. I was all set to roll up a new priest of Thor just like Elzaac, when I discovered that our new Dungeon Master's real name was... Thor. I made quick use of a pencil eraser (always write your new characters in pencil) and introduced my character as Praxos, a priest of the Egyptian god Ra.

Praxos and his companions set out into the Fell Pass, a long tunnel through the Barrier Peaks, the only short cut to something, I don't even remember what, but whatever it was our characters desperately needed to find it before something horrible happened to the entire world. Fifteen years later I discovered that the "Fell Pass" had been written up by one of Thor's California friends and published in *The Dragon*, the number one *Dungeons & Dragons* magazine. It bore little resemblance except for

His companions were O'Shin, a Halfling thief, Dweomer, a Gnome illusionist, Kellson, a wizard—Vince always played a wizard—and probably a fighter or two. In those days, everyone tried to fight, although O'Shin came to regret it. If there were such a thing, he probably would have won the award for "most resurrections". *Dungeons & Dragons* shares one thing in common with computer games, the concept of multiple lives. If you can afford it, you can be resurrected until your "lives" (an ability called *constitution*) run out.

the name and the concept, but even that didn't matter, as I'd never read it. The nearest game store in my home town had received *The Dragon* only sporadically (and with great fanfare: our cousins ran the gaming section of their parents' general store and always let us know when new products were available).

On our journey through the Fell Pass we met displacer beasts, dog-like creatures that attacked, disappeared, re-appeared, and attacked again. Huge rats menaced us throughout the caverns, and in D&D, huge rats are dangerous foes to first level characters. There were things that roamed the corridors that we never did know what they were. We killed them all and took their treasure, although we never got rich. Thor was much stingier with treasure than my hack-and-slash high school friends had been. The treasure didn't matter. It was all make-believe anyway, and it was all fun.

Praxos eventually died by failing a die roll and slipping off of the side of a mountain. After he slipped, he also failed his roll to grab the side of the trail and hang on; and 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 some magical shrine for resurrection, but Praxos also failed the roll to see if his magical staff survived the fall. It didn't, and the powerful magic of the staff exploded, leaving a crater and no trace of the fourth level Curate of Ra. I still have the maps of the Fell Pass that he was carrying when he fell as well as the final character sheet. When Praxos 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 day.

I apparently had no problems accepting the death and moving on: Praxos' final character sheet also contains the notes on my next character in that campaign, a Paladin of the god Vanimaar. If you don't recognize the name, don't worry. I made the god up. If real gods couldn't keep my character from dying, I'd make one up who could. Vanimaar was the god of light and the sculptor of the heavens. As far as I know Sheridan survived to the end of that campaign. The last of my "Sheridan" character sheets has him at eighth level with a warhorse named Daren. I assume he rode off into the sunset.

Of those six friends I still game with two, and Thor is still our Dungeon Master. We gamed as much as we could that year, and not just *Dungeons & Dragons*. Unlike the village where I grew up, Ithaca had a game store within walking distance. We not only bought *The Dragon*, we bought all sorts of weird games. We played the superhero game *Villains & Vigilantes*; we played my own *Men & Supermen*. When the fantasy game *Dragon Quest* hit the bargain bin after their financial troubles we played that, too. We played the horribly complicated *Chivalry & Sorcery* (where even moral code was a random roll, and my character ended up diabolically evil, to Thor's chagrin) and its sci-fi counterpart, *Space Opera*. Star Wars was still in its original trilogy at that time, and a huge influence on most of us gaming geeks, but *Space Opera* took an entire night just to make a character, and sometimes longer. It was too much even for a bunch of computer geeks. Later we would use the simpler *Traveller* and the even simpler *Star Frontiers*. Traveller is remembered today mostly for a very unique character creation process, which produced nicely detailed random backgrounds—with the risk that a character could die before you even started playing.

I also remember *Tunnels & Trolls*, an amazingly different game because while it superficially resembled the other fantasy games we'd played, it emphasized group play to such a degree that the combat rolls of each member of a group were combined when combat ensued. In all other games, it is every man, woman, and demihuman to themselves.

And there was *Call of Cthulhu*, where the goal was not surviving against unbeatable odds and coming back with great treasures, it was maintaining personal sanity in the face of unspeakable Lovecraftian horrors. Success didn't mean being a hero, killing monsters, or even staying sane, it meant slowing the inevitable slide into madness. The best way to "win" in *Call of Cthulhu* was to die in style or retire only moderately insane.

I remember all of those characters in bits and pieces. There are so many of them. Besides Elzaac, Praxos, and Sheridan, there was the superhero "Snapdragon". Snapdragon could fly, travel to other dimensions, create darkness, control plants, and move quickly. Snapdragon had a short-lived romance with the local NPC newscaster. That's Non-Player Character for the uninitiated: it means a character that no player is playing. The Adventure Guide wings it.

As Editor of a *Men & Supermen* campaign, I had "FireBlade", a fencing, fire-wielding superhero physically inspired by a young Lily Tomlin. The same campaign sported an archaeologist who entered an ancient library in the Urals and came out five years later as "The Rainbow Wizard" and who resembled Stockard Channing.

Editor is a cute word for Adventure Guide; ever since Dungeons & Dragons' "Dungeon Master," games have tried to make up cool names for their referees. "Dungeon Master" is still the best.

After graduating from college, gaming took a back seat to finding a job. But when, in the course of finding a job, I ended up in the hospital and then in a body cast for four months, I could have spent my free time learning new skills or planning a future; instead, in my post-near-death-experience mental re-alignment, I spent my time learning to play the guitar and designing a better adventure world than the old fifty-feet to a square magical island of Mordol. There were still some adventures to be had before dying, and I wasn't about to waste any time on lesser pursuits. I've occasionally said that I went through my mid-life crisis at 22.

Tolkien has had a heavy influence on almost all fantasy role-playing games. I'm sure that the name "Mordol" was influenced by Tolkien's "Mordor."

I wrote "The World of Highland" on single hex sheets, and designed it for Dragon Quest, later using it in Runequest when I moved back to Ithaca, before returning to the AD&D fold. My friends were mostly still there. We lived down the hill from our alma mater, took badly-paying jobs, and hung out in bars that we hadn't had the money to hang out in while actually going to college. And played role-playing games, until one by one we drifted away—Boston, San Diego, Beijing, Los Angeles, Seattle, Bloomington... it started to get very boring in Ithaca, and part of that mid-life crisis involved heading to Los Angeles to play guitar.

When three of our original college group found ourselves in the same city in the nineties, we had a new breed of games to play. Role-playing games were back in vogue now that the Internet was bringing gamers together on-line. While *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*

had a second edition, there were also some new genres available. Thor had foreseen the need for a near-future, cybered-up role-playing game back in the eighties in Ithaca, but we had 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*. *Shadowrun* combined the fantasy of *Dungeons & Dragons* with the near-future gothic bleakness of the cyberpunk genre. I even founded the then-premier on-line *Shadowrun* zine, *The Neo-Anarchists' Guide to Everything Else* (<http://www.hoboes.com/pub/Role-Playing/Shadowrun/NAGEE/>). And since goth was in, the *Vampire* role-playing game took *Call of Cthulhu* to a different level. We role-played undead creatures struggling vainly to maintain a grip on their humanity in the face of unquenchable hunger.

The nineties also brought different kinds of characters to the old standards. One character sheet I have from this time period is for “Raj Gua’dar ab’d’allah”. I no longer have any idea what the name means, but Raj was a second edition *Dungeons & Dragons* gay psychic whose dialogue was based on a few characters from the writings of Oscar Wilde and Donna Barr. Raj’s psychic powers included teleportation, mind reading, and dream travel. He could dance, play the harpsichord, and had a charisma of 17.

Today, in the twenty-first century, we’ve come full circle. Our gaming group is playing *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, first edition, the same game we played in college. *Dungeons & Dragons* itself has a third edition which is seeing some popularity despite being under its fourth owner. *Hackmaster*, once a joke in “Knights of the Dinner Table”, brings on board many of those weird house rules that in our naïve exuberance we added to *Dungeons & Dragons* in the seventies and eighties.

Role-playing games are not for everyone, but those of us who enjoy them find it hard to understand why. Who could not enjoy a game that makes such a profound use of individual creativity in a shared setting? Who could not enjoy a game that provides an outlet for pent-up creativity, frustrations, and the need to just get together with friends? A game that also stimulates creativity and challenges intelligence in a way that makes no demands that are not fun to meet? A game whose rules flow with the path that the game takes?

In “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy,” Douglas Adams writes that the population of the universe is zero, because the universe is infinite and the population is finite. Since “any finite number divided by infinity is as near to nothing as makes no odds, it follows that the population of the whole Universe is zero, and any people you may meet from time to time are merely the products of a deranged imagination.”

Role-playing games have no rules. Even *Space Opera*, with its night-long character creation process, has finite rules and infinite possibilities. *Role-playing games have no rules*. What rules they do have are there to assist you as player and Guide, but for the most part they are inconsequential. There are no rules for the vast majority of things that your character does. When you enter combat, there are rules to assure that you know how to keep your character alive, so that you can 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 Guide, decisions that have no rules to cover them. Practically speaking, there are no rules.

Rules are, in a sense, “sandboxes” that the characters occasionally enter, where the players know more precisely the process of what will happen to their characters. But most of the action in a role-playing game takes place in the “negative space” shaped by, but not defined by, the game’s rules.

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 and old warriors. *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 skeleton ghouls! Or the time Xen-Arbus decided that there was definitely a monster behind this one door, and opened and rushed it—in full plate armor—to surprise them, only to discover a forty-foot down stairway behind the door? He couldn’t hear for the rest of the adventure.*

Maybe you have to be one of Adams’ “deranged imaginations” to enjoy role-playing games. If you read books and often wonder what might have happened if the characters took a different path, you might enjoy role-playing games. If you read books and can discuss in detail the motivations of your favorite characters and what they probably did after the book was over or in the parts of their lives the book didn’t cover, you will almost certainly enjoy role-playing games.

Being a role-playing gamer sometimes feels like being part of a secret club. You’re one of the people in the theater yelling to the characters in the horror movie to “pick up the gun, dammit!” because you think about what the characters in the movie *should* be doing. You think in terms of what *you* would do in that utterly ridiculous situation. You accept for the story that dragons are real, and then worry about how “realistic” they are within the story. You’re one of the people who read Harry Potter and know not only what Quidditch means, you also know the rules of the game. You’re one of the people who, after reading one too many wonderful books, sat down and tried to write a book of your own. The chapters you wrote—perhaps even the whole thing—are still sitting in a corner of your workshop or hard drive. You still remember the names of your imaginary friends. You don’t daydream meeting the man or woman of your dreams. You daydream meeting the man or woman of your dreams in an adventure on the Amazon, a pirate ship in the Caribbean, a gothic castle, or a western desert against a setting sun.

If you like stories, if you like making up stories, if you like being in stories, you’ll find something to enjoy in role-playing games. You’ll find adventure, and really wild things. And I hope that *Gods & Monsters* can be a part of your journey.

MORE GAMING LITERATURE

If you go to your local bookstore, new or used, you can find shelves full of fantasy books. If you aren't familiar with fantasy literature yet, however, you might want to start with the best. This is all opinion, of course, but these books and movies ought to give you a lot of enjoyment as well as good ideas for gaming, whether as a player or Guide.

You can find most of these at your local or your on-line bookstore. The rest are available from the publishers' web sites or at used bookstores and on-line auctions. Good gaming literature is hard to find, and this list reflects that. Even here, most of the stories are about individuals. The two book series that come closest to being about a group are "The Lord of the Rings," which you must read, and "The Dark Tower," which you should. The "Knights of the Dinner Table" comic book stands on its own.

For movies, you must see *The Seven Samurai*. I strongly recommend getting a DVD player or cultivating a friend with one. The difference between a clear, uncut version of a good movie and the low resolution, usually side-chopped, versions found on VHS can be the difference between enjoying a movie and wondering what the creators were thinking.

The Dark Tower, Stephen King: The Dark Tower currently consists of four books, "The Gunslinger," "The Drawing of the Three," "The Waste Lands," and "Wizard and Glass." Roland the Gunslinger and his three companions search a dissolving world for the Dark Tower.

The Dead Alewives: This comedy group has a hilarious send-up of fantasy gaming in their "Dungeons & Dragons" skit. <http://www.deadalewives.com/funny.ccc>

Dragon Magazine CD-ROM Collection: "The Dragon" and its predecessor "The Strategic Review" were part of the gaming scene from the start. Now out of print, the CD-ROM collection collects all of *The Strategic Review* and the first 250 issues of *The Dragon*, which, in my opinion, will get you the best of *The Dragon* and the most useful of its gaming articles. If you can find a copy of this at a used bookstore or in the corner of your local gaming store, you won't regret it. If you can't find that, then the first two volumes of "The Best of Dragon Magazine" are also fascinating. Note that this CD collection was from the period when Wizard of the Coast's user interface choices were, well, unique. Fortunately the files are all available as PDF files, which means that you can use any PDF viewer to read them. Avoid the buggy software that comes on the CD-ROM like the plague. (If you use Macintosh or Unix, you're lucky: you'll never have to worry about accidentally starting up their buggy proprietary software.)

Excalibur, John Boorman: This movie is the best adaptation of the Arthurian legend I've seen. Directed by John Boorman and starring his daughters as the babes. <http://www.hoboes.com/Movies/Excalibur.shtml>

Ghostbusters, Harold Ramis: While the story itself isn't necessarily fantasy-gaming oriented, if you don't watch this movie you won't get half the in-jokes at your gaming table, and you won't know what to say when someone asks you if you're a god. <http://www.hoboes.com/Movies/Ghostbusters.shtml>

Highlander, *Russell Mulcahy*: There are at least two sequels to this fantasy movie, and you don't want to see any of them. The first, however, is a classic. An immortal from the Scottish highlands learns swordplay from Sean Connery, and ends with a rambling swordfight through New York City. Get this on DVD for the extended version, although the print hasn't weathered the ages as well as the highlander himself did. <http://www.hoboes.com/Movies/highlander.shtml>

The Hobbit, *J.R.R. Tolkien*: If any fantasy literature can be said to have inspired fantasy gaming, it would be the middle-earth works of Tolkien. "The Hobbit" was the book that started it all, and it stands alone. There is a decent animated version of the Hobbit, although the accents are often jarring. <http://www.hoboes.com/Books/HobbitLord.shtml>

The Knights of the Dinner Table, *Jolly Blackburn*: This strip featuring a group of long-time gamers is dead on. There are two sets. "Tales from the Vault," which currently has three volumes, collects the strips. "Bundle of Trouble," currently in nine volumes, collects the comic books. <http://www.kenzerco.com/>

The Lord of the Rings, *J.R.R. Tolkien*: This seminal gaming work consists of three books, "The Fellowship of the Ring," "The Two Towers," and "The Return of the King." The books do not stand alone. You'll need to read them in order, and neither of the first two have any "ending" in the sense that stories have endings: you'll need to read them all if you read one of them. The movie directed by Peter Jackson is incredible, and destined to inspire a new generation of fantasy gamers. <http://www.hoboes.com/Books/HobbitLord.shtml>

The Road Warrior, *George Miller*: A sequel that you don't need to see the original for (although you should), "The Road Warrior" is set in apocalyptic Australia, with a crazy ex-cop wandering the wasteland from gasoline source to gasoline source in his V-8 Interceptor. <http://www.hoboes.com/Movies/RoadWarrior.shtml>

The Seven Samurai, *Akira Kurosawa*: A movie that inspired several imitations, including "The Magnificent Seven," the basic story of "adventurers protecting village from marauders" has also inspired many gaming sessions. <http://www.hoboes.com/Movies/sevensamurai.shtml>

The Three Musketeers, *Alexandre Dumas*: You cannot get much better than this story for high romance and adventure, and it does a pretty good job as a group story as well. <http://www.hoboes.com/FireBlade/Dumas/>

The Worm Ouroboros, *E.R. Eddison*: Interesting for its historical significance as well as its heroic storyline, "The Worm Ouroboros" predates the fantasy glut inspired by Tolkien. Because of this, it avoids some standard fantasy clichés, and started some of its own. "Ouroboros" is pure high fantasy with powerful individuals standing against armies of opponents and holding their own. The Goblins and the Demons are the good guys in this one, fighting the perfidy of Witchland after a long war with the Ghouls. <http://www.hoboes.com/Books/Ouroboros.shtml>

WHY OPEN GAMING?

Open gaming allows you to benefit from what everyone else in the open gaming community is doing, and it makes it easier for you to contribute back to the community. Go to the Free Roleplaying Community web site at <http://www.freeroleplay.org/> for more information about open gaming in general.

WHAT GOOD IS AN OPEN GAME?

An open game allows you, or your gaming group, to take the actual text of the game, modify it, and then make your modifications available to the rest of your group or even to the rest of the world. Someone else can then take your version of the game and use it, if they like it better than the other versions that are available. Their enhancements, if they decide to publish, are also available to the gaming community as open.

Let's say that your gaming group has a handful of "house rules" that you use. With an open game, you can take the text of the game, insert your house rules, and make the new version available to all of your group's members without any hint of breaking copyright law—as long as your version is also open.

You can use house rules in any game, open or closed. But an open game makes it a lot easier to distribute your house rules in a readable form. An open game must always provide the game in a form that makes it easy for you to add house rules directly to the game.

I DON'T USE HOUSE RULES.

Everyone uses house rules. What you're really saying is that you don't keep track of your house rules. No game has rules to cover every situation, and your group, like any, makes rules up on occasion. Even if you don't write those rules down, you still benefit from open gaming, because other groups will. Some of them will make enough house rules that they decide to publish their version of the game, and you can choose to use (or not use) their new version. Or you can pick and choose from their new rules.

I ONLY PLAY *INSERT GAME HERE*.

Then play it. But which version? First edition? The Blue Book? The Original? Second edition? Third? Or did you switch to it after discovering it difficult to get new copies of the game you preferred, but that their company bought and then buried?

Games come and go, especially closed games. Open games are required to be available in a freely-editable format. Your favorite version is on your hard drive, ready for reprinting for new group members at any time.

I DON'T WANT MY GAME WORLD OPEN.

So don't make your game world open. You can still play an open game and create closed supplementary materials, just as you can make accessories for closed games and non-games without permission from their respective copyright owners. People make "add-ons" for Gibson guitars, Harley-Davidson motorcycles, and Kitchen-Aid appliances all the time, with no license needed. As long as you don't infringe on the copyright of the open game, you're free to do whatever you wish. Of course, the open gaming community would like your add-ons to be released openly, but that's your choice, not ours, and has nothing to do with whether the game is open or not.

If you do decide to make your add-on open, however, you can take advantage of any other open material under the same license, and use it within your accessory. You can copy, paste, and modify to whatever extent is needed to make your accessory the best accessory possible.

And even if you choose to continue playing a closed game but the idea of open games appeals to you, you can just as easily make an open add-on for a closed game.

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