

PAPER FACES



Approximate Playtime
75 - 120 Minutes

ENJOYING THE PARTY

The first act of this quest represents the masquerade ball, a lavish social event hosted by Lady Regina Fairfax for the villagers of Dragonholt and the nobles of Dragonholt, Rostum, and Haverford counties to mingle without their identities or social standing interfering.

During this first act (if playing with two or more heroes), the decisions you make do not exhaust your activation token. We recommend discussing your options and making decisions as a group. Have fun!

An awning has been erected outside the manor's front door, curtained off to transform the space into a foyer. A human woman in black-and-white livery wearing a black domino mask stands before the door, and she bows to you as you arrive.

"Welcome," she says. "The countess requests that you please don your mask before you enter." She gestures to one side, where a curtain hangs to provide some privacy. "If you did not bring a mask, her ladyship has provided several for your use."

You step behind the curtain and find several white domino masks, similar to the servant's, in a variety of sizes.

Don the crescent-moon mask.

Requires moon mask (item).

- ➔ Mark story point R7.
- ➔ Read entry 1357.

Don the mask of green leaves.

Requires spirit mask (item).

- ➔ Mark story point T6.
- ➔ Read entry 1357.

Don the black dragon mask.

Requires dragon mask (item).

- ➔ Mark story point G5.
- ➔ Read entry 1357.

Don one of the provided masks.

- ➔ Read entry 1357.

1074

Braxton and Rochelle work smoothly together, trading opponents and shifting focus as you call out warnings and propose stratagems. Steadily, you advance toward the stair, until a sudden feint from a bandit catches you off guard, and you confuse your right and your left at a critical moment. Braxton pivots the wrong way to meet an attacker who isn't there, and a dwarf woman with her hair shaved to a single tall, black strip leaps through the gap and smashes a hammer against your leg.

- ➔ You lose three stamina.

Fortunately, you are close enough to the foot of the stairs that Tallea steps forward to defend you, and soon enough the entire group has gained the balcony and now holds a highly defensible position.

- ➔ Read entry 3692.

1109

The footbridge echoes like a drum as you and Shark battle back and forth across it. Your companions cheer you on from behind, and a smattering of bandits do the same for Shark from his side of the pond. With each exchange, you feel the bridge groan and tremble under your feet as Shark's sword chops bright wooden chips from the guardrail and your own attacks are knocked contemptuously aside to make the bridge's frame shiver.

For all his boastful arrogance, it seems that Shark is a dangerous opponent, and he soon has you bleeding from a number of small cuts, wounds so painful and yet only cosmetically damaging that you wonder if he is toying with you, prolonging your battle just to be cruel.

- ➔ You lose four stamina.

"That's enough," says Rochelle from behind you. "Step left." You do, and an arrow flashes through the air and lodges in Shark's chest. He shrieks, staggers, and slumps against the same guardrail you're propped against, which gives way. You scramble back to the shore as Shark falls with a splash into the black water of the pond, followed shortly by the bulk of the footbridge.

Rochelle lowers her bow and hands it to the old orc, Tweegal. "Let's move on," she says.

- ➔ Read entry 6602.

1112

"Ah, just feeling my years and the weight of all that's undone behind them," sighs the old man. "When I was a boy, I was in love with a girl, but I never could work up the courage to tell her. And by the time I found my courage, I'd lost the girl—a woman by then. She'd married, and there was no room in her heart for me any longer. And even after her husband died, still I held my peace. I prayed to the spirits to bring us together, but I never took that step myself, did I? Well, we're both old now, and whatever chance we had is gone. I figure I've got no more reason to stay here in Dragonholt, so I'll be selling my carpenter's shop to one of my apprentices and moving on." He glances up at the moon again and smiles. "Maybe live for myself for a bit, for whatever time I've got left, instead of for some woman who doesn't even know I'm pining for her."

He holds up his block of wood, running a thumb along the shape emerging from it. "Might be another badger in here. One last gift for Ursula." He smiles sadly, and leans back against the tree.

- ➔ Read entry 1118.

1118

You pause a moment to collect yourself and get a drink of water from a passing servant in a black mask. Revelers surround you and the masquerade shows no signs of slowing down.

- ➔ Time passes.

If five or more time has passed...

- ➔ Read entry 4129.

Otherwise...

- ➔ Read entry 1147.

1147

From your position on the edge of the great hall, you have a good view of the proceedings. Dancers in colorful costumes take up most of the floor. More guests cluster at a long table by the kitchen, laden with food. On a balcony overlooking the hall, a woman in a dragon mask entertains guests in fine clothing. A cool breeze and the scent of flowers wafts in from the open doors near the back of the hall, leading to the manor gardens.

Find yourself a dance partner.

➔ *Read entry 4573.*

Mingle near the banquet table and try the food.

➔ *Read entry 5335.*

Approach the dragon woman and her entourage.

➔ *Read entry 2247.*

Venture out to the garden.

➔ *Read entry 4063.*

1157

Rochelle sits, shaking with grief, at the edge of the hole left by the oak's departure. Regina lies on the ground, her head in Rochelle's lap and Phillip crouching at her side.

Phillip presses two fingers to his mother's wrist, bringing her hand up to his lips and closing his eyes. "No," he breathes. "She's gone, 'Chelle."

"I don't understand," sobs Rochelle. "There's not a mark on her."

"It was the magic," says Celyse, staring at the moon with her arms wrapped around her. "The price that she paid for her power. It was killing her, as she always knew it would when she bonded herself to the Spirit of Eventide all those years ago." Celyse crouches by their side. "Tonight was only the last leaf to fall."

Soft laughter comes from the hedge. You turn and see Kyrice standing at a gap, his scarred face alive with a manic light. "So, dear sister, your magic came at a price in the end. My informant told me as much." He pauses, drawing contrition around himself like a masquerade costume. "Rochelle. Phillip. Children. It's over. I am Lord of Dragonholt now."

Rochelle stands and draws her sword, her eyes burning like green fire. "Not while I live," she growls.

➔ *Time passes.*

➔ *Read entry 5205.*

1158

As the bandit rushes forward, you find yourself standing at the edge of a pond fed by a babbling stream and surrounded by hedges. A wooden footbridge spans the pond, and the others have already retreated across it, so you make your stand there.

"Going to fight me by water, eh?" leers the elf. "You know they call me Shark." He lifts his sword and battle is joined!

If you have dueling (skill) or willpower (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 2507.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 1109.*

1164

"I see you're wearing the mask I gave you," says the elf woman. "It looks well on you. Although it could do with a flash of color, don't you think?" She grins and gestures at the spray of emerald plumage that bursts from her own mask. Then her voice shifts down an octave and she leans in closer. "I don't like this masquerade business. I have a hard enough time telling humans apart, and now with everyone's face hidden I'm not sure how I'm supposed to spot Kyrice or any of his cronies in this crowd." She sighs. "I'm probably just being paranoid." The dance spins on, and it is nearly time to hand the elf woman off to her next partner when she leans in for one last murmured exchange. "I nearly forgot. Gawin, the stablemaster, he's left. Packed his things and vanished earlier tonight. So keep your eyes open."

With that, she's gone and you are passed on to your next partner.

If story point 06 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 2966.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 5871.*

1175

Celyse nimbly dances forward and back at the top of the stairs, alternating between lunging with her rapier and blasting with magic. Frantically, you consider the situation. The stairs appear to be wood, but solidly built. You lean out over them, looking for any signs of pins to pull or joists to cut, and an arrow flashes from below, slashing across your shoulder and sending you stumbling back for cover.

➔ *You lose three stamina.*

Above the stairs, however, hangs a thick and heavy chandelier, bright with many candles and sparkling silver lanterns. It's a simple matter to trace the rope suspending the chandelier back to its tie-off on the wall behind you, and then another simple matter to untie it.

The chandelier is heavier than you thought, however, and holding the rope proves impossible; the cord springs from your hands and the heavy furniture comes crashing down, directly atop a wiry human bandit with freckles and dead eyes like a fish.

The chandelier forms an effective barricade, but the bandits are already struggling to remove it. Celyse shakes her head and leads you off the balcony through the doors to the countess's audience chamber. "Yes," she says. "Just like the Blood Knight lair." You shrug and follow as Braxton and Tweegal slam and bar the heavy double doors behind you.

➔ *Read entry 4819.*

1220

Braxton steps toward the hedge maze to engage the bandit with the dramatic hair while Rochelle guards her flank, keeping two bandits at bay with swings of her sword. You call out warnings and tactical advice to both of them, trying to stay out of the conflict so you can see everything as it happens.

If you have military (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 6820.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 9666.*

1357

You adjust your mask and step through the door into the manor's grand hall. Lanterns have been strung from colored ropes above you, giving the space a brightness and light you've seldom seen even in daylight. Excited guests in masks of all shapes and sizes crowd the floor, already overflowing into the tables set aside for food and relaxation. Several liveried staff move to and fro through the crowd carrying trays or bottles. Each wears a plain black domino just like the woman at the door. Some of the staff are wearing swords at their hips and mail beneath their livery, ushering guests to and from various rooms of the house.

The crowd is brightly colored and in constant motion, making it difficult to pick out individual figures, but you do spy a few you think you recognize.

A gnome woman stands near the windows, chattering with a cluster of other guests. She wears a mask painted with blue swirling designs and a butterfly ornament set with a blue gemstone cleverly perched at her right temple.

A dwarf man sits against the wall to your right, his mask sporting black and white checks and a gold trim. A small dwarf girl clings to his leg, her mask a ruff of feathers styled to look like an owl.

Standing just to your left is a tall orc woman with a plain black mask. Standing at her side is a gnome woman with a flamboyant mask, a curl of immense red and pink feathers fluttering well above her head. The orc laughs at something the gnome says, then glances in your direction and pauses. After a moment, she touches the gnome on the shoulder and crosses the floor to you in three long strides.

"You're here," says the orc woman. "I'm glad. I don't think we have anything to worry about—there are guards masked and mingled throughout the crowd, including some from the Belmonts and Cunninghams—but I'm always happy to have you to hand." She smiles at you, then glances down as the wavering feathers of her gnome companion appear at her side. "You should try to enjoy the party," says the orc. "Leave protecting the guests to me and the other guards."

"Not before I get a dance out of you," says the gnome, leaning back and shoving her feathers aside with one hand in order to see the orc's face. "A proper one."

"Thanks for letting me know."

➔ *Read entry 8987.*

"Good evening, Mariam."

➔ *Read entry 2526.*

1425

You shout and run forward, weapon held high. "No!" shouts Braxton. Kyric laughs, drawing the dagger in a rough line across his niece's throat and hurling her at you. Choking on her own blood, Rochelle staggers into your arms, knocking you to your knees. You watch the light fade from her green eyes.

If story point 06 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 6412.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 8871.*

1432

Kyric rushes for the far doorway, passing between two overstuffed bookcases. You grip your frost rune through its sheepskin, feeling its chill surround you, then lash out, hurling the rune's power in front of you. Columns of ice erupt from the floor, forming a wall that blocks Kyric's progress. The rogue lord curses, then shoves his broad shoulders against the bookcase to his left, toppling it over and sending loose pages and volumes everywhere.

Kyric climbs over the fallen shelf, but you focus the frost rune's power and send a shard of razor-sharp ice flying at him, piercing his leg and sending him toppling down to the floor beyond. "Damn you!" he shouts. "Kill me or let me go. Leave off your sorcery!"

➔ *Mark one progress in peace.*

➔ *Mark two progress in war.*

➔ *Read entry 4428.*

1454

Celyse nimbly dances forward and back at the top of the stairs, alternating between lunging with her rapier and blasting with magic. Freed from distraction, you consider the situation. The stairs appear to be wood, but solidly built, and you don't fancy exposing yourself to the archers below for long enough to cut through them with an axe. Above them, however, hangs a thick and heavy chandelier, bright with many candles and sparkling silver lanterns. It's a simple matter to trace the rope suspending the chandelier back to its tie-off on the wall behind you, and then another simple matter to untie it.

The chandelier is heavier than you thought, however, and holding the rope proves impossible; the cord springs from your hands and the heavy furniture comes crashing down, directly atop a wiry human bandit with freckles and dead eyes like a fish.

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➔ *Read entry 4819.*

1492

You keep yourself two steps above Shark, using your higher position and advantage in leverage to keep battering him with high-angle blows. With each counterattack you leap back another step, looking for your chance and occasionally scrambling up to the banister to dodge a particularly savage swing.

Finally, Shark falls into a pattern, albeit one with ever more angry sloppiness to his swings. His final lunge leaves his sword dangerously close to the step beneath it and you stomp down, hard, snapping his blade at the hilt. "What?" he manages, holding the now-useless hilt in front of him, before you plant your foot against his chest with a solid kick. Shark goes tumbling head over heels down the stairs, to lie in a groaning heap at the bottom on top of the gnome woman and her now-discarded knives.

➔ *Read entry 2946.*

1509

Rochelle swings her sword in a single glimmering arc. Blood spatters on the ceiling as a dagger falls to the training room floor, still clutched in Kyric's severed hand.

The rogue lord falls to his knees, screaming as he stares at his bloody stump. Braxton slams her shield into the back of his head, then crouches down to pick up his limp body and tie his arms together behind his back.

➔ *Time passes.*

If story point 06 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 2027.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 4263.*

1512

You show Kyric your empty hands and encourage him to take a deep breath. You tell him you know he never meant for Sonia or Regina to die, that their deaths are a tragedy, and that no more blood need be shed.

If you have empathy (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 6357.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 9672.*

1513

"Drop your weapons or she dies," hisses Kyric. Braxton pauses, her sword half out of its sheath, her whole body tense. "Do it," the rogue lord hisses, pressing on the knife until a drop of crimson forms on Rochelle's light brown neck.

Braxton's sword clangs as it falls to the floor. The only other sound is Rochelle's ragged breathing.

Rush at Kyric with weapon in hand.

➔ *Read entry 1425.*

Put an arrow between Kyric's eyes.

Requires archery (skill).

➔ *Read entry 9073.*

Drop your weapons.

➔ *Read entry 7571.*

"Let her go. Killing her will only make things worse."

➔ *Read entry 4056.*

1523

Your arrow slams into Kyric's shoulder and sends his dagger flying across the room. Rochelle staggers away, clutching at a bleeding slash on her cheek, and Braxton rushes forward to restrain her erstwhile captor.

➔ *Time passes.*

If story point 06 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 2027.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 4263.*

1528

The crowd stills as a chime rings out, silver on glass coming from the balcony overlooking the grand hall. A tall, ethereal human woman in a resplendent green gown and a quartered black-and-white dragon mask steps forward on the balcony to address the guests.

"Welcome to the annual Three Lords' Ball," she says in a voice that feels quiet, but nonetheless fills the hall. "Tonight we celebrate the alliance of three noble houses, House Cunningham," and here a group of men and women in mainly blue and gold cheer from where they cluster near the garden door, "House Belmont," another cheer, this from a group of people in red and white close to the musicians, "and of course House Fairfax. Our relationship remains unique in the barony, I believe, stretching back some ten generations to the union of the Three Lords on the battlefield against the shambling undead hordes that threatened us all. By working together then, we showed that we were stronger than the forces that would tear us apart."

She raises her glass, where the wine within sparkles in the lantern-light. "Tonight, we celebrate that relationship and join together once more. Eat, dance, be merry. Together, we will always be stronger than the darkness."

The crowd cheers, but the woman's glass drops from her fingers, falling over the edge of the balcony to shatter on the floor far below. She staggers and begins to fall back, before being caught at each elbow by a human man in a black domino mask and a human woman in a mask angled and stylized to resemble a knight's helm. For a moment, the crowd holds its breath, and then the woman in the dragon mask steps forward once more, now clutching the arms of her two supporters.

If story point 06 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 1904.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 2367.*

1573

Deakon does not live up to his boasts and tall tales, his first strike missing completely and his sword getting lodged in the banquet table. The bandits write him off as incompetent and turn to focus on you. Their mistake.

The first bandit lunges at you with a hooked knife, which soon becomes your hooked knife as he lies screaming on the ground and clutching his broken hand. The second bandit trips over your leg and finds a knife in his back, and the third falls on top of him after you punch him in the throat. The fourth and fifth bandits prove more difficult to defeat, spreading out and jabbing at you with short swords to keep you at bay.

Just as you're getting concerned that you won't be able to attack one without taking a lethal wound from the other, Deakon cries "Aha!" and staggers back, his sword now free. A platter of roast duck goes flying through the air, launched by the vigor with which he pulled his sword out of the wood of the banquet table, and lands squarely on the head of one of your attackers. Offering up a quick prayer of thanks to the spirits, you drive the heel of your hand into the solar plexus of the fifth, dumbfounded, bandit.

➔ *Read entry 4731.*

1591

"Do it," snaps Rochelle. "Braxton, Tallea, with me. We'll give them some cover."

The group moves toward the stair as Braxton, Rochelle, and Tallea launch a concerted attack on the bandits, driving them back and giving you room to maneuver. Regina and Tymothi soon reach the stair and begin to climb, followed by the rest of the group one by one.

Soon enough, the only ones left on the great hall floor are you, Braxton, and Rochelle. Tallea and Celyse hold the bottom of the stair, using flashes of magic light and swings of Tallea's sword to keep back a pair of burly, almost neckless brigands.

Four bandits lie between you and the stair, led by a lean, brown human woman with dramatic patterns shaved into her hair. "Get the noble girl," sneers the lead bandit. "Kyric's paying one hundred gold to the one who cuts her down."

"Try it," hisses Rochelle, her knuckles whitening on the hilt of her sword.

"We have to get back to the group," says Braxton, shifting to keep her focus on the bandits now moving to encircle you.

Fend off the bandits while Rochelle clears a path.

➔ *Read entry 7946.*

Support the two fighters with tactical advice.

➔ *Read entry 8329.*

Fire from afar while the others engage.

Requires archery (skill).

➔ *Read entry 5438.*

Create an icy barrier between you and the bandits.

Requires frost rune (item).

➔ *Read entry 7851.*

1610

"My duty!? My duty?" The woman with the knight mask takes a step down the staircase toward you, her hand clenching into a fist. "My...duty."

"Yes," says the elf. "Your duty. Something your sister would never ask you to ignore for her sake."

"No," agrees the woman with the knight helm. "Nor would Phillip." She sighs. "Very well. What would you have me do?"

"Just go to them," says the elf, gesturing toward the dance floor where costumed guests caper and twirl. "Be with them. Let them see what kind of woman you are. Share your grief. Remember your brother and sister to them."

"I'm wearing a mask."

"So you are, but if you think there's a person in this room who doesn't know who you are underneath it, you're wrong." The elf glances at you and invites your agreement with a wave of her hand. "Am I correct?"

"Fine," says the woman in the knight mask. She snatches a glass of wine from a passing servant and drains the entire thing in one long gulp. "Here I go."

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

1688

You bleed off some of the gathering electricity in sparks and crackling arcs, illuminating Shark's sword and keeping him leaping backward every time he lunges forward on the attack. Eventually, Shark realizes that these minor shocks are painful but not actually dangerous, and he launches a renewed attack driving you up the staircase. What he doesn't realize is that your lightning rune is capable of much more.

Waiting until you have Shark and several of his eager companions all in the same line, you finally unleash the stored power in a white-hot torrent of thunder and light that arcs and dances between several of the bandits on the stairs and leaves your ears ringing. Shark is hurled from the staircase to crash, smoking and twitching, on the ballroom floor below, and his companions fall to their knees crying out in pain. You fall back to the balcony, wondering how long it will take the bandits to try again.

➔ *Read entry 2946.*

1714

"Yes, this isn't precisely gnome-style dancing, is it?" asks the woman in the blue mask. "I picked it up here and there. I spent almost a full year in Nerekhall, you know, when masquerade balls were just the thing. A woman who was handy with a needle and thread got very popular, turning out elaborate costumes." She smiles and spins gently out from you and back, in perfect time with the music. "Well, I was invited to a lot of balls during that year, in case of costume malfunction I suppose. I learned to dance there."

The music, and your dance, comes to an end, and she steps back to bow gracefully. "Thank you for the lovely dance," she says, then turns and sashays toward the garden. "I think I need some fresh air."

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

1715

"The county belongs to me," says Kyric. "And you don't have the courage to take it from me!" He rushes forward, apparently convinced that you won't put an arrow in him. He is, of course, wrong. He staggers back in shock as your shaft punches into his shoulder. He gasps, stumbling back against the wall and grasping at the arrow with his free hand. You draw another arrow and he stills, eyes narrowing. He moves his sword to the other hand and waits for you to make another move.

➔ *Mark three progress in war.*

➔ *Read entry 5863.*

1733

"Fair enough," says the gnome woman, kicking her feet in the air. "I just thought it might be fun, is all." She leans back against the bench, looking out at the flowers. "Well, I'll be back through again to check on the kids, you know. Maybe you'll have time for me then." She grins, hopping down off the bench. "Or maybe I'll have found some pretty young thing to take my mind off you. I guess we'll both find out." She blows you a kiss and sashays back toward the great hall. "See you around."

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

1742

"This thing?" asks the gnome as she blows some of the drooping plumage out of her face. "I didn't have a mask prepared. I found this among the masks—" She pauses to brush a tuft of feathers from her face with a hand. "—supplied by the hosts. It was the prettiest one I could find."

As she speaks, a single massive feather slowly leans down to rest on her pile of food. She sighs heavily and brushes it back in place with the rest of the plumage. "But if I'm being honest, I regret the decision deeply." With a huff, she blows a bit of fallen fluff from her forehead.

"I need to go find Brax—uh... my wife, and see if she can help me fix this blasted thing." She brushes the plumage from her face once more and sets her plate on the banquet table. "Excuse me."

With that she turns toward the rest of the party. However, she turns back quickly, causing numerous feathers to once again fall in front of her face. "Don't eat my food!" she says. Then she sweeps the feathers from her face and scampers off into the crowd, her plumage slapping and brushing the faces of almost every human she passes.

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

1822

As you clash together, Kyric surprises you with a deft and wickedly fast stab over your guard, catching you in the shoulder, then pulls back. His skin shines with sweat, and he stumbles as he moves—even his attack was weak. You probe your wound with one finger and find it shallow, hardly bleeding at all.

➔ *You lose one stamina.*

Moving with practiced confidence, you maneuver to trap Kyric against one wall, then step in to dismantle his guard. You pin his sword against the wall and give him a quick knee to the stomach. He snatches up a practice blade from a nearby rack, a heavy wooden stick with a lead core, pressing you back with a clumsy swing. You break the wooden sword in half with one swing, then land a telling blow to his leg and another to his shoulder, leaving him gasping and bleeding against the wall.

➔ *Mark three progress in war.*

➔ *Read entry 9321.*

1866

You comment mildly about the dragons circling one another being as much a dance as a conflict.

"But the history of Dragonholt is one of war," says your dance partner. "This is where a great battle was fought in the Dragon Wars, dragon against dragon." He frowns, looking up and past you, toward the balcony above the dance floor. "But that's the past, isn't it. She'd say we should look to the future."

If you have empathy (skill) or persuasion (skill)...

➔ *Mark one progress in peace.*

You finish your set of the dance in silence, your partner brooding. When the music stops, he vanishes into the crowd.

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

1895

An older human woman in a mask cascading with flowers rests on the fieldstone wall of a garden bed. She is idly running one hand through the soil, plucking the occasional weed. A burst of laughter from the ball behind you catches her attention, and she glances in your direction, then sighs and returns her attention to the soil in front of her.

Ask the woman what's wrong.

➔ *Read entry 3481.*

Leave the woman to her thoughts.

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

1904

"But it would be foolish to pretend that the darkness is not present. We mourn, tonight, the lives of two of our own, taken from us before their time." She gestures down to the hall floor, where a table sits to one side, occupied by no one. A pair of masks rest on the table. One mask is flocked with pure white wool and styled to resemble a lamb. The other is elegant, with fine patterns and an intricate wire butterfly wing that extends over half of what would be the wearer's face.

Each mask is surrounded by white roses and other cut flowers, with the occasional talisman or scrap of paper laid by mourners and guests. It reminds you of nothing so much as the Tree of Tales, a gathering of mementos to memorialize the fallen.

"Make no mistake. The darkness that claimed these young people is a threat to us all. If left unchecked, it will spread and throw us all into chaos." The woman bows her head and grips the hands of her supporters tightly. "A moment of silence, please, for those we've lost."

➔ *Read entry 2151.*

1913

An eerie stillness settles over the entire room. Kyric's hands stop trembling, and a look of serenity washes over him. His eyes stare into the empty space in the room, focused on nothing. For a long moment, silence holds the room captive.

Kyric's lips part, and then he whispers, "I'm sorry."

Without a trace of emotion left on his face, without looking away from the empty space in the room, Kyric draws his blade across the soft skin of Rochelle's throat.

He releases her limp body, which falls to the floor in a growing pool of blood, and steps backward, laughter overtaking him as he clutches at his head.

➔ *Read entry 8871.*

1944

You dash forward, drawing your weapon as you go. Rochelle sees you moving and draws her own sword as the assassin strikes!

If you have agility (skill) or military (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 3676.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 9479.*

1959

"Do it," snaps Rochelle. "Braxton, Tallea, with me. We'll give them some cover."

The group moves toward the garden as Braxton, Rochelle, and Tallea launch a concerted attack on the bandits, driving them back and giving you room to maneuver. Regina and Tymothi soon pass through the doors to the garden, and the others follow one by one.

Soon enough, you, Braxton, and Rochelle are the last ones standing in the doorway. You fall back into the garden and find yourselves confronted by another group of bandits, cutting you off from the hedge maze beyond where Tallea and Celyse stand fending off any pursuit.

Four bandits lie between you and the hedge, led by a lean, brown human woman with dramatic patterns shaved into her hair. "Get the noble girl," sneers the lead bandit. "Kyric's paying one hundred gold to the one who cuts her down."

"Try it," hisses Rochelle, her knuckles whitening on the hilt of her sword.

"We have to get back to the group," says Braxton, shifting to keep her focus on the bandits now moving to encircle you.

Fend off the bandits while Rochelle clears a path.

➔ *Read entry 9296.*

Support the two fighters with tactical advice.

➔ *Read entry 1220.*

Fire from afar while the others engage.

Requires archery (skill).

➔ *Read entry 8855.*

Create an icy barrier between you and the bandits.

Requires frost rune (item).

➔ *Read entry 8993.*

1966

The older dwarf pauses in his dancing to look down at his daughter, then over at you. The snowy owl gives another high kick, then pauses to look up at you too.

If story point Q5 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 5756.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 4569.*

1971

"Watch out!" calls Celyse a moment too late, as a human bandit bursts from the bushes to your left. He jabs you with a fire-hardened spear, slashing across your leg, sending you tumbling to the ground.

➔ *You lose three stamina.*

Celyse leaps forward, batting aside the bandit's next thrust and riposting off the parry to stab him in the chest. He falls with a small gurgling cry, and Celyse helps you to your feet, where you stumble unsteadily on your wounded leg for a moment. "Let's go," she says, and you rush toward the clearing with the great oak tree.

➔ *Read entry 4549.*

2027

With Kyric safely restrained, the fear and exhaustion of the last few hours catches up with you in a rush. You feel disjointed, almost as if swimming through your own life. Soldiers clad in mail and Belmont red arrive and, under Braxton's direction, escort Kyric away. Someone presses a clay cup of water into your hand. You drift into the great hall.

Regina's body lies on the only surviving table in the place, resting atop a dense carpet of flowers and other memorials. Her own masquerade disguise, the black-and-white dragon, lies next to Sonia's white lamb. Most of the household clusters around the table, openly weeping. Tymothi alternates between trying to give instructions that trail off mid-sentence to nearby staff and blowing his nose on a black handkerchief. Braxton clutches Mariam to her, furiously wiping tears away with one calloused thumb. Celyse cries silently, dabbing at her eyes with the hem of her cloak.

Rochelle stands alone, clutching the filigree butterfly mask that had been meant for Phillip to her chest. Her eyes glimmer with pain, but no tears fall. Her skin is ashen and her gaze fixed on nothing. You half expect to see an arrow protruding from her heart. Eventually, she takes a deep breath and her eyes focus. She looks at each member of her household, one at a time, and shares a quiet nod with them.

You stand for a silent moment, paying your own respects, and stagger out the front door of the manor. The sky offers a pre-dawn greyness, and somewhere a rooster crows.

➔ *Mark story point C8.*

➔ *Read entry 9997 (Stoic Ending).*

2081

Kyric opens his mouth to speak again, then closes it. His eyes are wide, staring at you and through you and at nothing at all. You shift away, as if his gaze were showing you something naked and private, something you'd rather not see.

In a sudden rush, Kyric roars and charges toward you, lifting his sword high. Quick as a flickering flame, you unleash a torrent of fire that drives him back and leaves him groaning and burned.

➔ *Mark two progress in war.*

➔ *Read entry 9321.*

2151

Silence settles over the assemblage like a snowfall. Heads bow, and stillness reigns. Then the woman in the dragon mask lifts her head and speaks again, her voice stronger, brighter.

"And now, it is time to celebrate. We celebrate the lives lost, and those yet living. We are the light against the darkness. Make merry, my friends, and let your light shine. Thank you." The crowd cheers, the minstrels strike up a tune, and the hall is once again awash in merriment and fellowship.

If story point G5 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 3811.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 2567.*

2247

The group of nobles on the balcony sprawls down the staircase, sorting themselves higher or lower on the stair presumably based on rank. At the head of the stair stands the woman with the black-and-white dragon mask. Leaning over the balcony rail at her side is a tall human man in a mask with blue-and-gold checks; a chirping drake flutters its leathery wings while perched on his hand. A step below the woman in the dragon mask is a stout human man with a mask of red silk with a white rose at his temple; his bushy red beard burns brightly against the black of his velvet tunic.

Below the man in the red mask stands a slender elf woman with a crescent-moon mask, in conversation with a brown-skinned human woman whose mask resembles a knight's helm with a crown of black feathers. Still more well-to-do partygoers spill down the steps, some climbing up or down in their pursuit of food, dancing, or gossip.

Some of the guests linger by the table covered in flowers long enough to lay one of their own upon it or just to touch the mask in the center and bow their heads for a silent moment. Then they move on.

Join the conversation on the stairs.

➔ *Read entry 2874.*

Linger nearby and eavesdrop on the balcony.

➔ *Read entry 5196.*

Approach the table surrounded by flowers.

➔ *Read entry 3399.*

2296

Celyse has no more time for wry remarks, as the bandits come rushing at her, jabbing with rusty knives and serrated blades. You work as quickly as you can, removing key poles from both sides, then climbing up the increasingly precarious structure to get the top pins. As Celyse spars with a wiry human man with freckles and colorless, dead-fish eyes, you give one last shove, and the trellis goes tumbling forward. The bandit battling Celyse stops to gape, so she runs him through and throws him into the tangle of broken wood and grasping vines that used to be a clear path through the garden.

"Good work," she says as the two of you jog toward the clearing with the great oak tree. "That should hold them for a few minutes."

➔ *Read entry 4549.*

2343

As the bandit rushes forward, you retreat deeper into the hedge maze, looking for some suitable place to make a stand. You find a wooden footbridge across a pond and clamber across it, thinking to restrict the elf's movement and make it easier to use your magic against him.

As he steps onto the bridge he smirks, flourishing his hooked sword. "Going to fight me by the water, eh? You know, they call me Shark." He begins running forward as you lift your flame rune.

If you have agility (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 8457.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 6105.*

2367

"But it would be foolish to pretend that the darkness is not present. We mourn, tonight, the life of one of our own, taken from us before her time." She gestures down to the hall floor, where a table sits to one side, occupied by no one. A mask rests on the table, flocked with pure white wool and stylized to look like a lamb. The mask is surrounded by white roses and other cut flowers, with the occasional talisman or scrap of paper laid by mourners and guests. It reminds you of nothing so much as the Tree of Tales, a gathering of mementos to memorialize the fallen.

A slender young human man in an elegant mask with an intricate wire butterfly wing that covers half his face places a white rose in front of the white lamb mask. He glances up at the balcony, where the woman in the dragon mask and her knight companion both nod.

"Make no mistake," the woman in the dragon mask continues. "The darkness that claimed Sonia Fairfax is a threat to us all. If left unchecked, it will spread and throw us all into chaos." The woman bows her head and grips the hands of her supporters tightly. "A moment of silence, please, for those we've lost."

➔ *Read entry 2151.*

2507

The footbridge echoes like a drum as you and Shark battle back and forth across it. Your companions cheer you on from behind you, and a smattering of bandits do the same for Shark from his side of the pond. You fight carefully and let Shark imagine he's driving you back across the bridge. You knock a few of his strikes aside, biting into the guardrail on the side of the bridge and sending bright chips of wood flying into the dark water below.

At length, you've reached the far side of the bridge, where you suddenly shift your momentum and begin to drive Shark back. Then, suddenly, you catch his weapon with yours, knock it aside, and kick him against the now-weakened guardrail. It gives way with a crash, and Shark goes flying into the pond.

The poor footbridge, abused beyond anything it was built to take, collapses soon after as you leap back to your side of the water. You retreat further into the hedge maze with your group as the bandits begin to wade across the pond.

➔ *Read entry 6602.*

2526

"Good evening!" says the gnome happily. The orc smirks. "Uh, I mean—who's this Mariam lady? I'm sure I don't know her. She sounds like a wonderful person!"

The masked orc chuckles as the gnome continues. "I'm honored that you—a stranger—would mistake me for this Mariam I've heard so much about!"

"I thought you didn't know who she is," interrupts the orc.

The gnome glares up at the orc. "Did I say that? Goodness, I think it's time for a dance!" With that the gnome takes the orc by the hand and drags her—well, the orc allows herself to be dragged—toward the dance floor.

➔ *Read entry 1528.*

2567

With no immediate demands on your attention, you take a moment to watch the crowd and survey the room. With the speeches out of the way, the guests are spreading throughout the manor. The minstrels, perched on the spiral stair overlooking the west side of the hall, are dashing out a lively tune on lute, pipes, tabor, and harp. About a dozen couples whirl and prance in a complicated quadrille on the dance floor, forming and re-forming into ever-evolving patterns as they move.

Many guests are clustered by the banquet table at the head of the hall, helping themselves to platters of food and settling in at nearby tables to eat. It's an unusual arrangement, but probably the only way to feed the large number of guests present in the space available. You note two humans, a man and woman in stag and doe masks, talking in low tones near the table, watching the rest of the crowd.

The woman in the dragon mask remains on the balcony overlooking the hall, where she is now surrounded by guests who you take to be other nobles. A tall human man with a half-mask of blue and gold checks is leaning over the edge of the balcony, scratching a small jeweled drake under its scaly chin while the creature coos in contentment. A stout human man with a bushy red beard and wearing a mask of red silk with a white rose at one temple leans in closely to the woman in the black-and-white dragon mask, talking less privately than he seems to think.

The doors to the garden are open, and you can see lanterns dotting the greenery. Several guests have already fled the noise and bustle of the main hall to walk in the garden alone or in pairs, where the pools of shadow and many twists and turns of the path provide privacy. At least one couple is walking hand in hand, clearly out for a romantic evening stroll.

Find yourself a dance partner.

➔ *Read entry 4573.*

Mingle near the banquet table and try the food.

➔ *Read entry 5335.*

Approach the dragon woman and her entourage.

➔ *Read entry 2247.*

Venture out to the garden.

➔ *Read entry 4063.*

2578

With another step, the rogue lord falls to his knees. He stares at Rochelle. Moving stiffly as if in pain, he places his hands behind his head. "I'm sorry," he says.

Rochelle recoils from the apology, storming away to lean on the doorframe to the salon. She clutches her sword in one hand and wipes furiously at her eyes with the other.

Kyric doesn't stop staring at her as Braxton carefully steps behind him and restrains him.

➔ *Time passes.*

If story point O6 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 2027.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 4263.*

2617

You allow that perhaps Regina's rise to power was controversial, but you point out that it doesn't matter, that as far as the people of Dragonholt are concerned, she was their countess. "Not all of them," says Kyric, leveling his sword at you. "I still have my allies here. Some may call me kinslayer, but they'll grow to love me in time." He paces, eyes shining. You're not certain if he's trying to convince you or himself.

➔ *Mark one progress in peace.*

➔ *Read entry 4428.*

2627

You interject with your own version of events, describing a goat chasing the man in the black mask into a blackberry bush. You make out the sounds of his approaching rescuers to be so startling to him that he imagined them as bandits and attempted to chase them off, until the goat chased back out of the blackberry bush and into a crowd of jeering children.

"Now that sounds believable!" hoots a human woman in a sheepskin vest with a mask of autumn leaves.

"I believe you have been misinformed," sniffs the man in the black mask, but it's too late. His audience has turned against him.

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

2712

You interrupt the man in the black mask and begin spinning your own story about Nerekhall and the dramatic events that unfolded there. At first the man in the black mask tries to reclaim the stage, but before long he's just as enraptured in your tale as everyone else. "What happened next?" he asks as you take a dramatic pause to wet your throat. With a grin and a flourish, you finish your story on a high note, leaving everyone impressed.

The best part is, you were almost entirely truthful. (But you did leave out the part with the spiders.)

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

2874

You climb the stairs and join the conversation with the knight-masked woman and the elf woman with the crescent-moon mask, standing aside to let a human woman in a red riding costume with a skull-faced mask brush past you.

If story point O6 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 7346.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 7905.*

2886

Kyric sighs, running a thumb along the bleeding wound on his nose. "There's always more where they come from. But you're not wrong. Perhaps Rochelle would agree to make peace; we've both lost so much already."

➔ *Mark two progress in peace.*

➔ *Read entry 5863.*

2946

Standing on the balcony, you watch as the bandits below get organized and prepare to mount an attack on your position. Some of them have found bows, and others now clutch spears. One group begins to climb the stair, led by a wiry human man with freckles and eyes as dead and colorless as a fish.

You and Celyse stand on the balcony, she with a rapier in one hand and her rune, bound with copper wire and looped around two fingers, clutched in the other. "Just like old times," she says sourly.

Fend off the bandits at the top of the stairs.

➔ *Read entry 9612.*

Find a way to keep the bandits at bay.

➔ *Read entry 4051.*

Pick off the bandits with your bow.

Requires archery (skill).

➔ *Read entry 7044.*

Smash a vial of liquid smoke on the stairs.

Requires alchemy (skill).

➔ *Read entry 8936.*

2966

You are next handed to a human woman wearing a mask that resembles a knight's helm with a crown of black feathers. She gives a stiff bow, incongruous with her ruffled black ball gown, and steps almost mechanically into the dance.

An uncomfortable silence grows between you, before she breaks it in a flood. "I'm sorry, I'm not much of a conversationalist tonight," she says. "I keep thinking of my sister and my brother. They died recently." The dance turns her in a circle, and she glances over toward the table adorned with masks and flowers. You offer your condolences as she returns, and she stiffens. "I don't want condolences. I want my family back." Then she sighs. "My apologies. You didn't deserve that. In truth, I'm angry at...someone else. At the adventurers who were supposed to keep my brother safe."

Before you can respond, the woman in the knight mask hands you off to the next dancer in line.

If story point G5 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 6252.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 3114.*

3004

You ready your weapon and place yourself on Celyse's right, knowing she'd prefer coverage on her rune arm so she can focus on using magic. "This reminds me of that bit with the nymph and the pig. Remember? And the apple? No? Oh, of course you don't, you were transformed into the pig at the time." She sighs, shaking her head. "Good times."

If you have dueling (skill) or military (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 6937.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 3657.*

3038

You shake your head and tell Kyric that he will never be count, not with so much blood and death surrounding him tonight. "I am count," he hisses. You ask him to drop his weapon, beg him to spare his own life. "It is you who should be surrendering!" he growls, but he steps back, away from you, his eyes wide and white in the soft light.

➔ *Mark two progress in peace.*

➔ *Read entry 4428.*

3057

You flail around with your weapon, drawing a lot of attention but not doing much good. The bandits seem impressed by the vigor of your attack—or at least they single you out for their counterattacks, one of which smashes through your guard and lands a stinging blow on your elbow. You nearly drop your weapon, but Rochelle takes advantage of your opponent's elation to slam her own sword into his gut. He falls, and she follows through with a flat slash, severing the second bandit's hand at the wrist. The third bandit elects to fight another day and rushes through the doors into the garden.

Rochelle dabs at the bandit's blood on her face. "Spirits protect me," she breathes. "I've never killed anyone before." You tap her on the shoulder and gesture toward the remaining bandits, who are even now gathering for a counterattack. "Yes," she says, "Well-argued. Fight now, reflect later."

➔ *You lose two stamina.*

➔ *Read entry 4731.*

3098

As the bandit rushes forward, you find yourself frantically retreating in search of some advantage to be gained from the environment. Soon you are standing at the edge of a pond fed by a babbling stream and surrounded by hedges. A wooden footbridge spans the pond, and the others have already retreated across it, so you make your stand there.

"Going to fight me by water, eh?" leers the elf. "You know they call me Shark." He lifts his sword and battle is joined!

If you have reasoning (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 5470.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 3205.*

3114

Your next partner is a tall, broad-shouldered human man with his face concealed behind a mask styled to look like a black dragon. He dances smoothly, with great ease and skill. "This is an elegant affair," he says. "I haven't been to one of the Fairfax's masquerades since I was scarcely more than a boy. I see they have not changed."

He glances up at the balcony, where the woman in the black-and-white dragon mask looks out over the dance floor. "Much else has, however. And much more will, I am certain."

The music comes to an end and your dance partner gives you an immaculate bow before vanishing into the crowd.

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

3154

Two masks lie on the table, one made of lambswool and the other incorporating a butterfly wing design. White roses form a dense carpet on the table, interrupted here and there by small mementos and rolled pieces of paper, trinkets and gifts for the departed.

In the center of the table rests a sprig of purple flowers like violet bells—monkshood—resting on the very top of the pile. At the near edge lies an ink pot and a loose stack of blank papers for guests to write their own missives.

Allow a moment of silence before rejoining the festivities.

➡ *Read entry 3438.*

Write a heartfelt message to the spirits.

➡ *Read entry 4060.*

Leave a gift for the departed.

Requires polished shell (item).

➡ *Read entry 3261.*

3174

A ghostly hand claps Kyric on the shoulder, and he turns to find himself staring into Phillip's dead face. "But a kinslayer you are, uncle," says the second ghost. "You murdered me. We quarreled and a quarrel ended my life." The ghost glances down at his chest, where a spectral crossbow bolt protrudes in a spreading field of red blood.

"No!" groans Kyric, staggering back.

"Murderer!" shouts Sonia's ghost.

"Abductor, brigand, and kinslayer!" howls Phillip's.

"I never meant for any of this to happen!" screams Kyric.

➡ *Read entry 9917.*

3205

Shark's first savage swing cuts a bright shard of wood from the bridge's guardrail and sends you scrambling backward. Shark follows up with pounding footwork and slash after thrust after vicious jab as you reel desperately from side to side. The bridge groans under your feet as you retreat, doing your best to stay out of reach of Shark's gleaming, hooked blade, barely able to stay alive, let alone come up with a cunning plan. Eventually, you place a foot wrong and feel it break through the wood of the bridge. You stumble, your leg trapped up to the knee in a hole in the bridge, and Shark lands a vicious blow on your shoulder.

➡ *You lose four stamina.*

You fall back, and abruptly an arrow plunges into Shark's chest. He drops his sword and falls to his knees, hands scrabbling at the arrow's shaft. You pull yourself free from the bridge, wincing as you feel your shoulder grinding against itself. You place both feet against Shark and shove, sending him tumbling against the guardrail, then smashing through it to fall into the water below.

You pull yourself back to your feet as the bridge falls to pieces, hobbling to join Rochelle and Tweegal at the shore. She hands the bow to the old orc and offers you a hand. "Let's move on," she says, and so you retreat deeper into the hedge maze.

➡ *Read entry 6602.*

3261

You whisper a few heartfelt words to the spirits and place the first thing that comes to hand—the small polished shell—on the table as a gift. The flowers ripple softly as if caressed by the wind, but you don't feel any breeze. Before you can investigate further, a slender elf woman in a crescent-moon mask appears at your side.

➡ *You lose the polished shell (item).*

"It's heartening to see that this family has allies, as well as enemies," she says. "They're good people. They mean well and want what's best for everyone." The emerald feathers that sprout from her mask flutter as she glances up to the balcony above you. A young woman in a ruffled dress and a mask stylized like a knight's helm leans in toward the tall, thin woman with a black-and-white dragon mask. "But that doesn't matter to those who would destroy them. I won't stand by and let that happen. I hope you won't, either."

After another moment in silence, the elf steps away. The flowers rest against the polished shell, as if their petals have reached out to touch it.

➡ *Mark one progress in heroism.*

➡ *Read entry 1118.*

3315

The gnome pats the bench at her side, inviting you to sit. "Come," she says. "Enjoy the flowers with me."

You sit and let the sweet scent wash over you as the gnome woman leans back and gazes up at the night sky. "The gardens here are lovely. Dragonholt has been a splendid home to me for these past few years, and I'm so happy that I got to meet you."

The gnome hops off the bench and turns to face you. "Oh, I'm sorry. That sounds dreadfully final, doesn't it? I'm not about to vanish into the night or anything." She laughs, then crouches down and busies herself with the flowers. "But I am going to leave Dragonholt. Eventually. I want to see new gardens and smell new flowers. Mariam is settled, Jasper has agreed to buy the Swan. I'll stay on a while longer to make sure he's got the hang of things, and then it's time for me to go."

She straightens, then offers you a small bouquet of primrose and baby's breath. "I'll see you around, I'm sure." As you take the flowers, the gnome woman leans in and gives you a quick kiss on the cheek. She giggles and rustles out of the flower garden, leaving you in a cloud of perfume.

➡ *Read entry 1118.*

3321

Weapon raised, you pick what looks like the weak link in the bandit chain and charge. "I'm with you!" calls Rochelle, rushing to your side. Together, you crash into a group of three bandits with clubs and swords.

If you have athletics (skill) or military (skill)...

➡ *Read entry 7264.*

Otherwise...

➡ *Read entry 8118.*

3325

Kyric laughs as your arrow passes harmlessly past his head. His knife drags a ragged line across Rochelle's throat, and he hurls her at you. Choking on her own blood, Rochelle staggers into your arms, knocking you to your knees. You watch the light fade from her green eyes.

If story point 06 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 6412.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 8871.*

3396

Sadly it seems that Shark's arrogance is well founded, as his expert attacks and feints leave you wrong-footed and uncertain. He drives you back and back, further and further up the staircase as he opens a series of cruel and ragged cuts on your arms.

➔ *You lose four stamina.*

As you reach the top of the stair Tallea swears and steps in, catching Shark's latest attack on her sword and driving him back with a practiced glissade. Taking advantage of the opening, you kick Shark back down the stair into a mob of shrieking bandits. "Cheater!" shouts the gnome woman, leaping to the banister and waving her twin knives. "Coward and a cheat!"

➔ *Read entry 2946.*

3399

As you step up toward the table, a tall, broad-shouldered human man briefly blocks your view. He pauses over the flowers for a moment, then walks away without a backward glance. You step up to examine the table and its flowers more closely.

If story point 06 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 3154.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 8497.*

3438

You stand in silence for a moment, meditating on the young people who were intended to wear these masks and their untimely deaths. After a short time, a slender elf woman in a mask shaped like a crescent moon appears at your side.

"They were too young," she says. The emerald feathers that sprout from her mask flutter as she glances up to the balcony above you. A young human woman in a black ruffled dress and a mask stylized like a knight's helm leans in toward the tall, thin woman with a black-and-white dragon mask. "This family has had too much grief. And more is coming; Regina may not survive the year. They're good people who want what's best for everyone. But the world is a cruel place, full of crueler people." She sighs and glances over at you. "They need people like us to stand for them. Especially Rochelle, now. She will need friends, and badly, lest she end like her sister and brother."

After another moment in silence, the elf steps away. The masks sit silently, looking at you with empty eyes.

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

3469

Rochelle rushes forward, slashing at her uncle. Kyric sidesteps her attack with no apparent distress. "This tantrum is unbecoming a young woman of noble birth," says Kyric. "Even a bastard's daughter."

"Enough!" shouts Rochelle, parrying Kyric's thrust. Her riposte cuts across the bridge of his nose, sending him staggering back. "You did this!" she screams. "You killed your sister, your niece, your nephew! You kinslayer!"

Kyric falters. "No," he says. He steps backward, sword up, as he glances at you and the rest of his audience. "That wasn't what I wanted. Phillip forced my hand!" Another step back. "I won't be held responsible for what you make me do if you persist!" Suddenly, Kyric turns and flees. Rochelle shrieks an incoherent wail of rage and races after. You and Braxton leap forward in pursuit, jumping over bandit corpses and struggling to keep both Kyric and Rochelle in view.

In the great hall, Kyric runs for the front door. Behind him, Rochelle bends and snatches a spear from the hands of a dead bandit lying on the floor, then steps forward and throws. The spear sinks into the wood of the door with a "thock!" nearly striking Kyric's head. He jumps back, and Rochelle rushes past him, throwing herself low under his panicked cross-cut to slash open his leg.

Trailing blood, Kyric staggers to the far stair and climbs up to the salon.

➔ *Mark two progress in war.*

➔ *Read entry 7609.*

3481

The woman brushes earth from her hands, then places them on her thighs as if to brace herself. "It's nothing, really. The mad dreaming of a lovesick girl." She glances up at the moon and smiles softly. "I loved a man—a boy, really, when I was just a girl. But he went away to war and by the time he came back I was married. I loved my husband, but I never stopped loving Theodore either. And with my husband gone now for these many years, I find myself wishing we were still young again and still had our whole lives ahead of us to spend together." She stands, pushing herself up with a soft grunt of effort. "Like I said, it's nothing. I'd like to be alone now, if you don't mind. I don't much feel like celebrating tonight."

"I think this is for you."

Requires love letter (item).

➔ *Read entry 5379.*

"I'll leave you to your thoughts."

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

3491

Kyric slashes his sword through empty air as he paces back and forth. You take a deep breath and step forward, pointing out that all of his bandits have been defeated and asking him to surrender.

If you have persuasion (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 2886.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 5345.*

3631

"Yes," murmurs the orc man. "I see the mask, too." His eyes are closed. You hear a gentle whisper and find yourself turning to see who is speaking. "Ah," says the orc man. "You can hear them, can't you? The voices of the spirits." He opens his eyes and stands, extending a hand. "Come, watch with me."

Tentatively, you take his hand, and he turns you to gaze out over the garden. "The spirits like this place, because she is here, the Bride of Eventide. Find the stillness within you, open yourself, and see." He places a finger on the side of your head, and you feel the world drop out from within your stomach, feel it crash in around you, and then everywhere you see spirits. Gamboling spectral animals, serene ancestors long dead, surreal images—you see a badger shuffle by with a heart marked into its fur, and a tiny knight sitting astride a sparrow flits past your head.

"We love her!" they cry. "We need her!" they wail. "We will have her," they promise. "She will join us soon," says one tall figure, cloaked, crowned with stag's horns. He seems almost sad.

You hear a voice calling your name and awaken to find an elf woman with a crescent-moon mask peering at you. "Are you alright?" she asks. "Did you fall asleep out here? The party's not that dull." You look around for the old orc, but he is gone.

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

3657

The bandits come up the stairs, wave after wave, and wave after wave you turn them back, but it's been so long since you've done battle at Celyse's side that you're working awkwardly, not in sync. Celyse uses her magic to blind and dazzle the bandits, but you fail to avert your eyes and get blinded yourself. A wiry, freckled human man with colorless eyes jams a spear into your leg before you're able to knock his weapon aside and cut him down.

➔ *You lose three stamina.*

In time, the weight of numbers begins to tell. You tire as the bandits rotate out their wounded and exhausted for fresh fighters. You're forced back from the vine trellis, and several bandits rush forward, spreading out and threatening to overwhelm you.

"Time to go," says Celyse. She holds up her runeshard and cries out in the elven tongue, sending bolts of prismatic light to transfix the nearby bandits and send them twitching to the ground. The two of you hobble toward the clearing with the great oak tree, Celyse supporting you on your injured leg.

➔ *Read entry 4549.*

3676

You throw yourself into a slide and knock the dagger from the assassin's hand just before it sinks into Rochelle's unprotected back. You sweep out a leg and knock the assassin flat on her back as you scramble back to your feet. Rochelle steps up and holds her attacker at swordpoint on the ground.

"Thank you," she says to you. "Using a catspaw doesn't make you any less of a murderer, uncle."

➔ *Read entry 3968.*

3692

You hold the foot of the stair while the others retreat into the tower. Before you can follow them, a bandit steps forward to challenge you to a duel. "Come down here and fight, you coward," he calls, grinning around a mouthful of sharp teeth. He is an elf man with skin so pale it almost seems translucent, and he holds his hooked sword with a casual arrogance that suggests he knows how to use it. "Your countess can't hide behind your skirts forever, not if she wants to keep the respect of her people!"

Before you can respond to either the challenge or the insults, the elf leaps to the attack, his sword flashing in a deadly arc!

Meet his assault with a clash of steel.

➔ *Read entry 9101.*

Use the high ground to your advantage.

➔ *Read entry 3866.*

Fend off his advances with lightning.

Requires runes (skill).

➔ *Read entry 9049.*

3708

You explain the true history of how Regina became Count Holland's heir, how she rescued the county from the dragon when Kyrice would not, how her father legitimized her and named her his heir formally. "No," mutters Kyrice. You go on to explain that, by all legal measures, Regina's claim is legitimate, and more to the point her heroism and her wise leadership have earned her the support of the common people and the local lords. "I would have done as well. The lords will see that, surely." He staggers away from you, as if wounded by your arguments.

➔ *Mark two progress in peace.*

➔ *Read entry 4428.*

3811

A stocky human man in one of the plain black masks reserved for staff approaches you. Glancing over his shoulder, he takes your arm and ushers you to lurk beneath the stairs. "I expected the man himself," he says, "but if you're wearing his mask he must have sent you in his stead. Everything's arranged. I told your friend who she's looking for and made sure she could find a weapon. The countess is the one in the black-and-white dragon mask, in case that wasn't clear." He jabs his thumb toward the ceiling, where the balcony with the nobles hangs over his head. "Lady Rochelle is here, too. She's the one in the knight's helm mask."

The man drags a hand across the back of his neck and sighs. "I'm leaving the county tonight; I've been tending the Fairfaxes' stables long enough, I figure they owe me a horse." With that, he ducks away and vanishes into the crowd.

You move to follow him, but he is lost among a sea of facades. Instead you find a tall orc woman wearing a black domino mask with a sword at her hip. You whisper to her about your encounter, and she nods. "I'll alert the other guards. We'll keep our eyes open for anyone suspicious. Good work."

➔ *Read entry 2567.*

3866

It's obvious almost immediately that the elf bandit has the upper hand on you when it comes to skill with a blade, so you scramble up the steps, trading position for a chance to find an opportunity to gain the advantage. "Kill 'em, Shark!" shouts a gnome woman, waving her twin knives in the air.

If you have reasoning (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 1492.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 7972.*

3883

You focus the energy into an expertly guided burst of force. The bandits tumble shrieking into the air, then go sliding across the dance floor, their weapons scattering away out of reach and their bodies bloodied and bruised.

➔ *Read entry 4731.*

3909

"I thought you'd never ask," says the woman in the blue mask, grabbing your hand and leading you out onto the dance floor. The current song ends and a new dance, a waltz, begins. Your partner allows you to lead and smoothly steps through the form of the dance, moving with easy grace. "This is nice," she says. "I do love a waltz."

"Where did you learn to dance?"

➔ *Read entry 1714.*

"I could dance with you all night."

Requires story point X6 is marked.

➔ *Read entry 7987.*

"Shall we retire to the garden?"

Requires story point L2 is marked.

➔ *Read entry 7308.*

3928

You settle down by the edge of the pond and listen to the trill of the frogs and the lapping of the water. After a few moments, the dwarf man settles down next to you. "Mind if I sit wit' ye?" he asks.

When you don't object, he leans back and watches the girl playing on the bridge. He says nothing, seeming to simply soak in the sounds of the water and a child at play. After a while, he stands. "Thank ye," he says. The girl comes rushing up and grabs his hand.

"Dah," she says. "Come see! Come see!" The man allows himself to be dragged away, giving you a small wave as he goes.

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

3944

You step back, waiting to see the impact Rochelle's words will have. Kyric laughs, rolling his head back and forth as he leans against the wall. "How could things have gone so wrong?" he mutters. "Spirits help you, child, you just might be right."

➔ *Mark two progress in peace.*

➔ *Read entry 9321.*

3963

You settle onto the grass at the dwarf man's side, watching his daughter play on the bridge.

"I been living for her," says the dwarf man. "Ever since her Mah died, every decision I made has been for her. I came down out o' th' mountains for her. I set up me shop in this wee quiet village for her. I'm even here, tonight, because she wanted to come." He glances at you and smiles. "Well, I wanted to come, too. I hoped I might see ye here."

He reaches out and takes your hand in his. His hand is warm, strong, and he smells just slightly like flour and a glowing warm hearth. "Ye reminded me that sometimes, a man can live for himself too. I donna have to choose 'twixt her an' me."

"Dah," says the girl, tromping off the bridge and racing up toward you. "I want ta go see the flowers, an' explore the maze, an'—"

The dwarf man laughs. "Well, go off wit' ye, then. I'll be right here when ye're done." The girl races off into the night, and the dwarf man turns to you.

Grisbeck takes off his mask and smiles, the wrinkles at the edges of his eyes deepening. He squeezes both of your hands gently but firmly with his. "Thank ye for reminding me to live for meself," he says before pausing for a moment as if picking his next words carefully. "If'n ye'll have me, I'd like ta live for ye as well."

The dwarf man's cheeks burn with a flush of color, and he opens his mouth to speak again before you can answer. "Take ye time an' think it through, o' course." You sit together, holding hands, in the gentle silence of the brook and the life that fills the garden.

After a few minutes, Penny returns in a flurry of energy and excitement. "Dah," she says. "Come see! Come see!" Grisbeck allows himself to be dragged away, giving you a small wave as he goes.

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

3964

You find a few sticks under the nearest hedge and bring them up onto the bridge. The dwarf girl comes to a halt, watching you, as you drop a stick into the water and watch the current carry it under the bridge.

"Oh!" she says. "Let's race them!" You offer her a stick, and she giggles, climbing up on the bridge railing to see the water clearly. The moon shines in the blackness of the water, and with another laugh the girl drops her stick right onto its silver face.

You drop your own stick, and then both of you rush to the other side of the bridge. "Mine will win," says the dwarf girl. "I chose a fast one." In short order, two sticks emerge from under the bridge, spinning gently in the lazy current. "There," says the girl in the snowy owl mask. "That one is mine, and I won." She looks up at you and smiles. "Again!" You rush back to the other side of the bridge, feet rattling on the wooden boards, and select two more sticks.

After a couple more races, the dwarf girl begs her father to return to the dance floor with her, and the two of them take their leave with polite nods.

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

3968

Kyric slashes at Braxton with a knife, breaking away. "There's no turning back now!" he calls. A number of partygoers throw off their masks and draw a motley assortment of hooked knives, cudgels set with nails, and other weapons made as much for cruelty as effect. Sonia's ghost shrieks as the remaining guests cry out in fear and begin running for the exits, where more bandits come streaming in. The ghost rises above them all, her cries rising higher and higher, until a knife flashes through her and she vanishes. "Kill them all," spits Kyric. "And may we all be damned for it."

Five bandits rush forward, heading for Rochelle and her mother. Braxton steps forward and lashes out at the lead bandit, sending him staggering, but the other four rush past her like water. Rochelle shoves her mother behind her, holding her sword in a low grip.

"You get to her past my corpse," she hisses.

"That's the idea, princess," chuckles the bandit in front, a lean dark-skinned woman with dramatic patterns shaved into her hair.

The screaming crowd parts, and a woman in Fairfax livery shoves to the front, tossing aside her black domino mask: the surly guard, Tallea. "You vermin are going to make me earn my pay tonight, aren't you," she snaps, drawing her sword. Then she rushes forward and scatters the bandits with a swing of her blade.

More bandits fight their way through the fleeing guests, moving to surround you. Rochelle shifts to and fro, desperately trying to stay between all of them and her mother.

Cut a path through the enemy.

➔ *Read entry 3321.*

Charge headlong at the bandits.

➔ *Read entry 7478.*

Blast the flanking bandits away.

Requires arcana (skill) or runes (skill).

➔ *Read entry 4191.*

Inspire your fellows with bardic song.

Requires performance (skill).

➔ *Read entry 9681.*

4019

You keep the pressure on the bandits, felling some and driving others back. Celyse handily dispatches the few that actually gain the top of the stair. For a moment it seems the bandits have given up, then you hear Kyric bellowing orders, and the bandits drag the banquet table out into the hall and flip it up to form a crude palisade. Several begin climbing the stair under the cover of broad serving platters, most of which prove to be of little use against a proper bow, but at least they make you work for your telling blows. Soon, several bandits have gained the balcony and are driving Celyse back.

"Retreat!" bellows Braxton from the doorway, and you do so, falling back and firing your last few arrows at the lead bandits. Celyse follows you through the doors into the countess's audience chamber, then Braxton and Tweegal slam them shut and bar them. Tallea hands you a fresh quiver of arrows, and you stretch out your burning arm and back muscles.

➔ *Read entry 4819.*

4051

You step back, looking for some clever way to sidestep a battle altogether. Celyse sighs and steps in front of you, holding her rapier in a low guard and her rune arm above her head. "This is just like that time in the Blood Knight lair. Me doing all the work while you stand around looking thoughtful." You remind her that you all survived the Blood Knight lair and ask her to be quiet while you think.

If you have craftsmanship (skill) or reasoning (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 1454.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 1175.*

4056

"Worse?" Kyric chuckles, a deep belly laugh with teeth. "How could it get worse? Do you think I wanted them to die? Light and shadow, they're my own blood!" His laughter dies. "I just wanted what was mine. Can you imagine what sort of reign I would have had, with my sister by my side? How strong our county would be today?" He twists the knife against Rochelle's throat, sneering. "But she couldn't have that, could she? She couldn't just... let me have what was mine!"

You pull Kyric's attention back to you, reminding him that Rochelle isn't the one who "stole" his title and urging him to leave the past in the past and focus on the future. Kyric begins to weep, and his grip on his dagger relaxes.

➔ *Mark one progress in peace.*

If you have empathy (skill) or persuasion (skill)...

➔ *Mark one additional progress in peace.*

"Kyric," says Rochelle. "I'm sorry for what happened to you. But this is not the way to get justice." She reaches one hand up to his wrist. "Let me go."

If eight progress is marked in peace...

➔ *Read entry 9509.*

If seven or less progress is marked in peace and story point O6 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 8192.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 1913.*

4060

You take up a quill and parchment to write something, not quite knowing what you are going to say. But soon your hand finds the words your heart struggled with, and a eulogy—part prayer, part promise—spills easily from your pen.

An elf woman in a crescent-moon mask appears at your elbow as you sign your work, nodding in approval. She hands you a single white rose, then places one herself on the table. You let your missive dry for a moment, then wrap it around the rose and place it on the table as well. Perhaps the spirits will read it, and approve of your message. You know only that you feel lighter, somehow, for having written it.

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

4063

The garden is cool and dark, with only a small handful of lanterns glimmering softly to light the paths. A gentle breeze stirs the leaves and washes across your skin, bringing with it the sweet scent of flowers.

The dark silhouette of a large oak tree stands in the center of the garden, the moon silvery behind it. It towers above the hedges that mark off its space. On the right along the manor wall and near the door to the kitchen is a vegetable garden, pragmatic but not precisely beautiful. To your left, behind another hedge, you can hear the tinkling of a running brook, feeding a pond. Directly in front of you an arched trellis climbs with flowering vines. Beyond it lies a rambling footpath marked with occasional stone lanterns, benches screened by tall shrubs, and flowers blooming in the moonlight.

Make your way to the oak tree.

➔ *Read entry 8395.*

Follow the sound of water to the pond.

➔ *Read entry 6771.*

Pass under the flower trellis.

➔ *Read entry 5869.*

Go to the vegetable garden.

➔ *Read entry 5222.*

4129

A shriek tears through the music and commotion like a talon through lace. Screaming comes from the stairs up to the balcony, and panicked guests go streaming past you, rushing for the door. The ghostly figure of a young human woman moans in midair over the stairs! The woman's skin is dark, her hair a riot of golden curls, and she wears her dress worn bunched at one hip for riding. Color fades in and out as she moves, flickering in the air, and blood spatters across her face.

Celyse removes her crescent-moon mask and gasps. "Sonia!" She steps toward the ghost, holding the mask over her breast as if to guard herself. "Sonia, talk to us!"

"He sabotaged my saddle..." moans the ghost. "Kyric! My own uncle!" She moans and floats out over the crowd, where a sudden circle appears around a tall human man. "You wanted my mother's seat, and you were willing to kill me to get it, uncle!"

The tall man removes his mask, revealing the scarred face of the bandit leader. "I did not!" he shouts. "That idiot stablemaster acted without my orders!" He pulls away from the spectre but finds his path blocked by a broad-shouldered orc woman in a black mask. Braxton throws her mask aside and draws her sword.

On the balcony above, Regina removes her black-and-white dragon mask, and Rochelle doffs her faux knight's helm. Both seem several shades paler than normal, transfixed by the sight of Sonia's ghost.

"Regina!" calls Kyric. "I never intended for things to get this out of hand. The spirits hate a kinslayer."

If story point 06 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 3174.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 6666.*

4191

Two groups of bandits rush to close the gap, fully encircling the noble family. Celyse speaks a few words in the elven tongue and throws her hand above her head. A small stone secreted in the palm of her hand pulses and flares, its brilliance painful to behold.

As your vision clears, you see both groups of bandits blinking in a daze. They wander aimlessly, shaking their heads in an effort to regain their sight. You lift your blasting rune and focus its energy to take advantage of their confusion.

If you have willpower (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 3883.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 8006.*

4263

With Kyric safely restrained, the fear and exhaustion of the last few hours catches up with you in a rush. You feel disjointed, almost as if swimming through your own life. Soldiers clad in mail and Belmont red arrive and, under Braxton's direction, escort Kyric away. Someone presses a clay cup of water into your hand. You drift into the great hall.

Regina's body lies on the only surviving table in the place, resting atop a dense carpet of flowers and other memorials. Her own masquerade disguise, the black-and-white dragon, lies next to the white lamb that had been meant for her daughter, Sonia. Rochelle and Phillip stand vigil next to the table. Rochelle wraps one arm around her brother's shoulder as they stand and grieve, leaning on each other, neither quite falling because the other is there.

You stand for a silent moment, paying your own respects, and stagger out the front door of the manor. The first light of dawn kindles in the eastern sky, and the birds begin to sing.

➔ *Mark story point C8.*

➔ *Read entry 9998 (Hopeful Ending).*

4270

You stand in silence for a moment, meditating on the young woman who was intended to wear this mask and her untimely death. After a short time, a slender elf woman in a mask shaped like a crescent moon appears at your side.

"She was too young," she says. The emerald feathers that sprout from her mask flutter as she glances up to the balcony above you. A young woman in a peach ruffled dress and a mask stylized like a knight's helm wraps one arm around a young man whose mask sports a butterfly wing taking up half his face. "This family has had too much grief. First Sonia, then Phillip had a narrow escape. And more is coming; Regina may not survive the year. They're good people who want what's best for everyone. But the world is a cruel place, full of crueler people." She sighs and glances over at you. "They need people like us to stand for them. Especially Rochelle, now. She will need friends, and badly, lest she end like her sister."

After another moment in silence, the elf steps away. The mask sits silently, looking at you with empty eyes.

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

4428

Stumbling through the fallen books, Kyric staggers through the door from Phillip's studio into Rochelle's training hall. You follow, passing into the long dueling salle with its racks of weapons and carefully smoothed floor to find Braxton and Rochelle blocking the door back to the salon. Braxton's face is grave, Rochelle's flushed and bright-eyed. Kyric has nowhere to run.

"Everywhere I turn," he breathes. He lifts his sword and stalks to the side, keeping his eyes on Rochelle. "Come, then. Let us make an end of this."

End this farce with steel and blood.

➔ *Read entry 9260.*

Bring him to his knees with fire.

Requires arcana (skill).

➔ *Read entry 6442.*

"Throw down your sword. You're outnumbered."

➔ *Read entry 8226.*

"We're not going to fight you, Kyric."

➔ *Read entry 8498.*

4519

Kyric doesn't seem to see you, holding his arms wide and shouting at the ceiling. "Well? Haven't I proved to you that I have the courage? That I have the will? Aren't you proud of me, father?" He staggers, sobbing and laughing and barely puts up a fight as you and Braxton slam him into the wall and restrain him.

➔ *Time passes.*

With Kyric safely restrained, the fear and exhaustion of the last few hours catches up with you in a rush. You feel disjointed, almost as if swimming through your own life. Soldiers clad in mail and Belmont red arrive and, under Braxton's direction, escort Kyric away. Someone presses a clay cup of water into your hand. You drift into the great hall.

You find Phillip sitting against the only furniture still standing in the room, the table carpeted with flowers and memorials for Sonia. Regina's body lies to his right, Rochelle's to his left. He clutches one of their hands in each of his and sobs, coughing and breathing in long, ragged gasps.

One by one, his household gathers around him, tears in their eyes. Braxton clutches Mariam to her. Tymothi alternates between trying to give instructions that trail off mid-sentence to nearby staff and blowing his nose on a black handkerchief. Celyse dabs at her eyes with the hem of her cloak and after a while crouches by Phillip's side. "Your lordship," she says. "Your people are waiting for your instructions. Should we tell the village what has happened? Move the bodies to the shrine to lie in state?" Phillip snuffles and stares at her, a look of hurt betrayal crawling across his face. "I'm sorry, Count Phillip," says Celyse, shaking her head. "You are the lord of Dragonholt, now." After a long pause, Phillip nods.

You stagger through the front door of the manor and into a chilling mist. Somewhere the sun is rising, but you cannot see it through the still and silent fog.

➔ *Read entry 9996 (Lonely Ending).*

4549

As you reach the oak tree in its hedged-in clearing, you hear shouting and the sounds of battle. Emerging from one of the other gaps in the hedge, bandits in rougher costume, armed with swords and bows, have your companions pressed back against the tree.

"No!" shouts Celyse, rushing forward to lash out with her brilliant rune. You see Braxton shielding Regina with her body and blade, two bandits already at her feet. Mariam has scrambled up into the oak tree and is throwing bottles and vials of various noxious and unpleasant things down upon the bandits as they approach.

"I didn't pack my fight-for-your-life bag this morning!" she calls. "I'm nearly out of tricks!"

You run forward to Rochelle's side where she stands over the fallen form of the orc guard, Tweegal. The old man struggles to breathe while he clutches at the shaft of the arrow in his chest. "Don't worry about me," he grumbles at you. "Get the heir out of here."

"I'm not leaving my mother!" snaps Rochelle.

"Yes, Rochelle. You are." Regina straightens, placing one hand on Braxton's back and gently pushing the orc out of her way. "Spending your life to save mine is a poor trade. Daughters do not die for their mothers. Rather it should be the other way around, I feel." She smiles, a paper-thin thing already tearing apart. "Rochelle. I love you with all my heart. You will be a marvelous leader. I'm so sorry that I couldn't stay with you longer."

"Mother," says Rochelle, cutting down a bandit and turning toward the tree. "No, what are you—"

Regina spreads her arms wide, calls out, and steps backward into the trunk of the great oak. She presses herself against the bark, and the tree begins to groan, then twitch, and then pull itself free of the earth, standing and moving like a giant. The bandits scream as the tree steps forward on legs of roots, shaking off rich-smelling earth as it goes. The lanterns hanging from its branches become burning weapons as limbs swing, smashing bandits to the ground and setting them aflame. The tree itself catches fire, but that does nothing to stop its rampage, crashing through hedges and hurling screaming bandits around like dolls.

As the burning colossus vanishes from sight, you brush yourself off and climb back to your feet. No living bandits remain anywhere in the garden that you can see. Of Kyric, there is no sign.

"Oh," frets Tymothi, peering after the vanishing tree-monster. "I hope it doesn't set the orchard on fire."

If story point 06 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 6374.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 1157.*

4569

"I'm afraid all me dances tonight are spoken for," says the dwarf in the checkered mask, scooping up the young girl into his arms. "Have a lovely evening, eh?" With that, he spins the giggling young girl in a circle and resumes dancing.

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

As you approach the dance floor, the music changes, and a new dance begins, a contradanza where rows of couples exchange partners in ever-more-complicated flurries of movement. The human woman with the knight mask is in the center of it, dancing with gusto down the row of celebrants arm in arm with a human man in a long-nosed grotesque mask before handing him off to take the arm of a human woman with a mask like a fox.

Off to one side, the tall orc woman with the black mask dances rather carefully with the gnome and her flamboyant plumage. The orc dances stiffly, formally, while the gnome spins and flourishes before her. "I do actually know these court dances," says the orc. "I could lead you through one if you want, it's not that hard."

"But then I'd have to dance with other people," says the gnome. "I'd rather dance with you. And this way I get to show you what gnomish dances are all about!" She cocks her hips, raises her arms above her head, and shimmies side to side until her partner begins to laugh.

Another gnome, in a blue mask with a sapphire butterfly ornament, stands nearby, laughing and clapping at the couple's antics. She glances your way and smiles, then returns her attention to the dancing.

At the other edge of the dance floor, near the garden, two dwarves are dancing, an older man with a black-and-white checked mask with gold trim and a young girl with a feathered mask styled to resemble an owl. They don't seem to be moving with the music, but they don't seem to have noticed this fact with all the jumping and shrieking the young girl is doing.

Ask the gnome woman with the blue mask for a dance.

➔ *Read entry 3909.*

Approach the two dwarves on the dance floor.

➔ *Read entry 7266.*

Join the large group in the elaborate dance.

➔ *Read entry 5941.*

A strangled sob pulls you back to the black wooden chair. Rochelle lies there, gripping her mother's skirts and shaking with grief. Regina's body sits on the chair, her face peaceful and empty.

Mariam places her fingers on Regina's wrist and closes her eyes for a moment. "She's gone."

"No," moans Rochelle. Mariam reaches for her, but Rochelle slaps the apothecary's hand away. "Sonia, Phillip, now mother? Why?"

Soft laughter comes from the balcony. You turn and see Kyric standing in the shattered remains of the door, his scarred face alive with a manic light. "So, dear sister, your magic came at a price in the end. My informant told me as much." He pauses, drawing contrition around himself like a masquerade costume. "Rochelle. My niece. It's over. I am Lord of Dragonholt now."

Rochelle stands and draws her sword, her eyes burning like green fire. "Not while I live," she growls.

➔ *Time passes.*

➔ *Read entry 3469.*

The gnome woman with the butterfly mask leans forward with a conspiratorial tone. "It was before my time, of course, but I heard that her ladyship got her position in a bit of a scandal."

"I was only a girl," says the woman with the flowers on her mask. "We were all surprised when Lord Holland set his son aside and named Regina his heir. Especially because most of us had no idea she even existed."

"Lord Holland did the right thing," says the man in the stag mask. "Kyric's response to the dragon threatening the county was to hide, and tell us all to hide, too." He cocks his head, looking up and past you at nothing. "I thought about taking a shot at the beast myself; I was young and stupid then and that sounded like just the sort of challenge for me."

"I remember," says the doe-masked woman. "I had to talk you out of it." She shakes her head. "You're too harsh on Kyric. None of us had the magic or the skill to hunt a dragon. Hiding until help could come from the baron wasn't a coward's decision."

"But then," says the man with the stag mask, shaking his head in wonder. "Regina. She walked out of the forest and unleashed her magic, and that was that. Eventide was with her, and the dragon never stood a chance."

"Is Regina a powerful sorceress, then?" asks the gnome.

"I've never seen her do any magic," says the woman with the flower mask. "I thought that was just a story."

"Well, then how do you think she saved us from the dragon?" asks the stag-masked man.

"I just thought she'd tricked it into following her into the trees where it couldn't fly and then..." The woman mimes a knife across her own throat.

"Ahhh," says the gnome, nodding her head. "Gnome magic."

➔ *Mark story point Y3.*

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

You focus your attention on the archers below you, using and abusing your superior position and cover to drop some and chase the rest out of the great hall. Too late, you turn your attention to the bandits climbing the stairs, who have Celyse hard pressed. "Shoot them!" she calls. "With arrows, if available!" Wary of hitting Celyse, you are over-cautious and your shot goes wide. One of the bandits, an olive-skinned human man with crooked teeth, knocks her back with a brutal backhand swing, then pivots to you and hurls a handaxe head over handle at you. It slams into your shoulder, sending your arm boneless with ice-cold pain.

➔ *You lose three stamina.*

"Fall back!" cries Celyse, holding up her rune and sending out a fan of brilliant prismatic beams, each of which sends a bandit twitching to the ground. You stagger through the doors to the countess's audience chamber, barely able to keep hold of your bow, and Braxton and Tweegal slam and bar them behind you.

➔ *Read entry 4819.*

You have a moment's peace and regroup with the Fairfaxes, Tymothi, Braxton, Mariam, and the three guards, Tweegal, Tallea, and Deakon. The bandits hang back, but every moment, more filter through doors or out of the rapidly thinning crowd.

"We cannot stay here," says Braxton. "We have no cover and are badly outnumbered."

"Aye, the young knight has the right of it," mutters Tweegal. "We must move or die." He jerks his head at the stone stair behind you. "Up into the tower. It's the only part of the manor grounds that are fortified at all." You realize that the eastern wing of the manor house is, in fact, an old stone tower, and the balcony overlooking the ballroom would be a fairly defensible position.

"The garden," suggests Tymothi, his voice ragged. "We'll be trapped in the tower. In the garden we can use the hedges to our advantage, and we'll have room to run if we need to." The gardens border directly on the orchards surrounding the village. Although its hedges offer some protection, the true safety in that direction might be to slip into the trees in the darkness and hope for the best.

Tweegal and Braxton share a glance, then look to you for a decision.

"Up the stairs to the balcony!"

➔ *Read entry 1591.*

"Out to the garden!"

➔ *Read entry 1959.*

4819

The countess's audience chamber is almost silent, with only the hissing and spitting of the fire in the hearth breaking the stillness. Regina sits on her chair of black wood, slender fingers wrapped around the arms of the chair as if she fears to fall. Tymothi hovers at her side, fingering the dagger at his belt and casting nervous glances to the double doors. Rochelle leans against the fireplace, staring at the flames, Braxton paces by the door, and Mariam sits with her legs kicking in the air on a cushioned wooden chair, chewing her lip. Only Celyse seems serene, kneeling in the center of the room with her eyes closed.

"We have to do something," says Rochelle. "They'll get through the door eventually." The door suddenly rocks, a loud bang sounding from outside.

"They're trying to batter it down," notes Braxton. "Probably using a table. The balcony isn't large enough to get a proper ram up there. It won't work. They're better off using axes." Moments later, the distinctive "thock, thock, thock" of an axe sounds through the door, and Braxton shrugs apologetically against Mariam's glare. "What? I scarcely think they heard me and took my suggestion."

"That's it, then," sighs Regina.

"No," says Rochelle. "We fight." Her hand slashes like a sword through the room, arranging battle lines. "Braxton there, me here—"

"Rochelle," says Regina. "Spending your life to save mine is a poor trade. Daughters do not die for their mothers. Rather it should be the other way around, I feel." She smiles, a paper-thin thing already tearing apart. "Rochelle. I love you with all my heart. You will be a marvelous leader. I'm so sorry that I couldn't stay with you longer."

"Mother—" Rochelle steps forward as Regina groans, resting her head against the black wood of her chair. A light fills her, escaping through eyes and mouth and fingernails, and she stands, a tall, fey figure, shimmering with power.

Sonia's spirit appears at her side, offering a long sword. Another ghost flickers behind her, a broad-shouldered, dark-skinned man with love and sadness writ in the lines of his face, and hands the spectral Regina a shield. More and more apparitions appear, some human, others animals or fanciful creations. A badger—its fur marked with a heart and inscribed with initials—snuffles at the hem of Regina's dress. A diminutive knight, lance streaming with black and white pennants, sits astride a sparrow on her shoulder.

"You are not welcome in this place!" thunders Regina. She gestures, and the doors to the audience chamber burst open, shards of wood flying out into the mass of bandits on the balcony. "You have no roots here. Depart or perish!" With a wordless cry, Regina and her legion of spirits rush forward, and the bandits shriek in terror. One leaps forward swinging an axe, but his weapon shatters on a shield of shimmering light. Regina's shining sword lashes out, and the bandit falls, split in two.

The bandits scream, some rushing forward to attack and die, others fleeing, even leaping from the balcony. In moments, the great hall is empty of bandits and the spirit legion vanished, chasing the few survivors in all directions or simply fading from existence.

You cross to the balcony and look out, seeing no sign of Kyric either alive or dead. The spectral Regina nods to you, then vanishes as if a cloud blown apart by the wind.

If story point 06 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 4588.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 6741.*

4957

Celyse has no more time for wry remarks as the bandits come rushing at her, jabbing with rusty knives and serrated blades. You work as quickly as you can, removing key poles from both sides of the trellis structure, then pushing the whole thing over—only it doesn't fall. You frown, examining the thing again to see what you missed while Celyse curses and falls back under the bandits' assault. As she does battle with a wiry human man with freckles and dead-fish eyes, a larger orc man with crooked teeth dashes past, then swings his axe at your head. You pull back just in time to turn a fatal skull splitting into a painful gash across your nose.

➔ *You lose three stamina.*

You scramble away as the bandit lifts his axe for an overhead swing, which cuts into the trellis above his head and apparently severs whatever last pin or pole was holding the whole assembly in place. The structure crashes down around him. You and Celyse barely escape in time, leaving a twisted mass of wood and vines where there was once a clear path through the garden.

"Clever is fine," mutters Celyse, "but I do think that simplicity has its place, my dear." You jog deeper into the garden, toward the clearing with the great oak tree.

➔ *Read entry 4549.*

You settle down on the bench at the gnome's side while she keeps her gaze coyly fixed on her flower. One by one, she plucks its petals. "Ah," she says, plucking the final petal and pressing it to your lips. "It seems as if you love me after all." She giggles and drops the flower, sliding herself down the bench to press against you. She is warm, and soft, and smells better than any flower.

After a while, she pulls away again. "I should tell you," she says, adjusting her mask, "before things become...too complicated." She takes a deep breath, then exhales. "I'm leaving. I never intended to stay in Dragonholt so long, and it's time to go, to see new things, to visit old friends, to stretch my legs again after so long." She glances at you for just a moment, then fixes her gaze on the flowers rippling in the night breeze.

"I'll stay a little while more, to make sure Mariam is on her feet, to help Jasper learn what he needs to learn to run the Swan. But in just a few more weeks, I'll be heading out on my next adventure." She bites her lip, then turns to you, grasping your hand in hers. "Will you come with me?"

"Of course I'll come with you."

➔ *Read entry 7996.*

"No. But I'm sure we'll meet again on the road."

➔ *Read entry 5666.*

"I can't. I'm needed here."

➔ *Read entry 1733.*

5087

"The Cunninghams and Belmonts are the lords of the nearest counties," explains the woman with the doe mask. "The three families have been friends and allies for generations."

"Lord Holland's wife was a Belmont," says the woman with the flower mask. "Kyric's mother. Not—ah—not Regina's, though. No one's entirely certain who her mother was."

"Bit of an insult to the Belmonts, then, when Kyric was set aside, no?" suggests the gnome.

"That's probably why Lord Leone Belmont was trying to marry one of his sons to Lady Sonia, before her death," says the woman with the flower mask. "That would go a long way toward repairing any rift between the families."

"You learn a lot about these nobles tending bar at the Countess Inn, don't you?" chuckles the man with the stag mask.

"What about the Cunninghams?" asks the gnome woman. "What's their stake in all this?"

"Lord Oszric Cunningham is more interested in that jeweled drake pet of his than in politics," says the woman with the flower mask. "It's his wife, Elena, who makes those decisions. She's from Highcrest and she favors closer relations with the Fairfaxes."

"Well, I guess Rochelle will have her pick of suitors, then, won't she," says the gnome woman. "That should keep us in good gossip for another few years!"

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

"...another two families last month, and I'll lose a half-dozen more when harvest is over," complains the human man with the bushy red beard. "They're all moving to your lands! I'll have farms going fallow, and who will replace their taxes in my coffers, hmm?"

"They're not serfs, my lord," says the woman with the dragon mask. "If they're leaving your lands for mine, that's their choice. Perhaps you should spend more time thinking of ways to encourage them to stay and less time blaming me for your problems."

The human man with the drake coiled around his arm chirps, and the drake suddenly flutters out into the air above the dancers below. "Dragonholt's prosperity can help us all," he says.

"Oh, so you were listening all along," grumbles the bearded man in the red mask.

"I was. Your mistake is seeing Dragonholt as competition, rather than finding ways to benefit. In my county, I've shifted the market day to the middle of the week. That way, merchants don't have to choose between two markets, but can visit them both. And some of those rich travelers who are flocking to Countess Fairfax's streets are passing through my lands on their way home. We both win that way." He shrugs as his drake returns to coil around his arm again, proffering up a small morsel of something in his free hand for the creature to eat. It flares its iridescent ruff of scales and coos, darting in at the food like a striking serpent.

"Well we can't very well both shift our market day or we're right back to the same problem, aren't we?" grumbles the man with the beard. He turns to the woman with the dragon mask and points one thick finger. "You need to bar my peasants from settling on your land!"

"I'll do nothing of the sort, my lord," she says with a flick of her fingers. "Our families have been intertwined for generations, and so have theirs. You'd have me sunder brother from sister, grandparents from their grandchildren."

"Leave off, Leone," says the tall man with the drake. "Tonight isn't the time for this discussion."

The man with the bushy beard huffs, takes a drink of wine, and fumes over the balcony. You move on.

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

5201

"She did," agrees the woman in the knight's-helm mask. "And not the way I do. It wasn't just the riding that interested her."

"No," agrees the youth in the butterfly mask. "She liked to study bloodlines and think about training and breeding. I'd never have the patience to think about something like that."

"In fact, wasn't her horse put to pasture because she was with foal?" asks the woman in the knight's-helm mask. "I wonder. If she'd been riding her own horse the day she died, do you think...?"

"Best not to dwell on it," suggests the elf with the crescent-moon mask. But as the others climb down the stairs to the dance floor, she remains, lips pursed, thinking.

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

5205

Rochelle rushes forward, slashing at her uncle as she comes. Kyric sidesteps her attack with no apparent distress. "This tantrum is unbecoming a young woman of noble birth," says Kyric. "Even a bastard's daughter."

"Enough!" shouts Rochelle, parrying Kyric's thrust. Her riposte cuts across the bridge of his nose, sending him staggering back. "You did this!" she screams. She slams the hilt of her sword into Kyric's stomach, dropping him to his knees. "You killed your sister, your niece! You kinslayer!" She lifts her sword over her head.

"No, Rochelle, don't kill him!" Phillip rushes forward, arms outstretched. Rochelle steps back, glancing back and forth between her brother and her uncle.

Kyric struggles to his feet, wiping blood from his face. "I'm not the monster you believe me to be, Rochelle. This isn't what I wanted." His knuckles whiten on the hilt of his sword, and he laughs, a brittle, breaking sound like a shattering pot. "But it doesn't matter, does it. I've come too far, now, to turn back." Suddenly, he turns and flees.

Rochelle shrieks an incoherent wail of rage and races after. You, Phillip, and Braxton all leap forward in pursuit, jumping over bandit corpses and struggling to keep both Kyric and Rochelle in view.

In the great hall, Kyric runs for the front door. Behind him, Rochelle bends and snatches a spear from the hands of a dead bandit lying on the floor, then steps forward and throws. The spear sinks into the wood of the door with a "thock!" nearly striking Kyric's head. He jumps back, and Rochelle rushes toward him with her sword high, only to be hauled to a stop by Phillip.

"Please, Rochelle," begs Phillip. "What our uncle did is terrible, but don't stoop to his level."

"He doesn't deserve to live, Phillip!" Rochelle grabs Phillip's hand and hurls him back into Braxton. "He was going to kill you!" she screams, fear, anger, and tears marring her expression.

Phillip stands tall and places himself between his sister and uncle. "But he didn't. I'm alive, and so are you. No one else has to die."

➔ *Mark two progress in peace.*

Rochelle screams and swings her sword, splitting a nearby chair in half. She seems torn in half herself, afire with rage and grief. Kyric sprints away from the siblings, climbing the far stairs up to the salon.

➔ *Read entry 7609.*

5222

The vegetable garden is quiet and lit only by moonlight and the spill of light from the manor. Carrots and cabbage, beets and broccoli, parsnips and peas, and other vegetables grow in rows in raised beds of rich-smelling dark earth surrounded by grey stones. Rusty-red pots bracket the beds and march along the manor wall, filled with basil, hyssop, and other herbs. The entire garden is surrounded by a weathered wooden fence and waving stalks of lavender and bee balm.

If story point K8 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 7738.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 1895.*

5335

The smell from the banquet table takes hold of you and drags you closer. Steam rises from a heavy earthenware dish decorated with ram's horns where joints of mutton, falling off the bone, lie on a bed of roasted tubers and shallots. Ducks stuffed with spices lie at either end of the table, roasted to a rich golden brown. The sides of the table are piled high with crisp apples and wheels of white cheese, bowls of deep purple plums, jars of pickled cabbage and onions, dishes of roasted vegetables of every description. Baskets of bread and urns of creamy butter and sweet jams are crammed into what little table space remains. A table to one side holds a collection of pastries and cakes, as well as a small side dish of candied nuts and fruits. Black-masked staff flit in and out of the kitchen, frantically replacing food as fast as the guests consume it.

As you help yourself to your favorite dishes, you notice several other guests loitering near the banquet table. A small group is centered around a tall human man with a stag mask and a human woman with her mask styled to resemble a doe. At the other end of the table, a human man in a plain black mask is spinning a yarn of valiant chivalry to an audience that seems half amused and half annoyed. Just to your left, a gnome woman whose mask sports an almost dangerously long plume of red feathers carefully loads food onto her plate.

Mingle with the stag- and doe-masked humans.

➔ *Read entry 5551.*

Listen to the man in the black mask tell his tales.

➔ *Read entry 6186.*

Help yourself to platefuls of food.

➔ *Read entry 5594.*

5337

"Well nothing compares to a gnome feast! Especially if it's prepared by my aunt Sapph—uh—by the innkeeper at the Swan. A real great cook she is!"

You compare the dishes available at this feast with those traditionally supplied by gnomes, and the woman in the red-feather mask is happy to expand on the differences. "Well, partly it's just the foods available, of course. Dragonholt is lousy with ducks, but a gnome feast would usually serve chicken or gamefowl. We'd be more likely to serve goat than mutton, and of course we wouldn't have this sheer variety of vegetables and grains. Berries and nuts, though, those are always good to find when you're on the road, and anything you can preserve or pickle you can bring with you when you travel." She nods her head, sniffing her plate. "Okay, if I'm being honest, maybe it's all the traveling that makes gnome food so good. They say hunger is the best spice."

She scoops up a morsel of purple and orange carrots sautéed in butter with garlic and parsley and pops it into her mouth. "That is good," she admits. "But I'll tell you what I wish they had here. Berries and clotted cream. Maybe with some oatcakes to mop up the cream. Now that is a gnome treat I've never seen any human cook do right." She grins, then leans forward. "Not that it requires any cooking!"

You finish your plates in happy, delicious silence.

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

5345

He sighs, rubbing at the wound across his nose with one thumb. "I'm outnumbered, is that your argument? I can't possibly hope to beat you, and my niece, and that orc knight?" Suddenly, he lunges forward, sword ringing through the air to leave a bright line of pain across your shoulder. "I'll take my chances." You duck behind a cushioned chair as he resumes pacing.

- ➔ *Mark one progress in peace.*
- ➔ *Mark one progress in war.*
- ➔ *You lose three stamina.*
- ➔ *Read entry 5863.*

5346

Warmth flows out from you and into the vines over the trellis, spreading and rippling from plant to plant, until the entire flowering garden is alive with your power.

The first bandits to rush out of the hedges see nothing out of the ordinary, so they charge toward you with their weapons held high, only to be ensnared as the vines on the trellis lazily pull them up off the ground. Their battle cries become screams of fear and pain, and as more and more bandits run toward you the whole garden lashes out against them, thorns biting into flesh, roots dragging them down to the dirt, even flowers blooming to cover their faces and obscure their vision.

You and Celyse take a moment to watch, then turn and walk toward the clearing with the oak. "Remind me never to quarrel with you in a garden," says Celyse.

- ➔ *Read entry 4549.*

5379

You offer the sealed envelope to Ursula, and she begins to smile as soon as she sees the handwriting on the outside. "Oh, Lady's grace," she breathes. "Theo you damn fool. Took you long enough."

- ➔ *You lose the love letter (item).*

She breaks the seal and opens the letter. After a few moments of squinting she gives up and folds the letter back up. "My old eyes can't read it in this light, but it hardly matters. There's only one thing Theo could be saying in this letter." She smiles beneath her mask and the garden grows just a little brighter.

Then she stands, presses the letter to her heart, and closes her eyes. "I have something for you," she says, and presents a timeworn cloth doll that she cradles with obvious affection. "My mother made this doll for me when we first came to Dragonholt. I had no friends, then, you see, so she told me the doll would keep me from being lonely. And it has, for all these long years." She reaches out and places the doll in your hands. Its colors are fading, but its stitches still hold true. Something about its crooked face seems welcoming. "I don't need this anymore. I won't be lonely. I want you to have it. Maybe you can find some other poor lonely child in need, as you seem to be going about doing good deeds."

- ➔ *You gain the cloth doll (item R).*
- ➔ *Mark story point K8.*
- ➔ *Mark one progress in heroism.*
- ➔ *Read entry 1118.*

5438

You nock an arrow and draw. Braxton and Rochelle drive the bandits back, giving you a clean shot at the two no-necked brigands attacking the stair.

If you have athletics (skill)...

- ➔ *Read entry 9214.*

Otherwise...

- ➔ *Read entry 6199.*

5470

Shark's first swing is savage and fast, and it carves a hunk of bright wood from the guardrail at the edge of the bridge—which gives you an idea. You duck and weave, letting his attacks hack away at the wood of the bridge, its posts and rails and planks on the floor. From time to time you launch your own attacks, keeping Shark off balance and shifting him to another piece of the bridge, which groans alarmingly under your feet.

Finally, Shark places a foot wrong and steps knee deep through a broken floorboard. As he's struggling to recover, you grab him and hurl him bodily to smash through the badly weakened guardrail and into the pond below. As more bandits appear on the far shore, you snatch up Shark's sword, plunge it down into the remaining floorboards, and twist, sending broken wood everywhere and collapsing part of the bridge.

You retreat to the near shore and deeper into the hedge maze, the bandits screaming behind you.

- ➔ *Read entry 6602.*

5551

You grab only a few morsels of your favorites from the banquet table before wandering over to the group of guests nearby.

"No truffles this year," says the man in the stag mask.

"It's a miracle there were any last year, dear," says the woman in the doe mask. "They don't come into season until fall, and Swyndon gets such a good price for them in Highcrest there's rarely any left by Highsummer."

"Truffles or no truffles," says a gnome with a blue mask adorned with a butterfly at her right temple, "Regina's cook knows her trade."

"High praise coming from you!" says the stag.

A slender human woman in a plain wooden mask painted with wildflowers laughs, one hand fluttering up to her mouth. "Oh goodness. I've never heard you say the same about mother's cooking!"

"I have no idea what any of you are talking about," says the gnome with the blue mask. She winks in your direction. "I am just a passing stranger in a mask, not a local innkeeper."

Direct the conversation toward the harvest feast rivalry.

- ➔ *Read entry 6126.*

Steer the topic toward the Fairfax family history.

- ➔ *Read entry 4600.*

Inquire about the Belmonts and Cunninghams.

- ➔ *Read entry 5087.*

5569

"I am!" says the gnome woman. "There's music and dancing and enough food to build a fort out of; what more could a woman want?" She takes a bite from a plum and sighs contentedly, catching the juice on a handkerchief as it runs down her chin. "I even had a chance to dance with my wife earlier. I have no complaints." Her feather curls over on itself and threatens to fall into her plate of food, and she swats it aside. "I've changed my mind. This feather is fixing to spoil my evening. But I'll conquer it yet. When I'm done with it, it'll wish it'd chosen some other gnome's mask to adorn."

Another servant walks by and receives a faceful of feather, not that the gnome woman seems to notice. "It is rather loud and hot in here, though, isn't it? I've seen more than a few people sneak off to the garden for a bit of fresh air and perhaps some privacy. Clearly they want me to join them." The woman flashes you a wicked grin, then wanders off, shoving roast duck into her mouth. "Oh, so good."

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

5582

"That's a shame," says the youth in the butterfly mask. "You'd have liked her. And she would have liked you, too, I think." He winks, then slips off the banister to land nimbly at your side. "I think I'd like to dance now. Sonia wouldn't want me to mope around all night."

"That's true," allows the woman in the crescent-moon mask.

"Let's all dance," says the woman in the knight's helm.

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

5594

Ignoring the clusters of conversation, you focus on the food and fill your plate. On closer inspection, the mutton seems to have been seasoned with cider and spices, and the roast duck stuffed with plums and offered with a plum sauce side. The vegetables include beans, carrots, onions, cabbage, mushrooms, and spinach, dishes of squash and peppers, all steaming and expertly spiced. The bread comes in two flavors: thick and brown, and golden-white, with jars of butter and jam to slather over it. Everywhere you look, you find some new delicacy, and your plate is quite overflowing before you even get to the dessert table.

➔ *You each recover two stamina.*

As you are choosing from among the cakes and pastries, you almost bump into a gnome woman whose mask sports a tall plume of red feathers. "Pardon me!" she says, turning to face you, causing her feathers to flutter into the face of a passing servant. "I couldn't see you past all this food." The servant steps backward, trying to remove the feather from her mouth, and the gnome turns again, her feather drifting up into the nose of a human woman in a fox mask. The woman sneezes and staggers off. "What was that all about?"

"Are you enjoying the festivities?"

➔ *Read entry 5569.*

"A great spread, but nothing compared to a gnome feast."

➔ *Read entry 5337.*

"Where did you find such a magnificent mask?"

➔ *Read entry 1742.*

5664

Kyric meets you in the middle of the salon with an aggressive High Counter, followed by a classic Threshing the Wheat advance, clear evidence of a formal education in swordplay. Your training was no less effective, however, and you counter his attack and then press your own.

Eventually, Kyric is able to batter your guard aside and land a glancing strike across your chest, but in doing so he leaves his wrist overextended, and you're able to land a telling blow to his sword arm. He pulls back, shifting the sword to his other hand and evaluating you with newfound respect.

➔ *Mark three progress in war.*

➔ *You lose two stamina.*

➔ *Read entry 5863.*

5666

"Oh," says the gnome woman, looking away from you. "Oh, of course. I'm sure." She sniffs, then shoves the mask up to her forehead and dabs at her eyes with a handkerchief. "Bit of a silly question anyway, wasn't it? Don't know what I was thinking." You open your mouth to try to say something, anything, you aren't certain what, but she stands. "No, that's alright. I'll just..." Sapphire chokes back a sob, then turns and rushes to the corner of the garden, where she hides her face in her arms and rocks steadily.

Not sure what else to do, you stand and retreat, leaving the flower garden to her.

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

5694

"My word," he says, taking the trinket from you with trembling hands. He peers down at the wooden badger, seeming to see it more with his fingers than his watery eyes. "I carved this, you know." He lifts his carving knife, as if to prove it. "I gave this to Ursula when we were both so very young. Oh, I loved her like a fire, but I never did anything about it." A smile spreads slowly across his face, crinkling his wrinkles like a withered apple. "It didn't have these letters carved into it then, though. 'T' and 'U.' Theodore and Ursula. You found this at the Tree of Tales?" Hand trembling, he reaches inside his sawdust-covered woolen coat and withdraws a letter, stiff and dry and crinkling with age and sealed with a dollop of red wax.

"I think the spirit of the Tree of Tales is telling me that it's finally time. Why else would you bring this talisman into my hands? She must have carved in our initials and placed it there herself." He looks down at the letter, smoothing it on his lap. "Oh, but I still can't bear to face her. I feel like such a fool, letting it go so long." He holds out the letter, his voice wavering. "Do you think you might... deliver this to her for me? She shouldn't be hard to find. She's the one with the magnificent flowers all over her mask. Try looking in the vegetable garden."

➔ *You lose the wooden trinket (item).*

➔ *You gain the sealed letter (item C).*

➔ *Mark story point O3.*

➔ *Mark one progress in heroism.*

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

Growling like an animal, Braxton snatches her sword and rises. Before she can do more than lift her blade, however, mailed soldiers in Belmont red rush through the doors and fill the room. "No one move!" bellows their sergeant, a sallow woman with a gold crest on her helm. "Lord Kyric, what happened here?"

"These monsters just murdered my sister and niece!" says Kyric, gesturing at you and Braxton with a flick of his fingers. He tosses his bloody dagger to land on Rochelle's corpse, as if daring you to contradict him. "Take them into custody, sergeant. They will have to answer for their crimes."

"No!" whimpers Braxton. "You can't believe him, you can't—"

"Be silent, traitor," barks the sergeant, and the next thing you know you are clapped in irons and marched through the manor by a column of armored soldiers. As you pass through the great hall you see Celyse and Mariam held at spearpoint by more soldiers and the surviving members of the Fairfax household clustering beneath the balcony, staring with their mouths hanging agape.

"Braxton!" shouts Mariam. "Don't worry! I'll clear this up! We won't let this happen!"

You stagger through the front door and into a chilling mist. A raven croaks and flutters from a nearby apple tree, watching you with its black eyes gleaming.

➔ *Read entry 9994 (Tyrant Ending).*

5732

"Rochelle!" screams Phillip as he rushes into the room behind you. "Let her go!"

"Drop your weapons or she dies," hisses Kyric. Braxton pauses, her sword half out of its sheath, her whole body tense. "Do it," the rogue lord hisses, pressing on the knife until a drop of crimson forms on Rochelle's light brown neck.

Braxton's sword clangs as it falls to the floor. The only other sound is Rochelle's ragged breathing.

Rush at Kyric with weapon in hand.

➔ *Read entry 1425.*

Try to put an arrow between Kyric's eyes.

Requires archery (skill).

➔ *Read entry 9073.*

Drop your weapons.

➔ *Read entry 7571.*

"Let her go. Killing her will only make things worse."

➔ *Read entry 4056.*

5735

You shout a warning to Rochelle, who spins and draws in one fluid motion, one she must have practiced a thousand times. The assassin lunges forward, trying to get in under her guard.

If you have awareness (skill) or performance (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 7359.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 9787.*

"It's okay, Dah," says the girl. "I'll get myself a drink." She drops a little curtsy to you and wanders off through the crowd, leaving you with your masked dance partner. He bows very properly and offers a hand.

"I'm glad you asked me," he says as the music shifts into a slow-paced waltz. "I'm not, eh, the most forward fellow. I know sometimes it seems like there's nothing to me but me daughter and me work. But that isn't true." He smiles and tugs at his beard absently, then raises his arms and carries you into the dance. "Now let's see how a Dunwarr lad handles these human dances, eh?"

You make a slow circuit of the room without embarrassing either of you. The dwarf dances with careful, deliberate motions, even while his conversation and humor are quick and nimble. He cracks a number of good-natured jokes, feigning ignorance over this or that Terrinoth custom or relating an amusing anecdote about his daughter or his childhood in the Dunwarr mountains.

As you finish your circuit of the room, you find the girl with the snowy owl mask waiting for you. "My turn," she says, grabbing hold of your hand. "We all dance together now!" The dance ends, and a new one begins as the crowd gathers for a rousing rondel, so you join hands with the two dwarfs and dance gaily in a circle, where all of you leap and kick in a rough approximation of the rhythm of the song. All of you are soon shrieking with laughter, and by the time the song ends you are short of breath and wiping tears from your eyes.

"That was fun," says the owl-girl. She curtsies to you, then turns to the dwarf in the checkered mask. "Dah, let's go to the garden. I want to see the pond."

"An' that ye will, then, my treasure." The older dwarf bows to you and winks. "That were a lovely dance. Perhaps I'll see ye later tonight." Then he takes his daughter's hand and leads her out to the garden.

➔ *Mark story point D2.*

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

5794

Moving in perfect rhythm with one another and with your song, Braxton and Rochelle fend off the encircling bandits, each swing of their sword leaving no gap for the miscreants to exploit.

Three bandits rush to complete the circle around the embattled group, one flipping a dagger around to throw. Your music rises to a crescendo as Celyse steps forward, holding one hand aloft and shouting a phrase in the elven tongue. A stone secreted in the palm of her hand flares with an impossibly bright light, a light which blinds the onrushing bandits—but a moment too late to stop the bandit with the dagger from hurling the blade into your thigh. Your song breaks for a moment as you gasp with pain and grab at your wound, Mariam's voice alone insufficient to fill the room.

➔ *You lose three stamina.*

Fighting through the pain, you resume your song and rejoin your gnome ally. The old orc guard, Tweegal, casts aside his mask and steps into the disordered bandits, lashing out with a steel mace to the beat of the Requiem.

➔ *Read entry 4731.*

5843

You and Celyse fight as if you've rehearsed this battle a dozen times, protecting one another's flank and driving back wave after wave of bandits with practiced ease. Celyse's magic creates a shimmering shield above you, upon which arrows patter like rain. Your skill at arms cuts down bandit after bandit. The wiry, freckled man leads one determined charge, but you turn his attack aside and wound him with a cut to the leg, causing him to fall back, only to be replaced by another, fresher bandit.

In time, the weight of numbers begins to tell. You tire as the bandits rotate out their wounded and exhausted for fresh fighters. You're forced back from the head of the stairs, and several bandits rush forward, spreading out and threatening to overwhelm you.

"Retreat!" calls Braxton from behind you. Celyse holds up her runeshard and cries out in the elven tongue, sending bolts of prismatic light to transfix the bandits on the balcony and send them twitching to the floor.

The two of you race back into the countess's audience chamber, where Braxton and Tweegal slam shut the heavy doors and Tallea settles the crossbeam into place.

➔ *Read entry 4819.*

5863

Rochelle suddenly appears at the top of the stairs, her naked sword in hand. She stalks forward, Braxton behind her. "Give up, Kyrice. You'll never be count."

"I already am," he growls, then kicks through the door and into Phillip's studio. "The county is mine. If you make me kill you for it, you'll have only yourself to blame!" He knocks over an easel and shrouded canvas and topples a plinth holding a half-finished sculpture across your path. You follow, stepping sideways around the debris.

Give chase, despite the obstacles.

➔ *Read entry 9606.*

Block his path with a wall of ice.

Requires frost rune (item).

➔ *Read entry 1432.*

"There's nowhere to run, Kyrice. Give up!"

➔ *Read entry 7718.*

"It's as Rochelle says. You've already lost."

➔ *Read entry 9233.*

5869

The flowers blooming in the night air bathe you in sweet perfume as you pass beneath the garden trellis. Beyond, you find a tall rosebush splitting the garden path, which rambles past glowing stone lanterns and carpets of colorful flowers. Most of the flowers are closed for the night, but you see some primrose and moonflower fluttering in the evening breeze.

If story point E2 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 9298.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 6689.*

5871

You are next handed to a human woman wearing a mask that resembles a knight's helm with a crown of black feathers. She gives a stiff bow, incongruous with her ruffled peach ball gown, and steps into the dance.

"I'm sorry if I'm not much of a conversationalist tonight," she says. "I keep thinking of my sister. She would have loved this ball." She spins slowly, flowing into the next form of the dance before resuming the conversation. "She died recently. And my brother narrowly survived an attempt on his life, as well." The dance brings her close, her eyes blazing behind her mask. "I'll find the man responsible. And when I do, I'll make sure he never threatens my family again."

Before you can respond, the woman in the knight mask hands you off to the next dancer in line.

➔ *Read entry 7362.*

5941

You step up to the edge of the contradanza line and wait for the dance to bring you a partner, which it soon does in the form of an elf woman whose mask is in the shape of a crescent moon. A burst of emerald plumage rises from her left temple, and she moves with expert precision through the complex forms of the dance.

If story point R7 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 1164.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 9249.*

6013

The snowy owl eagerly accepts your offer and grabs both your hands firmly. "Let me teach ye how ta dance," she says, her voice serious. "It mainly involves kicking." She leaps into the air and kicks out with one leg. "Like this!"

You dance with the little girl for a while, the music shifting several times, not that the music makes much difference to how she dances. She compliments your excellent kicking and suggests that you also jump, like her, and explains that the jumping is how you can tell that she's dancing, and not just walking in a circle with you.

When you come to a stop, you see the older dwarf in the checked mask hiding a smile behind a mug of foaming beer. With his other hand he offers you a beverage. "Dancing is thirsty work. Leastways it is how our wee owlet does it." He chuckles and crouches down in front of his daughter. "Did ye have fun, me treasure?"

"Yes," she says with a solemn nod.

He straightens and turns to you with a gentle bow. "Thank ye for the dance."

If story point Q5 is marked...

➔ *Mark story point D2.*

"Dah, I'm done with dancing now. I want to see the pond in the garden," says the snowy owl.

"Then so ye shall!" says the older dwarf, and he leads her out through the doors.

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

6045

You feel the crops breathing, hear the plants dreaming, and feel the world drop out from within your stomach and then come crashing in around you.

A tall figure looms above you, cloaked, and crowned with stag's horns. "We grow and thrive, thanks to her life, thanks to her blood, thanks to her sacrifice." Hesitantly, you ask who the cloaked figure is talking about. "The bride," it says, its voice tinged with sadness. "She will join us, soon." The figure turns to go, and you find yourself lying on the ground with no idea how you got there.

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

6105

As Shark grows closer, you gather fiery energy from the rune, wreathing yourself in a nimbus of flame. The bandit doesn't even slow down, slashing across your chest with his wicked sword.

➔ *You lose four stamina.*

You take a deep breath, feeling the fire flowing into your wound and lungs, a scream bubbling up within you. You bring the rune up to your mouth where it glows like embers, then you blow, sending a cascade of flame boiling out across the surface of the entire pond.

Shark shrieks and leaps headlong into the water, trailing smoke and ribbons of flame from his hair and tunic. The bridge catches fire and is soon burning merrily. You step back, take a moment to admire your handiwork, and then retreat deeper into the hedge maze.

➔ *Read entry 6602.*

6126

"Oh, were you here for that silly game?" asks the woman with the flowers on her mask. "It's rather charming. Every year they pick a type of dish and try to outdo one another. This year was vegetables."

"Last year was game," smiles the stag mask. "My wife won."

"That was two years ago," says the woman in the doe mask. "Last year was sweets, and Sapphire won because someone smuggled her some cane sugar from who-knows-where."

"Well, I wasn't here for that," says the gnome in the butterfly mask. "But this Sapphire sounds like a brilliant and charming woman."

"Mother's glazed onions and blanched green beans didn't do so well this year," says the woman in the flower mask.

"You should take credit for your own work one of these days," says the gnome. "We all know you do most of the work over there."

"My turnips in red wine reduction weren't any better received," sighs the doe woman. "The countess barely picked at them."

"She didn't eat more than a few bites of my—I mean Sapphire's—seared carrots and pepper," says the gnome. "I think we all lost this year." The conversation stills, and all three women glance up toward where the woman in the dragon mask holds court. Finally, the gnome glances at you. "What about you? Which dish did you like the best?"

You smile and excuse yourself from the conversation.

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

6186

You help yourself to a small plate of your favorites and drift over toward where the man in the black mask holds his audience spellbound. Or at least, bound by the laws of politeness. The man's story seems unlikely, as he describes single-handedly fighting off a horde of bandits to rescue a single small goat. The surprising part is that some of his listeners are nodding and gasping at the right moments as if they actually believe him.

Engage the speaker with enthusiasm.

➔ *Read entry 8504.*

Subtly imply that the man's tales are false.

➔ *Read entry 2627.*

Overshadow his tales with a story of your own!

Requires performance (skill).

➔ *Read entry 2712.*

6199

Your first arrow lodges into the back of one of the no-necked brigands but seems only to enrage him. The man turns, snorting and pawing ineffectually at where the arrow is lodged into his flesh. Seeing you, his eyes narrow, and he charges with a roar! Startled, you miss your next shot, and by the time you draw a third arrow he's already upon you. You roll desperately to the side as his massive, two-handed, wooden club crashes down onto the ballroom floor, leaving a great crack behind, but as you struggle back to your feet another blow catches you in the stomach and drives all the breath from your lungs.

➔ *You lose four stamina.*

You swing your bow like a staff, just to buy yourself some room to breathe, and the brigand lifts his heavy club with a sick grin. The grin turns to a confused, blank expression as the hilt of Braxton's sword comes down on the back of his head, and he collapses like a boneless sack of potatoes. Then Braxton is pulling you to your feet and dragging you to the stair, where no matter what else happens you have a commanding view of the great hall and an elevated position. You're as safe as you can be for the short term.

➔ *Read entry 3692.*

6204

One of the bandits, a dwarf with her black hair shaved back to a single tall strip, leaps forward, attempting to knock you out of position and leave Rochelle exposed. She slashes at you with a hatchet, spinning to follow up with the hammer in her other hand.

You sidestep her first swing, but her second is too fast, and the hammer cracks a painful blow to your leg, leaving you stumbling. The bandit follows up with another swing from her hatchet, which you barely manage to block before closing in corps-a-corps and hurling the dwarf back with your entire body.

➔ *You lose three stamina.*

Staggering from your altercation with the bandit, you are relieved to discover that Rochelle has gained the staircase, and with Tallea's help, she drags you up it. Braxton follows, and you soon have command of a highly defensible position.

➔ *Read entry 3692.*

6252

Your next partner is a tall, broad-shouldered human man with his face concealed beneath a leather mask stylized to look like a snarling wolf. "That's a striking mask," he says as he takes your hand and bows elegantly. "A black dragon. You know, the Fairfax house crest is two dragons, black and white, always chasing each other." He steps smartly to the side and spins, arms folded behind his back, in perfect time to the music. "Someone might think you were trying to send a message to the Fairfaxes, wearing that mask. That the black dragon's time is coming." He grins, looking as feral as his wolf mask. "After all, it's all a cycle, isn't it?"

"Regina Fairfax has already bested one dragon."

Requires story point Y3 is marked.

➔ *Read entry 9517.*

"I always saw the crest as two dragons dancing."

➔ *Read entry 1866.*

Say nothing and finish the dance.

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

6257

You crouch down and offer Ursula's doll to the dwarf girl. She steps forward, taking the doll from you and lifting it up to see it better through her mask. "For me?" she says. "Oh, thank ye. I love her!" She squeezes the doll tight, then pulls a stuffed owl from within her dress. "Thegn Owl, meet yer new friend. Oh, does she have a name?" she asks you.

➔ *You lose the cloth doll (item).*

➔ *Mark one progress in heroism.*

You tell her about Ursula, and her mother, and how the doll was her friend when she was lonely. The girl in the owl mask nods, drinking in your story.

"I'll call ye Ursula, then," she says to the doll. "D'ye want to dance with us, Ursula? 'Yes please, I would like that very much.' Alright, then, we mus' all dance together." Suddenly, the girl reaches up and grabs your hand and her father's, and without warning you are all dancing in a circle as the music skirls and whirls around you.

After a while of enthusiastic leaping in circles to the laughter of both dwarves, you come to a stop, and the girl in the snowy owl mask rummages in her dress for a moment. "I have something for ye," she says, and she pulls a whorling shell on a leather cord from around her neck. "Here," she says, pressing it into your hand. "I found this," she explains, slightly out of breath. "When we first came t' Dragonholt, me dah an' me. It's been me good luck charm." She nods. "I want ye to have it, now."

➔ *You gain the polished shell (item J).*

➔ *Mark story point Q5.*

The girl then turns to her father. "Dah, can we go to the garden, now? I want ta see the pond."

"Aye, my treasure, and so ye shall." The dwarf man bows to you and smiles. "Thank ye for the dance." Then he leads the snowy owl out the rear doors into the garden.

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

6329

One bandit trips and falls over the side of the stair, her shriek suddenly cut short with a meaty thud somewhere below the balcony. You hear at least two more shouting within the smoke in panic.

Suddenly, and without warning, a clay-brown dwarf man comes running out of the smoke, howling. He shoves Celyse aside and sprints directly at you, beating his chest, then lashes out with a meaty fist and strikes a blow to the side of your head that makes your teeth clack together and your vision swim.

➔ *You lose five stamina.*

You realize you're leaning against the railing at the edge of the balcony as the dwarf man grabs your legs and starts trying to flip you out into the space beyond. You flail and kick in an attempt to keep your balance, but you feel yourself slipping over the edge until Celyse steps up behind him, wraps her arms around his face, and brings the rune clenched in the palm of her hand to his eyes. An impossibly bright flare shines out, and when your vision finally climbs back out of the darkness you see the dwarf man lying on his back, sobbing, and pawing at eyes ringed with black scorch marks.

"Let's get out of here," pants Celyse, and the two of you crawl into the countess's audience chamber at the back of the balcony. Braxton and Tweegal slam the doors shut and Tallea throws a heavy bar across them. You're safe for at least a little while.

➔ *Read entry 4819.*

6357

Kyric shifts the sword to his other hand, running a thumb along the slash on his nose. "No more blood, eh?" He chuckles, pacing up and down the salon. "Is it that easy? The seat is mine by right. Belmont will support me, but Cunningham?" He scratches at his chin, staring into the flame of a nearby lantern. "Rochelle will never accept it. She'd turn the peasants against me. No, the only way this ends with no more blood is if I stand aside." He looks at his sword.

➔ *Mark two progress in peace.*

➔ *Read entry 5863.*

6374

Rochelle sits, shaking with grief, at the edge of the hole left by the oak's departure. Regina lies on the ground, her head in Rochelle's lap. Celyse crouches at her side, two slender fingers pressed to Regina's wrist.

"I'm sorry," says the elf. "She has moved on."

"No," groans Rochelle. "Sonia, Phillip, now mother? Why?"

Soft laughter comes from the hedge. You turn and see Kyric standing at a gap, his scarred face alive with a manic light. "So, dear sister, your magic came at a price in the end. My informant told me as much." He pauses, drawing contrition around himself like a masquerade costume. "Rochelle. My niece. It's over. I am Lord of Dragonholt now."

Rochelle stands and draws her sword, her eyes burning like green fire. "Not while I live," she growls.

➔ *Time passes.*

➔ *Read entry 3469.*

6412

Braxton crouches over Rochelle's body, tears streaking her face. She reaches out with two fingers, thick with callouses and scars, and gently closes the corpse's eyes. The big orc blubbers, mopping at her eyes and nose with her other hand.

Kyric steps backward, laughter overtaking him as he clutches at his head. "I did it. I reign in Dragonholt." He straightens, staring up at nothing. "Aren't you proud of me, father?" he screams.

➔ *Read entry 5697.*

6442

You sigh and lift your flame rune, rough and black as a lump of coal. You clench your fist around it and feel its heat rise; first the shape of the carved rune itself and then the rest of the stone glows like a red-hot coal. As Kyric lifts his sword and opens his mouth for another round of invective, you release that heat as a burst of fire, the flames erupting around him and sending him staggering back against the wall.

➔ *Mark one progress in war.*

You banish the flames as swiftly as they appeared, leaving him singed but not badly burned. With a flourish you show him the glowing ember in your hand, then instruct him to throw down his sword.

If you have persuasion (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 9323.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 2081.*

6581

An older human man sits with his back to the trunk of the tree. He has a carved wooden mask in the shape of a frog pushed up to rest on top of his head, showing a face that is lined with age and gazing wistfully up at the moon above—Theodore's face, the long-winded carpenter who gave you a letter to give to his ladylove. He sighs and glances down at his hands, which are idly carving a block of wood painted red by lantern light. His knife scrapes steadily, and each new flake of fallen wood brings a waft of cedar to your nostrils.

When he hears your approach, the old man startles and looks away, wiping what you suspect are tears from his eyes. "Ah," he says. "Shouldn't sneak up on an old man like that. I have a knife, after all." He waggles the carving knife in his hand and leans back against the tree. "I really thought, after all this time, that Ursula and I would finally be together. But I gave you that letter to give to her, and then never heard anything from it. I've been carrying this hope around for so long, but it was the foolish hope of a young man." He laughs, a brittle, broken sound. "I'm not that, anymore. So it's time to stop mooning after a woman who doesn't love me and live for myself for a change. I'll be selling my shop to one of my apprentices and going off to see the world."

He holds up his block of wood, running a thumb along the shape emerging from it. "Might be another badger in here. One last gift for Ursula." He smiles sadly, and leans back against the tree.

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

6602

After a few more twists and turns of the maze you find yourself in a flower garden, awash with the scents of night-blooming moonflower and primrose. Celyse stands under a trellis of flowering vines, waiting for you as the others continue to retreat deeper into the maze. You can hear the sounds of pursuit, bandits howling for your blood and chasing you through the hedges.

"Just like old times," Celyse sighs, drawing her rapier. Her rune, bound in copper wire looped around two of her fingers, shimmers from her other palm.

Fend off the bandits on the narrow path.

➔ *Read entry 7329.*

Collapse the trellis upon the oncoming bandits.

➔ *Read entry 7430.*

Entangle the bandits with an alchemical concoction.

Requires alchemy (skill).

➔ *Read entry 8841.*

Call upon the vegetation to aid you.

Requires runes (skill).

➔ *Read entry 7272.*

6662

One of the bandits, a dwarf with her black hair shaved back to a single tall strip, leaps forward, attempting to knock you out of position and leave Rochelle exposed. She slashes at you with a hatchet, spinning to follow up with the hammer in her other hand.

You sidestep her first swing, but her second is too fast, and the hammer cracks a painful blow to your leg, leaving you stumbling. The bandit follows up with another swing from her hatchet, which you barely manage to block before closing in corps-a-corps and hurling the dwarf back with your entire body.

➔ *You lose three stamina.*

Staggering from your altercation with the bandit, you are relieved to discover that Rochelle has reached the hedge maze, and with Tallea's help, she drags you into it. Braxton follows and you are soon relatively safe within the hedges, where the bandits must come down a narrow corridor if they choose to follow.

➔ *Read entry 8913.*

6666

"Uncle!" says Phillip, tearing off his butterfly-wing mask. "Please, uncle. Surrender. Face justice for your crimes."

"I did not kill her!" murmurs Kyric again, turning a slow circle.

"Perhaps not," says Phillip. "But you abducted me. Held me prisoner. Threatened me, tried to force me to support your claim to my mother's seat. And when I refused, you tried to kill me. The only reason I'm alive today is an act of sheer heroism." He nods gravely in your direction. "Uncle, please. It's not too late. This can end without any more death."

Kyric shakes his head. "You're wrong, my nephew. It is too late."

➔ *Read entry 9917.*

6689

An elderly orc man wearing a mask made of tree bark and moss sits with his legs crossed, surrounded by blooming flowers. His eyes are closed, and you are not certain if he is asleep or awake.

If story point T6 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 3631.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 9856.*

6706

The bandits come up the stairs, wave after wave, and wave after wave you turn them back, but it's been so long since you've done battle at Celyse's side that you're working awkwardly, not in sync. Celyse uses her magic to send up a shimmering shield above you, but you step out of position to cut down a wiry, freckled human man, and an arrow falls past the shield and into your leg.

➔ *You lose three stamina.*

Before long, you're being forced back from the stair, every step sending ribbons of fire up your leg and down your arm. With more room to maneuver, the bandits spread out and threaten to surround you.

"Retreat!" calls Braxton from behind you. Celyse holds up her runeshard and cries out in the elven tongue, sending bolts of prismatic light to transfix the bandits on the balcony and send them twitching to the floor.

The two of you race back into the countess's audience chamber, where Braxton and Tweegal slam shut the heavy doors and Tallea settles the crossbeam into place.

➔ *Read entry 4819.*

6741

A strangled sob pulls you back to the black wooden chair. Rochelle lies there, gripping her mother's skirts and shaking with grief, Phillip's hand on her shoulder. Regina's body sits on the chair, her face peaceful and empty.

Phillip places his fingers on Regina's wrist and closes his eyes for a moment. "No," he breathes. "She's gone, 'Chelle."

"I never knew," sobs Rochelle, straightening and wiping tears from her eyes. "All this time, I never knew the power she could command."

"Your mother wanted it that way," says Celyse, carefully closing Regina's eyes with slender fingers. "She never wanted you to know the price she paid for her power."

Soft laughter comes from the balcony. You turn and see Kyrice standing in the shattered remains of the door, his scarred face alive with a manic light. "So, dear sister, your flame has finally burned out. I thought it might, if I gave you enough incentive." He pauses, drawing contrition around himself like a masquerade costume. "Rochelle. Phillip. Children. It's over. I am Lord of Dragonholt now."

Rochelle stands and draws her sword, her eyes burning like green fire. "Not while I live," she growls.

➔ *Time passes.*

➔ *Read entry 5205.*

6771

Following the sound of babbling water you soon find an artfully-arranged pond, fed by a small splashing rill and spanned by an arched wooden footbridge. A dwarf man with a mask of black and white checks sits by the water's edge, laughing as a young dwarf girl whose mask resembles a snowy owl rushes back and forth across the bridge. Her feet thump and rattle like drums with each trip across the wooden planks.

Gather sticks to race under the bridge.

➔ *Read entry 3964.*

Sit by the dwarf man for a romantic chat.

Requires story point D2.

➔ *Read entry 3963.*

Sit by yourself and watch.

➔ *Read entry 3928.*

6799

Your first arrow hits a dwarf bandit with her hair shaved into a single tall black stripe, striking her in the leg and sending her toppling to the ground. The second arrow slashes open the shoulder of a broad-chested human man with a hooked nose, who retreats, but not before hurling his dagger straight into your shoulder.

➔ *You lose three stamina.*

While the remaining bandits waver with indecision, Tallea and Celyse shout and rush forward. The bandits fall back and all of you flee into the hedge maze, where the bandits will have to come down a narrow corridor to follow.

➔ *Read entry 8913.*

6820

Braxton and Rochelle work smoothly together, trading opponents and shifting their focus with ease. They react instantly to your warnings and fluidly enact your plans. Together, you move as an irresistible unit, the bandits giving ground with each shift and stratagem. Soon you've retreated into the hedge maze, where the bandits must proceed down a narrow corridor if they intend to follow.

➔ *Read entry 8913.*

6846

You spend a few calming minutes digging in the rich soil of the garden, plucking the few weeds you find and enjoying the rich smells and gentle breathing of the plants.

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

6886

You shake your head and tell Kyrice that he will never be count, not with so much blood and death surrounding him tonight. He chuckles. "As if such a thing has never happened before? Titles change hands in blood and death all the time." He lifts a nearby book—a fencing manual—and hurls it at your head. "All will be forgiven if I win!" He retreats, sword held high.

➔ *Mark one progress in peace.*

➔ *Read entry 4428.*

6937

You and Celyse fight as if you've rehearsed this battle a dozen times, protecting one another's flank and driving back wave after wave of bandits with practiced ease. Celyse's magic keeps the bandits dazzled and off balance. Your skill at arms cuts down bandit after bandit. A wiry, freckled human man leads one determined charge, but you turn his attack aside and wound him with a cut to the leg, causing him to fall back only to be replaced by another, fresher bandit.

In time, the weight of numbers begins to tell. You tire as the bandits rotate out their wounded and exhausted for fresh fighters. You're forced back from the vine trellis, and several bandits rush forward, spreading out and threatening to overwhelm you.

"Time to go," says Celyse. She holds up her runeshard and cries out in the elven tongue, sending bolts of prismatic light to transfix the nearby bandits and send them twitching to the ground. The two of you jog toward the clearing with the great oak tree.

➔ *Read entry 4549.*

7044

Your position above the bandits, protected by the stone banister of the balcony, is as close to the perfect roost for an archer as you can imagine. You nock arrow after arrow, letting fly and seeing bandits collapse or scurry for cover. Celyse covers the stairs with her rapier in one hand and rune in the other. "This is just like that time on the Rook's Tower," she calls. "Only it's not raining. Yet."

If you have awareness (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 4019.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 4652.*

7180

"Uncle," says Phillip, stepping past you. He walks slowly up to stand just out of arm's reach. "Please. You don't have to do this. You don't want to do this."

"Shut up, boy," growls Kyric. "You're next."

"No, I'm not," says Phillip. "Uncle, you held me at your mercy for the better part of a day, searching for what you thought was the courage to kill me, begging me to support your claim to mother's seat."

"You question my courage now?" laughs Kyric.

"You chose the wrong word, uncle. The word is 'mercy.' You could have killed me at any time, but you didn't. You couldn't. You don't want this. You didn't want Sonia to die, or mother." Phillip takes another step forward, taking his sister's hand in both of his. "It's still not too late. You can still turn back from this."

Kyric looks away, blinking tears from his burning green eyes.

➔ *Mark one progress in peace.*

If eight progress is marked in peace...

➔ *Read entry 9509.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 1913.*

7212

Fighting with careful, considered strategy, you give ground up the staircase step by step. You focus on not letting Shark touch you, keeping his strange hooked sword at bay with every increasingly-frustrated attack. By the time you reach the balcony, Shark is howling with fury, and his attacks have become sloppy and undisciplined, so you knock the sword from his hand with a flourish, then kick him back down the stairs. He curses as he falls, sprawling across the bandits who had been climbing the stairs after him and causing a general tangle of limbs and shrieking villains.

➔ *Read entry 2946.*

7264

You take the lead, using brutal, arcing strikes to knock through the bandits' guard and keep them off balance. Rochelle follows along behind you, brutally exploiting each opening you create with a swift, practiced stroke.

She cuts deep into the last bandit's leg, sending a fountain of blood up to spatter on her face. "Spirits protect me," she breathes. "I've never killed anyone before." You tap her on the shoulder and gesture toward the remaining bandits, who are even now gathering for a counterattack. "Yes," she says, "Well argued. Fight now, reflect later."

➔ *Read entry 4731.*

7266

"Dah," asks the young girl as you approach, "did you ever dance like this with Mah?"

"Nae, not like this," says the older dwarf. "A proper Dunwarr dance be lower to the ground, and far more kicking. The men and the women would ne'er dance together, but separately, to show off, y'see." He chuckles at some memory.

"More kicking," says the girl in the snowy owl mask. "Like this?" She adds high kicks to her leaps at great peril to those around her. Her father laughs, then nods to you as he notices your arrival.

Ask the older dwarf for a dance.

➔ *Read entry 1966.*

Offer to dance with the snowy owl.

➔ *Read entry 6013.*

Offer the snowy owl a gift.

Requires cloth doll (item).

➔ *Read entry 6257.*

7272

Celyse sighs as she stalks back and forth beneath the vine-laden trellis. "This is turning into that time at the Duke's hunting lodge. I don't suppose you..." She trails off as you step up to the vines, holding your growth rune in one hand and touching the closest leaves with the other. Magic thrums through you, and you feel the vines twitch in response.

If you have arcana (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 5346.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 7329.*

7308

"The garden? But we've just begun to dance, why—oh. Oh!" The gnome woman flushes scarlet, then turns her head and presses it against you as if her mask isn't doing enough to hide her face. "Well, it is a lovely garden. And I do like...flowers. I'm just not certain that I'm ready for...flowers. At this stage in the evening."

For a moment you dance in silence, then she steps away from you and takes a deep breath. "I need some fresh air. I'm going to go into the garden. To look at the flowers." She turns to go, her fingers brushing along your hand, and with each step she gains confidence and poise. By the time she reaches the door, her smile over her shoulder seems convinced she's made a good decision.

➔ *Mark story point E2.*

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

7329

Celyse falls back as your magic spreads into the garden around you, but something seems wrong. There's a touch of some other magic already present, something your rune struggles to overcome. As your magic finally takes hold, the first bandit grabs hold of you and throws you to the ground, nearly breaking your concentration.

➔ *You lose three stamina.*

Before the bandit—a sandy-haired human woman built like a stump—can deliver the killing blow with her hatchet, Celyse leaps forward and slashes across her arm. The bandit hisses, dropping her axe and stepping back, right into the vine-covered trellis. The vines casually wrap around her throat and begin to squeeze.

Soon the entire garden is alive with rustling vines, threatening roots, and even overly amorous flowers, ensnaring and attacking the bandits as they approach. You and Celyse retreat to the clearing with the great tree.

➔ *Read entry 4549.*

7346

"...as an opportunity to show them what kind of countess you'll be," says the elf woman in the crescent-moon mask.

The woman with the knight's-helm mask pulls away, shaking her head. "You ghou! My mother is still alive."

"May she live another hundred years," says the elf. "Your people, your neighbors, they were expecting Sonia to be the next countess. They knew what they were getting with her. They haven't made up their minds about you."

The knight turns to you. "Let's let them decide. My friend here wants me to turn this solemn occasion of mourning—"

"And celebrating the long alliance of the three families!"

"—Of mourning to my personal advantage. I think I should refrain from politicking for one night. What say you?"

"You should honor your grief."

➔ *Read entry 8095.*

"You should do your duty."

➔ *Read entry 1610.*

7359

Thanks to your warning, Rochelle has ample time to knock the assassin's knife aside with her own much larger blade. She follows through by holding her sword crosswise and thrusting, knocking her skull-masked attacker off balance, then kicking the woman's legs out from under her. In moments, she has the assassin flat on her back with a sword at her throat.

"Using a catspaw doesn't make you any less of a murderer, uncle," spits Rochelle.

➔ *Read entry 3968.*

7362

The music takes on a sprightly air during your set with your next partner, a young human man with an elegant mask whose butterfly wing covers half his face. He sneaks a quick bow of greeting into his dance steps, and moves with a bouncing energy that makes you wonder if his smile is about to fly off his face and around the room.

"I'm having a wonderful time," the boy says. "I think about how much my sister would have loved this, and everything I see reminds me of something I loved about her." He steps crosswise past you, then loops back around, still grinning. "It is splendid to be alive. Don't you think?"

Then the music shifts and the dance moves on.

If story point G5 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 6252.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 3114.*

7430

Celyse readies herself for battle, positioning herself in the center of the vine trellis to force the bandits to come at her one at a time. "At least it's nicer than the sewers under Nerekhall," she allows. Then she glances at you, realizing that you've been studying the trellis the whole time. "You've got that look. Are you about to do something clever?" You smile.

If you have craftsmanship (skill) or reasoning (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 2296.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 4957.*

7478

With no plan to speak of, you scream as loud as you can and run straight at the closest bandits. A human man in Fairfax livery, the long-winded guard Deakon, runs to your side. "Aha!" he bellows. "Have at thee, filthy bandits! We'll make short work of you!"

The bandits shift back and close ranks, forgetting the countess and her daughter for a moment to focus on this new, much louder threat.

If you have brawling (skill) or devotion (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 1573.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 7764.*

7571

You hurl your weapons to the floor and put up your hands. Kyric lets out a breath, and his grip on his niece's throat relaxes.

If story point O6 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 8192.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 7180.*

7609

Rochelle lifts her sword and makes to chase after Kyric, but suddenly Braxton is standing in her way with all the insistence of a brick wall. "No, my lady," says the orc. "You are Countess of Dragonholt now. I can't let you risk yourself like this." Braxton turns to you. "Go," she says. "Kill him or talk him down. I don't care which."

You climb the stairs and find Kyric pacing in the salon. He sees you and readies his sword—a handsome blade featuring the Fairfax family crest. "I never wanted Sonia to die, nor anyone else," he says. "But now it seems I have no choice. This county is mine by right; I should never have let my witch of a sister steal it from me." He raises the sword.

Engage Kyric in martial combat.

➔ *Read entry 8858.*

Nock an arrow and threaten him.

Requires archery (skill).

➔ *Read entry 8941.*

"I know. Just put down the sword."

➔ *Read entry 1512.*

"No one else has to die."

➔ *Read entry 3491.*

7718

"Nowhere for me to run?" Kyric laughs a bitter bark and comes to a stop near the door. He turns to face you, then kicks over a nearby bookshelf, sending loose papers and volumes tumbling every which way. "Why would I run?" He lifts his sword, its point shining in the dim light of a nearby lantern. "I am the Count of Dragonholt. If you want to avoid further bloodshed, all you need to do is surrender."

If you have persuasion (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 3038.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 6886.*

7738

You step in to examine the garden more closely. The crops are all growing well, with no signs of blight or illness.

If story point T6 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 6045.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 6846.*

7764

Deakon is less help than you might have hoped, and his first swing with his sword lodges awkwardly in the banquet table. The bandits ignore him and focus on you as the larger threat.

The first bandit lunges at you with a hooked knife, sending you scrambling back and breaking your momentum. You duck and dodge until the bandit overextends himself and gives you an opening to exploit, but by the time you've dispatched your first opponent the second and third bandit have you surrounded and pinned against the banquet table, where they swing at you over and over with stout oaken clubs. One breaks through your guard and sends a lance of pain flaring from your forearm up to your shoulder.

➔ *You lose three stamina.*

With a triumphant shout, Deakon wrests his sword free from the banquet table, sending a platter of roasted vegetables flying through the air. The food spatters across your assailants, blinding them for a moment and giving you the space you need to dispatch them both.

"I meant to do that," says Deakon, advancing on the remaining bandit with his sword held high. "All part of my cunning plan!" Apparently, the bandit believes him, because he pulls back, giving you a moment's respite in the battle.

➔ *Read entry 4731.*

7791

Moving in perfect rhythm with one another and with your song, Braxton and Rochelle fend off the encircling bandits, each swing of their sword leaving no gap for the miscreants to exploit.

Three bandits rush to complete the circle around the embattled group. Your music rises to a crescendo as Celyse steps forward, holding one hand aloft and shouting a phrase in the elven tongue. A stone secreted in the palm of her hand flares with an impossibly bright light, a light which blinds the onrushing bandits but leaves her allies, moving in time with the music, unfazed.

The old orc guard, Tweegal, casts aside his mask and steps into the disordered bandits, lashing out with a steel mace to the beat of the requiem.

➔ *Read entry 4731.*

7836

You feel the cold creep into your body before you even pull the frost rune from your bag. Even as you will it—almost before you will it—ice slicks the floor beneath the assassin's feet, sending her tumbling, then rushes upward with a crack to encase her arms and legs. A gasp runs through the crowd, and everyone takes a step back, except Regina, whose eyes remain fixed on the assassin.

Celyse steps toward you. "That is a very impressive rune. You must tell me everything about where you found it." She glances to where Rochelle has drawn her sword and Braxton wrestles with Kyric. "But later, I think."

➔ *Read entry 3968.*

7851

You lift your frost rune, careful not to touch it directly to your bare skin. With a shout, you spin in a tight circle, forcing the energy in the rune out toward the enemy. Cracking and groaning like a river in winter, shards of ice form around you, a rampart of frozen spikes blocking the bulk of the bandits away from you and the staircase.

Freed to focus only on the few bandits between them and the stair, Braxton and Rochelle shout and charge, chasing the suddenly worried-looking bandits away with a few swings of their swords. You follow and climb the stair, now in command of a very defensible position.

➔ *Read entry 3692.*

7905

"...never once beat her in a game of King's Folly," says the slender young human man in a butterfly mask. He has sprawled himself on the banister of the stone staircase with no apparent fear he'll fall, although the elf woman with the crescent-moon mask standing nearby keeps reaching out a tentative hand whenever he shifts position.

"No, nor me," says the woman in a mask styled like a knight's helm. "She'd drub me mercilessly, and then I'd try to get her to spar just to repair my self-esteem, but she was too clever for that."

"She was clever," agrees the elf woman in the crescent-moon mask. "She had a gift for seeing the lesson and even the lesson behind the lesson." The elf steps aside to grant you some room on the stair. "What about you? Do you have any memories of Sonia you'd like to share?"

"I never had a chance to meet her."

➔ *Read entry 5582.*

"She loved horses."

➔ *Read entry 5201.*

7921

You watch the happy couple for another moment, then turn to go, almost stepping into an elderly orc man wearing a mask made of tree bark and moss. "It's a wonderful thing to see, isn't it?" he asks, nodding to the couple under the tree. "They asked the spirits to bring them together. And so the spirits did." You follow his gaze to the happy couple again, then turn back to point out that the spirits didn't bring them together, you did, but the orc is gone.

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

7946

You and Braxton close ranks and keep the bandits at bay, doing your best to keep them off Rochelle's flank. Rochelle, meanwhile, steps toward the stair and engages the bandit leader, her sword ringing as she moves.

If you have brawling (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 8522.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 6204.*

7972

You scramble to keep yourself above Shark and out of range of his sword, looking for a weakness you can exploit. Sadly, no such weakness presents itself, and you keep jumping, scrambling, and losing ground, pressed back as you narrowly dodge the hooked tip of his sword. When you reach the top of the stair, you put a foot wrong looking for a step that isn't there, and Shark's blade lashes out, tearing a bloody gash out of your calf. You fall as your whole leg spasms and stiffens with the pain.

➔ *You lose four stamina.*

Tallea steps up to defend you before Shark can bring his sword down for a murder-stroke, catching his sword on her own and locking the two swords together. Back and forth they wrestle their locked blades, as the bandits below howl for blood, hurling insults and accusations of cheating and trickery at you.

Shark's attention seems to be on Tallea's sword, so you grit your teeth and use your good leg to kick him in the chest and send him tumbling down the stairs to sprawl limp atop his companions.

➔ *Read entry 2946.*

7987

"Perhaps you should!" laughs the gnome woman. "It's not every night I get to dance with a beautiful stranger." She grins, spinning away from you and then back in. "Why, you could be anyone under that mask. It's very exciting."

The dancing, and the flirting, continues for a while, your partner making increasingly outlandish "guesses" as to who you are under the mask. But eventually, the music comes to an end, and so does the dance.

"Well," says the gnome, stepping away, "I think I need some fresh air. Perhaps I'll see more of you later?" She sashays toward the garden, pausing at the doors to glance over her shoulder at you and smile. "Don't forget to stop and smell the roses," she says, and vanishes through the door.

➔ *Mark story point E2.*

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

7996

"You will?" Sapphire removes her mask, her eyes sparkling with tears. "Oh, I'm so glad! I was so frightened to ask you, and I didn't want to scare you away, but I didn't want to just leave. That would have been awful." You still her runaway babble with a kiss, and she sighs, melting against you.

You sit together in silence for a while, foreheads pressed together and full of one another's presence. Eventually, Sapphire pushes you gently away and pulls her mask back on. "Well," she says. "That's settled, then. Now we should go enjoy the rest of this party; we'll have plenty of time to spend with each other from now on." With a grin, she hikes up her skirts and marches back toward the great hall.

➔ *Mark story point G6.*

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

8006

You realize the closest bandits are already regaining their vision, and so you release the energy before you've had a chance to fully shape the blast. The bandits go tumbling, shrieking, in the air and roll across the dance floor leaving discarded weapons and streaks of blood behind them. You stagger backward, your hearing dropping out for a moment as the force of your own blast envelops you. A dab of blood runs from your left ear, and when sound returns it feels tinny and uneven.

- ➔ *You lose two stamina.*
- ➔ *Read entry 4731.*

8095

"Thank you," says the woman with the knight mask. "I would rather share my memories of my lost loved ones than sully those memories with empty platitudes right now." She nods stiffly to you and then to the elf in the crescent-moon mask before descending the stairs to the table covered in flowers. She pauses over the two masks resting there.

"I think I may have failed her as a tutor," says the elf. "Sharing her memories of her loved ones is exactly what she should be doing. By sharing her grief with the other families, she'll be forging a bond with them." She sighs, glancing down at you. "Ah well. She's doing the right thing, even if she doesn't realize it."

The elf takes a glass off the tray of a passing servant, takes a sip, makes a face, and puts the glass aside. "Human wines," she sighs.

- ➔ *Read entry 1118.*

8118

You take the lead, but the bandits rebuff your attack with ease. One of them distracts Rochelle while the other two circle around you, knives gleaming.

If story point U6 is marked...

- ➔ *Read entry 9098.*

Otherwise...

- ➔ *Read entry 3057.*

8164

An older human man sits with his back to the trunk of the tree. He has a carved wooden mask in the shape of a frog pushed up to rest on top of his head, showing a face that is lined with age and gazing wistfully up at the moon above. He sighs and glances down at his hands, which are idly carving a block of wood painted red by lantern light. His knife scrapes steadily, and each new flake of fallen wood brings a waft of cedar to your nostrils.

Ask the man what's wrong.

- ➔ *Read entry 1112.*

Show the man the wooden trinket.

Requires wooden trinket (item).

- ➔ *Read entry 5694.*

Leave the man to his thoughts.

- ➔ *Read entry 1118.*

8192

An eerie stillness settles over the entire room. Kyric's hands stop trembling, and a look of serenity washes over him. His eyes stare into the empty space in the room, focused on nothing. For a long moment, silence holds the room captive.

Kyric's lips part, and then he whispers, "I'm sorry."

Without a trace of emotion left on his face, without looking away from the empty space in the room, Kyric draws his blade across the soft skin of Rochelle's throat.

He releases her limp body, which falls to the floor in a growing pool of blood, and steps backward, laughter overtaking him as he clutches at his head. "I did it."

Braxton screams and rushes to Rochelle's side, holding her.

"I'm the count. Aren't you proud of me father?" asks Kyric to the open air.

- ➔ *Read entry 5697.*

8194

Your first arrow hits a dwarf bandit with her hair shaved into a single tall black stripe, striking her in the leg and sending her toppling to the ground. The second arrow slashes open the shoulder of a broad-chested human man with a hooked nose, who holds up his dagger as if it might help as he retreats. While the remaining bandits waver with indecision, Tallea and Celyse shout and rush forward. The bandits fall back and all of you flee into the hedge maze, where the bandits will have to come down a narrow corridor to follow.

- ➔ *Read entry 8913.*

8226

"Outnumbered?" chuckles Kyric. "I have allies you haven't seen yet. I don't need to beat you all. I just need to kill... her!" He spins and lashes out at Rochelle with his sword, but Braxton catches his blow on her shield, then steps into the block to drive him back. Kyric staggers, laughing and cursing.

If you have persuasion (skill)...

- ➔ *Read entry 9447.*

Otherwise...

- ➔ *Read entry 9536.*

8329

Braxton steps toward the stair to engage the bandit with the dramatic hair while Rochelle guards her flank, keeping two bandits at bay with swings of her sword. You call out warnings and tactical advice to both of them, trying to stay out of the conflict so you can see everything as it happens.

If you have military (skill)...

- ➔ *Read entry 8331.*

Otherwise...

- ➔ *Read entry 1074.*

8331

Braxton and Rochelle work smoothly together, trading opponents and shifting their focus with ease. They react instantly to your warnings and fluidly enact your plans before you even finish proposing them. Together, you move as an unstoppable unit, the bandits giving ground with each shift and stratagem. Soon you've gained the staircase and are safely entrenched in a highly defensible position.

➔ *Read entry 3692.*

8395

You make your way through a short hedge maze to the oak tree. From its crown hang a half-dozen paper lanterns, akin to those adorning the great hall inside.

If story point K8 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 8591.*

If neither story point K8 nor O3 are marked...

➔ *Read entry 8164.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 6581.*

8457

As Shark grows closer, you gather fiery energy from the rune, wreathing yourself in a nimbus of flame. He comes to a gradual stop, suddenly uncertain, shifting his sword from hand to hand. By the time he's worked up the nerve to attack, you have all the power you need. You take a deep breath, bringing the rune up to your mouth where it glows like embers. Then you blow and send a cascade of flame boiling out across the surface of the entire pond.

Shark shrieks and leaps headlong into the water, trailing smoke and ribbons of flame from his hair and tunic. The bridge catches fire and is soon burning merrily. You step back, take a moment to admire your handiwork, and then retreat deeper into the hedge maze.

➔ *Read entry 6602.*

8497

A mask lies on the table, stylized to look like a lamb and covered with fluffy white wool. White roses form a dense carpet on the table, interrupted here and there by small mementos and rolled pieces of paper, trinkets and gifts for the departed.

In the center of the table rests a sprig of purple flowers like a swirl of stars—hyacinth—resting on the very top of the pile. At the near edge lies an ink pot and a loose stack of blank papers for guests to write their own missives.

Allow a moment of silence before rejoining the festivities.

➔ *Read entry 4270.*

Write a heartfelt message to the spirits.

➔ *Read entry 4060.*

Leave a gift for the departed.

Requires polished shell (item).

➔ *Read entry 3261.*

8498

Kyric laughs, blood flecking his lips. "Then you're fools. Look at me, look at what I've done. I'm a threat to you as long as I live. Do you expect to rule a county with that kind of weakness, girl?"

Rochelle lifts her sword and bites her lip, then glances at you and lowers it again. "I may never be the countess my mother was, never be the ruler Sonia would have been, but I will at least be countess, which is more than I can say about you!"

If you have empathy (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 3944.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 9561.*

8504

You ask for more details on the goat with every indication of genuine enthusiasm. "Of course, the goat. Well, it was a small one, brown, uh, its horns were black. A kid, I believe." You express surprise that a juvenile goat small enough to fit under his arm would have horns already and a ripple of low laughter runs through the crowd. "Well, I'm quite strong, you know. I was rather distracted at the time by the bandits. Savage fellows, very dangerous. Fortunately, I had that very morning been instructing the other guards in a particular swordsman's trick—"

You ask him to demonstrate the trick, and volunteer to find him a pillow or roast duck to stand in for the goat. "That, ah, won't be necessary. I really shouldn't draw my sword while I'm on duty anyway, unless I intend to use it, no? Haha!" He laughs, and the crowd laughs with him, and somehow in the next five minutes you have him "armed" with a leg of mutton and holding an entire roast duck under one arm, pantomiming a ridiculous and awkward sword fight.

The crowd has now transitioned entirely to mocking laughter, but the man in the black mask seems to be happy with any attention, however unappreciative.

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

8522

One of the bandits, a dwarf with her black hair shaved back to a single tall strip, leaps forward, attempting to knock you out of position and leave Rochelle exposed. She slashes at you with a hatchet, spinning to follow up with the hammer in her other hand.

You sidestep her first swing, then step into the second and knock the hammer from her grip. You slam your hip into her, locking into corps-a-corps and sending her stumbling back. Her attack rebuffed, the dwarf bandit sprawls in the path of her companions, leaving the entire flank in disarray, which gives you time to pivot to the center and lend assistance to Rochelle's duel with the bandit leader. In moments, the bandit is falling back, clutching at a bleeding sword arm, and you are all climbing the staircase, giving you command of a highly defensible position.

➔ *Read entry 3692.*

8591

Beneath the spreading limbs of the oak tree an elderly couple sways gently to the music lilting out from the manor house. One, a human man, has a wooden mask carved like a frog. The other, a human woman, has a cascade of bright flowers flowing off her mask. She rests her head lightly against his chest as they dance in the flickering light of the lanterns hung from the tree.

"Was it worth the wait?" she asks after a silence.

"Yes," he says. "It was worth every single day that brought us here, tonight." She tilts her head up, and they kiss, then giggle as their masks clack together.

If story point T6 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 7921*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

8617

You do your best to fend Shark off with low-powered jolts of electricity while you gather your power, but it's difficult to maintain your concentration, and after a misstep Shark slashes you across the arm, sending you sprawling against the banister, where you leave a smear of your blood behind.

➔ *You lose four stamina.*

You shove your pain into the rune, feeling it buzz and tremble in your hand, and then unleash the stored power in a white-hot torrent of thunder and light that arcs and dances between several of the bandits on the stairs and leaves your ears ringing. Shark is hurled from the staircase to crash, smoking and twitching, on the ballroom floor below, and his companions fall to their knees crying out in pain. You fall back to the balcony, wondering how long it will take the bandits to try again.

➔ *Read entry 2946.*

8841

"Do you have any tricks up your sleeve, like that time in the Crimson Forest?" asks Celyse hopefully as she swishes her rapier through the air. You grin and produce a tangleweb bag, studying the vines and the trellis around you. Celyse chuckles as she recognizes your intention. "I'll blind them," she says, and she lifts her rune as the first pair of bandits rush down the vine-covered tunnel toward you. She calls out in elven, and a bright flash of light flares from her outstretched hand. As the bandits stagger, you hurl the sack to break against one of the bandit's blades, causing rapidly expanding, foaming gunk to explode over the bandits in thick, ropy blobs from floor to ceiling and wall to wall. The oobleck forms an impromptu spider web, and you step back to examine your handiwork.

If you have awareness (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 9032.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 1971.*

8854

One of the bandits, a dwarf with her black hair shaved back to a single tall strip, leaps forward, attempting to knock you out of position and leave Rochelle exposed. She slashes at you with a hatchet, spinning to follow up with the hammer in her other hand.

You sidestep her first swing, then step into the second and knock the hammer from her grip. You slam your hip into her, locking into corps-a-corps and sending her stumbling back. Her attack rebuffed, the dwarf bandit sprawls in the path of her companions, leaving the entire flank in disarray, which gives you time to pivot to the center. The bandit leader, realizing she is trapped between you, Rochelle, and Tallea and Celyse at the mouth of the hedge maze, curses and retreats, clutching at a bleeding sword arm. Soon, you are falling back into the protection of the hedge maze, forcing the bandits to advance down a single corridor if they wish to follow.

➔ *Read entry 8913.*

8855

You nock an arrow and draw. Braxton and Rochelle stand at your side, guarding you from any bandits that might threaten as you line up your shot at the bandits between you and the hedge maze.

If you have deception (skill) or persuasion (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 8194.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 6799.*

8858

You rush forward, and Kyric steps up to meet you. His new sword, with its dragon's head at the crossguard, is evidently no show piece, but as sharp and deadly as any weapon of war.

If you have dueling (skill) or military (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 5664.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 9636.*

8871

"Rochelle! No!" Phillip cries, collapsing to his sister's side. He clutches her hand, smooths her errant curls away from her face. "No, no, no," he whispers, pressing his forehead to hers. You're struck for a moment by how similar they look, the same brown skin, the same delicate features, the same green eyes. But his still flash with life and grief, and hers have gone flat, unseeing.

Phillip gathers his sister to him and rocks back and forth, shuddering. "My friends," he chokes out. "Bring my uncle to justice, please."

➔ *Read entry 4519.*

8907

A calm settles over the group. "I'm sorry," says Kyric. Rochelle turns away, recoiling as if burned. Braxton sheathes her sword and steps forward to restrain Kyric who suddenly bounds past her, drawing a knife from within his tunic!

If eight progress is marked in war...

➔ *Read entry 1509.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 9172.*

8913

You stop at the first turning of the maze to dissuade any further pursuit, while the others continue deeper into the garden. Before you can follow them, a bandit comes swaggering between the hedges, swinging a hooked sword with casual arrogance. "Come out here and fight me, you coward!" he calls around a mouthful of sharp teeth. He is an elf man with skin so pale it almost seems translucent. "Your countess can't hide behind your skirts forever, not if she wants to keep the respect of her people!"

Before you can respond to either the challenge or the insults, the elf leaps to the attack, his sword flashing in a deadly arc!

Meet his assault with a clash of steel.

➔ *Read entry 1158.*

Use the terrain to your advantage.

➔ *Read entry 3098.*

Fend off his advances with fire.

Requires arcana (skill).

➔ *Read entry 2343.*

8936

With a hoarse cry, the bandits rush the stairs. Celyse readies her rapier and rune and takes position at the top. "Maybe try that trick you used in the goblin caves?" she suggests. You nod and pull out a vial of grey liquid, hurling it to shatter halfway down the stair. A cloud of silky grey smoke billows up, soon enveloping the entire staircase. Within the smoke, you hear bandits shrieking and stumbling.

If you have awareness (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 9587.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 6329.*

8941

You nock an arrow and draw, centering the point over his chest. Kyric turns to the side and lifts his sword in a steady hand as you explain that his only option at this point is to surrender peacefully.

If you have performance (skill) or persuasion (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 9664.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 1715.*

8987

"Very well," says the orc, offering her hand to her gnome partner. "A dance." She turns to you and nods. "Enjoy the party." With that she is dragged—she allows herself to be dragged—out onto the dance floor, where over a dozen masked guests move through the intricate steps of a formal dance.

You take a moment to help yourself to a beverage from a passing servant and consider what to do next.

➔ *Read entry 1528.*

8993

You lift your frost rune, careful not to touch it directly to your bare skin. With a shout, you spin in a tight circle, forcing the energy in the rune out toward the enemy. Cracking and groaning like a river in winter, shards of ice form around you as grass and flowers wither and blacken from the cold. A rampart of frozen spikes blocks the bulk of the bandits away from you and the hedge maze.

Freed to focus only on the few bandits between them and the hedge, Braxton and Rochelle shout and charge, chasing the suddenly worried-looking bandits away with a few swings of their swords. You follow and retreat into the hedge maze, where the bandits will have to proceed down a narrow corridor if they want to follow you.

➔ *Read entry 8913.*

9032

As you examine the web of alchemical goop, you notice one bandit struggling to pass through the bushes to your left. Celyse gestures in his direction, and you nod, pulling out a vial of caustic acid. As the bandit bursts from the bushes with a spear, you casually splash the acid across his hands and chest, leaving him screaming on the ground and trying to rub the substance off with handfuls of dirt and dead leaves.

Celyse reaches out with her rune to launch a bolt of glimmering bright light through the bushes to her right; you hear another scream. "They're finding ways around," she says. "Let's fall back." So the two of you jog toward the clearing with the great oak tree.

➔ *Read entry 4549.*

9049

The elf bandit comes up the stair, swinging his vicious hooked sword in wide, glimmering arcs. "Get 'em, Shark!" shouts one of the bandits below, a gnome woman thrusting her twin knives into the air.

Seeing no real advantage to a duel, per se, you lift your lightning rune and begin channeling its energy.

If you have agility (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 1688.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 8617.*

9073

You draw back an arrow, trying not to think of the dozen ways this could go wrong. "No!" shouts Braxton, as Kyric begins to draw his knife across his niece's throat and your arrow flies from the bow.

If both story points D4 and W3 are marked...

➔ *Read entry 1523.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 3325.*

9098

Wounded as she is, Rochelle gives ground as her opponent hammers at her over and over with a thick club. You have no help to offer her, threatened as you are with your own problems. You manage to knock one of the bandits off balance, a foul-smelling man with a distinct yellowish tinge, but as you step forward to follow up you realize it was a ruse, and his companion sinks a dagger into your leg.

➔ *You lose three stamina.*

You fall to one knee and barely manage to knock a killing strike away from your throat. For an instant you think you're done for, but then a wizened orc wearing the Fairfax colors slams his shoulder into the jaundiced bandit. He lashes out with a steel mace, and the bandit's knee gives out with a pop; he falls down screaming. "Get on your feet," grunts Tweegal. "I'm too old to do more than scold these cowards," he says, expertly catching the other bandit's wrist, twisting until the dagger falls out of his hand, and smashing his mace into the unfortunate's skull.

You stagger back to your feet and go to Rochelle's aid, striking down her assailant as he locks his blade against hers and tries to knock her to the ground.

➔ *Read entry 4731.*

9101

"Get 'em, Shark!" calls a gnome woman from the ballroom floor with a fierce grin. Other bandits take up the cry. Sparks fly as weapon rings against weapon, Shark's sword describing glimmering arcs through the air ever closer to your head.

If you have dueling (skill) or willpower (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 7212.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 3396.*

9146

Desperately looking for something, anything, to stop Kyric, you snatch up a nearby book—a fencing manual—and hurl it at him. The book collides with the back of his head and sends him staggering into a bookshelf, which topples, cascading books everywhere. You allow yourself a tiny moment of celebration, then leap over the fallen easel and continue your chase.

➔ *Mark one progress in war.*

➔ *Read entry 4428.*

9172

Rochelle turns back, raising her sword between herself and her uncle, but she manages only a shallow cut across his side. Suddenly, Kyric is behind her, one hand tangled in her curls and the other holding the dagger to her throat.

"Dragonholt is mine!" he hisses.

If story point O6 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 1513.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 5732.*

9214

Your first arrow lodges into the back of one of the no-necked brigands, who collapses with a groan. His companion turns toward you, leaving himself open to a brutal overhand swing from Tallea, dispatching him instantly. As the bandits surrounding you attempt to drive past Rochelle and Braxton, you fire again and again, your arrows slashing through the air close enough to feel the feathers brush their cheeks.

With the bandits stumbling back for cover, you gain the stairs and start to climb, now commanding the entire length of the great hall with your bow from above, and in a highly defensible position no less.

➔ *Read entry 3692.*

9233

Kyric lashes out with one fist, knocking over an overstuffed bookcase. Loose papers and volumes go tumbling and fluttering through the air. "Enough. The child knows nothing," he growls. "My sister stole the title from me. It was never hers to begin with!"

If you have history (skill) or story point Y3 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 3708.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 2617.*

9249

As you dance, the woman in the crescent-moon mask says rather little, focusing on the movements of the dance and studying you carefully from the corner of her eye. She meets your attempts at small talk with sideways questions, and you soon realize she has no idea who you are under the mask.

Soon enough it's time to exchange dance partners.

If story point O6 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 2966.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 5871.*

9260

Without another word, you lift your weapon and step forward. Kyric's lip curls back in a snarl, and he shifts his stance to meet you. His sword trembles in his grip.

If you have dueling (skill) or military (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 1822.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 9851.*

9296

You and Braxton close ranks and keep the bandits at bay, doing your best to keep them off Rochelle's flank. Rochelle, meanwhile, pushes forward, driving the bandit leader back toward the hedges where Tallea and Celyse are waiting.

If you have brawling (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 8854.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 6662.*

9298

A gnome woman wearing a mask with a butterfly ornament at her right temple sits on a stone bench, her legs kicking in the air as she picks leaves from the stem of a freshly plucked moonflower.

As you enter the garden, she glances up in your direction and smiles. "Oh," she says. "A mysterious stranger intrudes upon my thoughts!"

If story point L2 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 5011.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 3315.*

9321

Kyric drops his sword to clatter on the floor, bringing his hands up to cover his face. "That's it, then," he sighs, his whole body shaking. He straightens and wipes at his face and watering eyes with one blood-streaked hand, then steps toward Rochelle with his palms open.

If eight progress is marked in peace...

➔ *Read entry 2578.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 8907.*

9323

Kyric opens his mouth to speak again, then slumps against the wall. He leans his head back, staring at nothing, for a long, slow, breath. Then he stares down at the sword held in his blood-streaked hand.

➔ *Mark one progress in peace.*

➔ *Read entry 9321.*

9447

You urge Kyric to put aside his sword and surrender, reminding him that it's the only way to end this conflict without any more bloodshed. Rochelle and Braxton step forward as well, their own weapons drawn.

Kyric looks from Braxton's sword, to you, to Rochelle's face, drawn and grave, her green eyes burning. The same color as his eyes, you notice suddenly. He sighs, his face contorting and then smoothing to blankness.

➔ *Mark two progress in peace.*

➔ *Read entry 9321.*

9479

You're an instant too slow to block the assassin's attack, and when you knock the blade from her hand it is already red with Fairfax blood. Your next strike knocks the skull mask from the assassin's aristocratic face and leaves her bloodied but still alive on the ballroom floor.

"Mariam!" shouts Braxton, rushing to Rochelle's side. Her diminutive wife appears an instant later with a healing potion.

"It's bad," says the gnome. "But she'll live."

➔ *Mark story point U6.*

➔ *Read entry 3968.*

9509

Shuddering, Kyric lets out a breath you didn't realize he was holding. The dagger falls from his hand, and he deflates, his shoulders slumping, his stance collapsing. Rochelle steps carefully away, and you and Braxton waste no time in pinning him to the wall and restraining him.

➔ *Time passes.*

If story point O6 is marked...

➔ *Read entry 2027.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 4263.*

9517

You point out that Countess Regina defeated a dragon—a real one—in her youth, and you doubt she has much to fear from people in masks, however dragon-like.

"Perhaps you're right," says your wolf-faced dance partner. "Someone would have to be a fool to go after her, wouldn't he. Well, then she has nothing to fear from you."

He sneers behind his wolf mask, but something in his brilliant green eyes seems troubled. Then your time is done, and the dance is over.

➔ *Mark one progress in war.*

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

9536

You urge Kyric to put aside his sword, but he only snarls and launches another flurry of attacks. Braxton catches each blow on her shield, sending splinters and fragments of wood flying. "That's enough, Kyric," she growls, barely knocking aside a lunge that slides past her shield. "Can't you see that you're beaten? Stand down or I will put you down."

Kyric staggers back and sobs, dragging a hand across his face and leaving a bloody smear. He leans against the wall, staring back and forth between you and Rochelle.

- ➔ *Mark one progress in peace.*
- ➔ *Read entry 9321.*

9561

You step toward Kyric, keeping your weapon to hand but low, and beg him to see reason and listen to his niece. He tears his eyes from her and fixes you with a burning witchfire green stare. "Be silent," he hisses. "All of you!" He leans his head back against the wall, his face twisting between fear, regret, anger, and something sinister lurking beneath the surface.

- ➔ *Mark one progress in peace.*
- ➔ *Read entry 9321.*

9562

You lift your blasting rune, skid to a stop, and hurl its energy in Kyric's general direction. The results are not as focused as you might have hoped but certainly spectacular. Books and loose pages go flying, and a bookcase topples, knocking Kyric to one side and into another shelf of books. You turn your body to shelter yourself from the debris, coughing and abandoning the chase for a moment.

- ➔ *Mark two progress in war.*
- ➔ *Read entry 4428.*

9587

One bandit trips and falls over the side of the stair, her shriek suddenly cut short with a meaty thud somewhere below the balcony and out of your sight. You hear at least two more shouting within the smoke, panic tinging their voices. A looming silhouette appears within the smoke at the top of the stair, and you shout a warning to Celyse. She is ready, and as an olive-skinned human man with crooked teeth rushes out of the smoke swinging a handaxe, she is ready to meet him with a brilliant flare of light from her rune and a precise and lethal jab from her rapier. As the man staggers, surprised to find blood running from his throat, she pirouettes and kicks him down the stair.

"They're rather bigger than goblins," she says, and the two of you retreat to the countess's audience chamber while the bandits struggle to regain some semblance of order. Braxton and Tweegal slam and bar the doors behind you, and you are safe for a moment.

- ➔ *Read entry 4819.*

9606

You rush after Kyric, shouting for him to give up, but the floor is covered with hazards and obstacles to your progress. Despite your best efforts, it's clear that Kyric will reach the door before you can catch him.

If you have arcana (skill) or runes (skill)...

- ➔ *Read entry 9562.*

Otherwise...

- ➔ *Read entry 9146.*

9612

You ready your weapon and place yourself on Celyse's right, knowing she'd prefer coverage on her rune arm so she can focus on using magic. "This reminds me of that time the Ironbound went crazy and tried to murder everyone in that tavern," says Celyse. "Only with less fire. So far."

If you have dueling (skill) or military (skill)...

- ➔ *Read entry 5843.*

Otherwise...

- ➔ *Read entry 6706.*

9636

Kyric meets you in the middle of the salon, knocking your attack aside and then using a flurry of expert attacks to drive you back. He is clearly a practiced swordsman and soon has you bleeding from several minor wounds and pressed back against a wall. In desperation, you charge forward and slam your shoulder into him, knocking him back and giving yourself room to breathe and maneuver. He grunts and pulls back, shifting his sword to his other hand and evaluating you carefully.

- ➔ *Mark one progress in war.*
- ➔ *You lose four stamina.*
- ➔ *Read entry 5863.*

9664

Kyric puts on a brave face, but he also makes no move to attack you while you have your bow drawn. "Dragonholt is my birthright," he explains. "It was mine before it was ever hers. We don't even know that Regina is the same person as the bastard daughter my father never bothered to mention. She was only ever accepted because she was the hero of the hour." Kyric grips his sword tightly, bringing it up between you. "But her hour has passed. This county is mine by right."

You explain that whether true or not, he lost any real claim on the county years ago, and forfeited it for good when Sonia died.

- ➔ *Mark two progress in peace and one progress in war.*
- ➔ *Read entry 5863.*

9666

Braxton and Rochelle work smoothly together, trading opponents and shifting focus as you call out warnings and propose stratagems. Steadily, you advance toward the hedge, until a sudden feint from a bandit catches you off guard and you confuse your right and your left at a critical moment. Braxton pivots the wrong way to meet an attacker who isn't there, and a dwarf woman with her hair shaved to a single tall, black strip leaps through the gap and smashes a hammer against your leg.

➔ *You lose three stamina.*

You stagger forward as Braxton knocks the dwarf back with a vicious kick. Rochelle sweeps her sword in a broad arc, sending the bandits leaping back and buying you time to limp to the hedge maze. Soon you are all retreating deeper into the maze, where the bandits must follow down a narrow corridor or not at all.

➔ *Read entry 8913.*

9672

"No more blood, eh?" He chuckles, pacing up and down the salon, then turns, shaking his head. "You're a fool to think so. There is already blood, and it's on my hands whether I did the deed myself or not. I cannot turn back now." He lifts his sword. "Stand down or die."

➔ *Mark one progress in peace.*

➔ *Read entry 5863.*

9681

Given the night's appearance of the recently deceased, you decide a rendition of "Requiem for a Martyred Love" (Vulgate) would be appropriate. Mariam's mezzo-soprano joins you before you finish the first verse, and a sense of grim resolve settles on the assembled company like a cloak.

➔ *You each recover two stamina.*

If you have empathy (skill)...

➔ *Read entry 7791.*

Otherwise...

➔ *Read entry 5794.*

9787

Your warning comes too late, or perhaps Rochelle didn't hear it! The assassin is upon her before she can do more than get her sword free from its scabbard, and the dagger is soon red with Fairfax blood. Rochelle staggers, lashes out with her sword, and cleaves through the assassin's skull mask, leaving a line of bright blood across an aristocratic face as the woman collapses.

Braxton is there a moment later to hurl the assassin to the ground and hold her at the point of a sword. "My lady!" shouts the orc. "Mariam, a healing potion, please!"

Her diminutive wife appears from the crowd and rushes to Rochelle's side. "It's bad," the gnome murmurs. "But she'll live."

➔ *Mark story point U6.*

➔ *Read entry 3968.*

9851

As you clash together, Kyric grips his sword in both hands and swings in a reckless cross-slash that catches you by surprise. He follows it up with a furious array of overhand blows, laughing as you retreat under the unexpected aggression before you're finally able to turn one aside and knock him back against the far wall. "Why won't you just die?" he sighs, fingers white around the hilt of his sword.

➔ *Mark one progress in war.*

➔ *You lose three stamina.*

➔ *Read entry 9321.*

9856

"Yes," murmurs the orc, his eyes closed. "I see them." As you approach, he opens his eyes and stands. "Come," he says, offering a hand. "Listen to the spirits. Hear their wisdom. Find the stillness within you, open yourself, and see." You take his hand, close your eyes, and do your best, but all you see and all you hear is a garden at night, awash with beauty and secrets.

When you look again, the orc is gone.

➔ *Read entry 1118.*

9917

BATTLE IS JOINED!

The first act ends here. From now on (if playing with two or more heroes), making a decision exhausts your activation token as normal. Requirements of decisions must be met by the hero making the decision.

If you exhausted your activation token, refresh it now.

Braxton steps forward and throws Kyric to the ground. She levels her sword at him. "Kyric Fairfax," she growls. "You are under arrest for treason."

The other Fairfaxes walk forward, Regina leading the way with Tymothi hovering at her side. "Brother. I think you can understand why, under the circumstances, I do not consider you an invited guest."

"Let's throw him in a cell," says Rochelle. One hand drops to the hilt of her sword and the other hikes up her ruffled skirts to free her movement. "Dame Braxton, would you be so kind?"

"Of course, my lady," says the orc, hauling Kyric to his feet.

Rochelle watches her uncle warily. Behind her, you see a human woman in a red riding costume and skull mask draw a long dagger and pad forward, the knife held flat against her arm—an assassin! It seems no one else has spotted her!

Shout a warning to Rochelle.

➔ *Read entry 5735.*

Spring forward to protect her.

➔ *Read entry 1944.*

Freeze the assassin in place.

Requires frost rune (item).

➔ *Read entry 7836.*

9994 (Tyrant Ending)

You and Braxton spend a few days crammed into the village's only jail cell, guarded at first by soldiers in Belmont red and white, and then by guards in Fairfax colors who you are certain were bandits a week ago. Celyse and Mariam visit as often as they can and are your only sources of food, water, and news.

From what they tell you, Kyric now rules as Count of Dragonholt with the support of the Belmont family. The Cunninghams of Haverford, rather than disputing the claim, have retreated back to their lands and hunkered down. Kyric's brigands are marching through the village streets to keep order, but even so many citizens of the county are upset. Some have already fled to Haverford or left the region entirely. Most of the local gnomes vanished overnight. The Countess Inn has been put up for sale.

After three cold, grey days, you are marched from the jail cell and onto the village green, where a gallows has been erected of fresh-cut wood. You and Braxton are each fitted with a rope and left to stand on the gallows while Kyric paces back and forth. Eventually, a crowd gathers on the village green, herded and shoved into place by mail-clad Fairfax guards.

Kyric gives a speech about the vile betrayal and murder of his dear niece and nephew at the hands of you and Braxton. You look out at the crowd and find it a sea of disbelieving, fearful faces. You see no trace of Celyse, but manage to pick a teary-eyed Sapphire, stoic Grisbeck with his hands over Penny's eyes, and a few others out of the crowd. Mariam is in the front row, staring at her wife and sobbing.

"...and there can be only one punishment for treason," says Kyric, and you feel yourself drop.

➔ *This campaign is complete.*

9996 (Lonely Ending)

Phillip puts on a brave face the following morning, giving a speech from within a curtain of fog on the village green. He proclaims a sentence of exile on his uncle Kyric, never to return to the barony on pain of death. No one seems to question whether his authority stretches that far.

You hear from Celyse over the following months that Phillip is doing well. The other lords have accepted him as the Count of Dragonholt, despite his age, and he is ably supported by Celyse, Tymothi, Braxton, and others. He soon cultivates a fine, if stiff, public face, but he is known to cry whenever he's alone, especially at night. "He will make a fine lord," she reports. "But it will take time for his wounds to heal."

As lord, Phillip continues the traditions and practices laid out by his mother. He begins construction on a small open-air theater at the edge of the willow grove and has the walls facing the market row painted with memorials to his sisters and mother.

Ursula has the mural in the Countess Inn repainted to show a green-eyed young man holding the twin masks of tragedy and comedy. The rest, she explains, will be added in time.

"Phillip will be fine," Celyse tells you. "And so will Dragonholt."

➔ *This campaign is complete.*

9997 (Stoic Ending)

Kyric is executed the next day in the orchard beneath the Fairfax memorial tree. Braxton does the honors with one swing of an enormous axe. Only a handful of witnesses are present; you note that Celyse is not among them.

Rochelle seems closed off, emotionally. She gives a leaden speech to the villagers about the events of the previous weeks and rejects all offers of comfort or assistance. Even at her coronation ceremony, she barely says a word. Celyse leaves for Dawnsmoor the morning after the ceremony. "My advice isn't welcome, and neither am I," she tells you.

Under Rochelle and Braxton's leadership, the Fairfax guard swells in number. In a month she has thirty swords at her command, and mercenaries are flocking to the county. She establishes a guard station in Evesmoore and orders the construction of a new castle on a hill north of the village. She names it Castle Phillip.

Ursula has the mural in the Countess Inn repainted to show a fierce warrior woman, blood-stained sword in hand. The rest, she explains, will be added in time.

As for you, Rochelle rewards you for your assistance with a fat purse and a stiffly worded speech. But she offers no friendship, and while she doesn't order you out of her county, you get the impression everyone would be happier if you left. It seems she still hasn't forgiven you, or herself, for Phillip's death.

➔ *This campaign is complete.*

9998 (Hopeful Ending)

Kyric is placed in the guard station's cell until the following day, when after some debate, Rochelle has him escorted to the main hall of Fairfax Manor to stand trial. Standing before the entire household, notables from the village, and members of the nearby nobility, Kyric offers no defense for his crimes, so it falls to Phillip to argue for him, which he does with passion. Rochelle pronounces a sentence of exile, never to return to the barony on pain of death, and promises that Baroness Katrin will honor the decree.

Together, the Fairfax siblings set about restoring their household and their county, often seen riding together through the village and the outlying lands. Rochelle strengthens her forces, adding ten new soldiers in under a month. Phillip returns to his studies with Celyse, who now also serves as one of Rochelle's chief advisors in matters of state. Braxton, too, becomes a member of Rochelle's inner council as well as the captain of her guard.

Ursula has the mural in the Countess Inn repainted to show a fierce warrior woman, sword and shield in hand, defending a young man, with the black and white dragons of Dragonholt rising to either side of her. The rest, she explains, will be added in time.

Rochelle rewards you richly for your part in the affair, both with money and honorary titles. "How does Defender of Dragonholt sound to you?" she asks. "I've also been thinking of creating a few landed knights in the county. If you're interested in settling down."

➔ *This campaign is complete.*